FROM THE EDITOR

Japan-South Korea relations have fallen to historic lows in recent years, as sensitivities over history, territory, and trade have impacted security cooperation and trilateral coordination with the United States. The Biden administration has prioritized U.S.-Japan-South Korea cooperation amid an ongoing debate about the extent to which the United States can help mend ties between Seoul and Tokyo.

In the 23rd issue of the Debating Japan newsletter series, the CSIS Japan Chair invited Daniel Sneider, lecturer in international policy and East Asian studies at Stanford University, and Cheol Hee Park, professor at Seoul National University, to share their perspectives on whether the United States can "fix" Japan-South Korea relations.

RESOLVED
The United States Can Fix the Japan-South Korea Problem
The current tensions between Japan and South Korea are rooted in a long history of rivalry, war and colonial rule. The past continues to shape national identity in both countries, and the passage of time has done little to diminish the power of historical memory. Both governments have struggled to fashion durable solutions to issues of historical justice, such as compensation for wartime victims—the so-called “comfort women” dragooned into sexual servitude and the laborers brought to work in Japan’s coal mines and factories.

The United States cannot “fix” the problems of history. That is a task for South Korea and Japan that may be the work of generations. What the United States can, and should, do is to use its considerable influence and leverage over its two strategic allies in Northeast Asia to limit the damage resulting from Japan-South Korea tensions. It can intervene, most effectively through quiet diplomacy, to add impetus to existing efforts by Japan and South Korea to overcome obstacles to resuming normal relations.

The current state of relations does not create much ground for optimism. The leaders of the two governments have not held a bilateral summit, other than brief encounters on the sidelines of broader gatherings, since 2015. A series of South Korean court decisions on comfort women and forced laborers, backed by the administration of South Korean president Moon Jae-in, plunged the relationship into a state of almost constant crisis. In 2018, tensions reached into the security realm when a South Korean destroyer locked its fire-control radar on a Japanese patrol plane. Friction spread to economic relations when Japan imposed export controls on South Korea. The hard-won General Secretary of Military Information Agreement or GSOMIA on defense intelligence sharing almost fell apart, rescued only by U.S. intervention.

The Biden administration came into office clearly determined to repair the damage to trilateral security cooperation. It has pushed for trilateral consultations on North Korea and other issues, in the hopes that the historical issues can be separated from these concerns. Both Japan and South Korea nominally support that two-track approach and the need for trilateral cooperation.

Still, the deeply dysfunctional relationship was painfully visible at the June G7 gathering in England when efforts to organize a trilateral leaders’ meeting failed, and even a brief sideline meeting between South Korean and Japanese leaders could not be organized. Even a meeting at the upcoming Olympic Games, which President Moon plans to attend, may be a challenge.

It is evident that historical issues cannot be easily put aside. The ruling parties in both Japan and South Korea face difficult elections in the coming months and find it hard to back off from long-held public postures.

It would be wrong, however, to view the situation as hopeless. Serious discussions are being held at senior foreign ministry levels, aimed at finding a way out of the impasse over compensation.
for wartime victims. Recent South Korean court decisions have lent legal and political support to Tokyo’s position on two key issues. First is the ongoing legitimacy of the 1965 treaty on the normalization of relations and its settlement of the claims of forced laborers. Second is the continued validity of the 2015 agreement reached by Japan and South Korea on creating a Japanese-funded foundation to provide compensation to the surviving comfort women, along with official acknowledgment of the responsibility of Imperial Japan for creating that system of coerced sexual service. Statements by President Moon in past months seemed to step back from earlier steps to both dismantle the 2015 agreement and to question the 1965 treaty.

There are potential solutions to these problems, including a proposal made by the former speaker of the South Korean National Assembly to create a new fund to provide compensation and apology to both sets of victims together. Restoration of the 2015 comfort women fund by South Korea could open the door to payments for forced laborers, provided it does not explicitly question the 1965 agreement. Foreign Ministry officials are quietly exploring such ideas, but in the absence of political leadership, compromise is hard to reach.

At such a moment, the United States can play a crucial role in telling both leaders that U.S. strategic interests—such as forging a broad front to face China—are at stake. There are historical precedents for this: the 1965 normalization treaty and the 2015 comfort women agreement were both cases where the impetus came from South Korea and Japan, but the United States stepped in to facilitate dialogue and compromise. At those moments, in the first case amidst the Vietnam War and in the second facing an aggressive North Korea and a rising China, the United States acted on the basis of a strategic imperative to foster South Korea-Japan cooperation.

The United States can at least create avenues of cooperation and foster habits of dialogue in other areas of shared trilateral interest. Problems such as cybersecurity, protection of intellectual property in digital technology, and resilience of supply chains all demand such cooperation, as is already understood. They are not, however, a substitute for confronting the legacy of historical enmity.

The burden of the past cannot be easily overcome. But the United States should act to repair enough damage so as to restore functional cooperation between our allies and open the door to a more lasting reconciliation.
Since the end of 2020, the Moon administration has begun to send sanguine gestures to Japan. The Blue House and the ruling party in South Korea suggested an unprecedented idea in November 2020: that the Tokyo Olympics could be a platform for East Asian peace and cooperation if the North Korean leader is invited to rejuvenate summit diplomacy. At a New Year’s press conference in 2021, President Moon stated that the 2015 Comfort Women agreement was an accord between the two governments. This position is diametrically different from his previous stance that remained extremely critical of the accord. He also showed his eagerness to solve problems with Japan through dialogue. This willingness to engage in dialogue is juxtaposed with his previous stance that the Supreme Court decision in 2018, in which the court made a verdict that Japanese corporations should compensate forced laborers with 100 million Korean Won to each, should be unconditionally respected. Despite President Moon’s hopeful gestures, Japan remains sober and calm.

It goes without saying that the arrival of the Biden administration serves as a ground for facilitating cooperation. President Biden’s emphasis on resuming global leadership, as well as his deep commitment to alliance partnership, has pushed the two allies in East Asia to take a renewed look at bilateral ties. Unlike Trump, who showed little sympathy for alliance partners while trying to extract maximum benefits from them for the United States, Biden is very keen to bring together U.S. allies and partners. He picked Prime Minister Suga as the first foreign leader for a summit meeting. Then he called upon President Moon for the second summit meeting. Before summit meetings, the Biden administration carefully arranged high-level trilateral talks among the United States, South Korea, and Japan, including foreign ministers’ and national security advisers’ meetings. This demonstrates that the Biden administration gives high priority to maintaining a solid network of alliances and democracies. It is crystal clear that the Biden administration is making utmost efforts to facilitate cooperation between South Korea and Japan.

Despite President Biden’s good-willed endeavors, South Korea-Japan relations are not showing signs of remarkable amelioration. At the G7 summit meeting in London, Suga and Moon exchanged greetings but did not sit together for a separate talk. Talks between the two leaders have been encouraged, but in the end, they have not taken place. On April 21, 2021, a local court in Korea made a verdict on comfort women, where it dismissed the appeal from the victims on the basis of respecting state sovereignty. On June 7, 2021, a similar decision was made about forced laborers, which virtually reversed the 2018 Supreme Court decision. Though new verdicts corresponded with the repeated claims raised by the Japanese government, the Suga administration did not evaluate them positively and did not utilize this opportunity to improve the bilateral relationship.

U.S. efforts to link the two partners remind us of an old saying: one can drag the horses to the waterside but cannot force them to drink water. Despite U.S. efforts, South Korea and Japan relations still remain lukewarm. There are several reasons why the United States cannot “fix” the Japan-South Korea problem. First of all, the two leaders are deficient of trust. Prime Minister Suga remembers the
Moon government’s first two years of turbulent anti-Japanese campaigns. President Moon is aware that Japanese leaders are reticent to engage in high level talks. In the background of these trust issues is everlasting anti-Japanese sentiment in South Korea, as well as rising anti-Korean sentiment in Japan. Trust can hardly be built by a third party, like the United States. Second, U.S. mediation has clear limits in that it cannot offer concrete solutions for deep-rooted problems within the South Korea-Japan relationship. When it comes to security and military issues or wider regional agendas, the United States can give friendly advice to both countries. However, concerning historical and territorial controversies between South Korea and Japan, limited space is available for U.S. intervention. These issues are socially molded mental constructs that hardly allow for third-party mediation. Third, and the most critical reason why both Moon and Suga are unenthusiastic about ameliorating ties, is most likely that fixing bilateral ties is not politically beneficial for either leader. Rather than solving the problem, managing volatile controversies while jumping on them from time to time for political manipulation serves the interests of political leaders in both countries.

Still, it is needless to say that trilateral cooperation should be promoted further. For that purpose, South Korea-Japan relations should be properly upgraded. Conflicts between the two U.S. allies only benefit third parties like China and North Korea. South Korean and Japanese leaders should come to the table and engage in dialogue without conditions or reservations. Avoiding dialogue is an ill-fashioned way of conducting diplomacy, and the United States should continue to try to bring the two allies together. U.S. facilitation of cooperation will apply pressure on both South Korea and Japan to continue to engage in dialogue, which will circumvent uncontrollable escalation of conflict between the two countries. U.S. encouragement for collaboration may open a new window of opportunity, which will better repair ties than relying on Japan and South Korea alone.
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