



Turn Japan-ROK relations into a 'Real' Partnership

by Junbeom Pyon and Yuka Tsukagoshi

[Editor's note: The two authors are Pacific Forum Vasey Fellows who were challenged to look beyond the answers and excuses provided by their elders and think outside the box on improving ROK-Japan relations.]

We are dismayed by the current state of Japan-ROK relations. The two countries are natural partners. Both are U.S. allies, democratic societies, and share similar values and security concerns. During the Cold War, both Japan and South Korea feared expansion of communism from the Soviet Union and China, and a North Korean invasion of the South. Today, both face the North Korean nuclear threat and share mutual concern about the rise of China. In addition to common interests, Japan and Korea share similar customs, culture, and language. All these suggest that it is logical and desirable for the two countries to have a strong and cooperative bilateral relationship.

But the logic of this outcome is outweighed by distrust, suspicion, and hatred in Japan and Korea. These feelings manifest themselves in protests – a cycle of action and reaction – in both countries. The causes vary: territory disputes, fisheries disputes, and differing views about the Japanese colonization of the Korean Peninsula. The list includes Japanese history text books, comfort women, crimes committed by the Japanese imperial army, and the politicization of the relationship – the tendency (if not eagerness) of politicians in Korea to play the anti-Japan card.

Koreans demand that the Japanese apologize for all the crimes of the past. But to be frank, Koreans will not stop demanding apologies because the core problem in the bilateral relationship is much deeper than disputes over particular issues.

The root of anti-Japanese sentiment in Korea is wounded pride. Koreans feel humiliated and insulted that they, a highly civilized society, were invaded by the Japanese, whom they believed to be barbarians. For thousands of years, the Korean Peninsula was divided into many different kingdoms that waged constant war on one another. But no Koreans criticize the people of Goguryeo, Shilla, Paekchae, or Palhae because they were Koreans waging war to unite the Korean people. Thus, Koreans hate the Japanese because Koreans cannot accept that the 'great people' of Korea were invaded by the people to whom the Koreans taught Confucianism and Buddhism.

For their part, Japanese are tired of complaints. The Japanese are sorry for what previous generations did during the colonial period. But Japan has compensated for and apologized to Koreans on a number of occasions – even though some Japanese leaders' statements and actions seem to

contradict the apologies. Japan seeks to move the relationship forward. Korea's continued complaints prevent that. Japanese are increasingly irritated and frustrated. Korean demands for more apologies wound Japanese pride, creating even more nationalism.

To borrow a metaphor, Japan and Korea are like teeth and lips: the deterioration of relations between ROK and Japan hurts both countries. Historically, foreign powers, such as the Mongolians and the Chinese sought to invade Japan through the peninsula. Thus, Japan has regarded Korea as a dagger aimed at its heart. It is in both countries' interest to see a stronger and a reunified Korean Peninsula under Seoul that serves as a first line of defense for Japan, and a stronger Japan that supports Korea against an overwhelming China.

Improving the Japan-ROK relationship depends on restoring Korean pride. The Japanese government can achieve this by encouraging the emperor to make a public statement that acknowledges the imperial heritage to Korea. Such acknowledgement would not be new: Emperor Akihito explained on a number of occasions that "the *Shoku Nihongi*, an eighth century chronicle, traced his lineage of his eighth-century ancestor, Emperor Kammu, to King Muryong of sixth-century Paekche, one of Korea's ancient kingdoms" and that "people from the Korean peninsula came to the nascent kingdom in central Japan, bringing East Asian culture and technology." Koreans believe these facts are not taught, told, or accepted in Japan because of the Tokyo government's intervention.

If the emperor, the symbol of Japan, would again acknowledge his heritage to Korea, this time with the support and approval of the Japanese government, it would greatly restore Korean pride and transform their thinking. Koreans would no longer have been invaded by 'barbarians' but by a highly civilized and advanced society formed of the descendants of Korean kingdoms.

Such a Japanese acknowledgement would help Koreans overcome the inferiority complex that is the real cause of anti-Japanese sentiment in Korea. It would also help Koreans accept Japanese achievements in the 20th century and allow them to share in the pride of these achievements because, ultimately, the Japanese and the Koreans share the same heritage.

What does Japan gain? First, Koreans will stop bickering about historical issues. Frustration over comfort women and crimes committed by the Japanese imperial army will continue to be discussed, but the magnitude and the nature of the discussions will be diminished.

Second, Koreans will be able to put history in the past and move toward a future with Japan. It is not that Koreans do not think the relationship is important; rather, their wounded pride

must be compensated before they can move forward. Koreans understand the need for and the importance of a partnership with Japan.

Third, an enhanced partnership will improve the security environment in both countries. Japan and Korea would be able to focus on solving the North Korean nuclear issue and work together for peaceful unification of the Korean Peninsula. That will be a confidence building measure to further improve the Japan-ROK partnership because Japan's support for reunification will reduce Korean mistrust about Japanese intentions.

Fourth, Japan and Korea will be able to further cooperate at a strategic level to deal with China's growth and reemergence on the world stage. This is not to imply that China is a military threat to Korea or Japan. But both increasingly feel the weight of its growing political and economic shadow.

Fifth, it will facilitate settlement of disputes on territorial claims over Dokdo/Takeshima and fisheries. If the Kim-Obuchi agreement of 1998 has proven anything, it is that the disputes between the two countries can be solved through dialogue. Seoul and Tokyo will be able to solve disputes when the two countries begin to see each other as partners, not enemies.

Six, Japan and ROK can work to become co-leaders in Asia by cooperating with each other. A Japan-ROK partnership would be bigger than the sum of its parts. Japan and the ROK could contribute to the growth and development of other Asian countries by sharing resources, technology, and knowhow. This again would bring the two countries closer together.

Ultimately, this will also result in a solid U.S.-ROK-Japan trilateral partnership that enhances regional stability and peace.

The benefits to Japan of taking the step proposed here seem self-evident. But skeptics may demand more. If so, in the spirit of compromise that animates this agreement, it is suggested that the ROK take positive steps too.

First, the Korean government can promise Tokyo that it will change the way ROK schools teach about Japan. Seoul can adopt regulations that prohibit teachers or textbooks from instigating unnecessarily emotional sentiment against Japan.

Second, South Korea can officially discourage anti-Japanese propaganda that is often broadcast in Seoul's most popular movie theatres or TV programs and, at the government level, highlight the many positive Japanese contributions to the ROK's economic development.

Third, South Korea's top political figures, such as the president, can express appreciation for the emperor's acknowledgement and express regret for South Korea's past anti-Japanese statements.

Fourth, the ROK government should support Japan's bid for a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council. Japan has long desired to become a permanent member. It is the second largest financial contributor to the United Nations. Korea's support would greatly improve Korea's image among

Japanese and would also suggest that the ROK regards Japan as a responsible country and supports Japan's leadership.

Realization of the proposal would open a new era in ROK-Japan relations. But progress in the partnership requires self-restraint in both countries and further actions that build mutual trust. Trust can be built when both governments rein in public sentiment inflamed by domestic politics. Political leaders in both countries should learn from the mistakes of their predecessors, and put their national image and national interests above their domestic political concerns. That will reinforce new a Japan-ROK relationship and make possible a genuine and enduring partnership.

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