Ending a Feud Between Allies*

By Victor D. Cha and Karl Friedhoff
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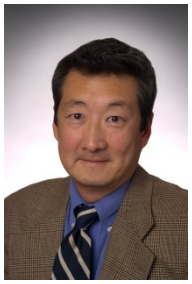

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***Victor Cha**, a senior adviser at the Center for Strategic and International Studies and a professor at Georgetown, was the director of Asian affairs for the National Security Council from 2004 to 2007. **Karl Friedhoff** is a program officer at the Asan Institute for Policy Studies in Seoul and a Mansfield Foundation U.S.-Korea Nexus scholar.*

Last month Japanese officials once again visited the controversial Yasukuni Shrine, which many Asians deplore as a symbol of Japan's militaristic past. Soon afterward, South Korea celebrated a law passed in 1900 that claimed sovereignty over the Liancourt Rocks, a disputed outcropping in the waters between the countries.

Animosity between Japan and Korea is nothing new. But these latest events have taken relations to a new low and threaten American interests just as President Obama has embarked on a new effort to improve Washington's position in the region.

Korean-Japanese tensions date from Japan's invasion of the Korean Peninsula in the late 16th century. But the sorest point remains Japan's 35-year occupation of Korea through the end of World War II. Japan may have lost the war, but the Japanese have maintained an attitude of national superiority over Koreans, which is matched by a Korean sense of resentment and outrage.

Under the pressures of the Cold War, and with a significant push by the United States, the two countries normalized political relations in 1965 and managed to forge security and economic cooperation. And while occasional flare-ups occurred over Japanese history textbooks or insensitive remarks by politicians, this cooperation extended well into the post-Cold War years.

This time is different. The latest strains come after a series of relations-eroding developments: The two countries have not renewed a currency-swap agreement, have shelved free-trade talks and have failed to complete two defense agreements.

At the recent Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation summit meeting in Indonesia, the South Korean president, Park Geun-hye, and the Japanese prime minister, Shinzo Abe, were seated next to each other but did not talk. When the American defense secretary, Chuck Hagel, raised

1616 RHODE ISLAND AVENUE NW
WASHINGTON, DC 20036
TEL. (202) 887.0200
FAX (202) 775.3199

the importance of Seoul-Tokyo cooperation in a private meeting with Ms. Park, she dressed him down with a history lesson.

Meanwhile, South Koreans are nervous over Mr. Abe's plans for a stronger Japanese military, which they fear could be used for offensive operations (currently prohibited by the Japanese Constitution).

Should these tensions continue, and deepen, they could undermine President Obama's "pivot" to Asia. Without defense cooperation between South Korea and Japan, the United States cannot respond effectively to North Korea's nuclear and missile provocations.

While the trilateral alliance does not seek to contain China, the absence of cooperation among the three like-minded allies on everything from cybersecurity to missile defense inhibits America's capacity to shape China's rise in constructive ways.

And the United States cannot work as effectively on a host of global issues, including climate change, international development, nuclear security and free trade without the cooperation of these two major economies.

In the past, Washington forged cooperation by more or less forcing the countries to do its bidding. But the perceived balance between the countries has shifted significantly, especially from the Korean perspective.

After decades of stagnation, Japan is awakening under a reinvigorated prime minister who has stimulated the economy and pushed national security reforms, boldly claiming, "Japan is back."

During Japan's stagnation, however, South Korea transformed itself. Not only did it become a complex democracy, but it is now the world's 15th largest economy, with companies that outperform their Japanese rivals. South Korea now views Japan as a declining power.

The difficult relations between the two countries are partly rooted in the expediencies of a 1945 peace settlement engineered by the United States, which eventually made Japan the bulwark of American Cold War security in Asia.

The solution today, however, is not to rewrite yesterday's agreements. The United States must continue to press for pragmatic cooperation, but with a new approach that focuses on three issues.

For one, the United States should recognize that even while Asian governments make difficulties over perceived historical slights, their publics care less and less about them. Our polling research in South Korea, for example, shows that only 8 percent of those questioned rank historical and territorial issues as the primary determinant of their voting behavior.

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FAX (202) 775.3199

South Korean leaders have typically cited public disgust over such slights as a reason closer cooperation with Japan won't work. Clearly that's wrong — and the United States can push them to stop using it as a crutch.

Washington should also push Tokyo to be more open about its foreign policy goals. Japan must reach out to its neighbors, perhaps through a special envoy, to discuss the intentions behind Mr. Abe's defense plans. Doing so would improve regional trust and most likely lead to mutually beneficial defense cooperation.

Finally, the United States should encourage Japanese good faith in resolving the biggest historical sticking point, comfort women. The practice of conscripting young girls as sexual slaves for the Japanese Imperial Army during World War II requires a formal acknowledgment and apology. Mr. Abe should also meet with some of the survivors.

While Asian publics do not rate historical issues as highly as politicians believe, anger on this particular issue is universal. Japan's long-running practice of accepting the existence of such practices but denying the government's involvement irreparably stains the country's reputation in the international court of public opinion.

The United States cannot "pivot" to Asia while remaining silent on the historical issues that most vex the region. Resolving these tensions would not only demonstrate America's influence but would also remove a barrier to the further expansion of American power in the region.

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