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IPRIS Viewpoints

AUGUST 2012

Japan-South Korea Relations under the DPJ Government: One Step Forward, Two Steps Back

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Japan and South Korea are the two societies in East Asia which espouse values of liberal democracy and market economy. These common values are the binding factors between the two nations. But territorial and historical issues are major irritants between them, which keep resurfacing and thereby straining Japan-South Korea relations. South Korean President Lee Myun-bak's August 10 visit has worsened the diplomatic relations as Japan has announced to suspend annual summit level dialogue with South Korea in protest of Lee's visit. This means both countries would have to start afresh to build ties. This article highlights some recent developments in Japan-South Korea relations during the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) regime. It also highlights why both countries have failed to conclude much talked about security agreement and what are the difficulties ahead. The analysis will help the readers understand why without resolving historical issues it will be difficult to arrive at a military agreement which both envisage.

DPJ's Ascent to Power: A New Beginning

Before the historic 2009 election, in which DPJ has ousted Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), it has proposed greater accommodation with China and South Korea and thus presented an alternative policy than that of LDP for which the United States was supreme. In its 2009 election manifesto, the DPJ promised to "develop relation of mutual trust with China, South Korea and other Asian countries".[1] Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama floated an idea to create East Asian Community (EAC) for the greater accommodation and reintegration of East Asian economies. At that time, the idea was seen as utopian to various political analysts. But Hatoyama seemed committed to his idea as he renewed his commitment when he visited Seoul and Beijing a month after assuming office. Inching closer towards achieving the goal of regional integration, the leaders of the three countries – Japan, China and South Korea – signed a trilateral cooperation agreement in October 2009 in Beijing in which the three parties, made their commitment for the "development of East Asian Community based on principles of openness, transparency, inclusiveness as a long term goal and to regional cooperation...".[2] The idea could not materialize as Hatoyama was forced to resign by his own colleagues amid his sagging popularity and inept handling of the relocation of Futenma base issue

1 The Democratic Party of Japan's Platform for Government (Election manifesto, 2009), p. 28.

2 "Joint Statement on the Tenth Anniversary of Trilateral Cooperation among the People's Republic of China, Japan and the Republic of Korea" (MoFA, 10 October 2009).

in Okinawa. However, commitments to form an EAC have been reiterated by Hatoyama's successors Naoto Kan and Yoshihiko Noda on various platforms and a close cooperation between South Korea and Japan would be inevitable to realize an EAC. The DPJ has taken various steps to assuage South Korean concerns on historical issues, though none has materialized as expected. Some of the issues needs to be highlighted here, which would help the readers analyze the developments in Japan-South Korea relations.

Issue of Franchise to South Korean Permanent Residents in Japan

During campaign in 2009 general elections, Hatoyama had said that "the time has come to take positive step" for granting the right starting with local elections, sparking speculation that the DPJ would implement the goal which it adopted in 1998 as part of its basic policies. The DPJ government had completed its ground works to present a bill in the Japanese Diet aimed at granting right to vote at the local level polls to foreign nationals registered as permanent residents. The move to grant the foreigners right to franchise in local elections was aimed at gaining trust of Seoul and Beijing, since the majority of the permanent foreign residents are South Korean and Chinese. According to Japan's Justice Ministry's Immigration bureau, there were more than 910,000 foreign nationals registered as permanent residents at the end of 2008. The ruling DPJ took this step as part of its strategy of reconciliation with China and South Korea, its two erstwhile colonies. But since the right of franchise is likely to give greater say to existing South Korean and Chinese constituencies in Japanese politics, the opposition LDP, and DPJ's coalition partner Peoples New Party (PNP, also known as *Kokumin Shinto*) opposed it. The conservative parties in Japan fear that if they are given right to vote they may gain major say on various issues including resolution of territorial disputes with South Korea and China. In other words, they may serve as Seoul and Beijing's proxies on various bilateral issues and influence domestic policies. Owing to opposition pressures, the DPJ has so far not put the bill to vote.

But it is likely that the issue to grant right to franchise South Korean will resurface as since the last few years Seoul has been urging Tokyo to grant these rights to their citizens in view of protests from the Korean Residents Union in Japan (*Mindan*), the largest organization of permanent South Korean residents in Japan. The Korean Residents Union in Japan has not only been struggling to get the right to franchise on streets but also took the battle to court. The demand to grant right to franchise to Korean citizens was reiterated by South Korea when then Japanese Foreign Minister Katsuya Okada visited Seoul in February 2010.[3]

Yasukuni Visit Issue

Yet another emotive issue for South Korea and China is the visits of Japanese politicians to the Yasukuni Shrine. The controversial shrine which enshrines souls of war dead including 14 Class A war criminals, continue to cloud Japan's relations with its neighbors and erstwhile colonies. The visits of Japanese leaders to the shrine in the past have drawn flak from its erstwhile colonies, which view the shrine as symbol of Japanese militarism and regard the visits to it by officials as insensitive and not conforming to the apology Japan offered for its atrocities during colonial expansion. On many occasions, the visits by politicians have served as irritants in the diplomatic relations between South Korea and Japan and have hampered Japan's normal diplomatic relations with its neighbors. The DPJ promised during the 2009 general elections that it will not allow its leaders to visit Yasukuni Shrine. It was yet another step towards forging ties with regional countries. Another promise the DPJ made during the 2009 elections was to build a non-religious site as a memorial to Japan's war dead. The DPJ has not fulfilled the later promise but has so far stuck to the promise that its leaders and cabinet ministers will not visit the controversial shrine.

Kan's Apology Ahead of 100 Years of Annexation of Korea

The DPJ government renewed its determination to build a future-oriented relation between Japan and South Korea by expressing remorse and an apology for Japan's colonial rule of Korean peninsula. Though, in the past Prime Minister Tomichi Murayama (in 1995) and Junichiro Koizumi (in 2005) had apologized for Japan's wartime atrocities towards its neighbors, Kan's apology (in 2010) was specifically aimed at assuaging South Korean concerns over Japan's colonial past. Kan understood Koreans' pain and their continuous suffering from Japan's past atrocities. He struck the right cord and stated in his apologies that "those who render pain tend to forget it while those who suffered cannot forget it easily. To the tremendous damage and sufferings that this colonial rule caused, I express here once again my feelings of deep remorse and my heartfelt apology".[4] He added that he will "transfer precious archives originated from the Korean Peninsula that were brought to Japan during the period of Japan's rule through the governor general of Korea and the government of Japan possesses, such as the Royal Protocols of the Joseon Dynasty". He also promised that he will "continue in all sincerity conducting such humanitarian cooperation as the assistance to ethnic Koreans left on Sakhalin and the assistance in returning remains of the people from the Korean Peninsula".[5]

3 Seoul pushes voting rights [*The Japan Times*, February 12, 2010].

4 "Kan's statement on Korean annexation" (*Kyodo News/The Japan Times*, 11 August 2010).

5 *Ibid.*

His remarks indicated that he is sincere in building the relationship between the two neighbors anew. In his concluding statement of the apology, he observed: "At this significant juncture of history, I strongly hope that our bond will become even more profound and solid between Japan and the Republic of Korea, and I declare my determination to make every ceaseless effort to open the future between our two nations".[6]

Japanese Foreign Minister Katsuya Okada while sharing dais with his South Korean counterpart had also expressed similar sentiments during his official visit to Seoul. Okada stated that "we never forget the feeling of the side that was annexed and of the victims who still feel the pains".

But it seems that the statements made by the Japanese leadership has not gone beyond the diplomatic conclave and the people still have deep anguish over Japanese colonial past. The two historical issues: the issue of "comfort women" and territorial dispute which came to fore in quick successions suggests that South Korean people have not forgiven the Japanese.

Issue of Comfort Women and Forced Laborers

The issues of comfort women – Korean women who provided sexual services to Japanese Imperial Army – and forced labor during World War II are yet another vexing issue between Japan and South Korea which keeps resurfacing at intervals and thus hamper a normal diplomatic relations between the two countries. The recent issue of "forced laborers" came to the fore when South Korea's Supreme Court ruled in May 2011 that South Koreans who were forced to work without pay for Japanese companies during World War II are entitled to seek compensation. While on the other hand, the Japanese apex court has been maintaining that the South Korean individuals have lost their right to sue under the 1965 treaty between Japan and South Korea, which was signed as part of the normalization of relations between the two.[7] South Korea, however, maintains that the 1965 treaty does not apply to issues of comfort women, victims of atomic bombing in Hiroshima and Nagasaki and South Koreans who were abandoned in Sakhalin at the end of World War II.

The Asahi Shimbun has quoted a 2010 study of Japan's Justice Ministry noting that at least 175,000 Koreans who worked for Japanese companies during the war returned to the Korean peninsula without being paid.[8] Following the apex Court ruling there would be an increasing pressure on South Korean government from its people to press Japan to resolve forced laborers issue appropriately.

Regarding the comfort women, the South Koreans have expedited the efforts to highlight the plight of the sufferings of sex slaves more vigorously both in South Korea and the United States. In Seoul, the South Korean protesters installed a statute of comfort women in front of the Japanese embassy in December 2011. Similarly, an image of comfort women was engraved in Palisades Park City, a suburb of New York City with a message: "In memory of the more than 200,000 women and girls who were abducted by the armed forces of the government of Imperial Japan".[9] Amid the South Korean campaign on comfort women issue, President Lee Myung-bak raised the issue during Japan-South Korea summit meeting in December 2011 held in Kyoto. This certainly created ripples in Japan's political circles. Japan Institute of National Fundamental, a leading think tank in Japan argued that Japan should organize a rebuttal to comfort women issue. Tsutomu Nishioka in a commentary argued that "comfort women issue is not a debate about facts. It is a campaign (...) to worsen Japan-South Korea relations".[10]

However, Junji Tachino suggests Japan to rethink on comfort women issue. He argues that "as long as there is a confrontation between states (...) international public opinion will side with those who appear to be in the weaker position, regardless of what legal arguments or interpretations of historical facts are presented. If Japan claims to be a human rights leader in Asia, it should reconsider its stance on this issue. For the sake of the country's dignity, Japan should look again at its war responsibility".[11]

Interestingly, Japanese government has been trying to assuage South Korean concern over the issue by creating a fund collected through private donation for payments of "atonement money" to former "comfort women". Till 2007, when the fund was closed, money was delivered along with a letter of apology signed by the prime minister. Four successive prime ministers signed such a letter, from Hashimoto to Koizumi. Yoshibumi Wakamiya, editor in chief of the *Asahi Shimbun* in an opinion column has quoted the text of apology as follows: "As Prime Minister of Japan, I thus extend anew my most sincere apologies and remorse to all the women who underwent immeasurable and painful experiences and suffered incurable physical and psychological wounds as 'comfort women'".

Wakamiya opines that prime minister's apologies have not been widely accepted in South Korea as former comfort women have refused to accept the money and

6 *Ibid.*

7 "S. Korean Supreme Court rules in favor of forced laborers" (*The Asahi Shimbun*, 25 May 2012).

8 *Ibid.*

9 Junji Tachino, "Japan should think again on 'comfort women'" (*The Asahi Shimbun*, 8 June 2012).

10 Tsutomu Nishioka, "Japan should organize rebuttal to comfort women allegation" (*Speaking Out*, No. 143, 28 May 2012).

11 Junji Tachino, "Japan should think again on 'comfort women'" (*The Asahi Shimbun*, 8 June 2012).

demanded an official compensation from the Japanese government. The closure of fund gave the impression to South Koreans that Japan has been refusing to apologize over the issue.[12] He suggests that the most important thing Japan should do now is to deliver the prime ministers' message of apology to former "comfort women". Sympathizing with the former comfort women he opines that "Japan would be acting in an unbearably callous manner if it allows these aged women to die holding a grudge against the Japanese government after many years of holding protest rallies only to be totally ignored by the Japanese Embassy".[13]

Territorial Dispute over Takeshima/Dokdo

Japan and South Korea have centuries' old contested claim over Takeshima (known as Dokdo in Korea). The issue has been resurfacing between the two countries following World War II and has hampered diplomatic ties between Seoul and Tokyo. The territorial dispute between South Korea and Japan recently intensified on August 10, 2012 when South Korean President made a surprise visit to Dokdo (known as Takeshima in Japan).

On August 10, hours after Lee's visit to the disputed territory, Japan recalled its ambassador to Seoul. Japan is considering to put off "shuttle diplomacy", under which leadership of both the countries have held bilateral summit-level meetings annually. Tokyo is also mulling to take the dispute for arbitration in International Court of Justice (ICJ). The developments suggest that the Japan-South Korea relations will deteriorate further as the issue will be dragged in court.

Both Japan and South Korea has centuries' old contested claims on the territory. The territories on which South Korea has an effective control since 1954 lie 157 kilometer northwest of Japan's Oki island chain in Sea of Japan (known as East Sea in South Korea). The Korean historical account suggests that Dokdo was incorporated in Korea in 512 AD during Silla dynasty. However, Japan claims that the island has been part of its Shimane prefecture since 1905 which was then uninhabited. The debate over the sovereignty of the rocky outcrop has seen many diplomatic stand-offs between Seoul and Tokyo. In recent past it has been heating up since 2006 when the Shimane prefecture started celebrating Takeshima day on February 22 every year.

In the past Takeshima had served as a temporary watchtower for Japan during the Russo-Japanese war and for the United States during the Korean War. Therefore it can be said that the islands' strategic location is fueling the sovereignty debate. Takeshima/Dokdo has an area of just 0.08 square miles but sovereignty over it would allow Japan to gain control over 200 nautical miles of Exclusive Economic Zone around it and the resources that lies therein.

In recent years Seoul has taken up series of steps to strengthen its claim over the island including expansion of its naval airbase on the island of Ulleung which is aimed at boosting the defense of nearby islands including Dokdo. The Japanese media, citing South Korean sources, has reported that South Korea aims to complete the expansion of its naval airbase in Ulleung by 2017, which will give it an effective edge over Tokyo to gain control of the disputed territory.

The unprecedented visit by Lee has surprised many political analysts both in Japan and Korea since Lee since the start of his presidential term in 2008 has been trying to establish a strong South Korea-Japan relations and at one occasion he has termed Japan as an "ally that is closest" to South Korea. In fact he tried his best to sign a military pact with Tokyo to share intelligence information between South Korean and Japanese defense forces before succumbing to public pressure to conclude it later. A section of analysts both in Japan and South Korea has seen Lee's visit as motivated by domestic concerns. The *Asahi Shimbun* in its editorial opines that "Lee's visit to the Islands appear to have been motivated more by domestic and political concerns than by the Takeshima dispute or any other diplomatic issue". The daily adds that "just as Lee began preparing for the final months of his term, set to end in February, his elder brother and some close aides were arrested in scandals. There is also growing discontent among South Koreans over widening gap in incomes".[14] In some what similar analyses the *Korea Times* in its editorial has stated that "opposition parties were cool about Lee's visit to Dokdo, dismissing it as a 'political show' intended to placate public opinion that turned sour in the wake of wrongdoings implicating his close relatives and key aides" adding that "we do not know whether the trip is politically motivated" but Lee has freedom to visit any place on "our territory".[15]

Lee's visit seen from the perspective of Japan-South Korea relations since the last two decades is not surprising. The relationship has seen many "warm and cold" phases and it has gone sour in the final year of presidential terms. South Korean columnist Oh Tae-kyu based on his analyses on Japan and South Korea love-hate relationship since the Kim Young-sam administration in 1990s has termed it the "final year syndrome".[16] He has predicted the same about Lee's administration much before his visit to the contested territory.

However, the "final year syndrome" will likely have a long-term impact on Japan-South Korea diplomatic

12 Yoshibumi Wakamiya, "Ex-prime ministers' apologies set tone for new efforts to resolve 'comfort women' issue" (*The Asahi Shimbun*, 31 March 2012).

13 *Ibid.*

14 "Lee's Political grand standing hurts Japan-South Korea relations" (*The Asahi Shimbun*, 11 August 2012).

15 "Visiting our territory" (*The Korea Times*, 10 August 2012).

16 Oh Tae-kyu, "Time to stop having the same old diplomatic squabbles with Japan" (*The Hankyoreh*, 13 June 2012).

relationship as Tokyo seems determined to take this issue to the ICJ. Japan has proposed to South Korea to refer the matter to ICJ in 1954 and 1962 but South Korea has not agreed. Foreign policy makers in Tokyo after 1962 have not raised the matter in the ICJ considering that this will have adverse impact on bilateral relations. However, statements of Japanese Foreign Minister Koichiro Genba following Lee's visit to the islets suggest that he is determined to take the issue to ICJ and possibly launch a diplomatic campaign to pressurize South Korea to agree for an international arbitration. As per the ICJ convention, the body takes up issue for arbitration with mutual consent from parties contesting a territory. South Korea on its part, as of now, has opposed to refer this issue to ICJ since it enjoys an effective control over the territory.

Japan South Korea diplomatic standoff following Lee's visit will have repercussion on various bilateral and regional cooperation. In the near term it will have an adverse impact on Japan-South Korea economic relations. Both have been very close to concluding an Economic Partnership Agreement. At the trilateral level, they had also been negotiation a Free Trade Agreement between Japan, South Korea and China. Since Japan has indicated that it will suspend "shuttle diplomacy" there would be no meeting at the higher political level between the leadership of the two countries. The standoff will also scuttle chance to conclude two military agreements, Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement (ACSA) and General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) for which the two countries have prepared ground since January 2011.

Strategic Cooperation: Would it come to Fruition?

All these historical and territorial irritants apart, Japan and South Korea have been mulling at various military pacts to strengthen their military cooperation. The rising tension on the Korean peninsula especially North Korea's belligerent actions of shelling at Yeonpyeong Island, *Cheonan* incident, long-range missiles and nuclear experiments have acted as a catalyst for the two democracies to seek such cooperation. In January 2011 Japan mooted a proposal to sign two military agreements: ACSA and GSOMIA. ACSA is generally an agreement under which the parties reach to a mutual agreement on sharing food, water, fuel as well cooperation on transportation. Japan wants to conclude ACSA with South Korea in regard to international Peacekeeping Operations, relief activities and joint drills.[17] GSOMIA is signed between the two countries' defense forces to prevent information leakage as they share necessary military information such as technology and coding information in conducting joint operations or in the case of emergencies. South Korean defense authorities were positive about the Japanese proposal and held a series of talks over the issue since January 2011. In fact, South Korea and Japan in May 2012 agreed to conclude the two pacts. South Korean Defense Minister Kim Kwan-jin was scheduled to visit Japan Tokyo in May 2012 to sign the agreement. But the visit was cancelled amid the criticism from the domestic constituencies for signing such agreement with the forces of a country which coerced Korean women to provide sex to Japanese soldiers during the World War II. As a result conclusion of the agreement was postponed.

Both the countries made a fresh effort to sign GSOMIA in June 2012 while deferring ACSA for another date. The military agreement was to be signed in Tokyo between South Korean ambassador to Tokyo and Japanese Foreign Minister Koichiro Genba.[18] However, South Korea announced postponement of the planned signing of agreement just before 20 minutes of the signing ceremony. South Korea's ruling Saenuri Party announced that the party believes that the pact "runs contrary to public sentiment and it is not acceptable to try to sign the pact hurriedly".[19] Despite growing opposition in Seoul about the agreement South Korean President Lee Myung-bak pressed the need for signing the agreement with Japan. He rapped his cabinet for mishandling the agreement with Tokyo. South Korean news agency quoted presidential spokesperson as saying that "contents of the pact should be disclosed and explained to the people in detail so that there won't be any misunderstanding".[20]

South Korea maintains that the GSOMIA with Japan is intended to share military intelligence on North Korea. However, critics in South Korea argue that Seoul is believed to have more intelligence information on North Korea than any country in the world and real intention is not North Korea but China. The *Chosun Ilbo* quoting a source (not identified in the report) writes that plans to sign military agreements with Japan have "strategic significance vis-à-vis China's growing might". It adds that the United States has proposed joint military drills for Korea, the United States and Japan for years and the information sharing agreement is something the United States has been asking for in the same context.[21]

The military agreements, if concluded, will meet twin goals for Japan and South Korea to keep both China and North Korea in check. But it is still to be seen whether South Korean government will be able to assuage domestic concerns towards signing the agreement with Japan. The South Koreans remain largely opposed to signing the agreement with a country which colonized it from 1910 to 1945.

17 "Military pact sought with South Korea" (*Kyodo News/The Japan Times*, 4 January 2011).

18 "South Korea and Japan forge historic military pact" (*International Herald Tribune*, 29 June 2012).

19 "Seoul balks at signing of first military pact with Tokyo at last minute" (*The Japan Times*, 30 June 2012).

20 "Lee rebukes officials for mishandling military pact with Japan" (*Yonhap News Agency*, 2 July 2012).

21 "The story behind the Korea-Japan military pact" (*Chosun Ilbo*, 29 June 2012).

Conclusion

Ever Since the DPJ assumed power in Japan it has taken sustained steps to strengthen political relationship with South Korea. However, because of deep-seated historical animosities and Japan's image of colonial power among the Korean people, both countries have so far failed to forge a strong political relation. A specific apology to South Korea offered by Prime Minister Naoto Kan ahead of 100th anniversary of Japanese annexation of Korea failed to yield desired results. Issues of territorial dispute, comfort women and forced laborers have surfaced one after another straining the bilateral relationship. The same was witnessed during the signing a military pact to share intelligence information between the defense forces of South Korea and Japan. Owing to public sentiments South Korea has postponed the signing of the pact.

How the historical issues and territorial dispute between South Korea and Japan will pan out remains uncertain. But these irritants, if allowed to linger further, will affect their bilateral relations including the security cooperation they envisaged amid regional security concerns. Since Japan and South Korea have announced many times that they share a common goal of ensuring peace and stability, the escalation of territorial disputes and historical issues between the two neighbors will hinder that goal and will have wider implications for the security situation in the region. It is hoped that both the countries would manage these issue so that it does not affect their overall diplomatic relations and regional security goals.

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