

Japan-ROK Relations: Antagonism over Alignment?

by Victor Cha

Victor Cha (chav@georgetown.edu) is professor at Georgetown University and Senior Adviser and Korea Chair at CSIS in Washington D.C. An earlier version of this article first appeared in JoongAng Ilbo.

APEC in Vladivostok last week provided an opportunity for Japanese and Korean leaders Noda Yoshihiko and Lee Myung-bak to cool recently white-hot bilateral relations. Noda, looking stone-faced, approached Lee who then engaged in a five-minute pull-aside with the prime minister. Foreign Ministers Gamba Koichiro and Kim Sung-hwan met the day prior and the collective message from their handlers was that both leaders would make an effort to “dispassionately” deal with tensions in relations at an early date.

Anyone in the United States who studies Asia has been watching with great interest the escalating historical dispute between Korea and Japan. Some pass off this friction over Dokdo/Takeshima or comfort women as emotional issues and do not consider them very carefully beyond that. On the contrary, these are very serious issues. My first major research project, a book, was about relations between Korea and Japan. This is what I have learned over 20 years of studying the bilateral relationship.

First, historical animosity between Korea and Japan will never die. Historical issues are inherently irresolvable. Some would retort that Germany successfully resolved its historical issues, and this is somewhat true, but ask any European how they really feel about Germany. There is still a deep reservoir of distrust there. In the case of Korea and Japan, there have been temporary solutions sought through treaties (like the 1965 normalization treaty) or other agreements, but the anger and resentment never go away. As analysts and as policymakers, we have to accept the reality that historical enmity constitutes the baseline of Seoul-Tokyo relations.

Second, the true metric of the Korea-Japan relationship is therefore not the level of animosity, but the degree to which this animosity hinders pragmatic cooperation. Bring a group of people together, and they can behave emotionally and angrily like a mob. But bring a government together, and it will behave rationally and in its national interest rather than succumb to the same mob mentality. Thus, pragmatic policy cooperation can't render history irrelevant, but it can demonstrate that decision makers can work together in spite of it.

The third and most important lesson of history is this: Because history is irresolvable, the worst thing that could be done politically is for either party to try to change the status quo when it comes to specific historical disputes. In other words, both sides can complain incessantly about historical

issues, but when one side tries to “win” by creating new precedents, this creates a downward spiral in relations that has no positive outcome whatsoever. The natural result of changing the status quo is escalation, not resolution.

These three points give us context in analyzing recent events. History is still very much alive between Koreans and Japanese. And there certainly has been a great deal of histrionics with Japanese authorities referring to President Lee's visit to Dokdo as an “illegal landing,” and the South Korean Foreign Ministry rejecting a letter of protest from Japan.

But to me, what is worse are the attempts by both sides recently to change the status quo. There is a sort of equilibrium in Korea-Japan relations that cycles through every year. There are Japan's defense white papers, the education ministry's textbook guidelines, and occasional insensitive statements by politicians that create anger and protests from the Korean side. These protests grab the headlines for a week or two, but generally, the equilibrium is restored after that, and until the next spat.

But recent events have disrupted the equilibrium in a more permanent way. On the Korean side, President Lee's visit to Dokdo constitutes an attempt to change the historical status quo. The visit may seem completely reasonable from a Korean perspective, but it also set a new bar for every future South Korean leader: it obligates the next South Korean president, and ones to follow, to ratchet up tensions by making a similar trip. Choosing not to make such a trip is an option, but it would open the leader up to criticisms from the opposition or others as “unpatriotic.” Similarly, the recent Supreme Court decision allowing individual cases of reparations to be heard also tries to change the status quo. The decision sets a new legal precedent that could affect the 1965 treaty.

On the Japanese side, the Diet resolution harshly criticizing President Lee's trip also sets a new precedent. There has not been a joint resolution of this kind against Korea in nearly 60 years. Again, this may seem completely reasonable from Japanese perspectives, but it is terribly unhealthy for political relations between Seoul and Tokyo because future legislatures will now be expected to take similar extensive measures in response to any spat. Similarly, the recent efforts by Japanese government officials to lobby local US politicians to block construction of comfort women monuments in US localities also sets a new precedent that is bad for Seoul-Tokyo as well as Tokyo-Washington relations.

These actions on both sides are different because they are exacerbating historical animosity and escalating the issues in a more permanent way. The damage to relations of this escalation is clear because these historical disputes now risk impeding practical cooperation between the two governments.

We have already seen the first casualty of this friction – the scrapping of the GSOMIA military intelligence-sharing agreement between Korea and Japan. The second causality has been the US-ROK missile guidelines negotiations. Some Japanese authorities openly opposed Seoul's desires to extend missile ranges as destabilizing to the region. The next shoe that could drop is Japan's decision on whether it will renew a currency swap agreement due to expire at the end of October. There is also a pending Japanese decision about whether it will continue with a scheduled purchase of Korean government bonds. From a US perspective, when historical animosity starts to impede pragmatic cooperation between its two most important allies in Asia, that is when Washington becomes concerned.

Why is this happening now? Domestic political cycles have something to do with it. In Japan's case, a terribly unpopular prime minister has an eye to reelection by his party in September. In Korea, an unpopular lame duck president loses nothing by being tough on Japan. But the current dispute has deeper drivers than politics. In some sense it is a reflection of geopolitical trends. Japan, a power in danger of falling into second-tier status in the world, clings even more tightly to nationalist symbols as a way to assert itself. Korea, a country that is now playing on a global stage more so than Japan, has no patience for Japanese anachronisms.

Unfortunately, there is no solution in sight. The fourth lesson of history I learned from my research is that historical animosity can only be addressed when it is considered politically legitimate in both countries to do so. Political leaders must internalize historical reconciliation as a positive metric of domestic legitimacy. That was the case in Germany. But it is not the case here. There is no domestic legitimacy accorded to any Japanese politician who wants to repent for the past. And there is no domestic legitimacy accorded to any South Korean politician who wants to accept such an apology if it were to be given.

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