Tokyo and Seoul are indisputably Washington’s two most important allies in Asia. They are not only central to America’s security architecture for the region, they are also important economic partners and share common values such as democracy and a commitment to the rule of law. And yet the prospect of a deep and effective trilateral relationship among the three countries has proved elusive. Is there a path forward?
A US Perspective
Dealing With Differences That Won’t Fade Away
By Brad Glosserman

Differences between South Korea and Japan over history — especially the highly emotive issue of “comfort women” during the Second World War — have bedeviled US efforts to forge closer trilateral relations between America and its two key allies in Northeast Asia.

Despite some progress between Tokyo and Seoul to resolve their differences, domestic politics in Japan and South Korea have proven to be stubborn petri dishes for continuing tensions, writes Brad Glosserman.

RELATIONS between Japan and South Korea improved considerably in 2016, and as that bilateral relationship improved, so too did US-Japan-South Korea trilateral security co-operation. Continuing that trajectory will be difficult, however. Low-hanging fruit have been plucked, and the challenge is to protect the gains made. The threat environment — North Korea, to be precise — will continue to push the three countries together. Unfortunately, domestic politics will counter these centripetal tendencies. The political chaos in Seoul, in particular, triggered by President Park Geun-hye’s impeachment, offers fertile soil for those who reject accommodation and progress in relations with Japan.

In 2016, Seoul and Tokyo moved forward in several ways. The two governments agreed to restart currency swap arrangements, initiated in 2001 but suspended in 2015 as bilateral relations deteriorated. Last November, the two concluded their bilateral General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA), which had eluded both governments for several years. South Korea, Japan and the US signed a trilateral information-sharing agreement to address the threat of North Korean use of weapons of mass destruction. They participated in a trilateral missile-defense exercise in summer 2016, and mid- and high-level defense and diplomatic consultations picked up pace. South Korea’s armed forces and Japan’s Self-Defense Forces are both engaged in counter-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden and peacekeeping operations in South Sudan.

MOST POSITIVE STEP
The high point of bilateral reconciliation was the December 2015 “comfort women” agreement. That deal signaled the readiness of leaders in both countries to make real their oft-stated desire to build a more positive relationship, and the agreement, if implemented, will be a cornerstone for genuine partnership. Thus far, the signs are good: the public is growing more accepting of it, some surviving comfort women have signaled their willingness to accept the Japanese statement of official responsibility and the funds that Tokyo provided to start a new foundation.

Much can still go wrong, however. The fate of the statue of the young girl representing comfort women outside the Japanese embassy in Seoul is the biggest potential problem, compounded by the appearance of a similar statue in front of the Japanese consulate in Busan and plans to place another on Dokdo, the islets that Japan also claims. Fortunately, both governments seem committed to seeing the deal through, but the new statues and the current political chaos give reasons to be less optimistic.

THANKING NORTH KOREA
We can thank North Korea for much of the improvement. It has validated realist interpretations of state behavior, and its January nuclear test redirected public attention in South Korea away from the controversial comfort women agreement to more immediate security concerns. Pyongyang’s bellicose and insulting rhetoric and its threatening behavior have kept South Koreans focused on the threat from the North.

But history remains alive and fully capable of poisoning South Korea-Japan relations. South Koreans worry about the “sincerity” of Japanese statements of remorse for the past. Moreover, as Scott Snyder and I explained in The Japan-South Korea Identity Clash (Columbia University Press, 2015), Japan remains the most significant “other” for Koreans, and this is a core component of the South Korean sense of identity. Unfortunately, rather than seeing Japan as a partner that shares values and interests, the inclination among South Koreans is to embrace a competitive and adversarial view of its neighbor. Even South Koreans who understand the need for a forward-looking relationship with Japan are reflexively suspicious. (And, in a modern democracy, there will always be ample evidence to feed those suspicions.)

Not surprisingly, the “Japan card” remains a powerful weapon in South Korean domestic politics, and the early advent of another South Korean presidential campaign means that the South Korea-Japan relationship is likely to be politicized again. President Park Geun-hye was impeached in December after a series of scandals that drove her approval ratings to historical lows. The Constitutional Court upheld this decision on March 10. But even if it had invalidated the impeachment vote, Park would have had no credibility with the public and would have been in no position to defend improvements in relations with Japan. Opposition to the comfort women agreement will likely become more vocal during the campaign to elect a new president, and progressive politicians will use it — and the anti-Japan card more generally — even if only to oppose one of Park’s primary accomplishments. Given that much South Korean animosity and suspicion is directed toward Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, who looks set to continue as PM for some time, an easy target of Japan-bashing will remain visible.

At the same time, North Korea will continue its provocations as a way to influence the cam-

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paign. That would push a conservative candidate to hew a hard line, but provocations could inspire progressives to question such a policy; a left-leaning candidate might call for a return to something like the “sunshine policy” of former President Kim Dae-jung, which would further drive a wedge between Tokyo and Seoul and make it easier still to demonize Japan.

HISTORY AND WASHINGTON

From an American perspective, the need to counter the North Korean threat should take precedence over identity issues. To that end, Americans welcome a Japan that is more willing and capable of contributing to regional security. Sheding the “shackles of the past” along with overly constrictive legal (and mindset) restraints capable of contributing to regional security.

More important, however, is the example that the US can set and the leadership it can show in an active and forward-leaning approach to historical responsibility. Obama made an admirable step in this direction when he visited Hiroshima last year. US actions effectively raise the bar and prod other leaders to face their own histories; there would be powerful repercussions for any government that “pocketed” gestures of reconciliation without addressing its own historical record. Abe’s visit to Pearl Harbor in December 2016 suggests that this logic is correct.

IN JAPAN’S INTEREST

There is another reason for Japan to be more forthcoming in addressing its historical legacies with South Korea: a declining position in the region that will undermine its national interests. In our book, Snyder and I call for Washington to be more engaged in history disputes. While the primary responsibility for resolving these issues rests on South Korea and Japanese shoulders, the US claim that it is not involved is disingenuous, misleading and, I believe, detrimental to US interests. This is a controversial position that makes many US policy-makers uncomfortable. But the US was part of, or left its fingerprints on, key decisions in modern Asian history. A short list includes the 1905 Taft-Katsura treaty, which discussed the colonization of Korea by Japan; the atomic bombings of Japan; dividing the Korean Peninsula after the Second World War; defending South Korea in the Korean War, drawing up the terms of the San Francisco Peace Treaty; and torpedoing the 1956 Japan-Soviet Union negotiations over the Northern Territories. Behind-the-scenes work by US diplomats to promote trilateralism in general in recent years, and in particular efforts to help Tokyo and Seoul conclude the December 2015 Comfort Women agreement, is proof of the US interest in activism.

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A richer but less dynamic economy, will diminish Japan’s international role and presence. This will compound the growing tendency to focus inward. This domestic adjustment will occur as the regional environment evolves in ways that could disadvantage Japan. A stronger China has shown a readiness to challenge Japan and to right perceived historical wrongs. There is little reason to expect it to be more accommodating as the balance of power between these two swings more in China’s favor. Alternatively, if China encounters economic difficulties, Japan would be an easy target for nationalists looking for a scapegoat. However it plays out, without a marked shift in Japanese policy toward China, greater competition is likely and inadvertent conflict is possible. A new approach to history that seeks a new relationship with Asia would have to be part of this shift.

In other words, in the mid-term, Japan could have a shrinking economy, an aging population and hostile neighbors. The best defense against this future is an Asia policy focusing on Tokyo’s immediate neighbors, as Yoshihide Soeya has argued with great force and clarity in his work on Japanese diplomacy. Central to this effort is a reckoning with history that makes it clear that Japan has done all it can and that the recalcitrant parties are the intended recipients of those gestures. To do that, Japan should make concrete gestures to set to rest contentious issues. The comfortable deal is one such effort. The renunciation of the claim to Dokdo/Takeshima is another. With China, options include some resource-sharing arrangement on the Senkakus that provides more than a straight cut down the median line.

There are two immediate problems with this logic. First, according to the 2016 Genron NPO survey of Japanese and South Korean opinion, there is a tendency among Japanese to believe that the issues that bedevil relations with South Korea reflect anti-Japanese education, anti-Japanese media and “aggressive anti-Japan acts over historical issues” by South Korea. In other words, there are no discrete “problems” to be solved, as there are for South Koreans in the form of textbooks, reparations and comfort women apologies. Instead, there are systemic forces at work against the relationship, a logic that obviates the need for Japan to take action. Consistent with this outlook is a belief among many Japanese that the best approach is to let time solve these irritants.

The second problem is the very real prospect that South Korea will reject Japanese overtures. This could reflect a genuine fear that Japan poses a security threat to South Korea (a notion that discounts Japan’s post-war history and is hard to take seriously among those who know Japan), a cynical attempt to exploit a perceived vulnerability for advantage in the competition with Japan, an attempt to permanently inhabit the moral high ground and keep Japan on the defensive, or an internal need to have an antagonistic “other” to conform or reinforce a Korean sense of identity. All of these options are disturbing, but they can be minimized — with leadership and commitment.

The question then is whether the current political and geopolitical environments will spur constructive movement. A presidential campaign is rarely the arena for unpopular positions that challenge deeply-rooted national images and identities, so South Korean politicians are unlikely to break ground on the issue this year. Abe is unlikely to spend political capital without some guarantee his overtures will be reciprocated. Ironically, Donald Trump’s election as US president may prod Tokyo and Seoul to do more to compensate for a feared US disengagement — which bodes ill for progress if mere “sanity” prevail in the US.