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OVERCOMING ONE OF THE GREATEST CHALLENGES IN THE TWENTY YEARS SINCE THE JAPAN-SOUTH KOREA JOINT DECLARATION

Tetsuya Haokoda

- Japan and South Korea are facing a serious test over differing historical perspectives at the milestone 20th anniversary of the Joint Declaration that laid the foundations for their current bilateral relations.
- Improved relations are more likely to be achieved by taking a detached look inside the Moon Jae-in administration to ascertain how its policies vis-à-vis Japan are decided, rather than by reacting emotionally.

The views expressed in this piece are the author's own and should not be attributed to The Association of Japanese Institutes of Strategic Studies.

- Next year will see an increase in factors that could further undermine Japan-South Korea relations. At times such as these, reciprocal visits by the leaders as advocated in the Japan-South Korea Joint Declaration are essential. If it is difficult for South Korea's president to make such a visit himself, then dialogues should begin with the prime minister, who is quite familiar with Japan, to build confidence.

Most of the positive aspects of today's Japan-South Korea relations were created by the 1998 Japan-South Korea Joint Declaration. Multi-faceted exchange picked up considerably after the Declaration, and the number of people traveling back and forth between the two countries in a single year is poised to top 10 million for the first time in 2018.

October of this year marked the milestone 20th anniversary of the Declaration, and a wide variety of symposia and other events were held between Japan and South Korea. As such a memorable October drew to a close, however, a ruling handed down by South Korea's Supreme Court dealt a blow that shook the very foundations of the countries' bilateral ties.

This ruling ordered a Japanese company to pay compensation to former laborers who had been mobilized during wartime. This mobilization was stipulated to be an anti-humanitarian and illegal act by a Japanese company stemming from the illegal colonial rule of the Korean peninsula by the Japanese government, and deemed to fall outside the coverage of the 1965 Agreement Between Japan and the Republic of Korea Concerning the Settlement of Problems in Regard to Property and Claims and Economic Cooperation.

In the course of normalizing Japan-ROK diplomatic relations, the claims made by Japan asserting the legality of the Korean annexation clashed with those of South Korea insisting on its illegality, and ultimately the matter was equivocally declared "already null and void" in the Treaty on Basic Relations between Japan and the Republic of Korea. In addition, the "Outline of Claims against Japan" presented by the South Korean side in diplomatic negotiations included unpaid wages for former mobilized laborers and the right to demand other reimbursement. The Agreement regarded all claims, including those in the

Outline, to “have been settled completely and finally”. Accordingly, the Japanese government opposed this recent ruling as being entirely in violation of the Agreement.

Some observers in Japan have suggested that the policies of the Moon Jae-in administration and its progressive support base are strongly reflected in this ruling. However, this latest ruling was based on a judgment made six years ago when the Supreme Court remanded the case to the high court during the conservative Lee Myung-bak administration. It would therefore seem that there were no significant changes in the substance of the ruling, regardless of the administration in power at the time.

Indeed, what is perhaps more important is the reaction of the Moon administration following the ruling. In response to the strong objections voiced by the Japanese government, President Moon assigned Prime Minister Lee Nak-yeon, one of the few members of the administration knowledgeable about Japan, principal responsibility for dealing with this matter, thereby effectively buying himself some time. This decision stemmed from the fact that so little specific preparation had been made prior to the ruling.

Why did President Moon allow such a situation to come about? To overcome what is one of the most serious tests of Japan-South Korea bilateral relations, it would be more effective to take a dispassionate look at the character and current status of the Moon administration than give in to a strong emotional reaction.

Careful scrutiny of the Moon administration reveals that its unpreparedness can be attributed in great part not to an “anti-Japan card” played to garner domestic support but rather to a lack of knowledge about Japan, due to the fact that knowledgeable and insightful politicians, bureaucrats and advisors essential for putting together a Japan policy have not been brought into the administration’s inner circle.

It has been pointed out that channels of communication between politicians such as the Japan-Korea (Korea-Japan) Parliamentarians' Union began tapering off long before Japan’s relative influence started to decline. As criticism has grown of the political settlement reached on the “comfort women”


issue, one of the previous Park Geun-hye administration's few political achievements, even the bureaucrats involved are being held liable, causing those engaged in diplomacy at the working level to regard tackling concerns with Japan as risky.

Furthermore, with North Korea once again showing a willingness to engage in dialogue, the Moon administration has invested substantial human and physical resources in its highest priority of North-South reconciliation. Despite the uncertain future of US-North Korea relations, which play a decisive role in issues concerning the Korean peninsula, North Korea will likely seek to strengthen its solidarity with South Korea for as long as they enjoy good relations by raising historical issues pertaining to Japan.

Next March will mark the centenary of the March 1st Movement, the largest independence movement during the colonial period, and its potential exploitation to boost North-South nationalism mandates that Japan adopt a cautious approach.

Despite these conspicuously negative factors, political leaders in both Japan and South Korea should interact frequently, striving to avoid mutual mistrust and to minimize any problems. Interruptions in summit diplomacy between Japan and South Korea heretofore have only worsened rather than improved issues, and the two countries must not repeat such mistakes.

That said, if circumstances make a summit meeting with President Moon impractical, another idea might to start up dialogue with Prime Minister Lee, who has personal ties with key figures in Japan's political and business establishment.

The issue of historical perspectives is not one that will be easily surmounted, but Japan and South Korea share many interests, including North Korean issues. Building trust between neighbors with an eye on the bigger picture will require bold decisions from political leaders. 

Tetsuya Hakoda is Editorial Writer at Asahi Shimbun.