

Break the chains of mutual distrust and celebrate 50 years of Japan-S. Korea relations

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June will mark 50 years since Japan and South Korea normalized diplomatic ties in 1965. The mood, however, is far from jubilant.

The three years that have passed since the last summit between the countries' leaders in May 2012 sums up the state of the bilateral ties. It is a publicly known fact that a major cause behind the soured relations is mutual distrust that the political leaders of Japan and South Korea hold toward each other.

Among themselves, experts are increasingly talking about "normalization without a summit."

What they mean is that under the administrations of Shinzo Abe and Park Geun-hye, we should give up hope of a summit being held and aim for limited improvements in ties in other areas.

Yet even if the leadership changes hands, mending ties will still not be easy. Today's relationship between Japan and South Korea is experiencing growing distrust not just among leaders, but on all levels: political, diplomatic and social. We are on the verge of a crisis.



President Barack Obama meets with Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and South Korean President Park Geun-hye on March 25, 2014, at the U.S. Ambassador's Residence in The Hague. (AP)

BACKROOM CHANNELS NOT FUNCTIONING

If we look at the past of Japan-South Korea ties, we see that even when the relationship between administrations became tense, close advisers or aides with an understanding of their leaders' intentions would play the role of negotiating channels to achieve a breakthrough in the impasse. But when the questions at hand between Japan and South Korea concerned historical issues and territorial disputes, and each country's public began responding too sensitively, these kinds of backroom negotiating channels ceased to function.

That is because Japan-South Korea relations have turned into matters of internal politics. In the past, networks of leaders from both countries, like the Japan-Korea Cooperation Committee and the Japan-Korea Parliamentarians' Union, played a meaningful role in Japan-South Korea relations. But now, these networks have lost the ability to coordinate on the outstanding issues between the two countries.

The transformation of bilateral relations into matters of internal politics has also had a detrimental effect on official diplomatic channels.

Previously, even if there were insufficient communications between political leaders, Japanese and South Korean diplomats would sweat it out together and work hard for the sake of sustaining and developing bilateral ties. This would be the foundation for strengthening the relationship. In other words, it was the diplomats' tireless efforts that supported the rapport between the two countries.

However observing the situation over the past few years, it looks as if the trust between the diplomats have eroded, as the ferocious war of words over historical issues and territorial disputes has also engendered distrust toward their counterparts and a sense of weariness among Japanese and South Korean diplomats.

The situation is also serious on a social level. The South Korean media says the Japanese society is “moving to the right,” and this coverage is negatively affecting South Koreans’ perceptions of Japan.

For example, The Asahi Shimbun conducted a public opinion survey in Japan, China and South Korea from February to March 2014. One question was: “In the 70 years since World War II, has Japan walked the path of a peaceful country?” Among South Koreans, 19 percent said “yes” while 79 percent said “no.”

When asked if they thought Japan would walk a peaceful path in the future, 82 percent of South Koreans responded with “no” (The Asahi Shimbun, April 7, 2014).

And that is not all.

One idea that is becoming mainstream in South Korean society is that the relationship between Japan and South Korea--which will mark their 50th year of diplomatic ties--should be reviewed.

This trend results from 10 years of progressive administrations under President Kim Dae-jung (1998-2003) and President Roh Moo-hyun (2003-08) that widened the ideological spectrum of the South Korean society and allowed progressive ideas more room in the political and social spheres.

The progressive forces thought it was a major problem that the Park Chung-hee administration normalized diplomatic relations with Japan in the 1960s without an adequate apology or compensation, a perception that is now becoming the norm in South Korean society.

Clear signs of this change were the Constitutional Court’s decision in August 2011 to encourage the South Korean government to engage in diplomatic negotiations with Japan over the “comfort women” issue, and the Supreme Court’s May 2012 decision recognizing claims for individual reparations against Japanese companies that sent Koreans to work at factories and coal mines under Japanese colonial rule.

This development and the trend of public opinion have greatly limited the current Park Geun-hye administration’s flexibility on Japan-South Korea relations.

Conversely, South Korean society’s perceptions of Japan and the bilateral relationship exert an acute, negative influence on Japanese people’s perceptions of South Korea.

Something that becomes clear when we look at the results of the Cabinet Office's annual public opinion poll on diplomacy.

Beginning in 1999, the year after Japanese Prime Minister Keizo Obuchi and South Korean President Kim Dae-jung made their Japan-South Korea Joint Declaration, those responding that they "feel affection" toward South Korea exceeded those answering that they "do not feel affection." The share of respondents who "feel affection" reached a peak in 2009 at 63.1 percent. However, this trend reversed itself in 2012, when that figure plummeted to 39.2 percent, while 59 percent answered that they "do not feel affection."

Last year, 31.5 percent said they "feel affection" and 66.4 percent said they "do not feel affection." Each figure marked a new low and high, respectively, since the survey began in 1978.

The Japanese media's daily portrayal of actions like criticizing Japan and moving closer to China as "anti-Japanese" is also encouraging a hateful mood toward South Korea from within Japan.

STOP APPLYING EMOTIONAL LABELS

It is terribly unfortunate that as we mark the 50th year of diplomatic ties, the idea that "both countries squarely face the past and develop relations based on mutual understanding and trust"--extolled in the Japan-South Korea Joint Declaration of 1998 and fostered by the two countries--is under heavy attack.

The people of both Japan and South Korea must pull themselves out of the negative spiral of assessing the other side negatively and reacting to such criticism. Therefore, rather than indulging denunciations of the other side by labeling them as "moving to the right" or as "anti-Japanese," we need to assess the progress Japan-South Korea ties have made thus far as coolly and objectively as possible, and be discerning when viewing the actions our counterparts are currently taking.

Furthermore, we should distance ourselves from short-sighted emotional debates and conceptualize a long-term relationship between neighboring countries.

The 50-year milestone is an excellent opportunity to reflect and celebrate the development of diplomatic ties, and to look to the future of the relationship between Japan and South Korea. It is time to break the chains of the past three years of mutual distrust, and for the people of both countries to again be more self-conscious about further developing the partnership we have worked so hard together to build.