

“CIGS Professor Yung Chul Park Seminar”

Date & time: 27th February 2014 (Thursday) 15:00 - 16:30

Venue: CIGS Meeting Room

An outline (rev.01) by Professor Yung Chul Park

The fundamental source of the conflict between Japan on the one hand and China and South Korea on the other lies in the inevitable rivalry and tension associated with the resurgence of nationalism in all three countries. The intensification of nationalistic fervor defies construction of a new framework for governance of their bilateral relations that reflects changes in economic and security environments in Northeast Asia that have taken place over the past three decades.

China considers itself a global power-second only to the US- capable of setting the global agenda. It demands to be accorded a role commensurate with its power in managing regional as well as global economic and security affairs. The Chinese public in general and policy makers in particular believe that Japan is engaged in a campaign to contain China's rise by strengthening its collective self-defense in alliance with the US and its cooperation with India and other Southeast Asian countries. China perceives of Japan as challenging its strategic- and perhaps natural - role in East Asia. Although they should be conscious of potential ramifications of the rise of nationalism, the Chinese authorities are likely to ignore the rise as benign as long as it helps diffuse the growing discontent over worsening regional and income disparities and lack of political freedom.

South Korea has labored hard and succeeded in building an open economy -of which size is the fifteenth largest in the world- and a noisy, but working democracy. It considers itself no longer a developing economy many Japanese believe it still is. It has become more assertive than before, and wants its voice heard on the global stage. As a trading nation, South Korea is bound to be globalized, but if the current trend continues, many fear that the nation may risk losing its identity. At the same time, South Korea's dependence on China as a trading partner has risen to the point where it could undermine its political and economic independence.

Many at home abroad believe that China holds the key to two Koreas' unification. Faced with North Korea's relentless threat of a nuclear attack, South Korea can hardly afford to alienate either China or Japan. A confluence of these internal and external developments that has narrowed the space for pursuing independent security and economic policy appears to have made Korean society turn to nationalistic instincts

Japan is coming out of a long period of hibernation of a pacifist state after World War II to put itself on the global map as a major economic power. In its quest for transforming itself as a normal state, many Japanese conservative political leaders believe that Japan needs to confront and resist for

national security China's aggressive pursuit of regional dominance. They have also stiffened their stand on the bilateral issues that have strained the relations between South Korea and Japan. They have done so in the belief that South Korea has gone over to the side of China, an insinuation deeply resented by the South Korean public.

China, South Korea and other Southeast Asian countries realize that the Abe government sees and responds to the conservative drift of society demanding a transformation of Japan as a normal country with proper military defense capabilities. By paying tribute to the Yasukuni Shrine Prime minister Abe is simply sending the message that his administration is determined to reassert Japan's proper role under the banner of a stronger Japan. While they have been lodging-and will continue to be doing- strong protest against the Abe government's denial of historical events taken place during WWII, China and South Korea will be content with supporting the international disapproval of the Abe government's intransigencies, which in their view will undermine Japan's credibility and influence and eventually the quest for creating a stronger Japan.

In view of the conflicting interests and divergent paths they follow in managing their bilateral relations, it is clear that the three countries cannot easily find the common ground for economic and security cooperation and compromising their different objectives. For this reason, the tension between Japan on the one hand and China and South Korea on the other will persist for a long time to come.

Despite the worsening of the conflict in recent years, South Korea has compelling interest in normalizing its bilateral relations with Japan, which is an important trade partner and a country South Korea emulates more than any other to catch up with in terms of technological sophistication and living standards. South Korea has a lot to learn from Japan. The two countries are also the members of the security alliance with the United States.

In this writer's personal view, it is more of Japan's problem than South Korea's, if the Abe administration insists on propagating distorted views on its wartime activities and on teaching the younger generations biased interpretations of history. Japan may decide to strengthen its collective defense capabilities. If it does, it is a Japan's domestic political decision. Neither China nor South Korea has much to say about this. If Japanese politicians wish to continue to visit the Yasukuni shrine at the risk of inviting the denunciation of the international community, China and South Korea will continue to protest, but that is about all they can and will do. Furthermore, as far as the territorial issue is concerned, there is no solution Japan and Korea can agree to. If there is not, then political leaders of the two countries should act as if there is no territorial issue and turn to other pressing matters of which resolution will have a far more important bearing on improving the bilateral relations between the two countries.

One urgent matter the two countries need to address is the growing disputes on the wartime comfort women, which have been blown up out of proportions. Japan must accept the Kono Statement of 1993 on the comfort woman and publicly declare that it is the position of the Abe government as a first step towards discussing modalities of settlement. As far as South Korea is concerned, Japan should realize that the resolution of the comfort women is a matter of national dignity.

Japan and Korea has a common interest in deterring North Korea from building up its nuclear weapons program. To this end, the two countries need to consolidate their security alliance with United States to send a clear message that under no circumstances North Korea be allowed to develop nuclear weapons. This strategic cooperation will also pave the way for forming an East Asia's

regional security arrangement in which the two countries together with ASEAN could assume a balancing role in accommodating the rise of China without involving India.

On the economic sphere, Japan and South Korea need to resume negotiations for a bilateral free trade even before South Korea joins the TPP with the long-term objective of creating a trilateral FTA among China, Japan and South Korea. The three countries do have political capacity of as well as economic interest in pursuing a two-track strategy in which they continue on one track as they have in the past to work together to consolidate the existing schemes for regional economic cooperation and integration, while managing other bilateral conflicts on the other track.

Finally, it is in the interest of East Asia that the Abenomics succeeds in restoring Japan's economic vitality. China is not expected grow in the coming years as fast as it has in the past. Now it is Japan's turn to contribute to the region's growth by enlarging its capacity to imports from and invest in the rest of the region. In this regard, the Abe government appears to spend too much of its political capital on security issues at the expense of promoting the Abenomics. Unless Japan succeeds in reviving the economy and regaining its economic strength, Japan will lose its influence in shaping new security relations in Northeast Asia no matter what it does in rebuilding its military capabilities.