

South Korean Views of Japan: A Polarizing Split in Coverage

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South Korean views of Japan are neither uniform nor unified. Considering that national strategic identities are competing even within a single country,¹ it is not strange at all that South Koreans have complex and fragmented views of Japan. Depending on their ideological and dispositional orientations, South Koreans hold varying perceptions about Japan. It is much more so in the age of ideological polarization. Not only in the United States, but also in South Korea, identity politics more and more dominate.² Widespread social networking service communications made tribal communications, instead of mass communications, permeate the society, which strengthened the trend of polarization.³ Increasingly people do not cross over ideological divides or social cleavage lines, creating islands of tribes to convince themselves in a particular way. The combination of ideological divide and tribal communications opens an unexplored political domain of contending views in a society.⁴

This chapter aims to delineate the development of complex and divided South Korean views of Japan, especially under the Moon administration. It shows South Korea divided within. Then it analyzes the rise of anti-Japanese elements in Moon's handling of Japan affairs after 2017. Careful analysis of the Moon government's posture toward Japan reveals that such aspects can be visibly identified. I also analyze the political background of rising anti-Japanese elements within the ruling party of South Korea, while attempting to show that alternative views of Japan are widely available despite the Moon government's generally negative posture toward Japan. Based on a review of newspaper columns and civic initiatives for reconciling with Japan, this study further illustrates the existence of modest alternative views that are different from the government position. This clearly reflects that South Korea's discursive space remains relatively democratic and plural. Finally, I address the question of whether political and diplomatic tensions would increase or decrease in the process of South Korean and Japanese interactions. Prescriptions are highly conditional in a sense that the level of tensions will be determined by the way interactions address the issues in contention.⁵

I take the position that there is not a single view but multiple and divided views of Japan in South Korea, particularly under the Moon administration. Although the Moon government contains a strong anti-Japanese and nationalist orientation, conservative intellectuals keep a moderate, cooperative stance toward Japan. One can find increasing diversity despite intense bilateral controversies over contemporary and past issues. I conclude that tensions between South Korea and Japan originate from political elites, rather than the general populace. Narrowing the perception gap between political leaders may be easier to do in bettering the relationship.

South Korea Divided Within: The Conservative-Progressive Divide

Political cleavages between conservatives and progressives in South Korea have been deepening after a progressive government assumed power.⁶ After Moon was elected president, the Blue House and incumbent ruling party launched a strong drive to expel conservative personnel in the government and public sector. They called it "clearing the old accumulated wrongdoings" (*jokpye chongsan*). They not only targeted the people in the opposition camp who supported former conservative presidents Park Geun-hye and Lee

Myung-bak, but also purged government officials who were favorable to these conservative administrations. Not only people in the executive branch but also high-ranking officials in the judiciary branch of the government, including a former supreme court judge, were targeted. Consecutive indictments and imprisonment aroused a strong backlash in conservative circles, especially from those who opposed the impeachment of Park Geun-hye. On the ruling party side, labor unions and progressive civic organizations gave unanimous support to clearing the house while newly organized conservative civic groups, represented by “Korean Flag followers,” reacted angrily against the progressive camp’s initiatives against conservative circles. The clash between conservatives and progressives was heightened and highlighted when Moon’s former senior political aide, Cho Kuk, was appointed justice minister despite numerous scandals. Those who supported Moon’s decision gathered in the Seocho area to stand against the prosecutors’ office that was investigating the Cho case, while those who strongly opposed Cho’s appointment rushed out to the Gwanghwamun area near the Blue House to convey their resistance directly to the president. South Korea looked as if it were divided into the Seocho and Gwanghwamun cliques, representing extreme polarization of society that denied any possibility of political compromise or mutual consensus building. This extreme form of polarization in South Korean society is rare. During the past administrations, it was usually the case that labor unions and the progressive camp mobilized their members to stand against the conservative establishment, but conservatives were more reserved. However, under the Moon government, conservative groups began organizing big mass events to raise their voice against the progressive camp, particularly against the incumbent president.⁷

Intense polarization of the political spectrum set the tone for how to interpret political, economic, social, and diplomatic affairs in South Korea. Cleavages formed mostly around domestic political issues, e.g., blaming the practice of impeaching the former president, calling for reform of the prosecutors’ office, and reversing economic policies that downgraded people’s livelihood.

Security and foreign policy issues also stood as a critical dividing line between the conservatives and progressives. How one viewed Japan and the United States was a telling indicator of the strong prisms at work in this deepening foreign policy cleavage. Progressives in South Korea generally preferred the idea of making positive steps toward inter-Korean collaboration with little regard to North Korean denuclearization. They expressed hope for the possibility that North Korea would denuclearize itself if advanced measures of inter-Korean cooperation were adopted. For them, avoiding another war on the Korean Peninsula is a priority along with establishing a peace regime. How to make progress on the inter-Korean reconciliatory agenda has more weight than securing the country from potential military threat from North Korea. In contrast, conservatives remained highly suspicious of Kim Jong-un’s commitment to North Korean denuclearization, arguing that Kim would never drop his nuclear weapons voluntarily. Even though Kim may send positive signals toward denuclearizing North Korea, conservative groups think that such talk can be highly deceptive. If that is the case, how to defend South Korean security from an increasing North Korean military threat assumes priority.⁸ Instead of naively advancing inter-Korean collaboration, conservatives argue that tightening security cooperation with the United States should remain the priority. That is why conservative groups bring American flags together with South Korean flags when they demonstrate on the streets.

Along with security cooperation with the United States, cooperation with Japan, a U.S. ally, sounds reasonable from the conservative standpoint. In a politically polarized South Korea, perceptions about Japan have been evolving indirectly through the prism of overall security policy orientation. From the progressive perspective, cooperation with the United States makes sense only when a U.S. president expresses an interest in dialogue with the North Korean leader. Rather than focusing on security ties with the United States, progressives put emphasis on generating a favorable atmosphere for setting up a peace regime on the peninsula. How to link Trump, Moon, and North Korean leader Kim remains their preoccupation to sustain the mood for a peaceful environment on the Korean Peninsula. From the progressive angle, Japan's diplomatic weight is not so high, because Japan was not a legitimate party in the armistice agreement that was concluded in 1953 after the Korean War. This may be the reason why the president's special advisor for unification, diplomacy, and national security affairs, Moon Chung-in, expressed his opinion in a seminar held in Tokyo that Japan's role is invisible or at least not crucial at the moment.⁹ In the eyes of the progressives, Japan's role is negligible or minimal at least in the process of establishing a peace regime on the Korean Peninsula.

In terms of understanding South Korean views of Japan, it is noteworthy that progressives remain quite generous regarding Chinese moves while they remain extremely critical toward Japan's motives. When it comes to Japan-related issues, progressives are critical on all matters. They turn their attention to history issues first and interpret Japan's positions and moves from that angle. Assuming that Japan never apologized sincerely about its colonial past, progressives in general express angry attitudes toward Japan whether the issues concerned are security issues, diplomatic struggles, or human rights issues. They argue that Japan should first apologize and take legal responsibility regarding history-related wrong doings, including the "comfort women" and forced laborers.¹⁰ In contrast, progressives remain strangely silent when China puts pressure on South Korea. Even though China took strong retaliatory measures against South Korea when the Park administration decided to deploy the THAAD system on South Korean soil, progressives never raised their voices against China. Instead they blamed the United States for entangling South Korea on a regional security front against China and North Korea. As an extension, progressives in South Korea were extremely critical of Japan's introduction of collective self-defense and security-related laws in 2014 and 2015.

More Diversified Opinions on Japan than Before

For a long time in the postwar period, discussion about Japan in South Korea remained relatively monotonous. Anti-Japanese nationalistic discourse prevailed not only in the mass media but also in scholarly discussions. Newspaper writers often did not hesitate to use terms like "right-wing shift," "remilitarization," and "return to the prewar order" when they discussed Japan-related issues. Some Korean journalists even confessed that newspapers would not sell if they do not employ such provocative concepts. It was taken for granted for a long time that to be safe when you talk about Japan, you had better be critical (anti-Japanese).

However, from around the Lee Myung-bak time, a conservative backlash began. As progressive civic groups continued to raise the "comfort women" issue for criticizing what they called "non-repentant Japan," a few stood up against blaming Japan without

factual evidence. A typical example was Professor Park Yuha, who wrote a book entitled *Comfort Women of the (Japanese) Empire*,¹¹ in which she argued that not all “comfort women” were forcefully mobilized by the Japanese authority. Instead, she claimed that many of them were deceived or seduced with financial compensation by the private Korean agents endorsed by the Japanese authority. She even revealed that some of the “comfort women” volunteered to get out of extreme poverty. This book immediately aroused very strong resistance from a civic group advocating for the “comfort women.”¹² They even had her indicted in a Korean court for inventing fake stories in order to give support to the claims of the Japanese government. She was depicted as a traitor of Korean nationalism. Park Yuha had a hard time fighting against them in a painstaking legal process. However, the publication of the book itself was an unprecedented occurrence in South Korea’s academic environment.

In 2019, a much more controversial book was published by a group of conservative economic historians. Led by Lee Young-hoon, *Anti-Japan Tribalism*¹³ took the stance that progressive intellectuals in South Korea tend to blame Japan on the basis of biased and selective aggregation of historical facts. Lee and his colleagues’ investigation of economic history during the Japanese colonial time tells us that Japanese colonial rule was not severely oppressive before the early 1940s when Japan launched total mobilization to win the war. Another point raised in their book is that the Japanese colonial authority treated Koreans relatively on equal terms with the Japanese due to the fact that Japan wanted to internalize Korea as part of Japan. This kind of book would have never been published if the anti-Japanese mood prevailed in South Korean society. However, not only was it published, it remained the second best-seller in a bookstore for more than five months after publication. As of December 2019, more than 100,000 copies were sold, recording a tenth printing within five months.¹⁴ Its publication represents a conservative backlash against a tilted intellectual circle favoring a progressive vantage point.

It is not only in book publications but also in newspaper editorials and columns that conservative commentary rose to a par with progressive viewpoints. Newspapers with relatively conservative orientations, such as *Chosun Ilbo*, *DongA Ilbo*, *JoongAng Ilbo*, and *Munhwa Ilbo*, began disseminating columns and editorials that grew critical toward “demonizing” Japan.¹⁵ This does not mean that these newspapers took sides with the claims of the Japanese government. Rather they expressed criticism of the selective reports offered by progressive newspapers. Also, instead of blaming Japan and negating any possibility of advancing cooperation with Japan, these newspapers suggested that South Korea had reason to cooperate with Japan while raising critical points about Japan’s failure to address past history issues in a proper manner.

What has changed on South Korean soil is that alternative voices, which are different from the claims of nationalists or chauvinists, surfaced on intellectual grounds. Public opinion surveys show that anti-Japanese feelings are still predominant, especially when it comes to past history issues.¹⁶ However, at the opinion leaders’ level, it is gradually turning into a level playing ground. It is not simply anti-Japanese nationalism that is presented in South Korean mass media. Though it may not be mainstream opinion yet, different voices are heard, especially from a conservative and internationalist standpoint.

The Generational Divide

It is also noteworthy that the younger generations in both Japan and South Korea care less about the political and diplomatic circumstances in bilateral relations. One can find a much more favorable feeling toward each other among “youngsters” in their 20s and 30s.¹⁷ There is a tendency in South Korea that older generations take a more critical stance toward Japan without regard to government admonitions or publicly prevailing nationalism on both sides. For example, among South Korean travelers to Japan and Japanese travelers to Korea, those in their 20s and 30s predominate. They enjoy the culture of the other side. Korean travelers partake in Japanese hot-springs, sushi, and good local restaurants, local scenic drives, and other attractions. Murakami Haruki is almost always on the list of best-selling books whenever new books are introduced. Japanese manga, animation, and songs are popular among Korean youngsters. They do not care much about political concerns. Japanese youngsters feel the same. When they go to South Korea, they enjoy Korean food, spas, tourist spots, and entertainment.

It would not be an exaggeration to say that there is a “generational divide” when it comes to South Korean views of Japan or Japanese views of South Korea. One of the critical differences is that the younger generation have been personally exposed to other cultures at an early stage of their life. Rather than simply relying on textbooks or mass media, they navigate through the internet and collect information from colleagues and friends. They are taught and trained by the same generation rather than by previous generations.

The Moon Administration’s Priority on North Korea

Despite the development of alternative perspectives about Japan in the 2010s, one can hardly be hopeful about the future course of the relationship between the two countries. The Moon government has consciously taken a progressive stance with a strong anti-Japan flavor. From the beginning, it put unusual emphasis on cooperative ties with North Korea. Considering that the possibility of another war or military option against North Korea was under discussion at the end of 2017, it is not unusual that the new Korean administration gave this priority. North Korea conducted its fourth and fifth nuclear tests in 2016 and continued to escalate military tensions on the peninsula. After facing a sixth nuclear test and a series of long-range missile tests, the Trump administration sent a signal that a surgical strike in the name of a “bloody nose operation” could be considered. In order to avoid a military conflict and to reverse course to establish a peaceful environment, the Moon administration launched a campaign for engaging North Korea on the sidelines of the Pyeongchang Winter Olympic Games in 2018. Inter-Korean summits were held three times in 2018. A military accord for reducing tensions along the DMZ was reached in the fall of 2018, and measures were taken to implement it. Trump-Kim summits were held in Singapore in 2018 and in Hanoi in 2019. To establish peace on the peninsula, several interrelated policy measures were designed. First, for the purpose of reducing military tensions along the DMZ, confidence building measures were introduced. Second, constructing a peace regime was actively discussed, including the possibility of declaring an end to the war, which could be connected to a peace treaty. Third, inter-Korean economic and social collaboration projects were on the table with a view to opening a new economic map of the Korean Peninsula.

All these moves were driven by the inter-Korean initiative with the help of Trump's partial endorsement. Because the policy priority was to accelerate cooperation between North and South Korea with the help of the United States, Japan's strategic priority declined in the process. Japan's role was not visible at all at this stage of confidence building and opening a dialogue with North Korea. In this sense, Japan was relatively neglected by the Moon government, especially between 2017 and 2018.

Digging to Reverse Past History Issues: Undisguised Anti-Japan Flavor

In 2017, the seeds of conflict between the Moon and Abe administration began growing, though. The Moon administration remained critical of the "comfort women" accord signed by Park in December 2015. Taking advantage of critical public opinion against the Park administration after she was impeached and imprisoned, the Moon administration negated her policy legacy in many areas. Japan-related controversy was just one of them. Immediately after assuming power, in May 2017, the Moon administration set up a critical review commission on the "comfort women" agreement. The final report of the commission publicized in December 2017 denied the legitimacy of the accord in the name of a "victim-centered perspective," claiming that the victims' voices were not respectfully regarded while a government, elite-driven consensus was hastily pushed ahead. Following the guideline suggested by the final report, the "Reconciliation and Healing Foundation" was dissolved in 2019. South Korea's ministry of gender equality prepared a budget equivalent to the one-billion yen contributed by the Japanese government to compensate victimized "comfort women," which almost made Japan's fund meaningless. This aroused anger in the Abe cabinet, because the Moon government had nullified the effectiveness of the historic accord that Abe had achieved over the objection of domestic critics in Japan.

This was just the beginning, not the end, of the process. In August 2018, the Moon government reprimanded the Supreme Court for illegally intervening in the legal decision for handling "comfort women" cases. The head of the Supreme Court was later indicted and arrested. In October 2018, Japanese naval ships were not allowed to raise the "imperial Japanese flag" on the occasion of the International Naval Parade hosted by the South Korean Navy. Japan then decided not to attend the parade. In December 2018, the South Korean navy reportedly targeted a laser gun at Japanese naval planes in the process of searching for North Korean ships. Though the whole story remains undisclosed even at this moment, the lack of communications between the two parties ended up escalating tensions. The anti-Japanese campaign reached a peak when the South Korean Supreme Court issued a verdict in October 2018 that Japanese corporations have to compensate the former forcefully mobilized Korean laborers during the colonial period. The court took the position that victimized individuals still possess the right to seek compensation from corporations although the two governments had reached an agreement on the settlement of issues from the colonial period. It presumed that illegal and forceful mobilization by Japan was not a legitimate part of the 1965 settlement. Yet the Japanese government strongly insisted that the issue was finally and completely resolved in 1965, and Japan has no reason to compensate the forced Korean laborers again. How to narrow the gap between the two sides was a major point of conflict after the end of 2018. The two governments tried to reach a compromise point through the entirety of 2019, but they failed to reach a breakthrough even at the beginning of 2020.

The series of conflicts between the two governments illustrate that the Moon government is preoccupied with history issues to reverse decisions in the name of respecting human rights. It had no intention of making a diplomatic compromise or reconciling on the history-related issues. What the Moon government pursues is similar to the claims of progressive civil society in South Korea, which argues that Japan is obliged to continue to apologize about the past wrongdoings until the Korean victims are fully satisfied. Also, it argues that Japan should take legal responsibility to compensate the victims as a sign of respecting international human rights. These demands go beyond what Japan can accept, especially under the hawkish Abe government, which refuses further apology or compensation to Asian victims.

Resurrecting Korean Identity from the Independence Movement

The Moon government's return to the past does not necessarily come from contentions about victimhood during the Japanese colonial times. It is deeply rooted in the progressive camp's historical revisionism, which strives to revise modern Korean history from the perspective of tracing the legitimacy of the Korean government to an interim government established in Shanghai in 1919. For them, the start of the Korean government in 1948 signifies only the beginning of a divided Korea separating the Korean people into two. In an ideological drive to reunify the country, the roots of South Korea should spring from the interim government and independence movement led by it. As the interim government was established in Shanghai, with the support of Chang Kai-shek during the colonial period, locating the roots of national legitimacy in that regime connotes that Japan is a natural enemy of the Korean people. While giving full legitimacy to the independence movement, progressives find fault with pro-Japanese political and social elites who collaborated in Japan's colonial domination.

As an extension of this logic, pro-Japanese collaborators, whose descendants are mostly found in conservative circles, are depicted as illegitimate people who occupied higher social positions despite the will of the Korean masses.¹⁸ Even though Rhee Syngman was the first president who contributed to setting up "the only legitimate Korean government endorsed by the United Nations," progressives criticize him also as a pro-Japanese collaborator who appointed former landlords to his cabinet. Rhee's devotion to the independence of Korea is simply erased in their mindset. In the same manner, President Park Chung-hee is depicted as a pro-Japanese collaborator because he worked as a Japanese military officer during the colonial period. Also, his decision to normalize relations with Japan in 1965, despite strong resistance from university students, is regarded as a betrayal of Korean nationalism.

In this way, independence movement activists, especially hardliners among them who advocated military action against Japanese colonialism, are highly regarded, while conservative political leaders who hired pro-Japanese collaborators or worked for Japanese colonialism are denounced as turncoats to Korean nationalism.¹⁹ Historical revisionism advocated by the progressives in South Korea has a strong scent of anti-Japanese nationalism, which goes back to the pre-colonial period. Even the Donghak movement, which stood against the tyranny of the Chosun dynasty, is eulogized. From this standpoint, the pride of the Korean people lies in fighting against the oppressive Japanese colonial

past, not in the postwar development under American auspices or Japanese assistance. This attests to the conclusion that the anti-Japanese element of the Moon administration has deep ideological roots in regaining the legitimacy and pride of a nation.

The Korean-style historical revisionism advocated by Moon and progressive groups is juxtaposed to the Abe-style historical revisionism advocated by Japanese right-wingers.²⁰ Abe and his cabinet embrace the notion that the Japanese government has no reason to apologize again for wrongdoings during the colonial period. Abe strongly negates the element of enforcement, especially physical enforcement, in the mobilization of “comfort women” and forced labor. According to Abe and his close aides, Japan did nothing wrong to violate the fundamentals of human rights even during the colonial period. The two strands of historical revisionism have little in common, which only widens the perception gap between the two leaders. It is fair to say that Moon and Abe have different conceptions about Japan’s colonial past and the postwar development of Korea and Japan. This is not simply a political but also an ideological divergence between the two leaders. Ideological differences do not always come to surface, but if we take a deeper look at what is going on, political leaders’ convictions and supportive groups’ ideological orientations do matter.

Negating Trilateral Security Cooperation

Another element of anti-Japan thinking comes from the Moon administration’s reluctance to strengthen trilateral security cooperation between the United States, Japan, and South Korea. This does not mean that the administration is against the alliance with the United States, which is the pivotal axis of securing South Korea. However, to the Moon government, enhancing the level of security cooperation with the United States and Japan implies the position that the current division of the peninsula had better be maintained; also, it indicates that North Korea and China should be regarded as a major source of threat, which should be contained together.

The progressive Moon government takes the position that North Korea should be embraced for the peace and prosperity of the nation, eventually leading to integration. Accordingly, antagonizing North Korea goes against the strategic cornerstone of the Moon government. Undue reliance on the United States leaves little room for diplomatic maneuvering on the part of South Korea. Progressive intellectuals try to find a different route in handling peninsular and regional affairs. First of all, even though they acknowledge the heavy weight of the American presence for South Korean security, they think that alleviating the security concerns of North Korea is necessary, sometimes even to the extent that joint military exercises with the United States can be postponed or scaled down.²¹ Second, they try to find room for diplomatic maneuvering between South and North Korea to open the door to closer inter-Korean cooperative projects. For example, Moon Chung-in argues that, to get cooperation from North Korea regarding denuclearization, compensation is indispensable.²² He made a conditional statement that “if there is no objection coming from North Korea, then let us have American forces here in South Korea even after a peace treaty.” For him, the decision regarding U.S. forces in South Korea can be a topic to discuss with North Korea.²³ As a sovereign nation, South Korea can make independent decisions at times at odds with the will of the United States. Third, plugging Japan into the framework of South Korean security invites strong criticism from China, another partner with which South Korea should work.

Pro-Moon intellectuals are supportive of the "Three Noes" position toward China after China pressured South Korea not to deploy THAAD;²⁴ they are not willing to take a cooperative stance when it comes to security cooperation with Japan.

Controversy over the extension of GSOMIA clearly illustrates the policy orientation of the Moon government. On August 22, 2019, the Blue House made the decision that GSOMIA would not be extended if Japan does not cancel export control measures announced on July 1, 2019. Deputy National Security Advisor Kim Hyun-jong was reported to have taken the lead in this argument. Even National Security Advisor Chung Eui-yong was reported to have said that GSOMIA has nothing to do with the United States because it is a bilateral agreement between South Korea and Japan.²⁵ What has been neglected is that GSOMIA was strongly encouraged by the United States when it was signed in 2016. Resistance against the extension of GSOMIA sounded like the negation of security cooperation not only with Japan but also with the United States. That is why a number of high-ranking U.S. officials visited South Korea to convey messages of disappointment and frustration.²⁶ Only at the last moment, on November 22, 2019, did the South Korean government announce that it was willing to cancel putting the decision not to extend GSOMIA into effect on condition that the Japanese government is willing to discuss the cancellation of export control measures in a timely manner.

Such developments illustrate the fact that the Moon administration is not enthusiastic at all about advancing security ties with the United States and Japan. It stepped back only when the United States pressured it to extend the agreement, doing so only at the last moment. This is telling proof that the Moon administration has little intention to advance security ties with Japan unless the United States pushes hard from behind. Whether or not the Moon administration is anti-Japanese, it is reluctant to cooperate with Japan on the security front.

Conservative Intellectuals' Critical Stance against the Moon Administration

Despite the Moon administration's negative assessment of working with Japan, not all Koreans follow suit. In particular, conservative civil society continues to voice concern and criticize this posture. On almost every issue that the Moon government raises, conservative intellectuals offer a rebuttal despite negative campaigns by progressive supporters of the administration. A number of editorials and news columns did not correspond with the government policy.

When the Supreme Court issued a verdict that Japanese corporations are supposed to compensate forced laborers, several people wrote columns that the issue has been finalized by the 1965 treaty. Lee Won-Deog took the lead with a column in *Chosun Ilbo* that the decision has the potential to destroy the 1965 regime, which has served as a sound legal foundation for Korea-Japan relations for several decades.²⁷ I wrote that the sound backbone of Korea-Japan relations might be broken due to the Supreme Court decision. In particular, I argued that the decision went against the 2005 Korean government decision, where it announced that all the contentious pending issues had been resolved by the 1965 treaty except the "comfort women" issue, forced immigrants to Sakhalin, and nuclear bomb victims.²⁸ A former Korean ambassador to Japan, Shin Gak-soo, stated that diplomatic communications should be facilitated in order to avoid the worst outcome.²⁹ When military

authorities escalated tensions at the end of 2018, ignited by the South Korean Defense Ministry making an issue of the Japanese naval flag use as well as by alleged use of radar against a Japanese reconnaissance plane, four conservative intellectuals wrote a joint column, arguing that politicians on both sides should not jump on the populist temptation and how the two countries should continue to maintain joint security alertness against the North Korean military threat.³⁰

Amid controversies about Japan's export controls, President Moon mentioned the "remaining twelve naval ships," which was Admiral Yi Sun-sin's rhetoric to fight against Hideyoshi Toyotomi's attack in the late sixteenth century. Right after strong anti-Japanese emotions had been aroused, Hur Min at *Munhwa Ilbo* wrote that retaliation is not possible without power and capability. He reminded readers that a romantic pro-North Korean stance and emotional anti-Japan stance are closely intertwined with resistant nationalism that is rooted in tribalism. Cho Kuk, who served as a senior secretary to the president at the time, wrote in Facebook that Koreans should wield bamboo sticks to fight against the retaliatory measures taken by the Japanese government. Park Hyung-joon suggested that Cho Kuk's agitation contains elements of shadowy totalitarianism and the politics of negative framing.³² Lee Il-young wrote in *Kyunghang Daily*, a progressive newspaper, that bamboo stick reminds us of a nationally enclosed economy, which goes against the trend of the globalized economy, in which South Korea has prospered.³³

Controversies about GSOMIA within South Korea revealed diversified opinions more vividly. When the Moon administration decided not to extend GSOMIA in August 2019, many intellectuals resisted. Hur Min asked whether the administration was dreaming anti-Americanism.³⁴ Lee Chun-keun argued that Moon's going against the United States and Japan would invite disaster to South Korea.³⁵ Park Young-june at Korean National Defense University warned, "Dropping GSOMIA would be interpreted as sliding away from security cooperation among the U.S., Japan, and South Korea."³⁶ When the Blue House was wondering whether to extend GSOMIA or not, I said in an interview that breaking up GSOMIA might be an act of self-injury originating from a misjudgement.³⁷ At another interview, I went further to say that terminating GSOMIA would be a dangerous gamble.³⁸ Voices of resistance never faded away until the government made a final decision to extend it on November 22, 2019.

Non-governmental initiatives to take a moderate, cooperative stance toward Japan are not confined to individual efforts. *JoongAng Ilbo* organized a "Korea-Japan Vision Forum" in March 2019 and consistently featured critical articles after thorough internal discussions regarding worsening Korea-Japan relations and how to fix them. Led by Hong Seok-Hyun, chairman of JoongAng Holdings, this vision group continued heated debates about what should be done to make bilateral ties better through a total of fourteen meetings in 2019. Most of the discussion points have been introduced in *JoongAng Ilbo*. Titles of the news coverage prove that this group tried to suggest moderate alternative views of Korea-Japan relations. Examples are: "Catastrophe Should Be Avoided,"³⁹ "Solution to Forced Labor Issues Should Be Found through the Composition of Presidential Commission Where Specialists Participate,"⁴⁰ "Japan Is an Important Security Partner,"⁴¹ "Moon and Abe Should Meet in Osaka Without Conditions,"⁴² "Win-Win Cooperation between Korean and Japanese Corporations,"⁴³ "Dropping GSOMIA May Be Interpreted as Sliding Away from Security Cooperation between the U.S., Japan, and South Korea,"⁴⁴ "Indignation Should Be

Stopped,”⁴⁵ “Gap between Domestic and International Law Should Be Narrowed Down,”⁴⁶ “Solution to Forced Labor Should Be Prepared Before the Termination of GSOMIA,”⁴⁷ and “Let’s Demand Apology, not Compensation to Japan.”⁴⁸ All of these news stories suggest that moderate, neither extreme nationalist nor anti-government, views are openly featured. This shows the increasing diversity in South Korean views of Japan.

Conclusion

There are conflicting and diversified views of Japan within South Korea. Reflecting an intensely polarized political domain, perceptions and viewpoints about Japan are neither unified nor uniformed. South Korea is ideologically divided, and as an extension, views of Japan are divided and polarized. This does not mean that there is no point of agreement between the two polarized viewpoints. On many issues, progressives and conservatives converge with little disagreement. Still, they are divided over how to interpret the past history, how to take care of victims in Korea, the degree to which international law should be preserved, whether trilateral security cooperation should be maintained, to what extent South Korea should advance economic cooperation with Japan, and whether Japan is an integral and essential diplomatic partner in changing the regional atmosphere.

After the advent of the Moon administration, anti-Japanese emotions were promoted on the part of the government and the ruling party, not from the opposition. Starting from the handling of the issue of victims of colonial times to the issue of security cooperation, the Moon administration tended to take a hardline policy toward Japan or neglect the importance of working with Japan. Its priority is the establishment of a peace regime on the Korean Peninsula. Japan’s active role is invisible there, which led to relative neglect of Japan in diplomatic affairs. Diverging perspectives about how to interpret the 1965 agreement and 2015 “comfort women” agreement led to deepening frictions between Moon and Abe. While the Moon government asks Japan to compensate the victims of forced labor mobilization, the Abe cabinet is adamantly denying the possibility of addressing the issue. The gap between the two sides is hardly narrowing. Though there are signs of retreating from the principled positions on both parties, it is too early to tell that collaboration between the two governments would be restored soon. The political elites and key decision makers in both countries are not willing to make a compromise. Worsening public opinion was a reflection of government initiatives rather than the spontaneous development of attitudes toward each other. Unlike the perception that politicians are the captives and prisoners of public opinion, political leaders are manipulating the situation for their own political objectives. An easy fix is hard to find until changes of government take place.

Notwithstanding the persistent impasse, not all opinion leaders or intellectuals are following the inclinations of their incumbent government. A number of South Korean intellectuals, mostly of the conservative political circle, do not hesitate to rebut the Moon administration’s hardline posture toward Japan. They do not necessarily advocate Japan’s position. Rather they are inclined to focus criticism on the mistaken policy line of the Moon administration while also trying to suggest moderate alternatives to the government in a collective manner.

The fact that South Korean views of Japan are divided is different from the past when views had been more uniform and united. They are diversifying. The progressive Moon government's hardline posture toward Japan ironically has opened the gate to diversified viewpoints.

Endnotes

- ¹ Cheol Hee Park, "National Identities and South Korea-Japan Relations," in Gilbert Rozman, ed., *National Identities and Bilateral Relations* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013), 45-64.
- ² Francis Fukuyama points out that identity matters in politics. Francis Fukuyama, *Identity: The Demand for Dignity and the Politics of Resentment* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018).
- ³ Mass communication presupposes that the same news is read and spread to an anonymous mass at the same time. However, social network service communication makes it possible to selectively view at one's chosen timing for an audience of a selected group of people without being bothered by other people. The latter can be called tribal communication.
- ⁴ On the contentious nature of politics, see Charles Tilly and Sidney Tarrow, *Contentious Politics* (Boulder: Paradigm Publishers, 2007).
- ⁵ On how interactions and feedback can define the nature of relations between nations, see Robert Jervis, *System Effects: Complexity in Political and Social Life* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997).
- ⁶ Polarization was vividly visualized in October, 2019 when thousands of progressives repeatedly rallied in support of Cho Kuk, justice minister appointee, around the prosecutor's office in Seocho, while more than a million conservatives gathered together to protest against Cho Kuk's nomination in the Gwanghwamoon area in the center of Seoul.
- ⁷ From the conservative side, the evangelical church provided strong organizational initiative. Minister Chun Gwanhoon took the lead.
- ⁸ Sunghan Kim & Scott Snyder, "Denuclearizing North Korea: Time for Plan B," *Washington Quarterly* 42, no. 4 (Winter 2020): 75-90.
- ⁹ Moon Chung-in is reported to have said at a seminar at Keio University that there is no Japanese role in the process of North Korean denuclearization. *Chosun Ilbo*, February 11, 2019.
- ¹⁰ The Korean Council for Justice and Remembrance for the Issues of Military Sexual Slavery by Japan claims that Japan should first acknowledge its crimes, officially apologize, compensate victims legally, investigate the truth, and punish those who are responsible for the crimes, <http://womenandwar.net/kr/visionnmission>. (Accessed on April 5, 2020).
- ¹¹ Park Yuha, *제국의 위안부* (Seoul: Ppuri wa Epari, 2013).
- ¹² Park Yuha was indicted at the urging of the progressive civic movement on June 16, 2014, after she presented a summary of her argument at a symposium. She was indicted for reason of defamation of the victimized "comfort women." She revealed her life after being indicted by publishing another book, *Yuha Park, 제국의 위안부: 법정에서 1460일* (Seoul: Ppuri wa Epari, 2018).
- ¹³ Lee Young-hoon, et. al., *반일 종족주의* (Seoul: Miraesa, 2019)
- ¹⁴ *Monthly Joongang*, December 5, 2019, <http://news.joins.com/article/23649429>. (Accessed on April 5, 2020).

- ¹⁵ The following are representative columnists and translated titles of their articles. Sun Woojung, "Japan's Power as a Nobel Prize Winner," *Chosun Ilbo*, October 12, 2018; Sun Woojung, "Moon Jaein-style Anti-Japanism Has No Future," *Chosun Ilbo*, August 28, 2019; Lee Hakyung, "Is Japan Still an Enemy?" *JoongAng Ilbo*, April 8, 2019; Lee Hakyung, "Fear of Ruining Korea-Japan Relations Initiated by the Moon Government," *JoongAng Ilbo*, April 22, 2019; Lee Hakyung, "Old Bad Japanese in My Mind Is a Problem," *JoongAng Ilbo*, August 12, 2019; Park Jekyun, "Problem Is Not Abe But Kim Jungen," *DongA Ilbo*, August 12, 2019; Lee Misook, "Past Cannot Win the Future," *Munhwa Ilbo*, July 10, 2019; Lee Misook, "Retrieving GSOMIA Can Rescue Alliance," *Munhwa Ilbo*, October 2, 2019.
- ¹⁶ According to a joint survey conducted by Yomiuri and *Hankook Ilbo*, 71.6 percent of Korean respondents replied that they do not feel friendly to Japan, and 75.1 percent of Korean respondents answered that they do not trust Japan. *Hankook Ilbo*, June 10, 2019.
- ¹⁷ In an opinion survey conducted by the Cabinet Office of Japan in October 2018, 57.4 percent of the respondents in their 20s and 30s answered that they feel friendly with South Korea, while only 31.3 percent of the respondents in their 60s expressed a positive feeling toward South Korea. Yonhap News, August 9, 2019. *Mainichi* noted that Japanese youngsters continue to be attracted to the "Korean Wave" despite deterioration in Korea-Japan ties. *Mainichi Shimbun*, August 9, 2019.
- ¹⁸ Moon Jae-in delivered a speech with a strong anti-Japanese tone on March 1, 2019, Independence Day. He said, "Removing the legacy of pro-Japanese, which reconfirms that pro-Japanese should be something to be repented while the independence movement should be something to be respected, is to resurrect the very most basic value of the country. This simple truth is justice, and resurrecting justice is the beginning of a fair country." *Chosun Ilbo*, March 1, 2019.
- ¹⁹ The Moon government denounced Rhee Syngman, who laid the foundation for an independent South Korea, as a pro-Japanese political leader, while actively moving to confer a medal on Kim Won-bong, who led the armed opposition to Japanese imperialism but later worked for the establishment of the North Korean regime. *Chosun Ilbo*, February 16, 2019.
- ²⁰ Kan Kimura, *The Burden of the Past: Problems of Historical Perception in Japan-Korea Relations* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2018).
- ²¹ Suh Choo Suk, "Concerns about Weakening US-ROK Alliance?" *East Asia Foundation Policy Debate* No. 130 (January 14, 2020).
- ²² For Moon Chung-in's interview, see *Yomiuri Shimbun*, February 18, 2019.
- ²³ "Moon Chung-in Interview," *Atlantic*, May 17, 2018.
- ²⁴ Cheol Hee Park, "Three No Position toward China: Is It Sustainable?" *East Asia Foundation Policy Debate*, No. 86 (December 5, 2017).
- ²⁵ *Hankyoreh*, November 10, 2019.
- ²⁶ James Dehart, the chief U.S. negotiator in defense cost-sharing talks, visited Seoul on November 5, 2019. On the same day, David Stilwell, assistant secretary of state for East Asia and Pacific affairs arrived in Seoul. On November 13, 2019, General Mark Milley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, made a visit to Seoul. On the next day, Mark Esper, secretary of defense, called on the Blue House to deliver U.S. messages of concern.
- ²⁷ Lee Won-Deog said in an interview that the South Korean Supreme Court might not have made a verdict like that if they fully took international reality into consideration. *Chosun Ilbo*, November 1, 2018.

- ²⁸ *Maeil Economy Daily*, November 2, 2018.
- ²⁹ Shin Gaksoo, Yonhap News. November 7, 2018.
- ³⁰ Park Hwirak, Kim Taewoo, Song Daesung, and Shin Wonsik, "Like it or not what we need is security cooperation between Korea and Japan," *Daylian*, January 14, 2019.
- ³¹ *Munhwa Ilbo*, July 16, 2019.
- ³² *Kukmin Ilbo*, July 23, 2019.
- ³³ *Kyunghyang Daily*, August 6, 2019.
- ³⁴ *Munhwa Ilbo*, August 6, 2019.
- ³⁵ Lee Chunkeun, "미국과 일본 등지는 문재인 외교가 화를 부른다," *Monthly Chosun*, November 2, 2019.
- ³⁶ *JoongAng Ilbo*. August 21, 2019.
- ³⁷ *Munhwa Ilbo*, November 12, 2019.
- ³⁸ *DongA Ilbo*, November 20, 2019.
- ³⁹ *JoongAng Ilbo*, April 17, 2019.
- ⁴⁰ *JoongAng Ilbo*, May 1, 2019.
- ⁴¹ *JoongAng Ilbo*, May 15, 2019.
- ⁴² *JoongAng Ilbo*, May 29, 2019.
- ⁴³ *JoongAng Ilbo*, June 26, 2019.
- ⁴⁴ *JoongAng Ilbo*, August 21, 2019.
- ⁴⁵ *JoongAng Ilbo*, August 9, 2019.
- ⁴⁶ *JoongAng Ilbo*, August 16, 2019.
- ⁴⁷ *JoongAng Ilbo*, September 11, 2019.
- ⁴⁸ *JoongAng Ilbo*, November 14, 2019.