



Japan should apologize again to South Korea

by Yoichiro Sato

On Aug. 15, 2005, the 60th anniversary of the end of World War II, Japanese Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro issued a statement, part of which included yet another apology to China and Korea. On the same day, South Korean President Roh Moo-hyun celebrated his country's liberation from Japanese rule and refrained from making explicit reference to Japan's colonialism as he did in the last two years. China mobilized its police forces to guard against anti-Japanese riots, avoiding the widespread demonstrations that occurred earlier this year. While behind-the-scenes diplomacy has put a temporary stop to the downward spiral of Japan's relations with its neighbors, the explosive nature of the "history" problem continues to strain Japan's relations with both countries.

In fact, Prime Ministers Murayama Tomoichi and Koizumi already apologized to South Korea and China, and former Prime Minister Obuchi Keizo apologized to South Korea. Yet, another apology to South Korea is clearly needed to save deteriorating Japan-ROK relations. Koizumi's inclusion of China in his recent apology would appear to be a setback to the Japanese public, who proudly approved of Obuchi's refusal to apologize during the failed summit with Chinese President Jiang Zemin in 1998.

Japan needs differentiated approaches to South Korea on the one hand and China and North Korea on the other, favoring the country that appears more likely to forgive. The diplomatic gains from such a move far outweigh the cost of alienating domestic voters – the impact of which can be minimized with explanations. The message could sound something like this:

The people of Japan thoroughly recognize the pain and damage Japan inflicted upon the people of Korea since the late-19th century and especially during the 35 years of colonial rule. We offer a sincere apology to the people of Korea and their leaders in Seoul. In rivalry with other nations in Northeast Asia, Japan turned Korea into a battleground and a colony. During its colonial rule, Japan imposed a policy of national assimilation against the will of the great majority of the Korean people; worse we failed to treat the Korean people with equality and dignity as promised. The people of Japan pledge not to forget Japan's past wrongdoings and wholeheartedly wish to build a lasting friendship with the people of Korea.

Korean history dramas will likely continue to portray Hideyoshi (Toyotomi Hideyoshi, who sent an invasion force against Korea in the 16th century) as an early example of the villainous Japanese. However, a heartfelt apology on the modern invasion may put the story back where it belongs: in history and popular entertainment, not diplomacy.

Democratic Consolidation of South Korea

In the late-1990s, South Korean democracy entered a period of consolidation. The election of civilian leaders and the victories of opposition parties brought about new sources of political legitimacy in the South Korean polity. During the Cold War, sources of legitimacy were anti-communism, anti-Japanese sentiment, and economic growth. The weight of anti-communism declined after the collapse of the Soviet Union, and democratic elections became a new source of political legitimacy for political leaders. Earlier leaders of South Korea suffered a legitimacy deficit as a result of past ties with the Japanese colonial administration and military, and deliberately acted anti-Japanese. The new generation of democratically elected leaders can act without the mental baggage of their predecessors. President Kim Dae-jung's relaxation of the ban against cultural imports from Japan and President Roh's call for forward-looking relations with Japan reflects the new thinking of this generation of politicians. When Roh launched an investigation of wartime collaborators, suspicions were raised that he, like his predecessors, was using this issue to get back at his domestic political opponents. Others have interpreted Roh's initiative as an effort to put this dark side of Korean history to rest and move toward building a future-oriented relationship with Japan.

U.S.-ROK relations

South Korea's alliance with the U.S. has been the backbone of its security policy since the Korean War. The U.S. has brokered quarrelsome relations between the ROK and Japan through its bilateral alliances with both countries. Since the Cold War, North Korea has targeted its propaganda inside the ROK at left-leaning youths, who constitute a core voting group behind the ruling party. Though communism was hardly a popular sell, the idea that the U.S. presence on the peninsula prevented reunification of the two Koreas penetrated the minds of the post-Korean War generation. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, the U.S. has gradually shifted the burden of defending ROK to the ROK military. However, a combination of NIMBY (not-in-my-backyard) issues in urban Seoul, the traditional fear of abandonment by pro-U.S. leaders (which has been exacerbated by poor communications over troop relocation issues), and the unpopular Korean decision to dispatch troops to Iraq – and the perception that the move was not appreciated by Washington – contributed to worsening U.S.-ROK ties. During the Cold War, downturns in U.S.-ROK ties made the ROK to turn to Japan; today China is filling the void.

The Six-Party Talks

Since the 1990s nuclear crisis, the U.S., South Korea, and Japan have attempted to coordinate policies and present a unified front vis-à-vis North Korea. However, South Korea's

stubborn refusal to consider economic sanctions against the North and its decisions to go over the head of the U.S. and Japan and offer economic aid to North Korea have demonstrated that South Korea is more willing to appease North Korea than Japan and the U.S. South Korea's failure to support Japan's insistence that the abduction issue be addressed at the Six-Party Talks (despite the fact that far more South Koreans have been abducted by North Korea) also attests to this view.

Just prior to North Korea's announcement that it was ready to return to the six-party process, South Korea announced its offer to send electricity to North Korea in return for abolition of its nuclear programs. The offer was consistent with the U.S. and Japanese position in two ways: (1) any new offer of energy aid should be non-nuclear, and (2) North Korea must implement its side of the bargain first. As the talks went into gridlock and recess, South Korean Reunification Minister Chon Donyoung supported North Korea's right to peaceful nuclear use, presumably to entice the North Koreans back to the talks. South Korea has also been more generous than Japan and the U.S. in terms of food and fertilizer aid to North Korea. To assure South Korea's diplomatic coordination with Japan and the U.S., Japan can, and should, play a bridging role. Here, Japan-ROK reconciliation is essential.

East Asian integration

Japan has long been South Korea's number-one trade partner. It is no surprise then that Japan has started negotiations on a free trade agreement with the ROK. While China signed FTAs with ASEAN members ahead of Japan, there is no FTA negotiation between China and South Korea. Nevertheless, the volume of China-ROK trade has been rapidly growing, and China replaced the U.S. as ROK's number-two trade partner in 2003.

The recent diplomatic feud between Japan and ROK resulted in the suspension of their FTA talks. Delay in concluding the Japan-ROK FTA will give China an opportunity to take the leadership in shaping East Asian integration. Politically, Japan's interest in "open regionalism"

in East Asia – with a strong emphasis on links to North America – has been challenged by the Chinese version of regionalism that excludes the U.S. The recent invitations to Australia, New Zealand, and India to attend the first East Asian Summit meeting this fall in Kuala Lumpur is indicative of Japan's preference to dilute Chinese influence in this forum. A South Korea closely aligned with Japan will provide a strong counterweight in this forum.

Too early to push the ROK away

Although some geopolitics enthusiasts believe South Korea is going to shift its allegiance to China, its traditional patron, it is too early to give up on South Korea. Its growing democracy looks at both North Korea and China with great skepticism. There are strains in the U.S.-ROK alliance, but the strain is partly due to the ROK's fear of abandonment and a sense of being under-appreciated, rather than ROK trust of China or elite hostility toward the U.S. U.S.-Japan-ROK coordination in the six-party process has managed to present a unified front on nuclear weapons and energy development issues, and prevented North Korea from gaining a tactical advantage. China's economic growth is a great attraction to the ROK, but the decline in the relative importance of Japan for the ROK will be a slow process. If Japan is eager to preserve its leadership in Southeast Asia, there is more of a reason to attempt the same in ROK. Realizing the prophecy of geopolitics on the Korean Peninsula is easy. In fact, it is so easy that it can wait until after Japan tries one more time to win the hearts of South Koreans.

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