

Summary of JIIA Forum Presentation

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“Recent Developments in the ROK”

Having concluded a nearly three-year assignment in Seoul lasting from my appointment in September 2007 until my retirement in August of this year, I have a renewed feeling for the special place that ROK holds – in terms of both clear-cut importance and challenging issues – for Japan. Looking back on the frequent protestations on territorial and textbook issues I received and on the particular issues I faced in the special year 2010, I grasp the difficulties of Japan-ROK relations extending across a broad range of complicated matters. Over the long term, however, I also gained an on-the-ground sense that Japan-ROK relations are making progress, and I consider myself fortunate to have been able to conclude my posting with a certain degree of optimism. The restoration of shuttle diplomacy between the countries’ leaders, the development of joint responses to the global recession (expansion of currency swaps), and the bolstering of collaboration prompted by the sinking of a ROK’s patrol ship in March of this year all evidence a positive turn in Japan-ROK relations in recent years. From here on, however, it will be important to extend cooperative relations beyond this “bilateral” framework.

My term as ambassador also offered me an opportunity to witness ROK’s dynamism. Particularly notable changes have taken place since Lee Myung-bak assumed office as president (February 2008), and the pragmatic stance and the “diplomacy to neighboring four countries” adopted by “the CEO President” Lee as well as the proactive and omnidirectional diplomatic efforts of late have helped motivate the nation and boost economic performance. Such facts as the midterm rebound of the president’s approval ratings to nearly 50%, and the rapid decision making (deemed characteristic of ROK companies), the bold rationalization (“choice and concentration”) undertaken during the Asian currency crisis of the late 1990s, and the active expansion into emerging markets resulted in a UAE order for a nuclear power plant could be said in and themselves to illustrate part of such a “virtuous cycle.” Naturally, it must be borne in mind that the second half of Lee Myung-bak’s term will confront his government with the constraints on a lame-duck administration, the need to make a smooth transition to a middle-of-the-road course for stability’s sake, and that the booming ROK economy can be sensitive to the impact of a declining won and future global economic trends because of its high reliance on exports. But the “mindset” in ROK at

present is one of elation.

In view of these developments, what would be a desirable vision for future Japan-ROK relations? The two countries must increasingly engage in both competition and cooperation, and I believe Japan and ROK need to become more conscious of the fact that cooperation will serve their mutual interests. Indeed, "mutual interests" should be the new ideology for future Japan-ROK relations. Specific areas in which cooperation might be strengthened include North Korea policy and regional collaboration in Asia. Northeast Asia has the potential to become an enormous economic zone if its concerns can be resolved and peace established. In that connection, it is essential that the Japan-ROK EPA / FTA agreement on which negotiations have been suspended be concluded with the Lee Myung-bak administration; and I think that Japan-ROK director-general level discussions which will be held at an early date can be positive opportunities. In addition, Japan and ROK must "globalize" their relations (ODA coordination, cooperation between Japanese and ROK's companies in the Middle East and elsewhere, etc.). Such a globalization of relations will help to relativize bilateral ties. All in all, the greatest implications derived from my recent posting are that the development of Japan-ROK relations from a global perspective under the banner of "mutual interests" will be a new philosophy of cooperation between the two countries.