Japan and the two Koreas: The challenges and prospects of confidence-building

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INTRODUCTION

There is the tendency to view the situation in the Korean Peninsula in the context of an emerging triangle involving relations between Korea, the United States and China, as if to say that Japan's interest in the triangle is subsumed by the American interest. Yet, the relationship between Japan and Korea dates back to the 5th century when emigrants from the peninsula went to Japan with their cultural heritage. The geographical proximity of the peninsula to Japan was a natural factor, which was supposed to favor a close relation between the two nations. But it did not happen.

On the contrary, once Japan had colonized the peninsula, it succeeded in impacting greatly on the socio-economic and political history of the whole Korea to such an extent that nowadays, the foreign policies of the two Koreas are phrased in reaction to Japan's interest. Although Koreans are often hysterical when they reflect on Japan's colonial rule over them, it is however incontestable that the historical record of their colonial tutelage under Japan can neither be re-written nor wished away; it was a period and an experience, which has continued to influence the tempo, tenor, stress and strains of Japan-Korea reactions.

The post-Second World War politics and Cold War politics in Asia-Pacific strengthened Japan-U.S. relations at the expense of Japan's autonomous relations with the Koreas. Although Japan may not welcome the short-term effects of Korean unification, it would in the long run. What then, would happen to the U.S.-Japan security treaty after the reunification of Korea? What confidence-building measures should Japan put in place in periods preceding Korean reunification, since many Korean people believe that Japan would dislike a strong and unified Korea?

The first section of this article gives a brief history of Japan-Korea relations. The second section focuses on Japan-South Korean relations after the partitioning of the Korean Peninsula into two countries, and identifies some stumbling blocks in the relationship between the Republic of South-Korea (ROK) and Japan. The third section analyzes Japan-North Korean relations. The fourth discusses the prospects of Korean reunification against the backdrop of its perceived security implications for the hegemonic interests of the major powers in Asia-Pacific.

THE HISTORY OF JAPAN–KOREAN RELATIONS

The rendition of the historical record of the relationship between Japan and Korea has always evoked strong passion and emotive feelings among the Koreans over the agonies and tragedies of their country's political tutelage under Japan between 1905 and 1945. The designation of 2005 as the "Year of Korea-Japan Friendship" had the unanticipated coincidence with the 40th anniversary of the normalization of ties between Japan and South Korea (ROK). That year also marked the centurial of the national humiliation experienced by Korea when it was forced by Japan to sign the protectorate treaty in 1905, a treaty that stripped Korea of its statehood and diplomatic rights. It is on record that Korea experienced harsh Japanese colonial rule, a historical circumstance the Koreans have continued to remember with indignation, pain and anguish.

Preceding Japanese colonial rule, the Koreans had always considered themselves superior to the Japanese, a mindset that was totally obliterated by the Japanese domineering colonial onslaught against the Korean nation. The eventual defeat of Japan in the Pacific War in 1945 automatically effected the liberation of Korea and brought to an abrupt end, Japanese forty years' rule over Korea. According to Professor Okonogi, the subsequent partitioning of the Korean Peninsula along the 38º parallel between the United States and the Soviet Union, coupled with the resultant polarization of Korea into two countries with different and conflicting ideologies patterned after the two diametrically opposed superpowers, created the basis for the outbreak of war between the two Koreas-Democratic people's Republic of Korea (North Korea) (DPRK) and the Republic of Korea (South Korea) (ROK) in 1950 (1).

Although the United States and the Soviet Union had been variously blamed for the division of the Korean Peninsula, the Koreans believe that the Japanese colonial rule undermined the viability of the Korean State by destroying its historical course

while paralyzing the country's socio-economic and political institutions. That situation, the Koreans claim today, created the conditions that warranted the disintegration of Korea in the 1950s (2).

ROK-JAPAN RELATIONS

As expected, the relationship between South Korea and Japan in the early period of the post-war years was full of acrimony and hostility. Japan's quest for self-preservation, maintenance of its security, and advancement of its economy resulted in its signing of a military pact with the United States. In a similar sense, South Korea entered into a military alliance with the United States, an action borne out of its interest in preserving its newly evolved statehood and to put in check the threats posed by Japan and North Korea to its security. The separate military alignment of both South Korea and Japan with the United States, gave rise to the normalization of diplomatic relations between the hitherto hostile countries in 1965 (3).

It is noteworthy that the United States facilitated the reconciliation between South Korea and Japan, a relationship Washington considered as a vital step for the consolidation of its strategic security control in the region. The calculus of power distribution in East Asia where Japan and South Korea had willingly identified themselves as allies of the United States and spheres of its influence, is favorable to the post-war and Cold War agenda of the United States, which essentially was to rid the region of communist threats of invasion. To be sure, the Cold War relationship between the South Korea and Japan was predicated on the ideological, security and economic underpinnings of the Cold War years. During that historical epoch, the United States wielded tremendous influence over the bilateral diplomatic relations between the two countries.

In both countries, the Cold War era influenced socio-economic and political changes. The transition from military dictatorship to democratic governance in South Korea further helped to expand the growth of its economy to a point of global reckoning. In fact, one good aspect of the bilateral relations between the two countries during the Cold War years was the positive influence of the Japanese mode of industrialization on South Korea. Japan also attained a high level of technological development, as a result of its implementation of political, social and economic reforms, especially since the enactment of the new liberal constitution in 1947. The two countries joined various international organizations through the influence and support of the United States, a development that facilitated their participation in multilateral institutions, global commerce and politics.

However, since the emergence of the post-cold War era, following the demise of the Soviet Union, relations between South Korea and Japan have been vacillating between two extremes-one of mutual animosity, and the other, of mutual amity, a reflection of changes in both the external and domestic environments of the two countries. Different groups began to champion the evolution of a new regime of South Korea-Japan-U.S. relations, which they felt would accord with the new realities in the global setting where communist threats seemed to have fizzled out. In South Korea, opposition groups clamored for the termination of their country's military pact with the United States, and the withdrawal of about 50,000 U.S. troops from Seoul (4). Of course, similar agitations and tendencies exist in Japan which harbor-United States' military bases in Okinawa and elsewhere with about 46,000 troops (5). It is however reasonable that the dominant perspective of the foreign policy elites of the two countries favors the sustenance of their alliances with the United States, a viewpoint anchored on the realization that the United States was the bulwark behind the normalization of diplomatic relations between the two countries.

There have been some records of Korea-Japan security cooperation and mutually beneficial relations between the two countries in several areas. Mention could be made of the South Korean Navy's participation in the 1990 RIMPAC exercise, trilateral defense consultation meetings among Korea, the U.S., and Japan since 1997, trilateral burden-sharing for the execution of a light water reactor project in North Korea through the Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization (KEDO), Korea-Japan Defense Ministers' dialogue track-2 dialogue among RAND and CSIS of the U.S., Korea Institute of Defense Academy (KIDA) and NIDS (National Institute for Defense Studies) and RIPS of Japan (6). The creation of KEDO which was instigated by the United States (and comprise the U.S., South Korea and Japan) while fostering close ties between these allies and the United States on the other, offered to South Korea a confidence building platform (7). No doubt, through the instrumentality of KEDO, the three countries coordinated their dealings with North Korea. But KEDO failed to alleviate the deep-rooted suspicion of the DPRK. Meanwhile South Korea became Japan's third largest trade partner behind the United States and China (8).

Yet, despite all these visible cooperation between South Korea and Japan, suspicion, which has deep-rooted historical underpinnings, remains. What is unclear

is how atonement could be made for past wrongs in order for such a suspicion to go away and give place to a genuine friendship.

Let's revisit the historical wrongs, which now and then serve as opportunistic stumbling blocks in Korean - Japan relations.

STUMBLING BLOCKS IN KOREAN-JAPAN RELATIONS

It is significant to point out that the contemporary distrust of Japan among the Korean population is rooted in the perception that Japan has not taken any serious steps to address its past misdeeds.

i) The first issue in the mind of the Koreans is the enslavement of an estimated 100,000-200,000 Korean women by the Japanese soldiers for their sexual gratification during the World War II. This issue is laden with strong emotion among Koreans, particularly so, as they feel that Japan does not want to take official responsibility for the atrocities of its soldiers during the Second World War. Japan's establishment of a NGO (Asia Women Foundation) in 1995, which would source funding from the private sector for the payment of compensation to the Korean victims, was rejected by the Seoul government and most Korean victims, on the ground that Japan should first officially apologize and compensation should come from government sources (9). The Koreans view the procrastination by the Tokyo government as a deliberate ploy to buy time and wait for the Korean victims, already in theirs 70s and 80s, to die. The Koreans use this emotional issue as a benchmark of the readiness of Japan to atone for its past wrongs. So far their expectations have been disappointed (10).

ii) The second issue relates to territorial disputes and the control of the East Sea. The Seoul government and the Korean society consider that the aggressive posture of Japan in the past decade is unacceptable. Japan's 1996 declaration of 200-mile exclusive economic zone, the 1997 unilateral expansion of 12-mile territorial water with a new baseline from the coastline, and the subsequent seizure of Korean fishing boats by the Japanese Maritime Safety Agency under the new baseline,

coupled with the 1999 unilateral abrogation of the 1965 fishery treaty between the two countries, are a sore point (11).

iii) To make matters worse, the two countries have competing claims over a number of islands and islets (Tokdo, Takeshima). While Japan argues that Takeshima Islands were incorporated into Shimane Prefecture through a resolution by the Japanese government in 1905, South Korea has continually stated that the Islands had been Korean territory since the Shilla dynasty took them in the fifth century and that they were the territory of the Subsequent Korean Kingdoms (Koryo and Yi). The Koreans added that, in 1952, President-Syngnan Rhee declared sovereignty over the waters around the country including Tokdo Islands (12).

iv) Another worry among the Korean society, who remembers Japan as an aggressive military power, is the current security role that Japan plays in the region. The qualitative superiority of Japan's navy and air force coupled with its technological advancement in the atomic industry, as well as its military potential, have been heightening Korean's fears about Japan's true intention. As the level of trust between the two cultures is quite low, the Korean society believes that Japan has the potentials of becoming a nuclear power in the light of its advanced capability in the enrichment, reprocessing and production of plutonium and fast breeder reactors. The rational here is that Japan might use the excuse of the nuclear North Korea capability one day to remove its self-imposed current limitation. As South Korea's fears are the product of its distrust of Japan (13), they carry a very strong emotional appeal among the population.

v) Lastly, as in China, the Korean population is upset by what it sees as a distortion of the history between the two countries. They note that Japanese textbooks, according to their reading, do not mention accurately Japan's wartime atrocities and misdeeds in the Peninsula during the colonization period and during WWII. They see the omission, and Japan's chronic inability to face up to its own wrong doings, as the proof of a lack of remorse (14).

JAPAN'S PERCEPTION OF ROK-JAPAN'S RIFT

Reflecting on some of the above issues, Professor Okonogi, a renowned Japanese expert on Korean Affairs, affirmed that, historically, even though they considered the Korean Peninsula as a strategically significant place for the security of Japan in the Asia-Pacific region, the Japanese never entertained good relations with the

Koreans. Notwithstanding, he noted that the relationship between South Korea and Japan, while not smooth, had during the post-war era improved tremendously (15). The visit of President Kim Dae Jung to Japan in 1998, he opined, was an epoch-making event, which gave the two countries' leaders the opportunity of ironing out their differences as a first necessary step for fostering better relationship, adding that the Japanese leadership utilized that occasion to apologize to the Koreans for Japan's past colonial administration in Korea (16).

For Yutaka Kawashima, the problem of Japan with its neighbors had little to do with Japan's contemporary policy toward them. Rather it is the fear of a resurgence of Japanese militarism on account of its history that is at play. "*Whenever Japan's neighbors begin to suspect that Japan's prewar history is going to be officially glorified, for example, in the process of certifying a history textbook or when a prime minister makes and official visit to Yasukuni Shrine, a memorial to Japan's war dead, they express their strong resentment"* he wrote (17).

In the same vein, Professor Okonogi noted that the many visits of Prime Minister Koizumi to the Yasukuni Shrine have been badly perceived by the Koreans (and the Chinese as well).

However, most Japanese scholars are quick to say that beyond bouts of emotional distress on either side, there are positive and remarkable signs of a growing cordial relationship between Japan and South Korea. They note for example that a record number of Japanese students are studying in South Korea (18). Cross-exchange visits yearly are also at record numbers (19).

Those scholars also note that Korean movies have many fans in Japan, that they are aired on some channels of Japanese television stations, that Korean actors' photographs adorn the inner walls of video shops in Tokyo, etc…

This growing appreciation and acceptance of the Korean culture by the Japanese society, can only lead to warmer relations between the two countries, they point out. But is it actually enough?

JAPAN AND NORTH KOREA

Although there is still no diplomatic relations between Japan and North Korea, the Tokyo government had since the end of the Cold War been under the pressure of the South Korean government to normalize relations with Pyongyang.

Since the commencement of discussions between Japan and North Korea in the 1990s, for the normalization of relations, no concrete achievement has been recorded. It is argued that it was Japan that had been refusing to normalize diplomatic ties with North Korea (20). Yet, others noted that North Korea had never expressed any serious desire to normalize relations with Japan, since Pyongyang believes that what Japan would offer could be better obtained from the United States (21).

Professor Kawashima said that it is solely because the Soviet Union's normalized its relations with South Korea that North Korea considered proposing normalizing relations with Japan in the autumn of 1990 (22). He added that, because of the refusal of North Korea to address squarely the issue of its abduction of Japanese citizens in the 1970s and 80s, Japan did not follow through the proposal (23). Furthermore many considered, and the United States first among others, that the regime in Pyongyang was on borrowed time.

The predictions that the regime in North Korea would collapse, which pave the way for the reunification of Korea on South Korea's terms (the Berlin wall syndrome) have fallen flat on the ground like a pack of cards. The death of North Korea's revered leader-Kim-il sung, the years of famine and food shortages, the ascension of his son Kim Jong-il whose health was immediately described as frail, all being factors that had been noted would catalyze the process of decay and eventual collapse of the DPRK, did not alter the policies of DPRK (24).

Rather than fizzle out of contention in Northeast Asia on account of its decaying economy, and its isolation, North Korea re-launched itself into relevance by default, when it admitted to having developed its nuclear capability. Pyongyang also confronted its pasts and admitted that it abducted a number of Japanese in the 1970s and 1980s (25).

Such disclosures changed the political dynamics of the diplomatic discourse and set initially the stage for a renewed international offensive against North Korea, which also fell flat. In spite of President George W. Bush Jr. describing North Korea as a "rogue state", belonging to the "axis of evil" comprising such countries as Iran,