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STRATEGY SHARING RATHER THAN REFLECTION SHARING (1): A PRINCIPLE FOR PROACTIVE RELATIONS WITH KOREA (PART 1 OF 2)

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Japan-Republic of Korea (ROK) relations appear to be strained in the political and diplomatic domains. The current situation is, in particular, a source of serious concern for many observers of international relations in Japan, as the present state of affairs, unlike previous phases of bilateral tension, has come after the Kim-daejung administration in the ROK and the government led by Obuchi in Japan, under which the two countries seemed to overcome at last the negative legacy of the past and to put their bilateral relations on a “future-orientated” course.

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The enormous increase of cultural exchanges between Japan and the ROK, which was partly caused by the Kanryu boom in Japan but also spurred by Kim-daejung's open door policy for Japanese cultural inflow to the ROK, added a new dimension to the bilateral relations.

One of the most important aspects of this period, at least viewed from the Japanese side, was a clear recognition by the ROK government that post-war Japan had contributed substantially to the economic development and establishment of democratic rule in the ROK. In other words, the good and solid relations between the two countries in the late 1990s and early 2000s were based upon two undercurrents or policy stances.

One was the Japanese stance, namely to join hands with the ROK to achieve recovery from the Asian financial crisis of the 1990s and to promote cultural exchanges between the two countries, particularly among young people, so that they may be able to view each other emancipated from the negative legacies of the past.

The other undercurrent was the policy stance of the ROK government: to promote or strengthen the democratic trend in the ROK and to implement a "Sunshine Policy" towards North Korea.

Ironically, it was just such a policy stance that inadvertently absorbed the nationalist sentiment of Koreans. Kim-daejung's policy did not cause the Japanese bitter feelings towards the ROK over the latter's persistence in raising issues related to history.

Again paradoxically, the Sunshine Policy towards the North did not engender much tension with Japan as the Japanese policy towards the North was too much focused on the issue of abduction and there was no clear "strategy" underlying its policy towards North Korea.

There was also the China factor. China, which already loomed in the background as an important factor to be considered in Japan-ROK relations, did not, because of its undemocratic political system, reflect a disproportional importance in ROK diplomacy. In addition, the distance that the Kim-daejung government maintained in relation to the business community put some restraints on the ROK's political approach towards China.

Moreover, the fairly stable and friendly relations between Japan and China during that period did not, at least in Japan's view, create a situation in which the ROK and China formed a common front against Japan. In other words, neither Japan nor the ROK thought of using the "China card" in dealing with each other.

During the Kim-daejung administration and immediately thereafter, the US was not only a military ally for the ROK but also a nation that had long encouraged democratization in the ROK. It was indeed thanks to US intervention that Kim-daejung was exempted from a death sentence. In addition, for carrying out the Sunshine Policy towards North Korea, the ROK government at that time did not particularly wish to emphasize the strength of its alliance with the US.


With respect to Japanese policy towards the US, the bilateral alliance with the US, though increasingly regarded as a pattern of global commitment, was not yet recognized, at least openly, as a bastion against a possible Chinese threat.

For these reasons, the American factor did not figure as a potential source of friction between the ROK and Japan.

All these factors that contributed to stable and friendly relations between Japan and the ROK have undergone substantial changes over the subsequent decade.

First of all, the Lee-myongbak administration leaned more towards strengthening economic and trade relations with the US and China as the Japanese economy experienced persistent depression. It did not particularly appreciate Japan's democracy as something that could inspire the ROK.

In addition, the somewhat confused diplomatic policy stance of Japan's DPJ government engendered frustration in the ROK and, together with the speedy rise of China, gave rise in the ROK to a somewhat nationalistic sentiment towards Japan in the form of diminished attention to relations with Japan. The dramatic visit of Koizumi to North Korea also rekindled in the ROK the traditional suspicion about Japan's use of the North Korean card.

On the Japanese side, frustration became all the stronger over the ROK's attitude on historical issues as Japan experienced Kim-daejung's policy and the Kanryu boom of Korean films and dramas in Japan. 

To be continued.

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