

JAPAN-SOUTH KOREA RELATIONS IN THE POST-COLD WAR ERA

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Abstract

Since the mid-1990s, Japan and South Korea have engaged in concerted efforts at bilateral reconciliation. Such reconciliation is a necessary condition for a stable regional order in Northeast Asia. Without a successful reconciliation between the two countries, it would be difficult to establish a peaceful Northeast Asian community that is able to go beyond historical and ideological antagonism. What factors have motivated Japan and South Korea to make efforts at bilateral reconciliation? Do their efforts contain potential for the thick reconciliation that the historical antagonists Germany and France have achieved?

What will the relationship between Japan and South Korea be in a generation from now? This was not an easy question to answer before democracy and market economics took root in South Korea. Japanese and South Koreans then lived under different political and economic systems. Today, however, the question is not that difficult because the two countries share many fundamental elements determining the shapes of their states.

The first are democracy and market economics. Moreover, the two countries share such fundamental values as human rights and humanitarianism. The second is their industrial structures. Being technology-driven trading states of a similar kind, Japan and South Korea have developed high-tech industries featuring semiconductors, communication equipment and new energy resources, in addition to the heavy-chemical and automobile industries. The third is national security. Tokyo and Seoul will continue to maintain national security policies that place their

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alliances with the United States at the core. The last is their relations with China. Japanese and Koreans are not just racially close but also share a history of cultural development on the periphery of Chinese civilisation.¹

What will follow from these trends in two decades is the coexistence of 'twin states' in East Asia – a country that will have ceased to be a superpower but still too large to be a middle power (Japan) and a standard middle power that may come closer to great power status in the event of Korean unification, which will bring its total population to 70 million (Korea). It will be hard to differentiate these two countries from one another on the surface with their boundaries being lowered in many aspects.

The Korean Peninsula is the only region in the world where Japan's geopolitical interests seem to exceed its geo-economic interests. Often described as a 'dagger pointing to the heart of Japan', the Korean Peninsula is the most obvious launch-pad for any ambitious continental invader. Perceptions and reality, of course, are quite different – the only time the Peninsula actually served such a purpose was in the thirteenth century when Mongols twice attempted to invade from Japan to Korea. At the turn of the nineteenth century Tokyo used the excuse of potential Chinese and Russian threats to Korea to declare war on both countries, defeated them and incorporated the peninsula into the Japanese empire.

Since ancient times, Japan and South Korea have strongly influenced each other through competition and cooperation, which have in turn contributed to shaping the respective forms of these states. In modern history, diplomatic missions from the Korean Chosun dynasty to the Tokugawa shogunate played a significant role in bilateral relations politically, economically and culturally. It was Japan's annexation of Korea in August 1910 that put an end to this close bilateral relationship. Did Japanese leaders make the proper decision 100 years ago?

In 1945 a potential threat from the Korean Peninsula emerged again with Japan's devastating defeat and the liberation of its colonies, the Soviet Union's spread across Eastern Europe, the Imposition of Communist regime in North Korea and the threat of successful Communist revolutions in China and Vietnam. Tokyo's policy for the Peninsula has thus focused on simultaneously harvesting both the South's geo-economic threat and North's geopolitical threat by using diplomatic and economic means to make them dependent on Japan. Thus enhancing stability and peaceful coexistence between the two. Seoul and Pyonyang compete for Japan's attention, allowing Tokyo to play them off against each other. As in all other areas of Japan's foreign policy towards the third World, Tokyo has brilliantly succeeded in achieving these interrelated goals. Japan's cumulative surplus with South Korea reached over \$40 billion in 1989 while about 60% of all foreign investments in South Korea are Japanese. South Korea is firmly tied into Japan's economic orbit while, as North Korea's largest non-Communist trade partner, Tokyo is poised to rapidly dominate Pyonyang's economy should that regime ever attempt its own policy of Perestroika.

Tokyo's relationship with both Koreas is marred, however, by deep seated Japanese racism towards the Korean people. Colbert says that Japanese considers Koreans to be "inferior people, to crude and criminal behaviour"². Tokyo has been just as successful in neutralization the 700,000 Korean-Japanese. The Korean community in Japan is split into two large organization – Mindan, pro-Seoul organization, claim 450000 members while Chongrun, pro-Pyonyang, has 250000 followers. Although both organizations are economically powerful come with income derived from newspapers, banks, schools and sports clubs, as well as subsidies from their respective foreign patrons(in 1988 Chongryun received 39 billion yen and Mindan 1 billion yen) they spend most of their resources fighting each other rather than working for better conditions for Korean-Japanese. Thus Tokyo pays them off against each other as

much as North and South Korea does in international issues. However, Japan's relationship with Korea goes back thousands of years to the time when Japan was the melting-pot of East Asia. Although the ancestors of modern Japanese tickled in from all over East and South East. The Meiji leader's hotly debated colonizing Korean shortly after toppling the Tokudawa* regime in 1868 and embarking on sustained modernization drive. Japan fought two wars for control over Korea first against China (1894-95) and then Russia (1904-05).

Japanese domination of Korea formally began with the protectorate treaty (1905), forced on Korea after Russo-Japanese war. Under this treaty, Japan assumed control of Korea's foreign relations and ultimately its police, military, currency and banking, communication and all other vital functions. The Koreans tenaciously resisted these changes. In 1910 Japan formally annexed Korea when it realized Korea would not accept nominal sovereignty with actual Japanese control from 1910 to 1919 Japan solidified by purging nationalists, gaining control of land system, and enforcing rigid administrative changes. In 1919 these measures along with general demand for national self determination following World War I (1914-1918) led to what is known as the March First Movement. Millions of Koreans took the streets in non-violent demonstration for independence but the movement was quickly suppressed. In the following years Japan tightened its control, suppressing other nationalist movement. As the Japanese movement became more militaristic and eventually went to war in China then the Pacific and South East Asia in the 1930s and 1940s Japan imposed several measures designed to assimilate the Korean population, including outlawing Korean language and even Korean family names. Korea was liberated from the Japanese occupation by the Allied victory that ended World War II in 1945.

The 1945 agreement between Washington and Moscow to divide Korea at the Thirty-eight parallel into a Communist North and a non-Communist South provided to be the perfect solution to the

Japan's potential security problem. The Washington-Seoul alliance has been Japan's first line of defense in North-east Asia and serves as a vital buffer zone against possible aggression from the Soviet Union or China. Without 650000 tough South Koreans under arms, backed by 40000 American troops, Tokyo would have to divert far more of its resources from its export industries to its military. If the Communist North had united the Peninsula under its rule in 1950 the subsequent security threat to Japan would have forced Tokyo to embark on a significant rearmament, possibly including the employment of nuclear weapons. Prime Minister Sato succinctly articulated the Peninsula's importance in November 1969, saying the well-being of South Korea 'is essential to Japan's security'³.

But the creation of an American protected buffer in the South not only check Soviet and Chinese ambitions, it also prevented the emergence of a powerful Korea that could economically rival Tokyo. Divided against each other, the two Koreas focus much of their foreign policy energies across the thirty eight parallel rather than against their traditional enemy – Japan. A Peninsula united under the dynamic South would pose an even greater geo-economic challenge than it really does. With a huge domestic market of 60 million consumers, South Korea would be far less dependent on export-led growth, could achieve economies of scale for its products much sooner and would thus have much more bargaining power vis-à-vis Japan.

Japanese policy towards the two Koreans up until 1989 had been relatively passive. The reasons are fairly straightforward, after World War II the American presence in South Korea served Japanese security interests. Korean hostility towards Japanese precluded any Japanese security role in the South while cold war considerations prevented Japanese recognition of the North; and Japanese domestic factors such as a wide spread anti-war sentiment and the peace constitution did not allow any overseas Japanese security commitment. Today, however, these factors are changing, and the

result is a new, activist stance towards peace and security issues in the Korean Peninsula. Because the United States, China, and Russia have an interest in extricating themselves from direct confrontation, they share an interest in resolving the Korean situation in Northeast Asia and the Cambodian situation in Southeast Asia. This diplomatic process is defining the post-cold war order in East Asia. Japan's place in this process has been marginal because it has not had a direct role in any regional conflict. In the past Japan's non-involvement benefited it, but today this is a disadvantage. The situation is compounded because Japan is not a permanent member of the UN Security Council and so lacks the institutional disadvantage of the United States, China, or Russia. Thus, Japan has no alternative but to gain access to the ongoing diplomatic process through direct initiative.

Signs of a new approach of the Korean Peninsula emerged after the 1988 Seoul Summer Olympics. During talks with South Korean President Roh Tae-woo, then Prime Minister Takeshita Noboru got the impression that a Japanese opening to the North would help relieve tensions on the Peninsula. In March 1989 Takeshita directed an unprecedented apology for Japan's past treatment of Koreans to the DPRK in a Diet statement and the chairman of this faction. Kanemaru Shin, sent a letter of apology to Kim II-sung via a Japan Socialist Party (JSP) member, Tanabe Makoto, who assured Kim II-sung that the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) was serious about improving relations with the North. This resulted in the 1989 invitation to Kanemaru by Kim II-sung to visit the DPRK.

A little over a year passed before the visit was realized, but in late September 1990 Kanemaru took a delegation of LDP and JSP Diet members as well as ten government officials for talks and the signing of some minor agreements. As an enticement to the visit the North promised to release two Japanese sailors held on trumped-up spying charges since 1983.

What was expected was the DPRK request for official normalization talks and a sizable reparations and compensation agreement to cover the post-War as well as War time years. This deserve to open official talks on normalization marked a turn around in a long standing DPRK policy not to seek official ties with countries (other than the Unites States) having official relations with the ROK. The Foreign Ministry receiving the request for normalization talks were reportedly elated at this policy reversal. Several terms of the understanding reached between Kanemaru and Kim raised objections in the South, but the Japanese Foreign Ministry – which unpersuasively claimed that Kanemaru was visiting purely in a personal capacity – repudiated the questionable the DPRK and Japan over normalization was honored by the Japanese government. This was viewed cautiously by the ROK and the United States, but welcomed by the Soviet Union and China for this would allow them to take a further step away from the DPRK without fear of leaving it in dangerous isolation.

The significance of this opening lies in the fact that Japan succeeded in gaining a direct role in peace and security affairs on the Korean Peninsula. It is engaged in direct negotiations with the North in coordination with – but independent of – ongoing ROK or American diplomacy on the Peninsula. It gives Japan passive and marginal role in managing affairs on the Korean Peninsula, and gives Japan greater grounds for claiming credit in a successful inter-Korean peace process. In fact, Japan may claim credit for the DPRK decision to sign the nuclear safeguards protocol of the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) without preconditions because it has been urging that action in the bilateral normalization talks.

This episode shows how Japan's economic power gives it greater ability to penetrate areas of high politics. There were several reasons the DPRK reversed its long-standing policy of refusing to talk to Japan about normalization. Among the most important, however, was its failing economy and its lack of any other likely source pf

external economic assistance. The DPRK wanted normalization talks because the Japanese would not grant economic assistance without first having official relations.

References

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² Evelyn Colbert, "Japan and the Republic of Korea: Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow", *Asian Survey*, Vol. XXVI (March 1986) No.3, p.278.

* The name of the noble family that ruled Japan between 1606 to 1867.

³ John Wellfield, *An Empire in Eclipse*, Athlone Press, London, 1988, p.234.