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## **POLITICAL LEADERS IN JAPAN AND THE ROK SHOULD HIGHLIGHT THE IMPORTANCE OF BILATERAL COOPERATION**

*Junya Nishino*

- Japan and the ROK need to make active use of political and diplomatic channels to restore mutual trust, and deepen strategic dialogue in order to better understand each other's foreign and security policies.
- The political leaders of Japan and the ROK should speak more actively and frankly to their respective populaces about Japan-ROK relations and the importance of cooperation. Public support and understanding will be essential for further development of Japan-ROK relations.
- Diplomatic efforts on historical issues, i.e., mutual efforts to reach compromises and find equilibrium points, are vital. At the same time, political leaders in Japan and the ROK must make firm commitments not to allow historical issues to adversely impact Japan-ROK relations overall.

*The views expressed in this piece are the author's own and should not be attributed to The Association of Japanese Institutes of Strategic Studies.*

Excessive pessimism on improving Japan-ROK relations is prevalent at the moment. Japan-ROK relations were expected to be reset when the Abe Shinzo and Park Geun-hye administrations first came to power, but the past two years or so have seen further deterioration. June of this year (2015) will mark the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the normalization of diplomatic relations between the two countries, offering a perfect opportunity to share long-term visions for Japan-ROK relations. Especially at such a time as now when challenges abound, the course of the past 50 years since normalization should be affirmed and a vision formulated for Japan-ROK relations 50 or 100 years hence. Endeavors to that end must begin with the following three points.

Firstly, unceasing efforts must be made to restore trust between Japan and the ROK and deepen bilateral strategic dialogue. Japan and ROK should make active use of political and diplomatic channels to dispel each other's distrust and deepen mutual understanding through frequent communication. There has been a worrying halt of nearly three years in Japan-ROK summit meetings, the last one taking place in May 2012 between Prime Minister Noda Yoshihiko and President Lee Myung-bak in Beijing.

A growing number of experts are abandoning any hope for a Japan-ROK summit meeting under the Abe and Park administrations. However, the deterioration in Japan-ROK relations is not due solely to the chemistry between the two leaders; it stems in great part from changes in the international political structure in East Asia, i.e., changes in the regional power balance that encompasses Japan-ROK relations. In particular, differing perspectives on the rise of China have destabilized relations between the two countries. Japan views China as a military threat in part due to the Senkaku Islands issue, while the ROK has seemingly begun to view Japan's security posture vis-à-vis China as a potential threat. In a Japan-China-ROK opinion poll conducted by the *Asahi Shimbun* in February-March 2014, the top response in Japan on "the country you feel poses the greatest military threat" was China (55%) followed by the DPRK (29%), while respondents in the ROK put the DPRK (65%) first, Japan (20%) second, and China (10%) third. When asked "Which do you consider more important for your country, the US or China?" in a joint *Yomiuri*

*Shimbun-Hankook Ilbo* opinion poll conducted in May 2014, Japanese heavily favored the US (74%) over China (14%), while South Koreans were nearly evenly split between the US (47%) and China (46%). In sum, differing assessments of present and future China are causing a divergence in security policy between Japan and the ROK and at the same time encouraging mutual distrust.

It is hoped that political leaders and diplomats in both Japan and the ROK would as quickly as possible extricate themselves from the destabilization of relations caused by such changes in the balance of power and seek an even greater degree of cooperation. Essential to this would be a better understanding of each other's foreign and security policies. Frank dialogue is necessary on confronting the present circumstances in East Asia, above all a rising China and an uncertain future of North Korea. For example, consideration should be given to conducting the usual vice-ministerial strategic dialogues at a higher level by, say, holding regular meetings between top Japanese and ROK security policy officials such as that held between National Security Council Secretary-General Yachi Shotaro and National Security Office Chief Kim Kwan-jin last October.

Secondly, it goes without saying that the understanding and support of the people of both countries are essential to further development of Japan-ROK relations. The leaders of Japan and the ROK need to speak to their respective constituencies more enthusiastically and openly about the importance of Japan-ROK relations and cooperation. The deterioration in sentiment toward the ROK is especially serious in Japan at the moment. A poll conducted by the Cabinet Office last autumn showed the percentage of Japanese who do not feel an affinity with the ROK at an all-time high of 66%. The "fatigue" they feel when the ROK raises historical issues continues to cause many Japanese to lose sight of just how important with the ROK are for Japan.

The time has come for political leaders to distance themselves from short-sighted emotionally loaded arguments and to highlight the importance of relations of neighborly relations based on a long-term vision. The National Security Strategy adopted by the Cabinet in December 2013 made this clear: "The ROK is a neighboring country of the utmost geopolitical importance for the

security of Japan. Close cooperation with the ROK is of great significance for peace and stability in the region, including in addressing North Korean nuclear and missile issues." Japan holds the same importance for the ROK. Therefore it is incumbent upon the political leaders of Japan and the ROK to explain to their respective publics more candidly and persuasively the great importance of the other country for their own security.

Thirdly, diplomacy on historical issues that remain of concern is vital. Diplomacy - the handling of international relations through negotiations - is not a process in which countries push their own opinions through but rather one in which mutual compromises are made little by little to uncover equilibrium points. However, it must not be forgotten with respect to the issue of "comfort women," the greatest controversy at present, that Japan must supplement bilateral diplomacy with persuasive arguments at home and clear explanations internationally. Japan addressed the "comfort women" issue wholeheartedly in the 1990s by such means as establishing the Asian Women's Fund, but its explanations and dissemination of information on the issue both at home and abroad proved insufficient. Unfortunately, Japan's past efforts are almost entirely unknown in the ROK and thus not accorded any positive regard. With the "comfort women" issue treated since the turn of the century as an issue of women's human rights during wartime, approaches even more conscious of the opinions of the international community are needed now.

Japan and the ROK should explain domestically and internationally that they respect the decisions and efforts made thus far, that they will aim to resolve issues in accordance with the rules set out by the international community, and that they will address calmly, constructively and jointly the destabilizing impact of nationalism in East Asia. This has been the character of Japan-ROK relations for the past 50 years. Criticism of one another and persistent assertiveness do not engender joint action.

At the same time, it must be borne in mind that historical issues do not constitute the whole of Japan-ROK relations, and the political leaders of Japan and the ROK should firmly commit to expanding exchange and cooperation in various endeavors. Even while earnestly addressing an unfortunate past, we

must not lose sight of the cooperation over the past 50 years of diplomatic relations or of the initiatives for cooperation designed to ensure future peace and prosperity.✳

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