

Tokyo and Seoul should not rely on Washington to improve ties, U.S. expert says

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WASHINGTON – Tokyo and Seoul should not rely on Washington to help mend their soured ties, a U.S. expert says, despite many other researchers calling for a bigger American role in resolving the dispute.

The presence of the United States has dampened incentives for the two East Asian countries to improve their ties, according to Doug Bandow, senior fellow at the Cato Institute, a conservative U.S. think tank.

“Obviously, the relationship between the ROK and Japan is one that has a long history and a difficult history,” Bandow said in an interview earlier this month. ROK is short for the Republic of Korea, the official name of South Korea.

“I think it’s far too simplistic to assume that the United States is in control of the situation.”

Those saying that the United States should do more to improve the situation do not say what should be done or how it would work, Bandow said.

“I don’t think the United States can simply work this out or tell the countries to forget their dispute,” he said, pointing to the difficulty of dealing with “a lot of nationalist passions” in Japan and South Korea.

Tokyo and Seoul should resolve their differences because “the common threat to them from China, in my view, is far greater than any disagreements they might have,” Bandow said.

The historical issues “obviously have been a problem for Tokyo elsewhere in the region, but we do see countries like the Philippines, seeming to get over that,” he continued. “The Philippines wants a better relationship at least in part because of what they see from China.”

“So I don’t think there’s any reason historically (Japan and South Korea) have to have a bad relationship,” he said.

“I think that part of the problem is neither country sees a necessity (to mend their relations) as long as the United States defends them,” he said.

Bandow questioned whether South Korea would have conducted military drills on and around the disputed Takeshima islands — called Dokdo in South Korea — amid heightened tensions last month, without the U.S. presence as the protector of South Korea. Tokyo claims the Seoul-controlled Sea of Japan islands.

Because of the United States, South Korea was not worried about the tensions and acted “in ways that look irresponsible,” according to Bandow.

Asked what Washington should do, he said, “What is probably most important, and the (Donald) Trump administration could be the administration to do it, would be to communicate to both Seoul and Tokyo that the presence of American forces is not forever guaranteed.”

“There is no obvious reason why the United States should continue to have that kind of an alliance” with Japan or South Korea after over 70 years since the end of World War II and 66 years since the armistice in the Korean War, he said.

The United States needs to emphasize that this is an issue for both Asian countries, Bandow said.

Asked what Tokyo and Seoul should do, he pointed to the need for the neighboring countries to have a dialogue, which may be a private one “given how sensitive the political issues are.”

South Korea’s decision to terminate the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) with Japan “has made (Seoul) the bad guy in Washington,” he said.

Meanwhile, there is also “a lot of unhappiness” in the U.S. government over Tokyo’s “fairly extreme measure,” namely tightened controls on exports to South Korea, according to Bandow.

“I think (Prime Minister Shinzo) Abe sees very little incentive to act because he believes he’s in a strong position, and frankly he is,” Bandow said.

But in the long term, “this is not a good position for Japan, even if his government feels good about where it is at,” he said.

“The short-term political gain to Abe is obvious, but I think he’s sacrificing something very important for the future,” Bandow said, warning of negative security and regional implications.