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JAPANESE AND SOUTH KOREAN LEADERS SHOULD STRENGTHEN PUBLIC DIPLOMACY

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China's future as a major power is veiled in uncertainty, making efforts by Japan and South Korea to address this change critical. However, Japan-South Korea relations are currently experiencing structural changes and heightened tensions. Japan and South Korea share market-based democratic values and are increasingly becoming equals in terms of power. In their varied and multi-tiered connections based in civil society, the countries are establishing balanced two-way flows of people, goods and information.

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The consequence is that Japan and South Korea are entering a new phase of “competitive relations between two increasingly similar states.”

Behind the recent frictions between Japan and South Korea lie structural transformations in Japan-South Korea relations that cannot be attributed simply to the personalities of their respective political leaders. This point can be glimpsed in President Lee Myung-bak’s statement that “Japan’s influence is not as great as it used to be.” Japan’s Cold War support for South Korea in the North-South conflict quickly lost its significance with the end of the Cold War and the South’s regime victory, and no clear-cut common interests between Japan and South Korea have subsequently emerged to replace that.

Security cooperation between Japan and South Korea based on their alliances with the US has been hindered by South Korea’s mistrust of Japan stemming from historical issues, and no progress has been made on systemization through a General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) or Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement (ACSA). In addition, South Korea’s economic dependence on China is deepening and, coupled with expectations that China might exercise its clout on North Korea on the South’s behalf, this has led South Korea to place an obvious emphasis on its relations with China, which in turn has created a prominent divergence between Japanese and South Korean policies toward China. From South Korea’s perspective, Japan’s economic presence has shrunken considerably, and little can be expected from Japanese influence on North Korea. As a result, territorial and historical issues that had been kept in check under the Cold War framework have quickly moved to the forefront.

Amidst these conditions, new administrations have taken office in Japan and South Korea. Despite the hopes of some that Park Geun-hye, whose father Park Chung-hee had close ties to Japan, will lead an administration friendly toward Japan, these expectations are excessive. As a candidate, Park Geun-hye advocated a “Korean peninsula trust-building process” and is more likely than her predecessor Lee Myung-bak to focus on actively improving relations with North Korea. In doing so, she will emphasize stronger relations with China in hopes of taking advantage of that country’s influence on North

Korea. Nevertheless, her administration has acknowledged, in light of North Korea's recent third nuclear test, that there are limits to the say China has in North Korea's actions.

It is thus quite possible that South Korea will give greater attention to ties with the US and reassess the need to cooperate with Japan, which also faces a direct threat from North Korea's nuclear missiles and shares some of the same fundamental objectives in its North Korea policy. Accordingly, Japan and South Korea should manage their relations and exercise self-restraint to keep their disputes over historical and territorial issues from coming to the forefront. Both countries will likely seek to restore their respective influence on North Korea and reaffirm their common objective for Japan-South Korean cooperation of North Korea's denuclearization. Japan and South Korea should give serious thought to the possibilities of public diplomacy, determining what messages to convey to each other's citizens and how in order to favorably shape public opinion on both sides.

Finally, the regional order needs to be resolutely adjusted in line with the power shift in East Asia. Japan-South Korea relations today are significantly different than they were when diplomatic relations were normalized in 1965. Japan and South Korea have seen their ties transform into a balanced relationship of equals, with Japanese public opinion changing significantly as a result. This achievement has been manifested in the "Kono Statement," the "Murayama Statement," the Japan-South Korea Partnership Declaration and the "Kan Statement." The 50th anniversary of the normalization of diplomatic relations in 2015 should be regarded as an opportunity to further develop relations based on the progress made thus far. What remains to be seen is whether the two countries will opt to build strategic relations by overcoming their disputes over historical issues and making full use of each other's advantages in forming the East Asian order. 

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