

# Consideration of the Background of Japan-South Korea Relations

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Many people in Europe and in the United States might take it for granted that both Japan and South Korea are allies of the United States. Some people might also think that South Korea should be on cordial terms with Japan in order to compete with North Korea and China. However, relations between Japan and South Korea are not so simple.

The Korean Peninsula had been one country for hundreds of years, from 1392 until the Japanese colonization in 1910. It has always possessed its own distinctive history and culture. It was invaded by successive Chinese dynasties and had no choice but to comply with oppression. Despite such geopolitical circumstances, the country retained its uniqueness by creating its own writing system; the Hangul. Japan attempted to invade the Korean Peninsula after the Meiji Restoration. The Korean Empire was turned into a Japanese protectorate in 1905, before being annexed in 1910. The Empire showed fierce resistance (including through the use of armed combat) but the Western countries did not raise their voices against Japan's colonization of the Korean Peninsula.

When Japan was defeated in the Second World War (in 1945), the Koreans believed that they gained their independence from Japanese colonial rule. The people involved in the national independence movement set up a provisional government. However, the Allies did not acknowledge this arrangement. The Korean Peninsula was temporarily occupied by the US and the Soviet Union, thereby dividing the country into south and north. As the Cold War became increasingly intense, two different political systems came to exist on the peninsula. In the north, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) implemented socialism, whereas in the south, the Republic of Korea upheld anticommunist principles. The two political powers fought with each other for legitimacy. The DPRK, aiming to liberate the people in the south, began hostilities in June 1950. This was the Korean War. It started out as a civil war, but this changed following increased involvement from the (US-led) United Nations, China and (informally) the Soviet Union. The ensuing Cold War became an international conflict, costing the lives of millions. In order to protect the pro-American administration on the Korean Peninsula, the US used Japan as a rear base and urged Japan and South Korea to establish diplomatic ties.

Thus, due to American pressure, the Japanese and South Korean governments started negotiations in 1951 to normalize diplomatic relations. This was a difficult process as they opposed each other at every turn, most notably

regarding the awareness of Japanese colonialism. Far from reflecting on historical responsibility, Japanese politicians shifted to a defiant attitude, saying that colonial rule benefited Korea. Naturally, South Korean government representatives strongly protested, claiming that they could have become a more developed country without colonial rule. Due to such conflicts, negotiations were often suspended. Although diplomatic relations were finally normalized in 1965, it required a marathon negotiation that took 14 years.

The ambiguities surrounding this diplomatic achievement created a breeding ground for future problems regarding bilateral relations.

The Treaty on Basic Relations between Japan and the Republic of Korea, which marked the normalization of diplomatic relations, does not include the words ‘colonial rule’ and ‘annexation’. Consequently, the Japanese government did not express regret (or apologize) for these events. Article 2 of the Treaty notes that all treaties and agreements up to 1910 related to the annexation of the Korean Empire were "confirmed to be no longer valid". Even this point was explained in different ways. The Japanese government told domestic audiences that such treaties and agreements were valid when Japan ruled over South Korea, but that they became invalid after that. However, the South Korean side stated that those treaties and agreements were invalid from the very beginning because they were forced upon the Korean people in an unjustifiable manner. Both governments understood that each country would give different explanations.

When diplomatic relations became normalized, the Japanese government was concerned that South Korea would demand various damage compensations from Japan in the future. Therefore, in addition to the Treaty on Basic Relations, Japan also signed the Agreement Between Japan and the Republic of Korea Concerning the Settlement of Problems in Regard to Property and Claims and Economic Cooperation. In line with this agreement, Japan provided South Korea with Japanese produce and services worth 300 million dollars (free of charge), and offered a 200-million-dollar soft loan. Furthermore, Article 2 of the agreement states that the issues of property, rights and claims have been "completely and ultimately resolved". The agreement itself is unusual and does not indicate the basis as to why economic cooperation was established in the first place. It goes without saying that this was neither an apology nor a compensation for colonial rule. However, economic cooperation was chosen because Korean people were thought to not be appeased without some sort of donation. Incidentally, there are many people who think that Japan gave South Korea money to normalize diplomatic relations, but they are mistaken. Japanese products and services (such as technical guidance for Pohang Works) were provided.

As the Treaty on Basic Relations and related agreements do not demonstrate regret and do not apologize for Japan’s colonial rule, any possibility of compensation for the people of the Korean Peninsula was excluded. Of course, the South Korean side was dissatisfied with this. At the time, however, it could not demand more. The difference in international power between Japan and South Korea was evident. Also, the US government (which was pushing for the Japan-South Korea cooperation) was busy in confronting the Socialist Bloc and in intervening in the Vietnam War. The latter broke out in Asia following the Korean War. Amidst such complications, the US wanted to hasten the diplomatic normalization process between Japan and South Korea.

In the 1950s, South Korean President Syngman Rhee called for greater confrontation with DPRK and showed a

willingness to resume the war alone. He tried to tie the United States down on this matter. The US, feeling weighed down by the South Korean government, wanted Japan to gradually take on shouldering the burden of supporting South Korea. Normalizing diplomatic relations between the two countries was already a challenging task. The Park Chung-hee administration of the 1960s, known for accepting the compromise with Japan and for normalizing diplomatic relations, dispatched troops to Vietnam to assist with US intervention. This was an attempt to tie the US down on the issue of confronting the DPRK.

Achieving the normalization of diplomatic relations between Japan and South Korea in the 1960s was closely related to the international situation during the Cold War. The South Korean people expressed their discontent with the diplomatic negotiations because the issue of colonization was glossed over. Despite widespread protests, their voices went unheard in Japan and in the United States. US policies fueled South Korea's confrontational nature towards the North amidst the North-South division. US defeat in the Vietnam War strengthened South Korea's state power system and eventually triggered increased activity for democratic social movements in the country.

The 1960s marked an era when people in the 'Third World'(including Africa) gained independence from their colonial rulers. At that time, the former suzerain states did not make a straightforward apology to the colonized and oppressed nations. However, as we entered the 21st century, issues related to colonialism became more pressing. The collapse of the Socialist Bloc from 1989 (and throughout the 1990s) destroyed the framework of the global Cold War. Social movements for democratization sprang out (in succession) in Asian countries previously ruled by authoritarian regimes. At the same time, the scars from colonialism and aggression were increasingly revealed, and the responsibility of the perpetrators was specifically called into question.

There are some people in Japan who believe in the myth that Koreans have been anti-Japanese since independence. However, the South Korean government had been severely discouraged from voicing criticism of Japan until the 1980s. At the time, it was believed that criticizing Japan meant criticizing one of the anticommunist countries who were supposed to be on friendly terms with each other. It would, therefore, have been damaging to the Korean nation.

There was one social movement in South Korea in 1982 (centered on the criticism of Japanese history textbooks) that ultimately could not be suppressed. This is despite the fact that the government's wishes determined which social movements were allowed at that time. The administration tried to control the situation so that criticism of Japan would not turn into criticism of the Japanese government, as the administrations of Japan and South Korea were closely related. Those attempts were unsuccessful in the end. The far-reaching wave of public opinion, strengthened after the measures taken for democratization in 1987, carried the movement forward. The "comfort women" issue (related to Japan's military past) has a historical background.

It became increasingly difficult for the South Korean government to claim only anti-communism as a value. As the Cold War ended, tensions began to ease between the two Koreas. Amidst the reconciliation, it finally became possible to bring the historical problems with Japan to the forefront. In the 1990s, Japanese society also began to develop an awareness of historical issues that were swept under the rug during the Cold War, and efforts were made to resolve them. The 1990s brought about progress in this regard, but unfortunately there has been little progress made in the 21st century.

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