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TWIN STATES IN EAST ASIA: JAPAN - ROK RELATIONS IN A NEW ERA

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What will the relationship between Japan and South Korea be in a generation from now? This was not an easy question to answer before democracy and market economics took root in South Korea. Japanese and South Koreans then lived under different political and economic systems. Today, however, the question is not that difficult because the two countries share many fundamental elements determining the shapes of their states.

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The first are democracy and market economics. Moreover, the two countries share such fundamental values as human rights and humanitarianism. The second is their industrial structures. Being technology-driven trading states of a similar kind, Japan and South Korea have developed high-tech industries featuring semiconductors, communication equipment and new energy resources, in addition to the heavy-chemical and automobile industries. The third is national security. Tokyo and Seoul will continue to maintain national security policies that place their alliances with the United States at the core. The last is their relations with China. Japanese and Koreans are not just racially close but also share a history of cultural development on the periphery of Chinese civilization.

Since the late 19th century Japan preceded Korea in modernization, leading to an unfortunate period between the two countries. Japan achieved rapid economic recovery after World War II, yet what have brought about qualitative changes in the bilateral relationship are South Korea's rapid industrialization since the 1970s and democratization in the 1980s, and Japan's economic stagnation since the 1990s. The two societies now enjoy ever deepening popular cultural exchange.

What will follow from these trends in two decades is the coexistence of "twin states" in East Asia – a country that will have ceased to be a superpower but still too large to be a middle power (Japan) and a standard middle power that may come closer to great power status in the event of Korean unification, which will bring its total population to 70 million (Korea). It will be hard to differentiate these two countries from one another on the surface with their boundaries being lowered in many aspects.

It should also not be forgotten that at the center of East Asia sits China, which is greater than both these countries. To a large degree, the future of the Japan-South Korea relationship will be defined in the context of the trilateral relations among Japan, China and South Korea. For example, since the Lehman Brothers bankruptcy, particular attention has been drawn to an economic triangle emerging in East Asia in which Japan provides parts and materials made with superior technology, Korea exports intermediate goods to China or produces them in China, and China exports finished goods to Japan and the United States.

The total volume of trade among the three countries is more than 30 trillion yen, or 300 billion dollars.

The most prominent feature of the triangle is that the whole system is sustained by a hybrid. Given this economic trend, efforts by China to become a member of an East Asian Community by adopting a democratic polity and restraining the expansion of its military power should be welcomed. Otherwise, though, the shared political values and economic integration of Japan and South Korea will compel the twin states to join their national strategies and draw closer to the US. Once formed, this network will be extended to cover maritime Asia and Oceania.

Since ancient times, Japan and South Korea have strongly influenced each other through competition and cooperation, which have in turn contributed to shaping the respective forms of these states. In modern history, diplomatic missions from the Korean Chosun dynasty to the Tokugawa shogunate played a significant role in bilateral relations politically, economically and culturally. It was Japan's annexation of Korea in August 1910 that put an end to this close bilateral relationship. Did Japanese leaders make the proper decision 100 years ago?

An answer may not come easily from international political perspectives because anyone attempting to answer the question will have to prove whether there were other options at the time. However, to answer the question from a moral point of view is different. On the occasion of the coming 100th anniversary on August 29, the Japanese government should acknowledge that the annexation was conducted forcibly against the will of the Korean people. Such moral realism will lay the groundwork for the Japan-South Korea relationship over the next 20 years. 

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