

Only the United States Can Pull Japan and Korea Back from the Brink

In the vast U.S. alliance network, there are few tasks as prone to disappointment as managing the Japan-South Korea bilateral relationship. Just ask staffers at the National Security Council, the Pentagon and the State Department, who must continually push for enhanced bilateral and trilateral competition in the face of a steep hill of historical and political issues. Even amidst a half-century of occasional spats over these historical debates, U.S. alliance leadership has led to serious accomplishments: the Trilateral Information Sharing Arrangement (TISA), the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA), and a litany of bilateral agreements that have significantly expanded trade, military, and people-to-people ties between Japan and South Korea. But while previous disputes threatened to curtail future agreements or derail proposed initiatives, the threat of a full-bore Japan-South Korea trade war over the result of a judgment ordering expropriation of Japanese property to compensate former South Korean forced laborers threatens the very foundations of ties between the two nations. Though it has received little coverage in the Western press, make no mistake: the trade war is now a political war; a full-blown emergency that merits the full attention of U.S. senior leadership.

On recent visits to South Korea, we witnessed firsthand the nadir to which Japan-South Korea relations have plummeted. In our meetings with politicians, senior officials, think tanks, and academics, many were clear-eyed about the need for trilateral cooperation. Some officials, though, labeled the current Japanese government as “ultra-rightist” and all spoke about Japan’s political leadership and foreign policy establishment in unflinchingly harsh terms.

Based on what we heard separately from foreign policy types in Seoul, we came away deeply troubled at the state of Japan-South Korean relations—the lynchpin of the U.S. alliance network in Northeast Asia. In Japan too, policy elites have voiced mirror-image concerns over what we witnessed in Seoul.

With both countries due to hold elections soon, there are few domestic political

incentives to back down from the precipice. As President Moon's outreach to North Korea is falling on deaf ears, pivoting to support of domestic Korean electronics manufacturing may be the economic shot-in-the-arm he needs to shore up public support. In a squeeze between the U.S. alliance and the trade relationship with China, criticism of Japan plays well to both the conservative and liberal voting blocs in the electorate. With 56 percent of Japanese citizens deeming the economic retaliation against South Korea "appropriate," Prime Minister Abe also faces little incentive to change course. One should not expect a golden era in trilateral cooperation any time soon. Indeed, news that Japan has refused to hold further working group meetings with South Korea—even going so far as to say that "the relationship of trust has crumbled"—only further underscores the gravity of the present situation.

In both South Korea and Japan, a fervent brand of zero-sum nationalism in opposition to the other nation has existed for centuries. Indeed, we witnessed firsthand in our recent visit what we believe to be a 70-year low in Japan-South Korea relations, despite the best behind-the-scenes efforts of the United States to broker effective trilateral cooperation.

But despite past rancor over historical and territorial issues, two major interest groups in both nations, the business community, and the respective militaries have long served as the ballast in the relationship between South Korea and Japan. Military-military cooperation, particularly between the two navies, has seen the U.S. leverage its role as senior alliance partner to offer a neutral practice ground for both nations. Business and people-to-people ties have benefited from tourism numbers that continue to rise at a double-digit pace.

The recent skid in Japan-Korea relations is alarming, particularly because it directly impacts these foundational aspects of Japan-Korea ties. Were these key "ballast" areas to vanish, the ship of state would soon founder.

The naval relationship was nearly torpedoed in late January when the two sides traded accusations over what was alternatively a Japanese patrol aircraft buzzing a South Korean destroyer (the Korean side's perspective) or a South Korean destroyer locking its fire-control radar onto a Japanese patrol aircraft (the Japanese perspective).

The business community has been similarly shaken by fallout from a contentious

South Korean court case over the compensation for victims of Japan's colonial-era practice of forced labor. With Korean courts ordering expropriation of Japanese shares to compensate the victims, Tokyo has retaliated by restricting sales of technology components to South Korean firms. The Japanese government has vacillated between insisting that the restrictions are for legitimate national security purposes or alternatively are retaliatory measures for the forced labor ruling, weakening Japan's case. The restriction of components for South Korean semiconductor manufacturers, as well as Japanese accusations that South Korea has re-exported sanctioned chemicals to North Korea, threatens to take the relationship to an "emergency level."

The stakes could not be higher for the United States. With President Trump's on-again, off-again nuclear diplomacy with North Korea again taking off, and further Chinese moves to demonstrate a claim to hegemony in East Asia, maintaining a united front among allies is critical.

While the United States has played the role of mediator in the past, President Trump's repeated broadsides against both nations amidst contentious negotiations over trade and burden-sharing issues has reduced Washington's leverage in both countries. Though leader-level diplomacy is precisely what is required in this alliance "emergency," Washington's diminished stock leaves the United States with few options. Our meetings in Seoul further reinforced our conviction that China will be ready and willing to step up as a partner of South Korea if the United States does not right the relationship.

The question then becomes: where and how are U.S. efforts to begin?

Officials at the State Department have taken a public position that U.S. browbeating, cajoling, or other such impositions are likely to fail. This is likely why David Stilwell, the assistant Secretary of state for East Asia and Pacific affairs, insisted on a recent visit to Japan that it was "not [his] job to mediate" between the two nations. The U.S. government has had little to say publicly about the most recent downturn, issuing statements calling for trilateral cooperation from both Stilwell himself and the office of the State Department spokeswoman. It is in this vein of behind-closed-doors diplomacy that the NSC director for Asia, Matthew Pottinger, along with national security adviser John Bolton, visited Japan and Korea last weekend. This is welcome but insufficient.

Further, Stilwell's trip schedule did not take him directly from Tokyo to Seoul, but rather to Seoul by way of The Philippines and Thailand. This was likely to avoid the perception that the United States is engaged in shuttle diplomacy or is privileging Japan's concerns to those of South Korea.

This is a mistake. Months of private U.S. diplomacy has thus far yielded very little—in fact just the opposite. Things are now getting worse. News that the Blue House is considering abrogation of GSOMIA is a flashing alarm. The fact that the South Korean government considers GSOMIA abrogation a “lever to use against the U.S.” because of its “necessity” to U.S.-Japan relations only illustrates the speed at which the problem is deepening.

The United States must take a firm stand publicly and vocally—at the highest levels—about the criticality of these relationships to core U.S. interests. When the Japan-South Korea leader-to-leader relationship has become so thoroughly toxic, U.S. mediation is in order.

To put it bluntly, President Moon is viewed poorly in Japan—his government's withdrawal from the 2015 “comfort women” agreement and refusal to accept third-party arbitration for the forced labor dispute is seen by the Abe administration as evidence that the Korean government “cannot safeguard country-to-country promises.” Abe is similarly viewed in South Korea; Thirty-eight percent of Koreans view Japan as a “military threat.” Climbing out of the valley of Japan-Korea relations will look less like a full-blown reconciliation and more like a temporary truce. A tie break is needed, and only Washington has the heft to do that—the benefit and curse of being the senior alliance partner.

Beyond the public mediation effort, more private, behind-the-scenes work must be done to insulate the relationship from politics. Just as the navies of all three countries can cooperate well on the high seas, away from the prying eyes of politicians or the media, the United States should create private, neutral spaces for working-level officials from Japan and South Korea to continue cooperating on areas of mutual interest. We encourage the U.S. government to consider trilateral cooperation on creating a united front before the next phase of U.S.-North Korea diplomacy; increasing exchanges between navies; and discussing the implementation of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy. To begin healing the wounds caused by the budding political and trade war, we also recommend that the U.S. secretary of commerce host a business roundtable for Korean and

Japanese firms. By generating consensus among the business community, the United States can make it clear to Korean and Japanese policymakers that more restrictions will be deeply damaging to regional and global supply chains.

The key will be to avoid public discussions on sensitive issues that could become fodder for politicians eager to prove to voters back home that they are ready to do combat on historical matters. Maintaining the dialogue at the assistant secretary or senior official level would help to advance meaningful dialogue while avoiding prying eyes.

To make up for the lost opportunity of a leadership summit at the G-20 summit, we finally recommend that the United States strongly encourage a leader-to-leader meeting on the margins of the upcoming UN General Assembly meeting in New York. The opportunity to issue a joint communique and shake hands would be a welcome reset button and a display of statesmanship from both sides.

The resolution of the “emergency” in Japan-Korea relations will hinge on more than simply U.S. involvement, however. For as much as the United States is capable of convening officials from the two nations, fundamental resolution of the historical issues will depend upon South Korea and Japan engaging in the politics of compromise—based on their shared interest and shared democratic and liberal values.

South Korea must accept that any final agreement it reaches will be fundamentally imperfect and incomplete by design, while Japan will have to understand that “apology fatigue” cannot get in the way of a meaningful deal that has a real chance of bettering relations. Both countries will have to sign compromises and stick to them, no matter how political leadership might change.

It is no exaggeration to say that Japan-South Korea relations have entered their ugliest phase in decades. It remains unclear to some observers that further movement is even salvageable. Based on what we witnessed in our recent visits, it will take more than a gentle push for cooperation for Washington to play the role it needs to play as the senior ally of both nations. It will take a shove.

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