



# HOSTAGE TO HISTORY: JAPAN-SOUTH KOREA RELATIONS

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*With the two leaders of Japan and South Korea having failed to hold an official meeting between them since coming to office, historical issues remain a thorn in the the betterment of Japanese-South Korean relations. There continue to be anti-Korean ultra-nationalist protests in Japan while lingering grievances remain in South Korea. Gestures of goodwill as well as statesmanship are needed on both sides to lessen tensions and put their historical issues behind them.*

Tensions over lingering historical issues—exacerbated by the territorial dispute over Takeshima/Dokto—are continuing to undermine the relationship between Japan and South Korea. Indeed, as recently observed first-hand by this author, tensions are running high on some of Tokyo's streets. One such area is Azabu Juban, where the South Korean embassy along with the headquarters of Mindan, the organization of South Koreans in Japan, are located. Here, right-wingers and ultra-nationalists demonstrate against Japan's Korean residents and spout an historical revisionism that underplays Japan's wartime record. While these groups are not particularly large in number, their "hate speeches" against Koreans nonetheless serve to aggravate the situation. In South Korea, meanwhile, the above actions, the perceived lack of an adequate Japanese apology, and the issue of economic compensation continue to promote ill-feeling.

## History that Rankles

Until 1945 the Korean Peninsula was controlled by Japan. The two countries normalized relations in 1965, when a treaty was signed. The treaty is a remarkable document in terms of what is missing. No reference to any kind of apology for Japan's past conduct can be found in it, and instead of reparations due South Korea, Japan provided economic aid as a show of generosity. The delicate matter is that it was South Korean President Park Geun-hye's father, Park Chung-hee, who as the country's president (1961–79) was responsible on the South Korean side for signing the treaty.

At the time, the only apology Koreans received came from the Japanese foreign minister, Shiina Etsusaburo. On the way to the final negotiations for the 1965 treaty in Seoul,

he was warned that there would be big anti-Japanese demonstrations. In anticipation of such, he jotted down a statement that he read out when he stepped off the plane. While it constituted an apology of sorts for what had happened in the unfortunate past, it was left unclear as to who was apologizing: was it Japan? the Japanese government? or only the foreign minister?

It was not until 1998 that the Japanese government issued an apology in a way that South Korea found good and valid. After a state visit to Japan by South Korean President Kim Dae-jung, a joint communiqué was issued in which "[then] Prime Minister Obuchi regarded in a spirit of humility the fact that Japan caused, during a certain period in the past, tremendous damage and suffering to the people of the Republic of Korea through its colonial rule, and expressed his deep remorse and heartfelt apology for this fact. President Kim accepted with sincerity this statement of Prime Minister Obuchi's recognition of history and expressed his appreciation for it."

The oppression and maltreatment that Koreans had to endure is still in living memory. The demands on Japan for not only apologies but also economic compensation for past wrongdoings have been heard from many parties in South Korea in recent years. The most recent was in June when the high courts in Seoul and Busan ordered Mitsubishi Heavy Industries to pay compensation to Koreans who worked as forced labor for the company during the Japanese occupation. The Japanese government in response gave its standard answer: all of Japan's obligations atoning for colonial atrocities were settled with the treaty that was concluded in 1965 when Japan and South Korea normalized relations.

Still, seventy years after Japan's defeat, the issue of com-



fort women in particular—that is, Korean women and girls forced to provide sexual services to the Japanese military—continues to rankle. In a recent interview with the BBC, President Park Geun-hye of South Korea stated that this issue is one that complicates the relationship with Japan: “If Japan continues to stick to the same historical perceptions and repeat its past comments, then what purpose would a summit serve? Perhaps it would be better not to have one.” The fact is that Japan-South Korean summit meetings have stalled. No official meeting between the top leaders of the countries have taken place since they took office.

The issue of Japan’s wartime actions have thus far from been resolved, and grievances and dissatisfaction have been expressed more and more loudly in South Korea in recent years. That President Park Geun-hye has also joined in such sentiments must be said to be surprising as a diplomatic move. After all, it was her father who signed the 1965 treaty and her predecessor in office, Kim Dae-jung, who accepted the Japanese apology.

## No More Hate

It is clear that the actions of a small minority of ultra-nationalists in Japan are counterproductive and are viewed negatively in South Korea. One of the problems is that Japan has no legislation against hate speeches. Nevertheless, there are some positive signs that the authorities are trying to distance themselves from such protestors and to be more conciliatory.

In October, the Kyoto District Court ordered a vocal anti-Korean group to stop a “hate speech” campaign against a Korean elementary school. The group was also ordered to pay 12 million yen (US\$120,000) in damages to the elementary school. The court’s presiding judge, Hitoshi Hashizume, said the group’s actions were illegal because they constituted racial discrimination.

Prime Minister Abe Shinzo has also made his standpoint clear. Responding to a question from Democratic Party of Japan lawmaker Kan Suzuki in the Upper House Budget Committee session on May 7, Abe said: “It is truly regrettable that there are words and actions that target certain countries and races.” He also told that those who are spreading hate speech do not represent the Japanese people. “It’s completely wrong to put others down and feel as if we are superior,” he said. “Such acts dishonor ourselves.” Therefore, Abe’s clear stance and the above court verdict are healthy signs that—in spite of a lack of legislation—hate speech is not accepted in Japan.

In sum, Japan and South Korea are close neighbors and have every reason not to want to see a worsening of the situation, which would be demaging for both sides. The negative rhetoric and protests that are played up in both countries would appear to point to the case of domestic politics having an unproportionate influence on the foreign policy stances of the two governments. But, as is well known from history, the policy resulting from such pressure is not always wise. Not only gestures of goodwill but also statesmanship are needed from the leaderships of both countries to lessen the tensions and finally put their historical issues behind them.

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