

Japanese-South Korean Diplomatic Relations: Why is it Worse than Ever Since the Normalization?

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The democratic policymaking process requires the participation of as many citizens as possible, and their will must be reflected all throughout. At the same time, in order to realize the interests of the whole population, politics must not only follow the majority. But, if policies are not decided according to already established experiences and theories comprehensively, it results in undermining the interests of everyone. That is the wisdom of representative democracy, so to speak; it is particularly evident in diplomatic relations. Diplomacy cannot be achieved by unilaterally emphasizing only the claims of own country. Even if there is a public backlash, compromising can contribute to the interests of everyone.

The 21st century saw the rise of populism, a political movement that sympathizes with the ideas of people who oppose the monopoly of power held by the political and economic elite. It can be described as catering to the masses, but if anything, it aims to consolidate political power by agitating the general public. Chauvinism is its most representative method. The current state of diplomatic relations between Japan and South Korea - called the worst since its normalization - has been deeply influenced by the rising populist trends in both countries.

A Gap in Historical Awareness

Japan, relying on its early and rapid modernization, coupled with superior military force, colonized neighboring Korea in 1910 (and colonized until 1945). Even though 75 years have passed since the decolonization of Korea, discrimination toward Koreans still remains. Likewise, memories of humiliation and a sense of rivalry towards Japan still exist.

The reason why it took 15 years to normalize diplomatic relations between Japan and South Korea (also known as the Republic of Korea) after the 1951 Treaty of San Francisco is that during that period, Japan neither acknowledged nor apologized for colonial crimes and refused compensation, stating that the annexation of Korea happened on equal terms. After the collapse of the strongly anti-Japanese Syngman Rhee administration brought about by the April Revolution in 1960, Park Chung-hee seized power in a coup and suppressed the domestic revolution. Affairs were concluded with the signing of the Treaty on Basic Relations Between Japan and the Republic of Korea in 1965. US Cold War policy played a role in completing the deal at a time when South Korea was politically weak and faced economic challenges. The treaty marked the normalization of Japanese - South Korean relations, 20 years after Japan lost the war in 1945 (and Korea being liberated from Japanese colonial rule).

The massive sum of economic cooperation from Japan certainly contributed to the South Korean economic development, but political as well as public discontent remained in two regards. One was the lack of mention regarding resolving the issue of Japanese colonial rule in the Treaty of Basic Relations. The other was Japan's stance on colonization.

The annexation of Korea was ruled void by Article 2 of the Treaty. However, the Japanese government interpreted this as effective from 1948, which is the founding date of the Republic of Korea, whereas the South Korean government traced it back to 1910, the date of the annexation itself. Such differences in interpretation have been prevailing up to this date. According to the Japanese government, the annexation happened on equal ground, based on the request of the Korean government at that time. Such a claim goes against historical facts: namely, that the annexation was carried out by applying military pressure and violently suppressing the opposition of the Korean government and people. Also, Korean people were exploited and discriminated against during colonial times. On top of it all, the claim goes against general knowledge about the nature of colonialism.

However, there were periods when the perceptions of the Japanese government as well as Japanese citizens shifted. During the meeting with President Kim Young-sam, held in 1993, Prime Minister Hosokawa apologized for the "unbearable suffering and sadness" imposed upon the Korean people under Japanese colonial rule. In 1995, Prime Minister Murayama acknowledged the "enormous damage and loss" that colonization caused. In the same vein, the Japan–South Korea Joint Declaration made in 1998 between Prime Minister Obuchi and President Kim Dae-jung expressed remorse regarding the loss and pain Koreans suffered. In 2010, which marked the 100th anniversary of the annexation of Korea, Prime Minister Kan mentioned in his statement that the annexation was "against the will" of the Korean people. The Japan-North Korea Pyongyang Declaration (2002) also includes an apology for the "great loss and agony" caused by Japanese colonization.

However, with the second Abe government coming into office in 2012, the political trend described above not only came to a halt, but also took a turn in the opposite direction. Prime Minister Abe, holding right-wing support, attempted to substantially revise the statements made by former Prime Minister Murayama (mentioned above) and Chief Cabinet Secretary Kono (who, back in 1993 under the Miyazawa administration, acknowledged and apologized for the Japanese army's involvement in the case of Korean comfort women). Abe issued his own statement in 2015, but in the end, the original statements could not be reversed.

The Two Trends of Korean Politics

South Korea was under a long-lasting military dictatorship on the pretext of standing up against North Korea (Democratic People's Republic of Korea; hereinafter DPRK). Although politicians, intellectuals, the clergy, students and citizens came together in pro-democracy movements, the cycle of opposition and oppression continued. The conflict between the public and the authorities intensified in the 70s; many citizens and students were killed by the army in the 1980 Gwangju Uprising. In 1987, a large-scale public uprising forced the military government to resign, and democratization began. Access to freedom of speech, freedom of learning and freedom of debate was achieved. Previously silenced debates about Korean reunification (racial unity) and resolving the issue of Japanese colonial rule appeared in public discourse.

Despite the re-emergence of these topics, public opinion is divided even 30 years after the country's democratization. Those soldiers, police officers and bureaucrats who contributed to Japanese colonization had a vested interest in supporting the military government, therefore the political forces behind South Korean democratization (Presidents Kim Dae-jung, No Mu-hyeon, Moon Jae-in) have been leaning towards more of a nationalistic approach by aiming to settle the issue of colonization, in addition to Korean reunification. On the other hand, the successors of the military government (Presidents Lee Myung-bak, Park Geun-hye) have been orienting towards a cold war-esque approach, so to speak: anti-DPRK sentiments, strengthening American-Korean security arrangements, and vague conclusions regarding Japanese colonization.

The Abe administration (2012-2020) with its tendency toward historical revisionism and the Moon Jae-in administration (2017-2022) as the successor to the democratic forces in South Korea had vastly different policy orientations. The Supreme Court's decision regarding the issue of Korean forced labor (2018) and the Japanese government's export restrictions on South Korea (2019) are said to be direct causes of the deterioration of relations, but the underlying cause is to be found in the following circumstances.

Japanese-Korean diplomatic relations did not progress at all under the Abe and Suga administrations (Prime Minister Suga had previously served as Chief Cabinet Secretary under the Abe administration for a long time). Even though the South Korean government has been proposing various negotiations since 2020, they refused to discuss the matter at all, saying, "This should be resolved by South Korea". Neither the media nor the opposition nor the general public expressed strong disapproval regarding the Japanese government's response. There seems to be an excessive fear in both Japan and South Korea that if one party appears to compromise with the other, it will lead to public opposition. This is the primary factor that prevents the demonstration of diplomatic wisdom between the two countries. Compared to the time when diplomatic relations were normalized, South Korea is much more economically advanced, and its per capita GDP is on par with Japan's. South Korea's confidence and Japan's impatience regarding the parity of the two countries have created a situation that can be called an "ill-natured competition". The United States seems to be doing nothing about the matter.

Change of Governments and Further Possibilities

In October 2021, the Kishida government was inaugurated. Prime Minister Kishida is originally from the Kochikai, the most liberal faction of the LDP with a high affinity for Asia. He also served as the Minister of Foreign Affairs at the time when the Comfort Women Agreement was signed between the Abe and Park Geun-hye administrations in 2015. Based on these parameters, he was expected to bring a paradigm shift in Japanese - South Korean diplomatic relations, but there are no signs of such a shift happening, perhaps due to the internal affairs of the LDP as well as public opinion.

In South Korea, the conservative candidate Yoon Suk-yeol from the People Power Party won the 2022 presidential election, taking over the previous Moon Jae-in administration. However, the vote difference between Yoon Suk-yeol and Lee Jae-myung, the nominee of the Democratic Party, was only 0.7%, which clearly demonstrated again that public opinion was split. The new administration seems to steer the country towards stronger security cooperation with the US and Japan. It also took on a confrontative stance with policies against the DPRK. However, as there is still an intense public opinion about the historical understanding of Japanese colonial rule, it might prove to be difficult to compromise.

The Japanese and South Korean governments are required to engage in dialogue, practice diplomatic discernment to tackle difficult issues, persuade people rather than fanning the flames of public opinion, and make efforts to build a stable relationship.

Before the coronavirus pandemic, many tourists from South Korea visited Japan and enjoyed interacting with Japanese people and immersing themselves in Japanese culture. Likewise, the number of Korean pop (K-POP) music fans, Korean drama fans, and Korean literature fans have been growing and growing in Japan. There is a foundation for friendship and trust between citizens.

Moreover, the two countries are ripe for cooperation in many areas including climate change, coronavirus pandemic measures, energy policy, and refugee policy. Amidst the deepening conflict between the US and China in terms of economy, technology, and trade, Japan and South Korea have similar positions. Cooperation with each other, as well as with ASEAN countries and so on, can be mutually beneficial. From 2022, Japan and South Korea must demonstrate diplomatic wisdom.

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