

A New Horizon for Japan-S. Korea Relations:

Toward a New Paradigm of East Asian Cooperation

By Yoshihide SOEYA

Japan-South Korea relations after the end of the Cold War have suffered from a huge opportunity cost. The bilateral relationship would have been much better if mutual strategic values had been realized explicitly, and if this knowledge had been used as a guidepost to steer the relationship. The reality, however, has been quite the opposite, which accounts for an emotionally charged vicious cycle between the political communities of the two countries, especially over the territorial and historical issues.

If I may be a bit cynical, the good news about this perceptual/emotional gap is that, precisely because the conflict is not substantiated by realities involving national interests of the two countries, the relationship would not deteriorate as much as the severity of the emotional gap might suggest. More seriously, however, the bad news is that national interests of both Japan and South Korea are damaged to the extent that both countries cannot mobilize huge potential for cooperation buried in the relationship.

I argue in this short essay that digging up this potential would not only make Japan-South Korea relations into plus-sum relations, but would even cause a paradigm shift in the future evolution of regional cooperation in Northeast Asia and the entire East Asian region.

Japan: a Misconstrued “Great Power”

The biggest obstacle in the relationship is a misconstrued image of Japan as a “great power.” A strong South Korean geopolitical perspective that the Korean Peninsula is being encircled by the “four great powers,” i.e., the United States, China, Russia, and Japan, is not only incorrect, but a fundamental source of confusion in the management of Japan-South Korea relations. It is much more realistic to view Northeast Asian geopolitics with a perspective that Japan and South Korea are being surrounded by the three strategically independent great powers armed with nuclear weapons, i.e., the United States, China, and Russia.

For that matter, there is also a serious problem on the Japanese side. Simply put, there is a gap between the nationalistic tone of the conservative arguments in Japanese domestic politics on the one hand, and the real substance of Japanese foreign policy characterized by internationalism, rather than nationalism, on the other. In other words, a dominant political discourse led by conservative ideologues in Japan today, often characterized (wrongly I should add) in South Korea and other places as Japan leaning toward the “right” or “nationalism,” does not reflect or fails to demonstrate the steady progress of Japanese foreign policy after the end of the Cold War toward proactive internationalism.

This is largely a fault on the part of Japanese conservative politicians who tend to raise voices and define issues from purely domestic concerns, mostly as a reaction against the dominantly pacifist and often leftist premises of postwar Japanese politics. This means that they are not inspired by any sense of alternative strategies to the successful postwar diplomacy of Japan, but that they do not pay due attention to the implications of their assertions, directed against their domestic opponents, for Japan’s external relations and diplomacy, let alone for Japan’s strategy.

There is also a lack of appreciation, on the part of the Japanese government, that the rise of conservatism fundamentally constrains

Japanese diplomacy. The perceptual gap, typical in Japan-South Korea relations, is not specific to the relationship but confuses Japanese diplomacy and its external relations more generally. This is a serious issue of a strategic nature for Japan, but is not being addressed as such in Tokyo.

Having said this, however, the South Korean interpretation that the rise of conservatism indicates a new Japan becoming nationalistic or even militaristic is still essentially misplaced. This leads to the grand failure of duly recognizing Japan’s diplomatic strengths, being demonstrated in domains and issues relevant for East Asian regionalism and cooperation among East Asian countries.

Agenda of Japan-South Korea Cooperation

Geopolitically, Japan and South Korea exist between the United States and China, which form the most critical strategic relationship in East Asia. The United States and China are integral parts of East Asian affairs, but they constitute a “small universe” of their own. In a nutshell, their engagement in East Asian regionalism would influence its structure and process fundamentally, but indigenous initiatives should come from regional countries, most notably Japan and South Korea.

An important agenda for Japan and South Korea, therefore, is the roles of the United States and China in East Asian cooperation. As allies of the United States, Japan and South Korea have a very similar agenda of managing their alliances with the United States, while advancing constructive relations with China. In tackling this task jointly, Japan and South Korea should have a shared vision for an East Asian community as a long-term goal, which should create common grounds for mutual cooperation.

To put it differently, there is a vast frontier in East Asia, buried in the “middle grounds” between the United States and China. This huge new area of cooperation would open up clearly if Japan and South Korea begin to look at their relationship as a plus-sum one

and to cultivate genuinely cooperative projects to advance East Asian regionalism.

The relevant agenda for such cooperation, I would argue, is typical “middle-power” cooperation, including peacekeeping, humanitarian assistance, capacity building, democracy building, and so forth. Perhaps, these issues can be grouped into the concept of human security, which would serve as a conceptual basis of Japan-South Korea cooperation in East Asia.

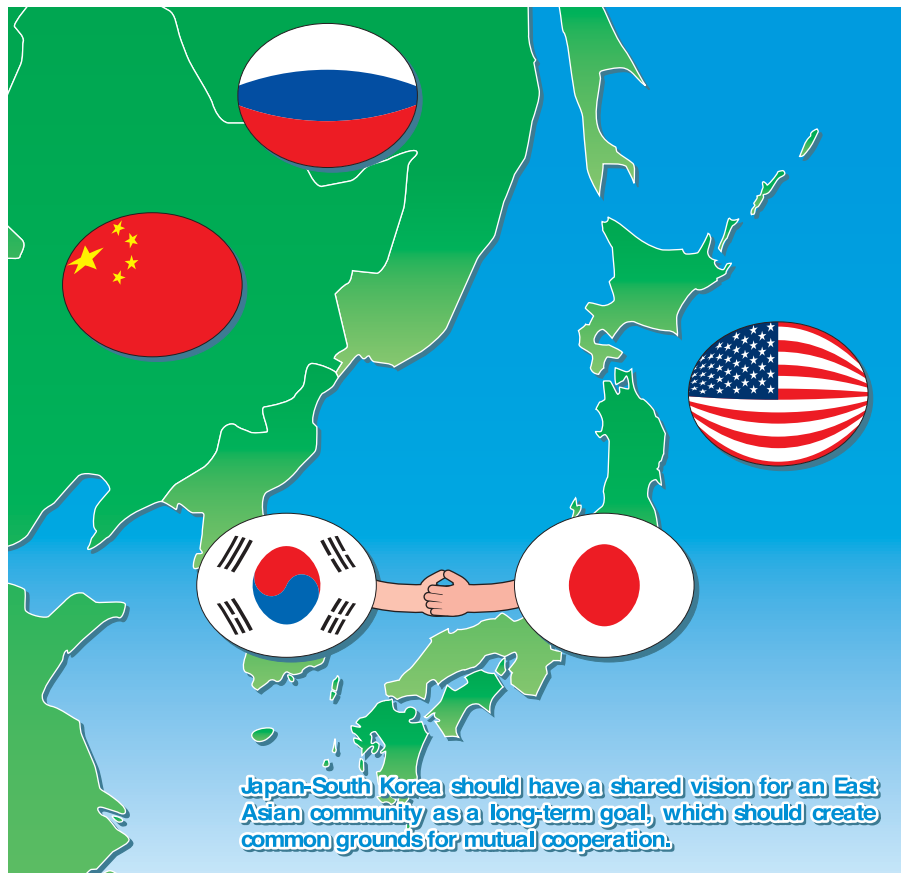
If Japan and South Korea should accumulate substantial cooperation in these domains, it would eventually develop into a solid infrastructure of a stable East Asian order. Then, both the United States and China would have to take into account this infrastructure, constructed in the “middle grounds” between them, in making their policies toward East Asia.

Toward a Paradigm Shift

In the overall context discussed above, the relationship between Japan and South Korea has a potential to cause what might be equal to a paradigm shift in East Asian cooperation. To repeat, the key to this new thinking is to realize the deep geopolitical reality that Japan and South Korea are surrounded by the three unilateralist powers, i.e., the United States, China and Russia. The conventional wisdom of the Korean Peninsula being surrounded by four great powers including Japan is a breeding ground for the myth of Japan-China geopolitical rivalry as well as the South Korean self-definition of its role as a balancer between Japan and China.

Rather, this new geopolitical perspective is a reminder that an equal partnership between Japan and South Korea is not a political slogan but is a substantive reality. It is against the backdrop of this geopolitical reality that civil society exchanges between the two peoples have impacted the bilateral relationship in a fundamental way, despite recurring difficulties.

It certainly takes political leadership in both Tokyo and Seoul to fill the emotional gap between the two nations emanating from historical and territorial issues. Recently, the leadership in both countries has played a role entirely in the reverse, aggravating the gap rather than easing it. The emotional vicious cycle, however, is clearly based on entirely misplaced assumptions about each other



and the irrelevant definitions of national interests in both Tokyo and Seoul.

If it were not for the prejudices, Japan and South Korea would be natural partners who could cooperate on an equal basis for stability and prosperity of East Asia. If such plus-sum cooperation becomes possible, it will be a small step toward a long-term march toward an East Asian community with the Japan-South Korea relationship as a hub and a trigger. I would even argue that the East Asian version of Franco-German reconciliation in Europe after World War II should now be Japan-South Korea reconciliation and cooperation, which should trigger an entirely new process of regional cooperation toward the creation of an East Asian community. **J.S**

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