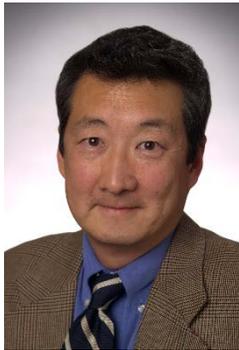


KOREA CHAIR PLATFORM

What We Learn From Edwin Reischauer About the U.S. Role in Japan-Korea Relations

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With foreign minister Yun Byung-se's visit to Tokyo and courtesy call on Prime Minister Abe Shinzo this week, it looks as though the feud between Japan and the Republic of Korea that has stymied bilateral relations may be coming to a close. Both governments celebrated the 50th anniversary of the diplomatic normalization treaty on Monday in a low-key but positive fashion, and speculation is that the two leaders will finally hold their first bilateral summit on the sidelines of a trilateral ROK-Japan-China meeting later this fall hosted in Seoul.

The causes for the current dispute are many, but I would point to two. The first was President Lee Myung-bak's visit to Dokdo island in 2012. Lee's visit was in retrospect ill-advised, not because Korea does not have the right to lay claim to the island, but because it violated the cardinal rule of unresolved historical issues in international relations – that is, if you cannot do any good, then do no further harm. Prior to Lee's visit, a routine cycle of diplomacy over Dokdo included the annual "Takeshima day" in Japan, that was then followed by Korean protests. This cycle would create irritants in the relationship, but it was predictable and therefore manageable. Lee's visit, the first ever by a Korean president, broke this tenuous status quo, forcing reactions on the Japanese side.

The second event was more personal and had to do with President Park's inauguration. Tokyo sent former premier Taro Aso, who given his diplomatic rank, was certainly meant convey a supportive message to Seoul. But Aso, not known to mince words, had a less-than-cordial conversation with the newly inaugurated Korean leader about history, which did not get the



relationship off to a good start.

Abe's intimations early on that he might revise the Kono statement and Murayama apology on comfort women added fuel to the fire, again because it suggested that Tokyo might seek to change the tenuous status quo on this delicate issue. To his credit, he later promised to uphold these conventions, which now sets the stage for his handling of August 15th, the 70th anniversary of the Pacific War.

I think the betting man in Washington hopes to see Abe use new language when he talks about history, perhaps reiterating the word "repentance" which he used in addressing the U.S. Congress last in April. But more than the word choice, which foreign ministry lawyers obsessively pore over, it would be nice to see the Prime Minister make some sort of human gesture regarding the comfort women survivors. Because that is what will be remembered more than any clever new language formulation.

Media coverage this week has been optimistic about the sudden turn in Seoul-Tokyo relations, but we should remember we are far from out of the shadows just yet. Experts on this relationship know its volatility well, and August 15 is still a long way away for things to go wrong or for tenuous negotiations to fall apart.

There is no country that would suffer more from a stalling of the newfound positive momentum than the United States. Throughout history, the U.S. has played a quiet but positive role behind the scenes urging its two allies to have better relations. Fifty years ago, when foreign minister Shiina Etsusaburo arrived in Seoul for normalization discussions with his counterpart Lee Tongwon, accompanying Japan's chief diplomat was the U.S. ambassador to Japan and Harvard Professor Edwin Reischauer. Reischauer and then-Assistant Secretary of State William Bundy played key roles exhorting Shiina to visit Seoul in February 1965 and to offer a statement about the colonial period. When treaty negotiations looked as though they would stall in the spring of 1965, the U.S. invited ROK foreign minister Lee to Washington, urging Seoul to help surmount the last hurdles.

Then and now, the U.S. has always managed a light but important touch, calling on the Koreans to be more forgiving and calling on the Japanese to be more forthcoming on history issues, but at the same time, urging pragmatic cooperation in the face of external challenges like North Korea, terrorism, or cyberattacks. Today, while the Obama administration has not intervened in Japan-Korea bilateral disputes, the Obama administration has quietly leaned to the Korean side on history issues, referring to comfort women as "sex slaves." But at the same time it has supported Abe's efforts to make Japan a more active security partner in Asia. And it has played the "hosting" function, bringing the two leaders together in the trilateral format to give the optic of alliance unity.

The famed Obama "pivot" to Asia cannot work if the two American allies are at odds with one another. This deficiency weakens our deterrence against North Korea. It also weakens our ability to shape China's rise in the region in positive directions. Thus, Washington has as much riding on a successful "second normalization" of Japan-Korea relations in its 50th year as do the two protagonists.

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