

## **Japan-Korea Relations: History and Future**

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When we discuss the issue of “history” between Japan and Korea, there is certain condition from which anyone engaged in the discussion cannot escape from. This is the issue of “to which country that interlocutor belongs”. In the analysis and policy debate between Japanese and Korean interlocutors no Japanese and no Korean can escape from the historical facts that took place between the two countries. At the center of these historical facts, there was the issue of Japan’s colonization of Korea from 1910 till 1945. That was the primary concern of the two sides so far, possibly more so for Koreans but also shared by many in the Japanese side. Then in the fundamental divide of victim-perpetrator the objective truth was clear and undeniable, that Japan, who was the colonizer, was at the perpetrator’s side and Korea, the colonized was at the victim’s side. If that is the case, for any Japanese interlocutor, the most important critical principle was that the only policy approach and moral principle which the Japanese side can advance was the recognition of the pain it caused and expression of apology. Reconciliation is not a policy or moral objective which Japan is entitled to ask. It is presumptuous and morally incorrect for the perpetrator’s side to seek reconciliation. It is only the victim side, Korean side, who is able to grant forgiveness and acknowledge reconciliation.

This most important policy approach and moral principle was a process of slow learning in Japan. But 14 years of normalization negotiations from 1952 till 1965, Japanese business to assist Korean reconstruction such as its POSCO cooperation from 1973 till 1983, the principle to take into consideration Asian neighbor’s feeling in text books in 1982, two Emperor’s statements in Tokyo to Korean Presidents in 1984 and 1990, Kono Statement of 1993, Murayama Statement of 1995, Obuchi-Kim Dae Jung’s communique of 1998, Kan’s statement of 2010 are just a few that show the process of slow learning. This increasing humility is underpinned by growing Japanese respect and admiration to Korea. Korea made its remarkable achievement in establishing powerful democracy from militarist autocracy. Especially students’ movement marked the decisive turning point of Korean democracy in 1960, 1979, 1980, and 1987 which finally led to the establishment of non-military and democratically elected presidency. Korea also developed one of the most vibrant and energetic economy in East Asia, joining OECD in 1996, and Hyundai, Samsun, Posco and other giant industries were

almost replacing once powerful Japanese brand companies. Lastly Obuchi-Kim communique unexpectedly resulted in the inflow of Kanryu 韓流 into Japan in the first half of the 2000's, when many, particularly women, began facing Korea with genuine sense of attraction and esteem. In normal inter-personal relations or inter-state relations, success results in confidence, confidence results into ability to accept others. So by the end of the 2000's there emerged in Japan certain naïve expectation that the two countries might have reached a stage of maturity to overcome the past and create relations based on trust and mutual respect for the future.

That expectation was not met, and present day Japan-Korea relations are one of the worst in their post-war relations. At this point in time there seems to be at least six issues which divide Japan and South Korea from historical memory perspective. These six issues include: lack of trust between Prime Minister Abe and ROK President Park Geun-hye; comfort women; Takeshima/Dokto; Korean judicial decisions on enforced labor; Yasukuni since December 2013; and Japan's security policy since July 2014. These six issues, among others, create a vicious cycle that deterioration of one is affecting negatively others. Why not the optimistic scenario as described above did not work? Both Koreans and Japanese may have reasons to consider.

From Korean perspectives, Korean success on political, economic and cultural spheres might have resulted into a feeling remote from "embracing Japan". Korean "curse" over Japan of having been subjugated for 36 years under its colonial ruling may have been so deeply rooted in their psychology that precisely at a time of Korean rise in confidence, unsettled issues of colonial ruling began to gain unprecedented momentum. The 2011 Constitutional Court's decision ruled that inaction by the Government of Korea of not having protected sufficiently the right and honor of former comfort women is unconstitutional. The 2012 Supreme Court abrogated lower-courts' verdicts that "enforced labors" cannot be compensated because the issue had already been covered by the 1965 agreement and asserted that the 1965 agreement is not compatible with the spirit of negating colonial ruling. In addition, Japan's turn to become a more assertive power under Abe might have hit the nerves and sensitivity of Koreans. From Korean perspectives the image of "Abe the revisionist" and repulsion to this image is taking a fixed character. The July 2014 cabinet decision to re-interpret Article nine was nothing but causing fear and instability in the region. The June 2014 government commissioned review of the process of drafting the 1993 Kono Statement contradicted Abe's policy to maintain the Kono Statement and intended to divert the responsibility of that Statement

to the Korean side. Abe's visit to Yasukuni in December 2013 was just another dangerous provocation of Korea, China and the US. To underpin Korean confidence and its anger against Abe, Korea may have observed the power of rising China, which distanced sharply from both Japan and North Korea, and taking highly friendly policy toward South Korea.

From Japanese perspectives, things looked very differently. Perceived changes in Korean attitude toward Japan are causing changes in Japanese attitude, again, in a very gradual manner, but now to reverse direction. One may probably argue that the turning point came with President Lee Myung-bak's landing on Dokdo/Takeshima in August 2012 and his public statement regarding Emperor's behavior (or lack of behavior) on apology. Arguably for the first time in post-war period Japanese side did not hesitate in showing their emotion, possibly stronger than Koreans' emotions. For those who follow closely the relationship, Korean Supreme Court's verdict of May 2012 not recognizing the validity of 1965 agreement was somewhat beyond comprehension. Korean categorical negative reaction to the review report of the Kono Statement in June 2014 created an impression that there may be no real willingness at the Korean side to take meaningful action based on mutual efforts. Just voices of concern against the revision of the interpretation of Article nine in July 2014 made many to wonder whether the Koreans have some understanding on the severity of security environment in East Asia. But probably, President Park's statement in March 2013 that "The curse as victim would not change even after 1,000 years" most symbolically set the tone of Japanese perception of Korean attitude against Japan. For many, this statement just created an impression of desperation and helplessness for continuing efforts for achieving reconciliation. For some minority, it created a sense of sorrow combined with some determination of keeping Japan's moral attitude of apology, a sort of feeling that "while you may not forgive for 1,000 years, we shall remember it for 10,000 years", but with any hope for reconciliation waning rapidly.

At this point in time, bridging the Korean position and Japanese position does not seem to be easy. Most fundamentally whether there is a need for bridging the relations from historical memory perspectives is put into doubt. Answers are not clear but points for consideration may include the following.

First, power and geo-politics for both sides: For Japan the answer is clear. Foreign policy and defense priority number one is China in an un-paralleled manner. With all surrounding countries in the region, including US, Korea and Russia there is only one

policy: strengthening ties and improving relations. For Korea, China seems to be looming heavily on economic, foreign policy, and regional cooperation. Can there not be some common ground?

Second, taking longer historical perspectives: In the long history of Japan-Korea relations, there were periods of deadly wars, followed by periods of reconciliation or hope for better relations. After the victory of Silla-Tang over Baekje-Wa in the 7<sup>th</sup> century, a part of royalties and leadership of Baekje came to Wa and formed a part of the grass root of the Imperial family of Japan. Toyotomi Hideyoshi's invasion to Korea resulted in the harshest war that took place between the two nations, but Tokugawa Ieyasu established the basis of reconciliation and quasi-permanent peace as early as the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. An Chung-gun's last will was to establish an East Asian Community of Korea, China and Japan and An's action as Korean patriot has been appreciated in broad circles of Japanese society right from the time of his assassination of Ito Hirobumi in 1909.

Third, present-day difficulty between Japan and Korea consists of the vicious cycle as described above. What is needed is to cut off the link and tackle these issues one by one. If one succeeds in improving one that might affect the resolution of another, so that relations eventually enter into a positive cycle. This should be possible, provided that there is a political will in both sides to do so, and that will might emerge from the geopolitical and historical common understanding mentioned above.