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STRATEGY SHARING RATHER THAN REFLECTION SHARING (2): A PRINCIPLE FOR PROACTIVE RELATIONS WITH KOREA (PART 2 OF 2)

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Viewed in such a historical perspective, the current tension between the two countries can be said to be deeper than it appears at first sight. In other words the Takeshima issue and the comfort women problem are symbols of an underlying tension or a potential source of tension rather than its real cause. If this is the case, the two countries should go deeper and wider in their efforts to promote dialogue.

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.

Firstly, the top leaders should agree in a declaration that, whatever problems lie between the two countries and however strained the political or diplomatic climate surrounding them is, the two countries should refrain from shutting the door of political communication by cancelling scheduled meetings or refusing to meet each other. To use the refusal of communication as a means of expressing displeasure or protest is similar to the childish behaviour of sulking and the image of the two countries in the international community is likely to be tarnished.

One may point out, however, that the historical complexities of the bilateral relations and the resulting national sentiment regarding each other cannot preclude such refusals of communication as means to manifest political determination. In order to cope with such a difficulty, the two countries should establish a wise men's forum that would meet with flexibility to discuss affairs and recommend ideas to cope with existing or potential problems. This forum, or at least a part of the discussions in this forum, should be open to the public and participants should have dialogue not only with members of the forum but also with representatives of various professional groups and young people.

Secondly, Japan and the ROK should more deeply and widely recognize each other as countries that share fundamental politico-economic values. In order to make it clearer in the eyes of the general public, several fora should be established to share views and policies on human rights, women's social roles, policies concerning the handicapped, social welfare and related problems or tasks. One might even suggest that the "comfort women" issue could be discussed not as an issue of the past but as an issue related to human rights (therefore the question of Japanese victims could also be encompassed).

Thirdly we should intensify our policy coordination on a future vision of the Korean peninsula. The so-called third track, which includes academics, journalists and businessmen together with policy makers, should be more effectively utilized or rejuvenated for discussing various alternative scenarios of the future of the Korean Peninsula and the roles to be played by Japan and the US.

In parallel with such efforts, the two governments should intensify Japan-ROK dialogue on China on various levels. In promoting such a dialogue, the important principle that the two countries should bear in mind is that Japan-ROK relations should in no way become a political tool that politicians can utilize to maximize their domestic authority, and that they belong to the peoples of the two countries.

In forming a vision for the future, we should not be concerned only with tensions and ways to surmount them. We should look at positive aspects of the two countries' relations and foster those aspects further.


One area of such cooperation is our activities in international organizations. We should intensify and regularize more consultation on each other's policies in various international organizations. Somewhat related to such coordination, one should look into the vast area of economic cooperation or joint endeavours between Japanese and Korean business companies in various parts of the world. Japanese business leaders as well as related government organizations could conduct surveys on on-going joint ventures or similar endeavours and work out ways and means to promote such activities.

With such a spirit in mind, Japan and the ROK could, for example, work out joint sightseeing programmes to attract third-country tourists to the Far East. Governments and business circles could also discuss some joint large-scale business projects on an international scale, such as joint storage of oil or agricultural products, the development of ocean fish farms or the construction of undersea tunnels across the strait. Only if the two countries share a vision of the future and engage themselves in concrete joint endeavours and put their relations in the wider global context will they be able to be freed from the chains of the past.

Even if Japan wishes to implement the above-described policies, the ROK, at least for the time being, may not be particularly responsive to such Japanese initiatives, due to the constraints of national sentiment or political reasons.

Then how can Japan try to induce Korea? Basically Japan should form more clearly its own mid-term strategy towards China and the Korean peninsula

and convey its thoughts to Korea. In parallel with such a path, Japan should reinvigorate its own economy and realize political stability. Then, on that basis, it should engage itself in the task of improving Japan-China relations.

In other words, Japan should situate its policies towards the ROK within a wider international strategy and convey its policies to the ROK. “The farthest way about is the nearest way home” (isogaba-maware, in Japanese) — this should be the motto for dealing with Korean issues. 

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