

Japanese Views of South Korea: Enough is Enough

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While the sources of contention are deep and enduring, relations between Japan and South Korea have been especially troubled in the last few years. The two countries are grappling with deeply entrenched, emotional legacies that have been inflamed by recent controversies, rendering history both immediate and real. This chapter explores Japan's perception of and reaction to those events. While it aims to provide an objective assessment of Japanese thinking, it does not purport to be even-handed or balanced. It is an analysis of the Japanese view of the relationship with South Korea.

To be brief and blunt, Japanese are frustrated with and angered by South Koreans. Frustrated because they have been unable to build a future with them that rests on a foundation of shared concerns and values; domestic politics continues to override strategic interests. Angry because Korean complaints deny the many changes that have occurred in Japan since the end of World War II. Japanese do not deny that atrocities took place, but they are offended when they are laid at the feet of current generations. A growing number of Japanese believe that Koreans prefer to occupy the moral high ground over building a mutually beneficial long-term partnership. This belief increasingly colors the way that Korean actions and statements are interpreted.

A Long and Tangled History

One of the paramount difficulties in understanding Japan-ROK relations is to ascertain at what point in time to start the analysis. The two governments are engaged in what can be described as either a *pas de deux* (by aesthetes) or (for the scientifically inclined) a geopolitical manifestation of Newton's Third Law, according to which every action generates an equal and opposite reaction. To put it more plainly, each insists that it is only responding to its counterpart, righting a wrong or defending national honor. Both are aggrieved, looking backward rather than forward, more focused on history than the future.

A modern assessment of the bilateral relationship could begin in 1965 when the two countries signed a treaty establishing diplomatic relations. That document provided a legal and diplomatic framework for engagement since Article II stipulates that "problems ... and interests ... and the claims between the High Contracting Parties and between their peoples ... have been settled completely and finally."¹ As the current dispute between the two countries has its origins in an argument over whether that treaty in fact settles those claims, a more useful starting point might be the Japan-Korea Annexation Treaty of 1910, by which Japan officially annexed the Korean Peninsula. That treaty is also disputed, however, with Koreans claiming that the Korean emperor was forced to sign and, lacking genuine consent, the document was not valid. Alternatively, the starting date could be pushed back to the Japan-Korea Treaty of 1905, which followed Japan's victory over Russia in the Russo-Japanese War (1904-05), ratified Moscow's withdrawal of all influence over the Korean Peninsula (to the victor go the spoils) and established a Japanese protectorate. That treaty was followed by the Taft-Katsura Agreement between Japan and the U.S., by which Washington acknowledged Tokyo's control over the peninsula in exchange for Japanese acquiescence to U.S. control over the Philippines. The consent of the Korean emperor was never in doubt: After signing the treaty, he sent entreaties to world leaders seeking their help, but they all rejected his pleas. While in almost all cases, scholars concede (sometimes

with regret) that the treaties comport with the legal and diplomatic realities of the time, they continue to be disputed by Koreans, which means that they have a power and meaning in contemporary politics and thus remain relevant.

Other experts insist that 100 years is not enough. They argue that the roots of conflict between the two countries were sown 430 years ago when the Japanese warlord Hideyoshi Toyotomi invaded Korea in 1592. The Imjin Wars, as they are known, were waged over six years and ended in 1598 with withdrawal of the Japanese forces. Those who roll their eyes at the notion that such ancient history could resonate in contemporary Korea must pause: President Moon and an aide both referred to General Yi Sun-sin, one of the national heroes in the fight against Hideyoshi, as they sought to rouse their nation to address challenges posed by recent Japanese actions.²

In both cases – Hideyoshi’s invasion and the 20th century annexation – Japan did great harm to Korea. The Imjin Wars were marked by atrocities and destruction, with some scholars claiming that more damage was done during that invasion than during the 1950-53 Korean War. During the imperial occupation, hundreds of thousands of Koreans were forced to work as unpaid labor, thousands of women were forced into sexual slavery, and Japanese authorities tried to obliterate Korean culture. That violence and devastation contributes to Korean anger today.

A still more encompassing history would journey back over 1,500 years and acknowledge the Korean roots of many of the Japanese clans that rose to prominence in the 4th and 5th centuries. The previous Japanese emperor drew attention to that heritage on his 68th birthday when he noted that “I, on my part, feel a certain kinship with Korea, given the fact that it is recorded in the Chronicles of Japan that the mother of Emperor Kammu was of the line of King Muryong of Paekche.”³ (Kammu ruled Japan from 781 to 806, and Muryong ruled the Paekche Kingdom in Korea from 501 to 523.) That lineage had long been discussed among academics and archeologists, but it remains little noted among the Japanese public. For Koreans, failure to acknowledge that history is another example of Japan’s readiness to marginalize their country and culture, and another source of grievance.

The key takeaway from this history is that the contemporary debate between Japanese and Koreans has deep roots, and some of the disputes cannot be resolved. The evidence is and will remain subject to interpretation. There will always be opportunities for those who wish to use history as a cudgel and score political points. Unfortunately, there have been politicians in both countries ready to do just that.

Conservative Disappointments and a Structural Shift

A Japanese government assessment of public views toward South Korea is revealing. It shows relative stagnation – with some ups and downs – from 1978 to 1996, at which point there is a steady climb to a near doubling – to 63.1% -- of those who say they feel “some affinity” toward South Korea.⁴ In 2012, the bottom drops out, however, and the number of those who say they feel “some affinity” toward the ROK plummets to previous lows before

dropping even further to an all-time low of 31.5% in 2014. Meanwhile, those who say they “do not feel affinity” toward South Korea climbs to new heights (66.4%), surpassing even the previous peak of those who felt favorably toward their neighbor. In 2014, momentum again shifted, and the relationship seemed to improve. By 2018, those claiming to have “some affinity” reached 39.4%, while those who said they have “no affinity” fell to 58%, in both cases an 8-percentage point shift in four years. Unfortunately, the most recent data show yet another reversal, with those claiming to have “some affinity” retreating to 26.7%, the lowest level ever, and those claiming “no affinity” climbing to 70.4%, a record high.⁵

The downturn in 2012 is generally attributed to President Lee Myung-bak’s decision in August of that year to visit the Dokdo islands, also claimed by Japan. Lee’s visit was the first by a South Korean president and came as a surprise to Koreans and Japanese alike. The consensus view is that the visit was designed to build on a nationalist wave triggered by the ROK’s strong performance at the London Olympic Games, which had just concluded, and sought to shore up Lee’s flagging domestic approval ratings.⁶ For Japanese, any assertion of Korean ownership over the disputed territory is anathema (even though South Korea controls the islands), but their anger was magnified by a sense of betrayal: Lee was a conservative and was supposed to understand the need to subordinate domestic politics to larger strategic concerns. His readiness to put politics before principle on this issue intimated that no Korean politician was above playing “the Japan card” to advance his (or her) fortunes.

The Lee administration strengthened Japanese skepticism toward Korea through inaction as well. Twice during his five years as president, the Seoul government tried and failed to conclude a General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) with Japan. GSOMIA is an ordinary agreement that stipulates how governments can share information in an emergency. No matter how anodyne the document, the prospect of security cooperation with Japan was too much for opposition politicians and much of the Korean public. On two separate occasions – once at the last hour – South Korea backed away from signing an agreement with Japan. Failure to secure the GSOMIA was interpreted by Japanese as a refusal to recognize and value Tokyo as a security partner.⁷

The case of Liu Qiang also fed this sentiment. Liu was arrested and imprisoned in South Korea for 10 months for throwing Molotov cocktails at the Japanese embassy in Seoul. Prior to that attack, he had set fire to Yasukuni Shrine, and upon his release Japan sought his extradition. A Korean judge ruled instead that Liu should be allowed to go to China, as sending him to Japan would have punished him for political acts, which “would be tantamount to denying the political order and constitutional ideas of South Korea, as well as the universal values of most of the civilized nations.”⁸

Suspicion and ill will intensified when Park Geun-hye became president in 2013. Japanese anticipated that Park would prove to be a strong partner: As president of South Korea, her father, Park Chung-hee, was the driving force behind the 1965 normalization agreement. He saw Japan as a model for South Korea’s own industrialization and modernization. Japanese expected Park to defend her father’s legacy and restore trust and stability to the bilateral relationship. Yet when she took office, Park sought to build a new relationship with North Korea. To accomplish that goal, her government worked closely with China, reasoning that

the road to Pyongyang ran through Beijing. In conversations with South Korean officials and experts at the time, I was repeatedly told that South Korean efforts to cooperate with China were tactical in nature and did not represent a strategic shift: The Seoul government still valued the alliance with the U.S. and its partnership with Japan.

Strategists in Tokyo did not accept that narrative. They noted that China had assumed an outsize presence in the South Korean economy -- in 2012, China was Korea's number one trade partner, with bilateral trade totaling \$215 billion; nearly 700,000 people traveled between the two countries that year⁹ -- and asserted that Park's alignment with China reflected a broader shift in national interests. As proof, they pointed to Park's six trips to China during her first three years in office. Some argued that it was only a matter of time before South Korea ended its alliance with the U.S. and entered a new relationship with China. When Park was the only leader of a major Asian democracy to attend the September 2015 military parade that China held to mark the 70th anniversary of the end of World War II, that moment seemed imminent.

Beijing was eager to promote that narrative. It sought to drive a wedge between South Korea and the U.S. and Japan and used their shared history of Japanese invasion to assert that Chinese and South Koreans had a common interest that outweighed whatever linked South Korea and Japan. In 2014, China opened a memorial in Harbin to celebrate Ahn Jung-geun, the Korean independence activist who assassinated Ito Hirobumi, the first Japanese Resident-General of Korea. Beijing played up the image of Ahn as "freedom fighter," a man the Japanese considered a terrorist. While the Koreans were pleased to honor Ahn, Seoul was reportedly surprised and somewhat unnerved by the size of the memorial.

If the Japanese misread or exaggerated the shift in South Korean orientation or the degree to which Beijing had seduced Seoul, there was no mistaking a change in South Korean thinking about Japan. Once a benchmark for South Korea, the relationship was becoming more equal, with the two countries sharing levels of economic development and political maturation. That convergence should have encouraged the two governments to work more closely, but Japanese analysts observed a relative decline in interest among Koreans as their country became more developed and adopted a more global perspective.¹⁰ (Japan's economic difficulties contributed to this mentality.)

For all the suspicions and disappointments, Park did manage to address one especially poisonous legacy in the Japan-South Korea relationship: In December 2015, her government reached agreement with Japan to deal with the "comfort women" problem. The deal -- which consisted of parallel statements by the foreign ministers of each country -- included an explicit apology by the prime minister of Japan that acknowledged that the "comfort women" existed and noted "direct and indirect" military involvement; creation of a South Korean foundation that facilitated Japanese payments to victims; and a pledge by South Korea that this agreement "finally and irreversibly" puts the issue to rest.¹¹ This agreement is responsible for the shift in Japanese views of the trajectory of the bilateral relationship noted above. Unfortunately, the agreement did not survive the change in administration in Seoul -- many believe it was a contributor to Park's impeachment a year later -- and the unraveling of the deal was one of the main drivers of the downward spiral that marks the relationship today.

Moon Jae-in Accelerates the Slide

Moon Jae-in succeeded Park, riding a wave of intense popular anger against a president who was perceived as elitist and out of touch. Japanese invariably worry whenever a progressive politician occupies the Blue House, fearing that bilateral relations will be subordinated to inter-Korean relations (the crude version of this charge is that they are North Korean sympathizers) and that such a president would embrace a social and political agenda that uses Japan as a scapegoat. Moon did not disappoint. He sought to improve relations with Pyongyang, and his engagement campaign – Sunshine 2.0 (derided by critics as “Moonshine”) – promoted economic cooperation that Japanese disparaged because it eased pressure on the North Korean regime, which would (in theory) compel it to negotiate over the future of its nuclear arsenal and the status of Japanese citizens abducted by the Kim regime.

During the campaign to succeed Park, Moon promised to renegotiate the 2015 “comfort women” agreement and, soon after his election win, he convened a task force to assess the deal. It concluded five months later that the agreement was flawed, an assessment with which Moon agreed. He said, “The agreement cannot solve the comfort women issue,” and called it a “political agreement that excludes victims and the public” and violates general principles in international society, according to a statement issued by his office. Japan’s then foreign minister Kono Taro responded by noting that any attempt to change the deal would be “unacceptable” and make relations “unmanageable.”¹²

Japanese were also angered by repeated comments by senior officials in the Moon administration, including the president himself, that called on Japan to reflect on history and make a sincere apology for its misdeeds, statements that undercut the pledge in the 2015 agreement to end public bashing over the “comfort women” issue.¹³ Nevertheless, despite growing unease, Prime Minister Abe Shinzo attended the 2018 Winter Olympic Games that South Korea hosted. Some attribute the visit to a desire by Abe to ensure that Moon would return the favor when Tokyo hosts the 2020 Summer Olympics; equally important, however, were consultations on security issues in the wake of the decision by President Donald Trump at his Singapore summit with North Korean leader Kim Jong-un to suspend U.S.-ROK joint military exercises.

In October, another issue emerged to shake the relationship: A South Korean court ruled that Nippon Steel & Sumitomo Metal Corp. could be held responsible for and was thus required to compensate Korean victims of forced labor during the colonial occupation of Korea. That holding ignored the Japanese argument that the 1965 normalization treaty foreclosed all such claims. A second, similar court ruling followed in November. Also, in November, the Korean government announced that it would dissolve the foundation established by the 2015 agreement to settle claims against Japan by Korean “comfort women.”

The year closed out with a particularly worrisome incident. On December 20, the Tokyo government complained that a South Korean destroyer allegedly locked its targeting radar on a Japanese patrol aircraft. South Korea denied the charge, and the two sides squabbled publicly over what happened, with each government releasing videos to make its case. Particularly troubling was the fact that the two militaries were causing bilateral friction; historically, they have served as shock absorbers for the relationship, arenas where the two countries could work together in important ways out of public view. Politicians might

choose to fight, but the two militaries were supposed to be promoting the long-term national interest of each country. In this case, however, military issues were intensifying discord, not overcoming it.

The year 2019 began with another gut punch for Japan. A former South Korean Supreme Court chief justice was arrested in January and charged with abusing his authority by impeding the forced labor compensation cases during Park's time in office. When the speaker of the National Assembly the very next month said that the Japanese emperor should apologize to the "comfort women," and a local court in March ordered the confiscation of assets of Mitsubishi Heavy Industries to compensate victims of the forced labor cases, Japanese may have been justified in feeling that the entire Korean state and society had been mobilized against them.

Over the summer, the deterioration of relations accelerated. On July 1, the Japanese government announced that it would restrict the export of certain "high-tech materials" to South Korea. Officially, the move reflected concern that Seoul could not ensure that sensitive products or materials would not end up in the hands of potential adversaries. Abe flatly denied that history and trade issues were intertwined. He explained that "The issue of former Korean laborers is not about a historical issue, but about whether to keep the promise between countries under international law ... and what to do when the promise is broken... if another country fails to keep its promise, we cannot give it preferential treatment like before."¹⁴ That rhetoric was undercut, however, by email from Japanese Foreign Ministry officials to reporters that announced the export curbs but also contained fact sheets about the forced labor dispute, intimating that the issues were linked. Three days later, the Seoul government followed through on its earlier statement and dissolved the "comfort women" foundation set up by the 2015 agreement.

The cycle of offense and response continued. The subsequent decision to remove South Korea from Japan's export "white list" – a status that allows the dispatch of products or materials without obtaining government approval prior to each shipment; it indicates trust in a trading partner's export control regime – prompted the ROK to remove Japan from its own export white list.

Then, Seoul dropped a bomb. It threatened to let the GSOMIA with Japan, finally secured in 2016, lapse when it was up for renewal in November. For Japanese, that was the final straw. With that move, Seoul crossed a line, mixing security and economic interests. The Japanese government was outraged by the decision, arguing that it undercut Japan's national security and indicated a devaluing of security ties and cooperation between the two countries.

The prospect of an end to security cooperation galvanized the United States; American officials called on both allies to reconsider and focus on larger strategic interests.¹⁶ Pressure mounted on Seoul until finally, hours before the GSOMIA was to expire, the Moon government announced that it would conditionally suspend its notice to end the information-sharing agreement with Japan subject to progress by the two countries on issues between them. Soon after Seoul reversed course, Japan announced that it was prepared to resume discussions on export controls, a step that could lead to South Korea's return to Japan's export white list. In a worrying sign, even the retreat was not without friction: South Korea's announcement of a deal to resume trade talks triggered recriminations, with Japan's media declaring victory while the Blue House complained about Tokyo's announcement, and the two governments then argued over whether Japan had apologized for those statements.¹⁷

Still, suspension of the GSOMIA termination appeared to put a floor on the relationship, at least temporarily. The two countries resumed talks over export controls after a three-year hiatus, the ROK Supreme Court dismissed an appeal by a group of “comfort women” who claimed that the 2015 agreement was unconstitutional, and both countries’ leaders signaled a desire to improve relations. During his New Year’s news conference, Moon did not criticize Japan, and he promised that South Korea would work with Japan to ensure that the 2020 Olympic Games are a success and hoped that the sporting event would provide an opportunity to improve ties. (Delivering on that pledge is another matter, as will be discussed below). Abe too, signaled his readiness to build on the political truce, as is discussed in the next section.¹⁸

Now You See Them, Now You Don’t

The deterioration of Japanese views of South Korea is evident in official Japanese government statements. Consider, for example, Abe’s references to South Korea in his policy speeches at the beginning of Diet sessions. In 2014, Abe referred to the ROK as “our most important neighboring country with which we share fundamental values and common interests. Good relations between Japan and the ROK are indispensable not only for our two countries but also for the peace and prosperity of East Asia.”¹⁹ The following year, sentiment had cooled, and Abe merely called South Korea “our most important neighboring country,” omitting the other important qualifiers.²⁰ In 2018, however, the tone shifted, and Abe called on Moon to “work to deepen the cooperative relationship between us for a new era with a future-oriented perspective, by building on the international agreements between our two nations and on our mutual trust.”²¹ A year later, South Korea was virtually omitted from the speech; the only reference was to working with Seoul to deal with North Korea. As the clock ticked down on the expiration of the GSOMIA in the fall of 2019, Abe offered an olive branch, acknowledging again that South Korea was “an important neighboring country,” but he also urged it “to honor the commitments between the two countries, in accordance with following international law.”²² By the beginning of 2020, South Korea had resumed its original role and importance. Addressing the Diet in January – after Seoul had suspended termination of the GSOMIA and the two governments worked to make the rapprochement more stable and enduring – Abe again referred to South Korea as “the most important neighbor that essentially shares basic values and strategic interests” with Japan and called on it to build “future-oriented” ties.”²³

A similar trajectory is evident in the Foreign Ministry’s Diplomatic Blue Book, the annual assessment of Japanese foreign policy positions and views. In 2012, the ROK was described as “Japan’s most important neighboring country, which shares fundamental values such as democracy,” and the Japanese government promised to “continue to make an effort to build future-oriented and multi-layered relations with the ROK.”²⁴ Four years later, following conclusion of the “comfort women” agreement, relations were still good, and the Foreign Ministry was effusive, calling the ROK “Japan’s most important neighbor that shares strategic interests,” adding that “good Japan-ROK relations are essential in ensuring peace and stability of the Asia-Pacific region. Furthermore, Japan and the ROK have worked in partnership on a variety of regional and global issues.”²⁵ In 2019, however, the mood had darkened and “relations between Japan and the ROK faced an extremely severe situation amid a series of negative moves by the ROK.”²⁶

The Business Community Pays a Price

If there is a group in Japan that does not share this outlook, it is the business community. It is less inclined to see the bilateral relationship through a political or ideological prism, and instead focuses on hard numbers. From that perspective, Korea continues to be a valuable partner. Japan is South Korea's third largest trading partner, and bilateral trade has doubled in volume during the first two decades of this century. The two economies are increasingly complementary, with South Korean firms relying on imported Japanese intermediary goods and materials for production or assembly. Japanese companies benefit from working with Korean counterparts. According to one report, 85% of Japanese businesses operating in South Korea reported profits in 2018— the highest proportion of profitable Japanese firms in an Asian economy — and just 4.6% reported losses.²⁷

That relationship is under threat. Anger in South Korea has prompted boycotts of Japanese consumer goods. Sales of Japanese beer, for example, fell to zero in October 2019; the previous year, the ROK was the Japanese industry's biggest market, generating \$7.3 million in sales.²⁸ Japanese automakers endured a 19% fall in sales in the ROK in 2019.²⁹ A still greater decline was registered among South Korean visitors to Japan; the Japan National Tourism Organization estimates there was a 25.9% drop in ROK tourists in 2019 compared to the previous year.³⁰ Of course, these declines would be much greater if only the second half of the year was considered.

Troubling though these numbers are, Japanese companies are more worried about a permanent alteration of business relationships with South Korean customers. Japan has positioned itself as a source of critical parts, components, and machine tools: One reason Japan's July 2019 decision to restrict sales of certain high-tech components to the ROK was such a shock, was precisely because of the critical nature of those supplies. The volume of sales is only in the hundreds of millions of dollars, but they are components vital to ROK production lines. While Japan has continued to grant export licenses for those products, Korean companies are now alert to the possibility of a loss or disruption of supply. "South Korean companies cite quality and stable supply as reasons for choosing Japanese materials. But this has made them aware of the need for change and they are already taking action."³¹ Steps to remedy this vulnerability include the diversification of suppliers and the development of domestic capacity, so ROK companies could become self-sufficient.³² The Seoul government has also launched a \$6.5 billion fund to reduce the country's reliance on Japanese parts imports. With ROK companies accounting for as much as 81% of Japanese exports of some equipment, that is a worrying prospect.

Consistent with this pragmatic mindset, Japanese businesses in South Korea do their best to avoid political issues. The Seoul Japan Club, the largest community of Japanese nationals in South Korea, did not mention the forced labor issue in its 2018 recommendations to the Seoul government.³³ At the September 2019 Japan-Korea Economic Association meeting, some 300 representatives of the biggest businesses in each country called for calm, and one Japanese speaker argued that "businesses do not look into the past but to the future, and reality over ideology."³⁴

They may get their wish. By January 2020, in keeping with political efforts to put a floor on the relationship, there was a rebound in economic relations. Japanese beer sales in the ROK in December were reviving and etching gas exports, one of the three items affected

by the July 1 decision, increased substantially as well. In both cases, the numbers were low compared to a year ago -- 106 kiloliters of beer is a drop in the “keg” (albeit a big keg), and 793 tons of etching gas is still a 73% decrease from the previous year – but each constituted a significant rebound from the previous month.³⁵

Putting Japan on the Couch

For Japanese, the bilateral relationship with South Korea has been undermined by a lack of trust. Despite repeated statements by Japanese officials that make amends for the past and efforts to make those statements real, South Koreans prefer to question Japanese intentions and sincerity, and keep historical controversies alive. Abe’s statement (cited above) explaining the logic behind the export restrictions is illuminating. He explained that the issue is “about whether to keep the promise between countries under international law ... and what to do when the promise is broken...” It may be disingenuous, but it does reflect Japanese thinking about cause and effect. Especially galling is the contravening of the provision of the agreement that says the deal “finally and irreversibly” concludes this debate -- Japanese are dismayed to see that this vital stipulation has been ignored. It feeds the view, increasingly prevalent among Japanese, that South Koreans want to maintain the moral high ground and keep Japan on the defensive. To that end, Japanese believe that Seoul continues to move the goalposts when it comes to addressing historical issues, and Japan will never, in Korean eyes, do enough.³⁶

Japanese point to a series of official statements that leave no room to evade responsibility. In 1993, the Japanese government acknowledged its mistreatment of the “comfort women” and expressed “sincere apologies and remorse.”³⁷ In 2010, on the centenary of the annexation treaty, the prime minister and cabinet issued a statement that flatly stated that “the Korean people of that time were deprived of their country and culture ... by the colonial rule which was imposed against their will.”³⁸ The 2015 “comfort women” agreement confirmed the “involvement of the Japanese military authorities at the time,” and Abe expressed “his most sincere apologies and remorse to all the women who underwent immeasurable and painful experiences and suffered incurable physical and psychological wounds as comfort women.”³⁹ This backdrop helps to explain the Japanese belief that the chief problem in the bilateral relationship is the Koreans’ focus on the past.⁴⁰ Some cranks deny history, but revisionism is, sadly, inevitable in a country that practices freedom of speech. The overwhelming majority of Japanese admit historical wrongs but feel that they have apologized enough.⁴¹ Moreover, they are offended by the claim that they and their country have not evolved since the imperial era and that they bear responsibility for the crimes of previous generations. Finally, the claim that Japan is unchanging, aggressive, and unrepentant strikes at the heart of Japanese national identity: Japanese see themselves as a uniquely peaceful nation that stands atop a foundation of historical learning – especially with regard to the lessons of the crimes of the imperial era.⁴²

Japanese irritation is exacerbated by uncertainty over regional security. Tokyo is worried about the U.S. commitment to the region at a time of great flux. China is increasingly assertive and seems intent on resuming its traditional role as the preeminent power in the region. It has used its economic resources and its military modernization to backstop an aggressive diplomatic campaign to extend Beijing’s influence in Asia and beyond. Meanwhile, North Korea has proceeded with its own nuclear modernization program, and the maximum

pressure campaign that was supposed to force Pyongyang to negotiate security issues has ended. Both developments pose real concerns for Japan, and in both cases, Trump seems more intent on promoting his personal relationship with those countries' leaders than addressing those concerns. While Abe has forged a unique relationship with Trump, there is little confidence that those bonds are sufficient to protect Japanese interests. Tokyo views Trump as transactional, suspicious of U.S. alliance commitments, especially skeptical of Japan, and myopically focused on the economic bottom line.

Driving home Japanese concerns were intrusions last year by Chinese and Russian aircraft on a joint long-range patrol that took them around the Korean Peninsula into airspace claimed by both Japan and South Korea.⁴³ ROK and Japanese air forces responded, and South Korean jets fired hundreds of warning shots at a Russian plane. (Russian officials denied that the incursion took place and that shots were fired.) That incident followed seemingly coordinated action by the two countries in 2016 when they sailed warships through Japanese-claimed waters in the East China Sea around the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands. The prevailing interpretation is that the challenges are intended to demonstrate expanding military cooperation between Beijing and Moscow and to stress the two alliances.

In this environment, Japan and South Korea should be moving closer together. Japanese logic dictates that Tokyo and Seoul should be cooperating to address shared concerns – as democracies and market economies, it is assumed that their interests, and thus their policies, converge – and send a unified message to Washington to work with them to counter those challenges. Instead, the two governments are squabbling among themselves and urging the U.S. to intervene on their behalf. Japanese worry that Trump, given his predilections, would prefer to wash his hands of the situation.

A Long Road Ahead, Illuminated by an Olympic Torch

Events of early 2020 tested both governments' intention to put a floor on the relationship. Japan resumed its efforts to challenge South Korean government assistance to its shipbuilding industry by filing a petition with the World Trade Organization (WTO) over subsidies to Daewoo Shipbuilding & Marine Engineering. A suit was first filed in 2018 and bilateral talks made no progress. On February 22, Shimane Prefecture marked Takeshima Day, an event that has been held annually since 2006 to reiterate its claim to the contested islands Dokdo/Takeshima. The Abe administration sent a Cabinet Office parliamentary vice minister – a representative of that rank has attended since 2013 – as a sign of central government attention and a desire to not inflame the issue. South Korea made its usual response: It summoned an official of the Japanese embassy in Seoul to the Foreign Ministry to lodge a protest, but did not go further.⁴⁴ On March 1, South Korea celebrated the March 1 Independence Movement, the 1919 uprising against the Japanese occupation of the Korean Peninsula. The historical significance of this date affords the president an opportunity to focus on relations with Japan. This year, however, the coronavirus outbreak, which was hammering South Korea, was the primary issue, and combating the contagion was the focal point for national unity. While calling on Japan to join South Korea and reflect on the past, Moon called the country South Korea's "closest neighbor," and noted that "Patriotic martyr Ahn Jung-geun stood against Japan's aggression with the force of arms, but he clarified that

his true intention was to achieve peace together in the East, not to show hostility against Japan.” He added that “joining hands while reflecting on history is the path toward peace and prosperity in East Asia.”⁴⁵ Finally, on April 15, South Korea will hold a general election, the campaign for which promises to explore, probe, and likely incite relations between the two countries.

The coronavirus outbreak crescendoed through the first months of 2020, providing Japan and South Korea the opportunity to trade tit-for-tat quarantine threats. Japan launched the cycle after the number of cases in South Korea exploded, announcing on March 6 that all visitors from that country would undergo a mandatory two-week government monitored isolation period. Seoul reacted with anger; the Foreign Ministry denounced the move as “unreasonable and excessive,” undertaken without prior consultation, and speculated that “Japan has other motives than containing the outbreak.”⁴⁶ A day later, the ROK government announced that it would raise its travel advisory for Japan to Level 2, or “refrain from travel,” halt a visa-waiver program for Japanese, and introduce its own mandatory two-week quarantine period for visitors from Japan.⁴⁷ By the end of March, after both countries seemed to have the outbreak under control, experts feared that second and third waves of infection would be possible. If the economic hardship caused by the pandemic is severe, each may be quick to scapegoat the other for some of the difficulties that follow.

The biggest test for the bilateral relationship could have been the 2020 Summer Olympics that Tokyo was to host.⁴⁸ It is difficult to overstate the importance of this event for Japan. The Games are heralded as the symbol of the nation’s re-emergence after the stagnation of lost decades and proof of the Abe government’s ability to put the country back on track. Abe himself celebrated the event in his speech to the opening session of the Diet in 2020, saying “This will bring all the people of Japan together to walk forward together into a new age.”⁴⁹ Moon, in remarks noted earlier, said that he was ready to work with Japan to make the Games a success – reminded, no doubt, of Abe swallowing his own doubts and attending the 2018 Winter Games that the ROK hosted in Pyeongchang.

ROK government policy is not in line with that pledge, however. Seoul has been leading international efforts to focus attention on the threat posed by lingering radioactivity from the accident at the Fukushima nuclear power plant in March 2011. The ROK ban on seafood from waters near Fukushima prompted Japan to file a complaint at the WTO in 2015. Japan prevailed in the initial dispute settlement panel, but Seoul appealed the ruling and won in April 2019. The two governments engaged in bilateral discussions to see if they could reach a compromise, but those have proven unsuccessful.

In early January, posters appeared near the site of the new Japanese embassy in Seoul. They included the official emblem of the Olympics and depicted an individual clad in a full HAZMAT suit, running with the Olympic torch, intending to link the Games to radiation. Ever quick to defend national honor, the rightwing *Sankei* newspaper concluded that the posters – put up by a South Korean nonprofit organization – “seem to be part of the country’s effort to incite anti-Japan sentiment.”⁵⁰ ROK newspapers also sounded alarm bells, with the conservative *Chosun Ilbo* noting “growing apprehension regarding the radiation levels in Japan,” and charging that the Ministry of the Environment “has downplayed concerns regarding radiation.”⁵¹ The Korean press highlighted the fact that the Olympic venues

for baseball and softball are 97 km and 118 km from the plant, and the Korean Olympic Committee said that it was considering running its own cafeteria to provide food for Korean athletes, ostensibly to ensure that the ingredients are radiation free.

South Korea knows well the significance of the Olympic Games for Japan. An easy test of its intentions was its readiness to help ensure that the Games are a success; raising doubts about safety will do great damage to the ROK's image in Japan. For all the troubles that bedevil the bilateral relationship, still more harm can be done. It is a sign of the times that such a future can be contemplated and that such warnings must be made.

Scott Snyder and I argue that the foundational problem in the ROK-Japan relationship is competing notions of national identity.⁵² For South Koreans, the Japanese annexation of the Korean Peninsula during the first half of the 20th century defines their identity, the very sense of who they are as a people. That brutal experience is used as the rallying point for the Korean nation, a reminder of the price of weakness and disunity. Moon invoked that spirit in his March 1 speech, noting that the March 1 movement "reminded us of unity's tremendous force. ...that we can prevail over anything as long as we stand together."⁵³

Koreans' continuing association of imperial Japan with contemporary Japan is profoundly offensive to Japanese, who not only consider themselves to be victims of that imperial regime as well, but who also see themselves as a fundamentally different nation from that which inflicted those brutalities upon the rest of Asia. Japanese insist that there was a complete break at the end of World War II. The result is a contemporary Japanese national identity that emphasizes its "peace-loving" nature, one that rejects the use of force as an instrument of state policy, as is explicitly articulated in Article 9 of the Japanese constitution. To argue, as South Koreans do, that there is continuity between the two regimes or that there is a risk of similarly brutal behavior by contemporary Japanese governments denies not only core conceptions of national identity in Japan, but also the wrenching experience of the Pacific War and the subsequent occupation.

While these competing beliefs have long bedeviled the bilateral relationship, they seem to have assumed greater poignancy, and their clash a greater impact in recent years. This is likely the result of the current political dynamic in which a conservative governs in Tokyo and a progressive is in power in Seoul. (As a corollary, it should be noted that only this combination of administrations could put historical issues to rest.) Korean policy may assume still greater force and offensiveness for Abe.⁵⁴ He is a strategist who believes in prioritizing national interests over short-term political calculations; Seoul's readiness to jeopardize security cooperation to score domestic political points is anathema to that way of thinking and makes Abe's own pragmatism look pointless. At the same time, Abe has made the promotion of values a cornerstone of his diplomacy, especially as he has promoted the vision of a Free and Open Indo-Pacific. The Korean refusal to concede that contemporary Japan is different from its imperial predecessor implies that his rhetoric is empty and meaningless; nothing could be more damaging to his international credibility. Finally, Abe is a nationalist who, while acknowledging the brutalities of the Pacific War, is quick to ground the behavior of imperial Japan in the context of the time.⁵⁵ While this belief may not be shared by a majority of Japanese, it is a pillar of the prime minister's worldview. Korean claims that Japanese behavior was *sui generis* are even more troubling to him and other like-minded conservatives.

Abe has managed to swallow his reservations and tried to engage South Korean governments. His patience is running out, however – and opinion polls indicate that he is not alone. At this moment, there is an opportunity to begin the long and difficult process of rebuilding trust and confidence between the two countries. Both nations will have to fight their instincts to do so. To their credit, they are trying.

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