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OVERCOMING OBSTACLES TO CLOSER JAPAN-KOREA-CHINA COOPERATION

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What are the prospects for furthering regional cooperation in Northeast Asia? Progress reports on trilateral cooperation, submitted each year at the annual summit meeting among Japan, South Korea and China, show cooperative relations among the three countries have been extended in various areas. Unlike previous meetings, this year's trilateral summit is scheduled to take place in Japan

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independently of Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) meetings this fall. Facilitators of this trilateral cooperation are not limited to politicians and bureaucrats. There are many events and projects involving other actors, such as the Japan-China-Korea A3 Soccer Champions Cup, the Japan-China-Korea Junior Sports Exchange Meet, and the Northeast Asia Petroleum Forum, where energy industry leaders from the three countries meet. There is also an annual international business competition organized by students from these countries, Our Vision for Asian Leadership (OVAL), just to cite one example of student exchange.

Japan, South Korea and China are geographically close to each other and share many cultural foundations, including Confucianism. Given the networks developed among these countries, the idea of establishing a regional community united by ties of common identity seems promising. What gets in the way here is the problem of nationalism sitting at the root of historical and territorial disputes.

The history of nation in Northeast Asia is old, and yet it is new. While it is known that some major ethnic groups have maintained ties with each other since ancient times, most countries in this region are relatively young as nation-states. South Korea and China may be seen as being on their way to becoming full-fledged nation-states given that they have not yet achieved national unification. Thus, nationalism in this region is deep-rooted, yet raw, and reveals itself in its crudest form now and then. What should be done to prevent such nationalism from running amok?

To prevent rows over historical recognition, it is important that the Japanese people learn lessons from prewar history; they need to know how Japanese colonial rule and wars began and why they could not be averted. On the other hand, the peoples of South Korea and China should learn that postwar Japan, a nation governed by the rule of law where the spirit of pacifism and democracy have firmly taken root, has done what it can for the peace and development of Asia and beyond.

In fact, the real issue underlying historical recognition is fear for the future, even though the apparent subject is the past. Alarm expressed about a

revival of Japanese militarism or a Sino-centric tributary order in fact reflects the anxieties of these countries over others building up their national strength and wielding regional hegemony. There is no shared vision for an East Asian order, and the image of future Japan-Korea-China relations remains ambiguous. Here lies the source of anxieties, the central problem of the unstable trilateral relations.

Mutual respect, in addition to mutual understanding and trust, is essential to removing such fear for the future. Realizing a multicultural society will become increasingly important not only for China, where ethnic tension remains a major problem, but also for South Korea and Japan. It will be difficult to maintain regional stability unless we respect different cultures and societies on an equal basis without judging them by our own standards.

Values are an unavoidable issue in discussing a regional order. Some circles in the Japanese government have been advocating freedom and democracy in recent years, but placing these two in parallel would be wrong. Liberty, equality and fraternity are the value principles of democracy, which have very much to do with the shared values of Japan, South Korea and China -- harmony and coexistence.

With the spread of globalization and the end of the Cold War, many people around the world, not just in Northeast Asia, are living in an era of uncertainty with great anxiety. At a time when the clash of civilizations and ever-growing social inequalities are being discussed, there is a certain tendency in the world to turn to nationalism. Would it not be possible for the three countries in Northeast Asia to set an example of respecting others as equals and collaborating and coexisting in a harmonious way?

Of course the harmony and coexistence mentioned here are different from the kind of harmony advocated by Confucius and Prince Shōtoku in ancient times, which presupposes hierarchical relations; 21st century harmony and coexistence are based on freedom and equality. If Japan, South Korea and China, the three major countries in Northeast Asia in terms of economic and geographical size, could promote harmony and coexistence in a new era by their own examples, it would lead to the establishment of a democratic, regional

regime covering the whole of East Asia. Giving shape to the idea of such a regime should be a common agenda item jointly pursued by the three countries.✧

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