



Washington needs to help Japan, South Korea find a way forward

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Forget the current economic tensions between the United States and China. There is a second trade war happening in Asia, and it is in America's interest to take action.

The current dispute between U.S. East Asian allies Japan and South Korea is rooted in historic grievances — grievances which have helped to keep relations between the two countries frosty for decades.

South Korea's complaints stem from Japanese atrocities committed during the Colonial period and World War II. There is a perception that Japan and the Japanese people feel no contrition about the horrors their countrymen inflicted in the past. Even generations later, that perception fuels mistrust, anger, and disdain in the former Japanese colonies.

There's at least some merit to Seoul's accusations. It would be a generalization to argue that Japan's war crimes are never taught in the country's schools, but it is not a stretch to state that there is no national effort on the part of the Japanese government to reconcile with past excesses (from gut-wrenching medical experiments to the institutionalization of sexual slavery). Japan's unwillingness to own these past wrongs has created a self-perpetuating case of confusion amongst its people as to why their neighbors are still upset, seriously hampering its foreign policy in the Asia-Pacific in the process.

From Japan's perspective, meanwhile, South Korea bears responsibility too. In 1965, the two countries signed a Treaty of Normal Relations, and the government of then-premier Park Chung Hee accepted \$500 million from Tokyo (roughly \$4 billion in today's dollars) as wartime reparations. As a result, relations reset, and the two countries began to have a working relationship, in keeping with the operative clause of the agreement which confirmed that outstanding claims between the two sides were "settled completely and finally." Nevertheless, recent actions by South Korea (among them repeated rulings by the country's Constitutional Court) have reopened grievances on such issues as forced labor during wartime — effectively reneging on the understanding hammered out more than half-a-century ago.

Why does all this matter? As China and the U.S. ramp up their own trade war, the acrimonious situation between Japan and South Korea continues to escalate and threatens to bleed over into the global economy. If left unchecked, the ramifications of the conflict will be felt here at home, for practical reasons.

For instance, 60 percent of all DRAM chips, mandatory components for the personal electronics we all rely on, are produced by just two South Korean companies, which rely on now restricted chemicals imported from Japan in order to build them.

Beyond the economic consequences, there are serious national security concerns at play as well. At a time when both China and North Korea continue to push political boundaries, the United States and its allies need more than ever to be on the same page. Yet, according to all the available evidence, Tokyo and Seoul are now drifting further and further apart. A recent poll by South Korean pollster Realmeter, for instance, found that 47.7 percent of South Koreans are now in favor of not renewing the country's General Security of Military Information Agreement with Japan — something that has long been an important tool for maintaining the security of Northeast Asia.

All of this should matter a great deal to Washington, because discord between America's east Asian allies weakens our position vis-à-vis China and North Korea. As such, the U.S. should encourage both countries to take ownership of past decisions and take steps that lead to a permanent political reconciliation. For, in an already unpredictable region, an unstable South Korea-Japan relationship is bad for the region, and bad for the United States.

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