



## Japan and South Korea in a Fraught Region

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There exists a chill in diplomatic ties between the two countries, Japan and South Korea, as of late. This mainly stems from old issues regarding Japan's colonial past and differing views on their shared history. These issues have been lingering in the sentiments of the Korean people since World War II and even though the two countries are vibrant democratic nations, they have been unable to resolve the contentious issues between them. This is a concern not only for their bilateral relationship, but also for the North East Asian region, which is ridden with problems in the form of North Korea's threats of aggression and China's grand strategy.

The leaders of the two Asian countries – the President of South Korea, Ms. Park Geun Hye and the Prime Minister of Japan, Shinzo Abe, had their first direct meeting on 25th March 2014 in Hague on the sidelines of the Nuclear Security Summit. This meeting was facilitated by the President of the United States, Barack Obama.<sup>1</sup> The United States has vested interest in the formation of a good relationship between Japan and South Korea as they are the closest US allies in the region. Their cooperation is required to deflect North Korean threats and contain China's expansionist policies. The meeting brought a particularly important outcome, i. e., the agreement by the two Asian leaders to meet diplomatically to discuss their bilateral relationship. President Obama seemed optimistic about providing a united front against regional concerns, such as North Korea and China.

A meeting between senior diplomats of the two countries happened a month later on 16th April 2014 in Seoul and certain agreements were made by both parties:

- The two countries agreed to have monthly meetings that will be low-key in nature.
- South Korea agreed to stop endorsing anti-Japan protests in the country.
- The territorial dispute over the islets located between the two countries has been put on the back burner.

Although no momentous decisions came from this meeting, another meeting was scheduled a month later to address "issues of mutual interest." That was definitely a good step in the right direction, especially necessary when the 50th anniversary of the "Friendship Treaty" the two countries signed is coming up in June, 2015. However, Japan and South Korea may not be in a celebratory mood if the situation continues as it is. This issue brief analyses the current situation between South Korea and Japan and the reasons why a cordial relationship cannot exist between these two countries. Given the fact that the two countries are strategic partners of India, the bilateral relationship between the two has an impact on India's East Asia strategy.

**In the political sphere**, one of the main issues that are in the limelight now is Japan's stance towards the South Korean "Comfort Women, a term used for females, who were forced into sexual slavery by the Japanese military before and during World War II. Prime Minister Abe suggested a revision of two national apologies offered for Japan's wartime atrocities – the Kono statement and the Murayama Statement. The Kono statement of 1993 acknowledged that the Japanese Imperial Army was involved in the establishment of comfort facilities that housed the 'comfort women', most of them from South Korea. The Murayama statement apologised for the sufferings caused by the Imperial Japan to its Asian neighbours during World War II. South Korea considers these to be attempts by Japan to downplay its role during the war, leading to chilly relations between them and President Park refused bilateral summits with Abe until this point. Prime Minister Abe assured in 2014 that his cabinet retains the facts of the Kono statement and that no changes will be made, which catalysed the trilateral talks with South Korea and the United States. However, this did not help much to

assuage the discontent of the South Korean public as the Kono statement had been questioned time and again by the Japanese officials.

Another contentious issue is that of the Yasukuni shrine in Japan, which honours not only the war dead, but also convicted class-A war criminals. Japanese lawmakers and officials continue to pay visits to the said Shinto shrine and Prime Minister Abe also sent his offerings to the shrine, albeit omitting to visit in 2014 unlike the previous year due to pressures from international factions. These frequent visits by the public officials hurt the sentiments of South Korea and China, who suffered at the hands of the honoured war criminals. This can possibly hinder Japan's attempts to improve diplomatic ties with South Korea. There is also the issue of differing views on history with the Abe government's nationalist agenda.

After the trilateral discussions facilitated by U.S. President Obama earlier in 2014, the two leaders have not yet met for bilateral talks since they assumed their respective offices. Prime Minister Abe had expressed hopes of a bilateral summit with South Korea,<sup>2</sup> but President Park has imposed conditions for the summit meeting, such as "a correct awareness of history", which goes against Abe's personal political beliefs. This comes amidst another recent event regarding a Japanese journalist, who has been charged for defaming the South Korean President.<sup>3</sup>

The concerned Japanese journalist had written an article on an online Japanese newspaper questioning the whereabouts of the South Korean President when the Korean ferry disaster happened on 16th April, 2014 and implied that she was absent during the early hours of the disaster as she was meeting a man, who was a former aide. Even though a Korean newspaper had first written about the rumours regarding the absence of the President or possible romance with a man, only the Japanese journalist was indicted, put under house arrest and barred from leaving the country. This situation had spurned concerns about its effect on the political ties between the two countries and also a worldwide debate on the freedom of expression.

**On the subject of security and defence**, the hiccups regarding their shared history continue to hinder the two Asian countries to form favourable bilateral ties between them. In

2012, when Lee Myung Bak was in the office of President, the two countries were on the verge of signing a General Security of Military Information (GSOMIA) deal, which would focus on North Korea's development of nuclear and other weapons of mass destruction. If signed, this pact would hold a historical significance for the two countries and was set to pave the way for military Acquisition and Cross Servicing Agreement (ACSA). But conditions between the two countries continued to deteriorate since then and signing of the pact has been postponed without any promise of future fulfilment by South Korea.<sup>4</sup> This was spurred on by vocal public dissent in South Korea where an opinion poll showed that 48 per cent of the public opposed the military pact with Japan.<sup>5</sup>

With continued push from the US, a trilateral intelligence sharing pact was finally signed on 29<sup>th</sup> December, 2014 between the US, Japan and South Korea.<sup>6</sup> This intelligence sharing is focussed solely on North Korea's nuclear and missile threats and a South Korean official from Seoul's Defence Ministry reported to a newspaper that the secrets will not be shared with Japan directly, but through the US.<sup>7</sup> While this intelligence sharing pact marks an important step forward in the bilateral ties between the two Asian countries, using the US as an intermediary shows that South Korea's distrust of Japan has not dissipated.

**On the economic front**, the relationship between the two countries does not seem to show such a dim outlook that the political sphere portrays. Japan is South Korea's second largest trading partner and according to the Centre for Strategic and International Studies' (CSIS) Asia programme, "... economic cooperation and competition have made both countries increasingly integrated and more equitable over recent years."<sup>8</sup> South Korea ran a \$28 billion deficit in its bilateral trade with Japan in 2009, but when the trade is calculated in value-added terms, this deficit falls by nearly 80 per cent. In 2014, Japan and South Korea along with China met to continue talks of the trilateral Free Trade Agreement despite the political tension in the region as a whole.<sup>9</sup> Even though there seem to be no measurable outcome with the trilateral talks as of now, such a meeting can be considered as progress.

However, bilaterally, the economic situation may start to get shaky soon. There are reports that the trade volume between the two countries shows a decline and stands at its lowest level since 2009,<sup>10</sup> and it stood at \$43 billion in the first half of 2014. Although the

tense economic climate has not been cited as a reason for this fall in trade, it has become obvious that South Korea is putting more emphasis on its bilateral relationship with China than Japan. The talks of bilateral Free Trade Agreement between South Korea and China have been progressing smoothly with both countries being optimistic of concluding the deal in the near future.<sup>11</sup> At the same time, the Free Trade Agreement between Japan and South Korea has not been resumed since 2012.

In the past, political tensions did not have considerable impact on the economic relationship between the two countries. This was in part due to the inter-connection and inter-dependence of Japanese and South Korean companies. But with recent developments in South Korea, such as the lawsuits against Japanese brought about by the South Korean workers conscripted during World War II, this strong economic bond may see possible frictions soon. There is also pressure in Japan due to South Korean declining reliance on imports from Japan, brought about by globalisation, which provides South Korea more options from where they receive raw materials they require.<sup>12</sup>

**In the social aspect**, opinion polls showed that there was a stark increase in negative impressions about each other between the two countries. While more than half Japanese respondents admitted to having negative feelings towards South Korea, citing the Koreans' "criticism of Japan" as the reason; more than two-thirds South Korean respondents were reported to have negative views of Japan because they felt that the Japanese had "inadequate repentance over the history of invasion."<sup>13,14</sup> There also still exists a common perception among the Japanese that South Korean goods are inferior and the South Koreans also cannot move away from the common perception that the Japanese consider themselves superior. These misconceptions can be linked to the Japanese occupation of the latter.

In Japan, there has been an increase in the amount of hate-speech against foreigners residing in the country.<sup>15</sup> The main target of these hate speeches and protests are ethnic Koreans, many of whom are direct descendants of forced labourers shipped to Japan during Japan's colonial rule over Korea. The Osaka High court has upheld the ruling that such hate speech is unlawful <sup>16</sup> and the rallies are considered to be fuelled by racist ideals and do not appear to be a portrait of the sentiments of the general public. The protests are held by a

limited number of participants, a few hundred at most and usually take place away from the major urban areas in smaller regional cities with an average number of 43 protestors at a time. These feelings of ill-will do not seem to inhibit cultural connections between the two countries and appear to be only political in nature. The same poll showed that 60.9 per cent of Koreans as well as 41.6 per cent of Japanese expressed the desire to visit the other country.<sup>17</sup>

At the grassroots level, concerning people to people interaction, there are indications that show that there has been a steady decline in the number of visitors to South Korea from Japan. The recent statistics showed that there had been a 20 per cent decrease in the amount of tourists as on September 2014 compared to the same month in 2013.<sup>18</sup> However, there seems to be no marked change in the number of visitors from South Korea<sup>19</sup> to Japan in the year 2014 as numbers remained more or less the same with only slight variations, which appear seasonal in nature.

This shows that people to people (P2P) exchange between the two countries continues despite the tense political climate. The Japan-Korea exchange festival, launched in 2005 to celebrate the 40th anniversary of normalisation of diplomatic relations between the two countries, continues to be held every year, alternating hosting between the two countries. This year the festival was held in Tokyo and the event was concluded without a hitch. The South Korean Ambassador to Japan, Yoo Heung Soo expressed his wish at the opening ceremony that the event would serve as a starting point for new South Korea-Japan relations.<sup>20</sup>

While it is still illegal to broadcast Japanese television and dramas in South Korea, with the advent of the Internet, Japanese popular culture is quite well known in South Korea with notable celebrities being mentioned daily on the Korean television. The Korean wave (Hallyu) also continues to make inroads into Japanese mainstream market with singers from South Korea releasing albums and songs constantly in Japanese. K-pop groups continue to sell out concert tours in Japan and there is no foreseeable decline in this aspect.

**Conclusion:**

Currently, the political relationship between South Korea and Japan is at its lowest since its normalisation in 1965. The historical disputes continue to play their part in hindering the formation of a working diplomatic relationship. A viable solution to this problem does seem to be forthcoming. There are certain reasons for this:

First is the decline in the importance of Japan to South Korea in economic terms as mentioned earlier, and the Japanese dependency on exports to South Korean market seem to be growing. Standing on uneven ground makes it difficult for the two countries to try and repair the relationship. At the same time, South Korea has stepped up investments in China, spurred on by its ongoing good relationship and helped in part by the Korean wave.

Second is the politicisation of history by nationalist groups of both countries. The nationalist groups of Japan have called for revision of the public apologies made by previous Japanese officials regarding their history, which is resented by the Korean public. At the same time, the nationalist groups of South Korea continue to attack Japan at any given chance regarding their history, territorial disputes, etc. inciting mass outcry from the public, especially during major elections.

Thirdly, the two countries seem to lack the presence of strong political leaders, who will not be swayed by every public opinion. For example, the GSOMIA and ACSA agreements were supposed to be important mechanisms in curbing threats from North Korea and would have helped better trilateral co-operation with the United States, but due to public disapproval, it has been postponed until further notice. It should be noted here that South Korea has already signed similar treaties with 23 other countries, including Russia and the United States.

Fourthly, the leaders of both the countries have deep rooted political beliefs, which are at odds with each other. While Prime Minister Shinzo Abe follows the strategy of revision of historical perceptions, Park Geun Hye regards the settlement of historical disputes a priority before holding a summit with the Japanese Prime Minister.

There is an imperative need for the two countries to put the past issues behind them and go forward to tackle the common issues that they both face. Japan and South Korea are both vibrant democracies with free market principles. They both face common threats in the form of North Korea and their respective economies are facing a slowdown. The trilateral alliance that they share with the United States is also weakened due to the two countries continued frosty relationship. There also looms the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of normalisation of diplomatic relations between them this year in 2015. Emotional outbursts from either country regarding their history may not help either of them, especially their reputation in the international arena. The only positive sign that is always somewhat dismissed is at the grassroots level where people to people interaction still exists and continues to grow. This probably may be the only indication that the future is not as dim as it appears now.

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*Disclaimer: Views expressed are of author and do not reflect the views of the Council.*

## Endnotes:

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