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U.S. Should Encourage Reconciliation Between Japan and South Korea

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Japanese Prime Minister Shinzō Abe's forthcoming statement commemorating the 70th anniversary of the end of World War II has the potential to either repair or further impair Tokyo's current stilted bilateral relations with Seoul. Indeed, a cottage industry has sprouted up predicting what he will say or will not say and the effect his words might have on recent rapprochement efforts by both countries.

At issue is whether Abe will include sufficient acknowledgement and atonement for Japan's actions during its 1910–1945 occupation of the Korean Peninsula. His remarks will be scoured for key phrases contained in previous official statements by Japan expressing remorse for wartime aggression and the forced sexual slavery of women.

Strained relations between two critically important allies is of grave concern to Washington since it hinders U.S. security interests in Asia and constrains effective integrated responses to the North Korean military threat. While Washington should be careful not to take sides in the contentious bilateral dispute, it is in U.S. national interests to advocate against historic revisionism, emotional nationalism, and mischaracterizations of U.S. and Japanese security policies.

The Past Is Always Present

There is always some degree of inherent stress in the South Korea–Japan relationship due to unresolved historic issues and sovereignty disputes. Periodic spikes in tensions are triggered by, for example, textbook revisions or comments by either country's policymakers. Though the most recent episode began during the previous South Korean and Japanese administrations, Abe's perceived revisionist beliefs have added fuel to the fire.

It is therefore encouraging that both leaders have, in recent months, endeavored to repair the relationship by addressing and by compartmentalizing historic issues. Prime Minister Abe's successful U.S. trip and his resumption of talks with China earlier this year triggered sharp domestic criticism of President Park Geun-hye for South Korea's growing diplomatic isolation.

South Korean media and legislators across the political spectrum reproached her singular foreign policy focus on gaining stronger acknowledgement by Tokyo of its wartime actions. She responded to the criticism by publicly acknowledging the necessity for Seoul to compartmentalize and prioritize its foreign policy and vowed a new willingness to improve relations with Japan.

In recent months, the South Korean and Japanese foreign, finance, and defense ministers have all met with their counterparts. For some, it was their first meeting in years. In June, Park and Abe attended parallel events at each other's embassies to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the normalization of diplomatic relations. Japan defused a diplomatic crisis in July by accommodating Seoul's request to incorporate references to forced Korean labor so as to gain UNESCO world heritage site status for historic Japanese locations.

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Real progress on the nascent rapprochement initiative remains dependent on Abe's anniversary statement. South Korean Foreign Minister Yun Byung-se commented in July that the two leaders' first bilateral summit was possible only if there is progress on historic issues such as "imperial Japan's mobilization of sex slaves."¹

Many Japanese believe that Tokyo apologized sufficiently and settled all issues of restitution during the 1965 treaty normalizing relations with South Korea. Yet, South Korean sensitivities remain that have led to present-day concerns over Abe's advocacy of Japanese defense forces assuming a larger global security role.

Abe has the opportunity to repair strained relations with Seoul and begin a new chapter of reconciliation and cooperation, but he can only do so by affirming unambiguous recognition and repentance of Japan's past actions, which would mean, at a minimum, incorporating terminology² used by his predecessors Tomiichi Murayama and Junichiro Koizumi on the 50th and 60th anniversaries of the end of World War II and by Chief Cabinet Secretary Yohei Kono on the topic of sexual slavery.

The Japanese leader would increase the potential for improving relations with Seoul if he were to go beyond previous Japanese statements of remorse. Moreover, he should gain Cabinet approval to make the proclamation official government policy rather than his current plan to release it as a "personal statement."

Washington has a role to play since the U.S. is inexorably linked to Asia, not only by history but by the need to stand firmly with our friends, even when they disagree with each other. The U.S. should continue to play an important behind-the-scenes facilitator role by encouraging, cajoling, and even occasionally privately criticizing both nations.

Washington must continue to make clear to Prime Minister Abe that the potential for improved relations with South Korea, the success of his defense reform policy—including implementing collective self-defense—and the ability for Japan to rightfully assume a larger regional and global leadership role all rest on the content of his anniversary statement. Quite simply, Abe's and Park's legacies may rely on the former's statement and the latter's response.

In the run-up to Abe's statement, the U.S. should engage South Korea to emphasize that, if it is willing to move forward, Seoul must acknowledge positive steps by Japan when they occur. Washington should encourage Seoul to provide specific conditions for reconciliation rather than continue to rely on amorphous and unattainable demands for "sincerity" from Tokyo.

While the majority of responsibility lies with Abe, President Park must be sincere in her own recent pledge to not allow history to be the sole determinant in policy toward Japan. Park has the opportunity to address growing regional security challenges and reassert an important Korean role on the world stage.

Alternatively, President Park could maintain her singular focus on the past, which has constrained South Korea's defense against security threats, caused frustration in Washington, led to Seoul's growing isolation, and left South Korea more susceptible to outreach from Beijing and Pyongyang—both of whom work against South Korea's best interests.

Both Prime Minister Abe and President Park will need to exercise strong and bold leadership by standing up to fervent populist nationalism which has inflamed public opinion and impeded reconciliation. That neither has been willing to do so shows the need for a U.S. role, though one that is usually best exercised in private diplomatic exchanges.

While it has been said that those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it, the same can be said of those unable to resolve the past and extricate themselves from it. The past is important, but so are the present and the future.

Asia is vitally important to the United States—as is American presence and involvement in Asia. We can only be present and involved with the help of strong and true friends, economic partners, and allies. There are no better examples of that than Japan and the Republic of Korea.

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1. Im Min-hyuk, "FM Comments on Defection of N. Korean Officials," *Chosun Ilbo*, July 10, 2015, http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2015/07/10/20150710000796.html (accessed July 23, 2015).
2. Some key phrases include colonial rule and aggression, deep remorse, and heartfelt apology.