

POLICY BRIEF

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Japan and Korea Must Look Forward

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In February, Japan's Prime Minister Shinzo Abe made a two-day visit to South Korea. Abe's visit – which included a bilateral summit with South Korean President Moon Jae-in – was premised on representing Japan's delegation for the opening ceremonies of the Pyeongchang Winter Olympics games. The Pyeongchang Olympics began a six-year cycle of games in East Asia, with Tokyo hosting the summer Olympics in 2020 and Beijing hosting in 2022. Another key rationale for Abe's trip – aside from sports diplomacy – was to demonstrate a united front alongside Moon and US Vice President Mike Pence, who also travelled to the opening of the games. Japan, the US and South Korea continue to share concerns about North Korea's rapid development of its nuclear weapons program in direct defiance of the international community.

Abe's trip to Korea was especially important amidst the charm offensive from North Korea – which sent two high-level emissaries, Kim Yong-nam and Kim Yo Jong, the younger sister of North Korean dictator Kim Jong-un. After the opening ceremonies, the North Korean officials met with Moon at the Blue House in South Korea and Kim Yo Jong delivered a personal invitation from her brother, North Korean dictator Kim Jong-un, for the South Korean President to visit at his “earliest convenience”. Pyongyang subsequently dispatched General Kim Yong Chol, a senior official on the UNSC sanctions list and thought to have masterminded the 2010 sinking of the South Korean naval corvette – the *Cheonan*, to the closing ceremonies. This series of events – and the looming inter-Koreas summit in late April and potential US-North Korea summit thereafter – has forced Japan to take the necessary diplomatic moves to ensure its interests on the Korean peninsula are not ignored.

But, while Abe and Moon played nice and were diplomatic during their meeting, beyond the surface there remains deep mistrust and frustration. The two sides have been at odds for years over lingering issues related to Japan's annexation and occupation of the Korean peninsula before and during World War II. Tokyo argues that it legally settled issues with regard to compensation for Japan's actions through the Treaty on Basic Relations, signed by both sides in 1965.

At the time, the Basic Treaty helped pave the way for a restoration of diplomatic relations between the two sides which were then – as they are now – staunch allies of the United States. In addition to the Basic Treaty, Japan has also made numerous efforts – at virtually every level of government – to show its remorse and come to terms with its history during the war period.

Shifting geopolitical winds over the past few decades has complicated reconciliation for Seoul and Tokyo. The key difference from 1965 to now is that, during the time of their normalization treaty being signed, the two sides were pushed towards strategic alignment in the midst of the Cold War and shared a common enemy – the Soviet Union. Today, the geostrategic outlook for Seoul and Tokyo is not so clear cut. Both sides remain concerned deeply about tensions on the Korean peninsula and the continued provocations by the Kim regime in North Korea. Japan and South Korea also have reservations and concerns – albeit at varying levels – to China’s rapid rise and incrementally assertive security posture in East Asia.

But despite all of this tension on the Korean peninsula, and the shared goal of Washington, Seoul and Tokyo on the need for Pyongyang to denuclearize, Abe’s trip to Korea last February almost did not happen. In the weeks leading up to the opening ceremonies, there was debate amongst Abe’s ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) on whether it was an appropriate time to visit with Moon in South Korea due to Seoul’s position on historical tensions between the two. On the thorny issue of the so-called “comfort women” – Abe and Moon have approached the issue directly but essentially agree to disagree on the way forward.

Tokyo continues to stress that issues related to the comfort women have been resolved “finally and irreversibly” as per their bilateral agreement in December 2015. Meanwhile, Moon also agreed to forward-looking relations with Tokyo but stressed the need to “face history

squarely”. This comes after Moon’s exculpatory decision earlier this year to label the 2015 agreement as defective, while still not asking for it to be renegotiated. The move has resulted in another unfortunate setback in relations between Tokyo and Seoul. Indeed, Moon’s repudiation of the 2015 agreement’s legitimacy is even more disappointing considering the political costs and difficulties that both sides expended in order to reach a compromise.

It appears that both sides remain dug in on the comfort women row with little sign of budging in their positions. It is understandable that Japan remains frustrated at South Korea’s diplomatic U-turn on the 2015 accord. But, while the historical issues – including continued diplomatic sparring over the disputed Takeshima-Dokdo islets in the Sea of Japan and a row over the compensation for wartime laborers – continue to drag the relationship’s progress, there is also a strong sense of pragmatism by both leaders. Unlike his predecessor Park Geun-hye, Moon has pledged a desire to resume bilateral shuttle-diplomacy with Tokyo and have more frequent summits. This is positive development for the future contours of the relationship.

The Abe administration in Japan has also displayed pragmatism in its ties with South Korea. There has been temptation – pushed by a significant, and legitimate, sense of “Korea fatigue” amongst Japan’s political and bureaucratic elites – to downgrades ties with South Korea after its about face on the 2015 deal. However, despite remaining firm on its position regarding the international agreement, Tokyo remains committed to working South Korea on critical regional security issues – foremost on mitigating provocations from North Korea. In the coming months, it will be crucial for the two sides, alongside their shared ally in the US, to continue pressing forward for a truly future orientated relationship that serves both of their national interests.