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PRESIDENT PARK GEUN-HYE'S "TRUSTPOLITIK" AND REGIONAL COOPERATION IN DOLDRUMS

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The South Korean President Park Geun-hye, the first female premier of the nation, had assumed office on 25 February 2013 with the promise of improving inter-Korean relationship that had considerably deteriorated under the isolationist policy of the previous President Lee Myung-bak. Towards North Korea, she had proposed a policy of "trustpolitik" based on her vision of the "Northeast Asia Peace Cooperative Initiative" (NAPCI) articulated in her write-up titled "A New Kind of Korea: Building Trust between Seoul and Pyongyang" which appeared in *Foreign Affairs* in 2011. Park also sought to resolve "Asia's Paradox"¹ between Japan, China and South Korea - the three nations divided by war memories amid increasing economic interdependence. Both her aspirations of "trustpolitik" and NAPCI failed to build either trust or sustainable peace in a region rendered tense by North Korea's third nuclear weapons test on 12 February 2013, just 11 days before Park entered office. On the other hand, with Japan, Park followed the previous

administration's policy of shunning PM Shinzo over his visit to Yasukuni Shrine in December 2012 and on his revisionist views on "comfort women" issue.

Park resorted to strong measures in response to North Korea's increasing missile provocations and nuclear weapons tests relying more on 'robust deterrence' than on 'greater engagement' - the two aspects of her dual policy visualized for North Korea. However, after refusing to hold a formal summit meeting with Abe, Park finally held the first high-level bilateral meeting, after a hiatus of three years, in the Blue House on 1 November 2015, the year that marked the 50th anniversary of the normalization of relations between Japan and South Korea. This meeting gathered momentum for a historic agreement reached on 28 December 2015. The two nations entered into an agreement to 'finally and irreversibly' bring to an end a long-standing acrimonious dispute over



the contentious issue of the "comfort women", an euphuism for those who were forced to serve as sex slaves for the Imperial Army during Japan's wartime mobilisation from 1932 to 1945. On this day, the Japanese Foreign Minister Fumio Kishida stated that PM Abe expresses "anew his most sincere apologies and remorse to all the women who underwent immeasurable and painful experiences and suffered incurable physical and psychological wounds as comfort women." Unequivocally acknowledging the "involvement of the Japanese military authorities" that was a "grave affront to the honor and dignity of large numbers of women", the terms of the settlement included a one-time contribution of US\$8.3 million through Japan's budget.²

This agreement was criticized in South Korea for being short on true reconciliation and healing. The barrage of criticism targeted three issues - first, that it was hastily arrived at without consulting the surviving comfort women in South Korea. Second, that Japan's compensation did not constitute official reparation, and thus escapes legal responsibility. Third, there is domestic opposition to the clause in the agreement mentioning the possible removal of the statue of a girl, installed by civil groups on 14 December 2011 in front of the Japanese embassy in Seoul as a symbol of the misery of the 'comfort women'. To arrive at a domestic consensus over this agreement is difficult not only because of the complex intertwined opportunistic domestic politics with

the emotive issue but also because of a lack of a shared and mutual understanding over the context and meaning of 'truth' and 'reconciliation' especially when restoring of honour and respect is the linchpin in confronting the memories of violence, a "spectre" that still haunts East Asia. Even when the strategic dictates are overwhelming, political harmony is at best elusive because of the dichotomies of memory production and memory suppression between the two nations that inhibit cooperation on more contingent fronts of national defense.

Park signed, yet again, another landmark agreement with Japan on 23 November 2016 but this time for security cooperation, called the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) for sharing military intelligence on North Korea in response to the rising level of its provocations in 2016. The terms of GSOMIA enables South Korea and Japan to directly share information with each other accessed from their respective intelligence systems rather than acquiring it indirectly through the U.S. South Korea will be able to provide Japan screening and video information collected by reconnaissance aircraft, and information obtained by intercepting wireless communication originating from North Korean military facilities. Japan will share with South Korea intelligence on North Korean nuclear weapons and missiles gathered by Japan's surveillance satellite and Aegis-equipped destroyers. The signing of GSOMIA was

previously stalled in 2012 when President Lee Myung-bak after pushing it through the cabinet failed to sign it in view of the opposition from the political parties and negative public opinion. But Park has managed to move one step forward.

Unfortunately, South Korea is grappling with a political crisis at a time when the region is encountering serious security issues and at stake is the future of GSOMIA which is facing similar opposition from those who remain bitter over Japan's repressive colonial rule of Korea from 1910-1945. Park is embroiled in a scandal of bribery, embezzlement and state interference involving her old-time close friend Choi Soon-sil. Choi was indicted on 20 November 2016 for exploiting her relationship with Park to extort large amounts of money to the tune of \$69 million from the major Korean conglomerates for the two foundations she controlled and to garner lucrative contracts for herself and other friends. Accused of betraying 'public trust', protesters in huge rallies across the country are forcing Park to resign from her position and most South Koreans support her impeachment. They are also insisting for the withdrawal of GSOMIA signed by Park.

Japan and South Korea can still carry on their national security task without GSOMIA but the withdrawal of this agreement will be to the detriment of the larger northeast Asian regional cooperation on security concerns. But if GSOMIA survives irrespective of Park's future status, she

will create history in having overcome obstacles shaped by 'history' in South Korean-Japan relations.

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])

Notes

¹ Park Geun-hye, "A Plan for Peace in North Asia", *The Wall Street Journal*, November 12, 2012 available at <http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424127887323894704578114310294100492> accessed on November 22, 2016.

² MOFA, "Announcement by Foreign Ministers of Japan and the Republic of Korea at the Joint Press Occasion", December 28, 2015 available at http://www.mofa.go.jp/a_o/na/kr/page4e_000364.html accessed on November 26, 2016.