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## Obama visit a double-edged sword

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Moon Chung-in

The Korean government's diplomatic ability to adjust the overseas travel schedule of the U.S. president is truly amazing. Before U.S. State Secretary John Kerry's visit to Korea last week, the U.S. government formally informed Seoul that Korea will be a part of President Barack Obama's tour of Asia in April. The news must have been sweet to the Blue House and Foreign Ministry officials who had worried that Obama would only visit Japan and skip Korea altogether.

Japan must think Korea is loathsome. Japan wanted to use Obama's three-day visit to display to the world that, despite controversies in Asia over interpretations of Japanese history, the U.S.-Japan alliance is strong. So the U.S. president's decision to visit Korea must have been a fiasco for the Abe administration.

Fumio Kishida, Japan's foreign minister, chartered a plane for a short trip to the United States to persuade Washington not to add Korea to the itinerary, but Obama decided on a two-day working visit anyway. Japan has long believed that its alliance with the United States is deeper and stronger than the Korean-American one, so the disappointment must have been serious. Since his inauguration, Obama has visited Korea three times, but has only gone to Japan once. Therefore, it is not a surprise that Japan is putting in so much effort to the coming visit by Obama.

As many observers have said, Washington's decision can be seen as the United States siding with Korea in the diplomatic battle between Seoul and Tokyo. Korea has seemingly persuaded the U.S. government that the United States could be seen as accepting Japan's historical claims if Obama only visited Japan.

The problem, however, is that Obama's visit to Korea could become a serious political boomerang in the future because the United States has to think about the trade-offs. Kerry's recent visit to Korea clearly showed that danger. During his visit to Seoul, Kerry urged Korea and Japan to "put history behind them," stressing that "there is no question that positive relations between Japan and its neighbors are in the best interests of the United States, the

region and the two countries themselves.”

When Obama visits Korea in April, his message will focus on improving Korea-Japan relations and strengthening trilateral cooperation among Korea, Japan and America. If Obama persuades Abe to change and relays that message to President Park Geun-hye by playing as an honest mediator, we could want for nothing more. But if Abe insists on his stubborn attitudes on many sensitive issues - including history, Japan’s sexual enslavement of Korean women and paying respects to the Yasukuni Shrine - the situation could become sticky.

If Japan remains unchanged but the United States urges Korea to mend the rupture with Japan, our victory in the latest diplomatic battle against Japan could quickly become shackles. In this case, all Park would discuss with Obama would be the same diplomatic rhetoric that she previously has said to U.S. Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel and Vice President Joseph R. Biden Jr.

Pending issues between Korea and the United States are not so simple. The negotiations on defense cost-sharing has already been concluded and progress was seen in the Korea-China free trade negotiations, so discussions on Korea’s participation in the Trans-Pacific Partnership will gain some momentum. But the issue of delaying the U.S. handover of wartime operational control back to Korea doesn’t appear to be easy, taking into account the latest mood in Washington. The kind of options President Park has to persuade Obama are being sensitively watched.

Renewing the Korea-U.S. nuclear cooperation agreement is an even harder task, because Korea wants to persuade America to give it an exception to Section 123 of the U.S. Atomic Energy Act, which stipulates that all countries that establish a nuclear cooperation agreement with the United States must give up the enrichment or reprocessing of nuclear materials.

Park made granting Korea the right to reprocess spent nuclear fuel one of her presidential pledges, but “a world free of nuclear weapons,” or nonproliferation, is Obama’s top priority. A crude attempt to persuade Obama could become a diplomatic burden for Korea.

The aftermath is also worrisome if the two leaders overemphasize the unification “jackpot” theory. The argument is basically based on the instability of the North Korean regime. If it dominates the diplomatic arena, it can create a deleterious effect on the mood for inter-Korean reconciliation through the latest agreement for conducting reunions of separated families and Park’s Korean Peninsula trust-building process.

If Park and Obama fail to present a new, creative vision for North Korea’s nuclear issue and reiterate “proportional retaliation” and “strategic patience,” public disappointment will be very big.

In a wider view, coordinating Park's Northeast Asia peace initiative, which inevitably takes China into account, and Obama's policy to rebalance the Asia-Pacific region, can also lead to unforeseen outcomes. Chinese President Xi Jinping has said he will visit Korea this year, and the pressure on Korea then will be far heavier on this matter.

Come to think of it, Obama's visit to Korea in April is not just a simple diplomatic victory. It is a formidable task. Just like everything in this world, there is no free meal when it comes to international relations, and naive miscalculations could bring about a fiasco. The Park administration must meticulously prepare for Obama's coming visit because it will be a double-edged sword.

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