Still Frosty After All These Years

Politics Cast a Chill Over Japan-South Korea Relations

By Jonathan Berkshire Miller

Closer relations between Japan and South Korea continue to be hindered by nationalism fueled by historical grievances, with relatively new leadership in both countries contributing in different ways. If tensions continue to escalate, it could undermine security in the region. It’s time for Tokyo and Seoul to step back from the brink, writes Jonathan Berkshire Miller.
Abe walked up to Park and extended his hand. The niceties that followed this gesture were mere protocol, but the symbolism of Abe’s daring approach should not be dismissed. The Abe government has been trying to set up a summit meeting with Park since she took office in February, but has been rebuffed on each occasion.

IT WOULD BE AN UNDERSTATEMENT to label this past year as a low point in recent Japan-South Korea relations. It began with cautious hope that new leadership in both countries might resist the temptation to give in to rising tides of domestic nationalism. Unfortunately, the opposite has been the case. Nine months have passed since South Korean President Park Geun-hye’s inauguration and there are no signs of a rapprochement between Tokyo and Seoul. In fact, on the political level, tensions have risen, highlighted by Park’s recent reference to a possible summit with Japan’s Prime Minister Shinzo Abe as “pointless.”

Yet as the months pass without engagement between Washington’s two key allies in Northeast Asia, the geopolitical scene in the region remains dynamic, requiring co-operation rather than division. North Korea continues its cycle of provocations followed by outreach to the West, and it has successfully delayed any resumption of the Six-Party talks or other substantive negotiations on its nuclear weapons program. Meanwhile, Tokyo’s regional strategic calculus has been evolving rapidly as it tries to meet an increasing assertive Chinese posture in the East China Sea — a situation with the potential to lead to miscalculation at best and open conflict at worst. The complete break-down in bilateral ties between Japan and South Korea is thus not only harmful to the two countries, but also has negative consequences for the region and the US “rebalance” to the Asia-Pacific.

LDP REDUX AND THE RETURN OF ABE
Abe, who had an underwhelming year as prime minister from 2006 to 2007, last December completed a remarkable political renaissance, returning to the leadership of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and scoring a decisive election victory to become prime minister again. He promised comprehensive reform of the country’s long-stalled economy through a series of stimulus measures dubbed “Abenomics.” On the foreign policy side, he stressed a reinvigorated commitment to defend Japan against Chinese provocations in the East China Sea as well as a stronger approach to resolving the abduction issue with North Korea.

Just before his election last year, Abe told his supporters that he would not permit Japan to be the region’s doormat: “What has happened in the past three years? Russia’s president landed on the Kurile Islands, while South Korea’s president landed on Dokdo-Takeshima. And Chinese vessels have intruded into Japanese territorial waters many times.” Tough campaign rhetoric such as this continues to fuel confusion in Seoul and worries that Abe is tilting toward right-wing nationalism.

This is not to say that Abe has not made mistakes in his approach to South Korea. Abe and his cabinet have made several clumsy remarks over the past year on Japan’s historical record surrounding World War II. Indeed, the prime minister fumbled at the beginning of Park’s term when he heralded the relationship between his grandfather — former Japanese Prime Minister Nobusuke Kishi — and Park’s father, former South Korean President Park Chung-hee. The innocent sentiment betrayed the political realities and pressures that Park faces as the daughter of the former dictator, who also served in the Japa-
South Korea believes that it has the opportunity — and the necessity — to hedge. In other words, South Korea is using this moment in geopolitical space to gain leverage over Japan and compel it to drift closer toward a regional approach to issues rather than one dominated by the US-Japan alliance.

PARK STRUGGLES FOR A DIPLOMATIC FOOTING
In September 2013, Park met with US Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel in Seoul. Hagel’s trip was connected with the 60th anniversary of the US-South Korea alliance. Yet, rather than focusing on the significant challenges and opportunities facing the partnership, Park dismissed Hagel’s call for greater trilateral co-operation with Japan, claiming that there was a lack of trust due to the Abe administration’s “inability to come to terms with history.” These comments follow a puzzling chain of events in which the Korean leader has shown a remarkable lack of diplomatic tact — including complaints to US President Barack Obama during their Washington summit in May and Park’s cold reception of Abe at the Asia-Pacific Economic Co-operation (APEC) meetings in Indonesia this fall.

Putting South Korea’s approach into context is essential. Park is still in the early stages of her presidency and is trying to gain footing politically. Moreover, she has to contend with pressures — some self-induced — magnified by the fact that she is South Korea’s first female leader and also the daughter of a notorious dictator. In other words, Park feels that it is politically safe, and perhaps even optimal, to maintain the status quo in South Korea’s frosty relationship with Japan. She will likely remain risk-adverse at least until the end of this year, and seems determined to wait out a summit meeting until Abe makes a commitment — even if quietly — not to visit the Yasukuni Shrine, because if Abe or a senior cabinet minister did visit, it would prove embarrassing for Park at home.

The truth is that South Korea’s decisions are less focused on relations with Japan than with its ties with the US and China. For example, during her summit with Obama, Park expressed a desire to co-ordinate efforts with Beijing on North Korea. Interestingly enough, this was after Obama had asked Park for more openness toward trilateral co-operation with Japan on the threat from Pyongyang. An Asahi Shimbun editorial earlier this year said that Tokyo had been “left as the odd man out as China and South Korea cozy up politically to counter the threat posed by North Korea’s nuclear weapons and missile programs.”

On the surface, it seems that Park’s attempt to forge a trilateral dialogue among South Korea, the US and China serves a dual purpose for Seoul: first, it tightens the screws on North Korea; second, it is a Public relations victory domestically, because it marginalizes Japan. This was evident in remarks last May by a senior South Korean bureaucrat who praised such collaboration and effectively snubbed Tokyo, noting that “North Korea may have been trying to get something by raising tensions, but South Korea, the US and China are not going to accept that any more.”

Tokyo seemingly struck back at this attempted isolation by sending Isao Iijima, special advisor to Abe and former North Korea hand, to Pyongyang two weeks after Park’s trip to Washington — a move loudly condemned by Seoul.

In this respect, it is important to differentiate the Japan-South Korea rift from the strained ties between China and Japan. Seoul has a more emotional view of ties with Japan — and believes it is taking a principled stand. Beijing, on the other hand, has been able to leverage such historical animosities in order to achieve its strategic goals, such as weakening Japan’s resolve and international support in the East China Sea, as well as its grander goal of upending the geostrategic order in East Asia that is largely dominated by the US-Japan alliance. South Korea recognizes these drivers as well as China’s economic emergence, and believes it has the opportunity — and the necessity — to hedge. In other words, South Korea is using this moment in geopolitical space to gain leverage over Japan and compel it to drift closer toward a regional approach to issues rather than one dominated by the US-Japan alliance.

Seoul has been emboldened by a series of diplomatic coups, including its hosting of the G-20 Summit in 2010 and the Nuclear Security Summit in 2012, as well as the impending 2018 Winter Olympics. South Korea is also upping the ante on traditional powerhouses — including Japan — on nuclear energy deals in the Middle East. All of this has built a sense of diplomatic muscle and a feeling that Seoul no longer needs to be dependent on Japanese foreign direct investment or play the role of a pragmatic economist. This success has also spurred a new sense of nationalism in South Korea that espouses more independent decisions — including the unprecedented outreach to China.

CURBING BRINKSMANSHIP, PUSHING INCREMENTALISM
The fact that Park wants to extract both emotional and strategic concessions from Japan shows that most policy-makers in Seoul have not yet determined what package is necessary from Japan in order to normalize ties. In other words, Seoul remains internally confused about its own expectations of Japan because of these ambiguities. This dual track is further complicated by the clash of perceived political risk with bureaucratic pragmatism and signs that the Korean public may be more inclined to co-operate with Japan than previously thought.

Interestingly, this past October, the Asan Institute in South Korea polled Koreans on whether there should be a summit meeting with Abe; 58 percent were in favor, 35 percent opposed and 7 percent undecided. Similarly, on the need for a General Security of Military Information Agreement with Japan, which is an agreement on the sharing of classified data, 60 percent of those polled were supportive, 32 percent opposed and 7 percent undecided. These polls provide an intriguing comparison to this past summer’s poll by Genron NPO in Japan, which showed that nearly 80 percent of Koreans have an “unfavorable” image of Japan. Even more interesting, though, is that the Korean public already

6 “GSOMIA is a fairly routine agreement outlining procedures to facilitate the sharing of classified defense-related threat information regarding North Korea’s nuclear and missile programs and other potential common security challenges. Its adoption would also make trilateral defense co-operation with Washington easier for both Japan and South Korea. Seoul has agreements similar to GSOMIA with some 26 other countries.” Source: Ralph A. Cossa, “Japan-South Korea Relations: Time to Open Both Eyes,” Council on Foreign Relations, July 2012. www.cfr.org/japan-south-korea/japansouth-korea-relations-time-open-both-eyes/p28736
seems to understand the necessity of cooperation with Japan, but that message has not yet pushed Park to mend ties with Abe due to her fear of political risk.

Seoul’s confusion on preconditions for improved relations has led many in Tokyo’s policy circles to wonder what Japan needs to do in order to restore high-level bilateral talks. Yet the prospect of a summit appears unlikely anytime soon. The Abe administration, meanwhile, has rejected the idea of preconditions for a face-to-face meeting with Park. Summits between leaders are particularly important during challenging times such as these, when diplomacy is most valued. Yet it is clear that trench diplomacy is not working, and the Abe and Park administrations will need to look at new approaches.

It is crucial for both leaders to avoid further inflaming ties by using historical grievances for domestic political purposes. Specifically, the Abe administration should maintain its self-imposed moratorium on visits by the prime minister and senior cabinet figures to the Yasukuni Shrine. Similarly, the Abe government should continue to uphold and vocally support the details of the Murayama and Kono statements. Finally, Japan should delicately approach Takeshima Day in February and avoid appearing to lend it official government support.

Similarly, in South Korea, Park should leverage the views of the Korean people, who are essentially advocating a pragmatic approach to Japan, in order to deflect sniping from critics at home. Park also needs to part with the extremely divisive and undiplomatic language she is directing towards Tokyo and allow the bureaucracies on both sides to work toward an understanding on differences. Moreover, South Korea should refrain from provoking Japan on Dokdo/Takeshima by maintaining the status quo and curbing any high-level political visits or military exercises.

In the coming year, it will be vital for both sides to recognize that incremental change is better than no change. A “grand bargain” is probably not realistic, but this is not to say that both sides cannot work towards this goal through a reduction of the current trust deficit. In this sense, Japan and South Korea should look at non-sensitive areas of enhanced cooperation such as counter-piracy, cyber security and energy consultations. These areas can strengthen political-security cooperation between the two without focusing on regional tensions. But efforts to build strategic cooperation at the bureaucratic and business level will suffer if political gridlock continues. Japan and South Korea will first need to put weight behind these confidence-building measures, which will help bring the relationship back from the brink and hopefully transform handshakes into summits.

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