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Moving Beyond the Abe Statement and President Park's Independence Day Speech

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The ROK-Japan Relations in the Age of Civilizational Transformation

Many efforts are being made to improve the relationship between South Korea and Japan which is at its lowest point ever since the normalization of diplomatic relations. Both countries attended the 50th anniversary celebration of the diplomatic normalization and the commemoration of the 70th anniversary of the end of World War II. In Prime Minister Abe's statement he referenced the four keywords of colonization, aggression, self-reflection, and remorse. On the 70th anniversary of its independence, Korea expressed a practical approach to the relationship and reconfirmed its desire to improve relations with Japan. In order for this to happen and to deter mutual irritation, efforts should be made to set aside emotional antagonism; however, in order for ROK-Japan relations to move beyond the conflicts of the past, both countries, following the civilizational transformation currently being felt throughout East Asia, need to overcome the past paradigm of seeking national prosperity and military power (or "rich nation, strong army") for their individual nations by moving forward with new ideas. Going beyond diplomatic recovery measures, the two countries should think in macroscopic terms of the whole region and with a long-term vision readjust the goals, values, and

roles of the relationship in order to initiate a new beginning for ROK-Japan relations.

What we mean by civilizational transformation in the twenty-first century is that the past international system, characterized by the struggle for and balance of power wherein each individual nation was caught in a heated competition with other nations for its national interest, is changing in terms of actors, stages, and performances. Both inside and outside of countries, the influence of non-state actors is growing and stages such as climate change, culture, technology, and others are newly emerging while the traditional pursuits of wealth and power persist. The time has come in which complex roles for global interests for competition, cooperation, and symbiosis are being considered and not just national interests. Even in East Asia, power transition caused by China's rapid rise is happening right in the middle of the U.S. and China's traditional balance of power. Meanwhile diverse issue areas such as trade, finance, development, climate change, environmental pollution, energy, and culture are becoming more complex. This leads to overlapping issue areas for local governments, citizen associations, multinational corporations, and NGOs which have now, rather than simply participating in discussions on these issues, are solving these issues through horizontal and flexible networks leading to a new international order of governance.

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Major nations are sensing a time of change where intense competition, the balance of power, and network governance are mixing with each other and showing an aspect of fierce competition while earnestly working to build regional orders to maximize their own national interests. The U.S. is putting up the banner of “rebalance to Asia” and joining the region in diverse ways while China is using flashy language such as “amity, sincerity, mutual benefit, and inclusiveness,” “a community of common destiny,” and “one belt, one road” to describe their foreign policy as both countries try to hold onto regional leadership. Neighboring Japan, under the banner of making “proactive contributions to peace,” clarified that it seeks to become a normal country while at the same time trying to solve regional and global issues through the integration of the U.S.-Japan alliance.

The effort to bring the whole region together is more important than the competitive aspect of the current order where each individual state thinks only in terms of its individual survival. From this point of view, ROK-Japan relations must seek new goals, values, and roles. In order to construct the complex order of East Asia with the value of symbiosis, the status of ROK-Japan relations should be reset and filled with new contents. Now is the time for Korea and Japan to both earnestly reflect on and discuss the future of their relationship and prepare a vision for a new standard of the future by tidying up the past.

In 1965 both South Korea and Japan decided to put aside the heavy baggage of the past and normalize diplomatic relations as both countries needed each other for the sake of prosperity within the Cold War order. Through economic cooperation with Japan,

Korea was able to modernize while Japan was able to become Korea’s biggest trading partner, augmenting the gains of economic cooperation. Furthermore, as allies of the U.S. within the Cold War system, the two countries steadily built up security cooperation while acting as an anti-communist bulwark. Within the scope of these shared benefits, Korea and Japan consistently devoted effort to converging historical perceptions; the 1992 Kono Statement, the 1995 Murayama Statement, the 1998 Joint Declaration for a New Japan-Republic of Korea Partnership towards the Twenty-first Century, and the Kan Statement can be counted as some definite accomplishments.

Nevertheless, at the dawn of the twenty-first century, East Asia’s strategic environment is changing with the rise of China, while emerging issues such as Japan’s long-term economic recession, Korea entering a period of slow economic growth, and the resurgence of nationalism, which are causing East Asia to undergo a process of dynamic change, have made it difficult to foster bilateral relations between Japan and Korea and they can no longer follow the algorithms of the past which called for the exclusive pursuit of national interests. However, the setting and pushing forward of strategic goals by the current governments of both countries are assuming a considerably outdated tinge. The Abe government is actively seeking to become a “normal country” using the logic of national prosperity through “Abenomics” and the logic of security through its military rearmament and the strengthening of its alliance with the U.S. Domestically the Abe government is deploying identity politics based on rightwing nationalism. Basing its stance simply on anti-Japanese nationalism, the Park Geun-hye government’s adherence to a firm position on

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historical issues has consequentially weakened its policy flexibility and resulted in restricted choices in its strategic space. In this context, if we look at ROK-Japan relations, tensions can be temporarily alleviated according to the situation, but it will be difficult to fully open up a new era of cooperation.

Six Objectives for Complex Co-evolution

Although efforts have currently been made on the part of both countries to improve relations, as past experiences have proved so far, it's hard to expect big results by maintaining the same, inert approach to manage historical issues all the while seeking cooperation within a narrow definition of national interest. It is difficult to build the desired twenty-first century cooperation between Korea and Japan through the current “two-track” approach advocated by the governments of both countries – that is on one hand resolving historical issues through negotiations between governments and on the other hand seeking opportunities for security and economic cooperation. Both sides should work through the following six objectives in order to bring about the transformation and co-evolution necessary for starting a new era.

First, both nations must properly understand the transformation unfolding in twenty-first century Asia. The changes that both countries are currently undergoing, while not a revolutionary change to the same degree as the shift between ancient, middle, and modern eras, come close to a civilizational transformation and demand new responses and new ways of thinking. The East Asian international order has been understood either based on the realism which emphasizes intense struggle for power and the balance of power between the great powers, or

based on liberalism which puts forth that governance consists of horizontal networks between states and non-state actors and that there are win-win games and diffusion of peace following the deepening economic interdependence. Lately there is also increasing interest in the constructivist point of view, which pays attention to the distinction between individual nations' identities. However, currently a complex world order is unfolding which is a combination of the modern balance-of-power and post-modern governance, as well as differentiated identity. Meanwhile, an accurate understanding is needed of how the leading power and the challenger along with the middle powers of the current order understand the new order and what kind of rules and visions they are using as they prepare for the future in order to grasp the future roadmap of the twenty-first century. The governments of Korea and Japan especially should understand the complexity of the U.S.-China relations. One the one hand they balance against each other which creates conflict, while on the other hand they engage in exchanges and cooperation on various stages. The governments of both countries should seek to minimize tensions between the two countries and must jointly take action to extend the possibility of cooperation.

Second, governments of both countries need to prepare a shared vision of the future which both countries will face together. The two countries must be able to provide each other with trust by designating a clear direction for the objectives of the ROK-Japan relationship and a strategic vision which emphasizes levels for cooperation. While bilateral ROK-Japan relations were previously formed through the sharing of common interests, the future of ROK-Japan relations

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should establish values and goals of bringing about prosperity in East Asia and the entire Asia-Pacific and also cooperating in order to form a symbiotic relationship. In more detail, the two countries should work together to change the future order in East Asia into a complex space in which various actors are connected through networks and adjust and manage modern and postmodern problems horizontally rather than an order characterized by modern power politics dominated by power politics.

Korea should deepen the ROK-U.S.-Japan cooperation network, while on the other hand expand the ROK-China network. Korea must cooperate with Japan to ensure that these two networks can mutually coexist and be cooperatively associated with one another. Both Japan and Korea must deepen their cooperation within the U.S. lead alliance structure, and, with regard to China, both countries should take an inclusive posture with a future-oriented network approach rather than using the post-Cold War type logic in consideration of the security situation and economic interests of China. Japan needs to carefully evaluate Korea's efforts to improve inter-Korea relations, revitalize its economy, and bring China into the ROK-U.S.-Japan network in order to promote security and prosperity in East Asia. Japan also needs to understand that these efforts to broaden networks contribute to Japan's long-term national interests. Meanwhile, Korea needs to understand that Japan has had a competitive relationship with China over the last 150 years and that Japan is involved in a territorial dispute over islands in the East China Sea with China, a problem that threatens the safety of its people. Both countries must build a complex network in East Asia that tolerates China based on these mutual understandings.

Third, if both countries are to cooperate on the long-term macro objectives, then above all else both governments need to reduce the differences in mutual perceptions held by the people of their respective countries. There is an absence of communication between the leaders of both countries and the radicalized identities in both countries are being diffused through sensationalized media reports, eliminating strategic approaches in foreign policy and reduced space for strategic thinking. In Korea, internalized anti-Japan sentiments leads to excessive simplification of Abe's political lineage, and there is a dangerously strong tendency to view everything through the prism of Abe's actions related to history, efforts to amend the peace constitution, changes to Japanese defense policy, and his move to the right on territorial policy. In Japan, on the other hand, there is a tendency to oversimplify Korea's perception of Japan and a lack of objectivity. Within Japanese society, some have grown tired of Korea's demands for apologies and even an anti-Korean atmosphere has arisen. Therefore sarcastic comments that portray Korea gravitating towards and standing with China while criticizing Japan have become widespread.

Presently, the core problem in ROK-Japan relations is more of an epistemic problem rather than an ontological one. Therefore, efforts to reduce the perception gap are crucial. Korea needs to keep in mind that Japan's current regional and foreign policies are not special products of the Abe administration alone and that even after Abe leaves office it is likely that Japan will maintain its policy of seeking to contain China through the U.S.-Japan alliance and continue to be critical of Korea. On the other side, Japan needs to recognize that despite

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deep rooted anti-Japan sentiments in Korea, there is a great deal of consumption of Japanese culture, study of the Japanese model, respect for Japanese economic development after the war within Korea. In order to reduce the perception gap between the people of both countries, there needs to be extensive efforts at public diplomacy. In the case of ROK-Japan relations, when providing a friendly image of each country, the most important thing is to promote an accurate recognition of reality in the counterpart state. Measures for developing contents to enhance mutual understanding, encouraging responsible media reports, and increasing and deepening exchanges between the younger generations should be prepared. Also, given that political leaders' behavior is an important aspect of mutual perception, leaders in both countries should observe each other's position and behavior based on broader views of history and the world, and pay attention to their own behavior so as not to increase tensions.

Fourth, both countries need to open a new era of finding and cooperating on interests they have in common on the stages of security, prosperity, and emerging issues. There needs to be an active collaboration on established stages such as cooperating for peace on the Korean Peninsula including North Korea's nuclear development, cooperating on regional and global security, concluding a comprehensive free trade agreement, designing a regional regime to protect against financial crises, etc. Also, the two countries should build a strong "win-win" relationship when it comes to emerging stages which are rapidly increasing in importance. Cooperation is likely on issues such as climate change, environment, advanced technology, energy, knowledge, cyber-security, disaster relief, preventing the spread of infectious

diseases, immigration, etc. On the both the traditional, established stages and newly emerging stages, which are complexly entangled together, Korea should not only increase its hard power but also strengthen its soft and network power related to knowledge, culture, and systems. Korea should thus take a leading role in establishing a cooperative relationship with Japan and making a regional regime.

Fifth, the largest cause of mutual distrust and the main obstacle to cooperation between Korea and Japan is the history issue. In order to solve this problem, the first move should be for the governments of both countries to decide to separate historical tensions from domestic politics. If the both governments, in order to build up domestic political support, continue to encourage and abet the tensions created by historical issues, then distrust between the two countries will continue to grow. Furthermore, in order to avoid emphasizing historical issues for domestic political gain, both countries should devise a standard recognition of history and a procedure for checking this at a bilateral summit. If this is too difficult, then the leaders of both countries should at least refrain from actions that cause historical issue tensions to flare up by agreeing to guidelines that regulate their behavior and share these guidelines with the domestic and international audiences. If done in this way, even when power passes to new leaders in both countries, expressions on and tensions related to historical issues can be avoided and a consistent recognition of history can be maintained.

In addition to these efforts, both countries need to prepare a long-term strategy for reconciling their historical animosity. In order to end the antagonism and conflict between both countries at the government

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level which is caused by the history issue, as a rule historical issues should be removed from pending political diplomatic issues and the role of performing research and providing education on history should be returned to civil society. On the civil society level, there should be an effort to build solidarity and mutual trust through conversations on history by sharing experiences with similar historical development processes. This can lead to a greater level of sympathy and understanding between the people of both countries. In this way, there needs to be an end to attitudes in both countries that encourage viewing history from an excessively self-centered position or only recognizing the counterpart country through the lens of bilateral relations. Instead, what is needed is to leave behind narrow views of understanding each country only through these issues and cultivate an attitude with a variety of perspectives.

Finally, the co-evolution of Korea and Japan should ultimately be in the direction of shared identities. Throughout Korea and Japan’s long histories of over 2,000 years, there have been a few mutations in each countries identity. The time for another mutation has come. Only when the people of both Korea and Japan identify simultaneously as not only members of their individual country but also as members of the broader East Asia region can there be a political answer to the zero-sum game played by the two countries that is made up of age-old historical issues and territorial disputes. Therefore, Korea and Japan need to pursue a creative project to build a comprehensive regional identity which will include China in the future. ■

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