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?

What’s Needed to Bring the US, Japan and South Korea Closer Together

Hard to Align
A South Korean Perspective
Getting to a Deal on ‘Comfort Women’
By Cheol Hee Park

No issue epitomizes the complexity of resolving history disputes between South Korea and Japan more than the issue of “comfort women.” For decades, differences over the issue have festered, hampering closer ties between the two countries and thwarting US efforts to foster stronger trilateral security co-operation. Cheol Hee Park examines the latest effort to address the issue and the remaining obstacles.

THE ACCORD of Dec. 28, 2015, between Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and South Korean President Park Geun-hye on settling the comfort women issue marked a diplomatic landmark: an effort to turn a contentious relationship into a co-operative one. It is not necessarily a perfect deal, but it set a new tone for relations between South Korea and Japan. But after Park’s December 2016 impeachment by the National Assembly, moves against the accord have risen in South Korea. The placement of another statue of a comfort woman in front of the Japanese Consulate in Busan reignited the controversy between the two countries, leading to an unstable, murky outlook for the full implementation of the deal.

TURNING DOWN THE HEAT
What were the gains of the agreement? First, it opened the way for Japan and South Korea to get out of a long, dark tunnel of suspicion, distrust and misunderstanding that they entered after the Kyoto Summit in December 2011 between South Korean President Lee Myung-bak and Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda. For almost four years, relations remained unpredictably turbulent. A way toward a deal was prepared by friendly gestures initiated on June 22, 2015, when Abe and Park appeared at a reception for the 50th anniversary of the normalization of diplomatic relations between South Korea and Japan. On Nov. 1, 2015, a bilateral summit meeting was held on the sidelines of the trilateral summit among South Korea, Japan and China. This accelerated the move toward a political deal. The two leaders agreed tacitly that the comfort women issue should be handled within the year that marked the diplomatic ties anniversary. This does not mean that they were free from domestic political pressures. Liberals in South Korea resisted any compromise with Abe’s Japan, while right-wingers in Japan rejected any convenient deal with Seoul. Only after the last-minute accord between Park and Abe in December 2015 has the comfort women issue been relatively sidelined — although problems certainly persist.

Second, by resolving the two countries’ most controversial issue, South Korea and Japan could proceed with other co-operative projects and initiatives, following the so-called two-track approach. It is no surprise that Seoul and Tokyo could co-operate on North Korea in the wake of Pyongyang’s fourth nuclear test on Jan. 6, 2016. Repeated missile launches further cemented security ties between the two countries. On Aug. 27, 2016, Japanese Finance Minister Taro Aso and South Korean Finance Minister Il-ho Yoo agreed to renegotiate the currency swap arrangement between the two countries that was stopped in February 2015. In a nutshell, the deal over comfort women opened a door to collaborative projects on several strategic issues.

The agreement was possible because both leaders eventually toned down the rhetoric on history issues that had been so common over the previous three years. At first, Abe had tilted to his right wing when history issues came up in the groundbreaking Murayama Statement of 1995. He also abstained from using controversial language that came close to the language used in the groundbreaking Murayama Statement of 1995. He also abstained from using controversial terms, even when he touched on history issues. Abe surprised many when he officially apologized and expressed repentance when the comfort women issue was raised during Abe’s Dec. 28, 2015 visit to the Yasukuni Shrine, despite repeated advice from personal aides and US leaders discouraging this. Abe often bundled China and South Korea together as countries that remained emotional hotspots for Japan.

But as time went by, he toned down his rhetoric. The so-called Abe Statement on August 15, 2015 — the 70th anniversary of the end of the Second World War — was a source of concern to South Korea, but in the end, Abe apologized in language that came close to the language used in the US President’s August 15, 2015 apology for wartime forced labor. In a nutshell, Abe’s approach was to use the term “comfort women issue” rather than vaguely expressing concerns about broader history issues, urging the Japanese government to resolve the issue while victims were still alive. Over the past three years, the two political leaders eventually showed a compromising stance toward each other, although they stood firm on the principles of handling history issues.

US PRESSURE
This process did not happen in a vacuum. The US constantly urged the two leaders to compromise on thorny history issues. The US could not
suggestion what the content of the deal should be to either side, but it did not stop urging the two sides to stand together as democratic allies. Faced with coping with a rising China and a provocative North Korea, the US, South Korea, and Japan felt a strategic need to collaborate. Although Washington could not force Seoul and Tokyo to strike a deal, both felt strong pressure from their common ally to re-establish a normal relationship.

Domestic pressure to improve the relationship also worked as a facilitating factor for both political leaders. While noisy minorities in both countries remained bound to nationalistic agendas and refused to compromise, civilian elites worked hard to re-engage. Party politicians, former ministers, scholars, and journalists worked at the end of August 2016, the Japanese government worked hard to re-engage. Party politicians, former ministers, scholars, and journalists worked investigated cases and heard the opinions of victimized comfort women about what should be done. The comfort women accord has faced more turmoil since President Park’s impeachment on Dec. 9, 2016. Opposition parties raised their voices against all of her achievements, backed up by massive demonstrations involving hundreds of thousands of citizens. Amid this political turmoil, civic organizations opposed to the comfort women deal set up another statue in front of the Japanese embassy. At the time of the deal, the South Korean government promised to make the utmost efforts to consult with relevant groups and bodies and relocate the statue. But more than 70 percent of the South Korean public is against relocation. As it is seen as a visible symbol of the issue, it is extremely hard for any political leader to act on moving it.

Meanwhile, the US security commitment to the entire Asia-Pacific region and sound alliance management are indispensable to bring South Korea and Japan together in an age of uncertainty. President Trump’s “America First” rhetoric and isolationist tendencies are a source of serious concern. While the deal is still in the process of being implemented, hawkish rhetoric from civil society should be avoided. In particular, right-wingers in Japan could reignite the emotional backlash in their country, making implementation very difficult. Patience and tolerance are necessary. The US should continue to encourage South Korea and Japan to stick to the deal and enlarge areas of trilateral and bilateral co-operation. Turning attention to provocative and unpredictable behavior by North Korea as well as a diplomatically assertive China would strengthen the basis for co-operative ties among the three countries. However, the hasty introduction of co-operative agendas, especially in the area of security co-operation, may unintentionally delay progress toward deepening ties between South Korea and Japan.

The comfort women accord’s first anniversary of the deal, 34 out of 46 remaining victims showed a willingness to accept compensation from the foundation. It looked as if implementation of the accord was going smoothly.

NEGATIVE VIEWS SURFACE
But negative public views of the deal remained greater than positive ones in South Korea. Hawkish opposition party members suggested repealing and renegotiating the deal. Civic groups supporting comfort women also refused to accept it. They established a foundation of their own, The Justice and Remembrance Foundation. The most politically sensitive issue might well be the relocation of the statue of a comfort woman in front of the Japanese embassy. At the time of the deal, 70 percent of the South Korean public is against relocation. At the time of the deal, 78 percent of respondents felt that the statue should remain. So the South Korean government is stuck between Japan’s request to relocate the statue and Korean public opinion that it stay.

No one can say for sure whether the comfort women accord will remain intact or be broken in the future, considering the very volatile political situation. It depends on the outcome of Park’s impeachment review and the result of a subsequent presidential election. If an opposition leader in favor of renegotiating the accord wins the presidency, the deal will face significant challenges. Unilateral repeal by South Korea may be possible, but renegotiating the deal is not likely given that the Abe government has no intention to do so. Another dilemma is that the Reconciliation and Healing Foundation is already moving to distribute money to victims. Turning the clock back would be a hard, if not impossible, task. Yet it is clear the accord cannot be smoothly implemented in the face of the domestic backlash in South Korea and reversing or renegotiating it may not be realistic. Much more likely is a scenario in which the two countries simply muddle through.

MOVING AHEAD, SLOWLY
What should be done? In order to manage the history issue, sincerity and modesty should be guiding principles. Because these history issues still involve clear and present victims, governments on both sides should be sincere in handling the issues in a way that brings comfort to the victims. Provoking them would block the possibility of implementing the deal.

While the deal is still in the process of being implemented, hawkish rhetoric from civil society should be avoided. In particular, right-wingers in Japan could reignite the emotional backlash in their country, making implementation very difficult. Patience and tolerance are necessary. The US should continue to encourage South Korea and Japan to stick to the deal and enlarge areas of trilateral and bilateral co-operation. Turning attention to provocative and unpredictable behavior by North Korea as well as a diplomatically assertive China would strengthen the basis for co-operative ties among the three countries. However, the hasty introduction of co-operative agendas, especially in the area of security co-operation, may unintentionally delay progress toward deepening ties between South Korea and Japan.

Most important of all, a US security commitment to the entire Asia-Pacific region and sound alliance management are indispensable to bring South Korea and Japan together in an age of uncertainty. President Trump’s “America First” rhetoric and isolationist tendencies are a source of serious concern. If the US retreats from its security presence in the region, South Korea and Japan may try to find an independent and autonomous way of handling their security concerns. This will lead to unnecessary troubles and instability in the Western Pacific and may disrupt peace in the region.

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