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Current Issues in South Korea-Japan Relations

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Ambassador Toshinori Shigeie's Talk on Current Issues in South Korea-Japan Relations

On February 12, 2010, the East Asia Institute (EAI) hosted Toshinori Shigeie, Ambassador of Japan to South Korea, for a private discussion on current issues in the bilateral relations between South Korea and Japan. This meeting brought together prominent South Korean experts to discuss an array of issues focusing on bilateral cooperation. Ambassador Shigeie expressed his positive views toward this bilateral relationship and its future prospects. Both Seoul and Tokyo have showed an increasing level of cooperation in recent years, particularly in 1) promoting a bilateral free trade agreement, 2) establishing an East Asian Community, 3) globalizing the scope of bilateral relations, 4) curbing North Korea's nuclear ambition, and 5) broadening cultural exchange. The following is a summary of his talk on the topic of current issues in the bilateral ties.

Presentation by Ambassador Toshinori Shigeie

The year 2009 marked a new era in Japan-South Korea relations as the Hatoyama government of Japan and the Lee Myung-bak administration of South Korea explicitly expressed their strategic interests in strengthening bilateral cooperation. This year will be

another great opportunity for both governments to further increase collaboration at the working level on many critical issues through various channels including the trilateral summit meeting among leaders from China, Japan, and South Korea, as well as summit meetings of the G-20 and the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC). Despite the current challenges facing the ruling Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) both in domestic and international affairs, the governments of Japan and South Korea are actively seeking to further strengthen bilateral relations to address common challenges in the 21st century. Some of the most critical areas for bilateral cooperation are discussed in detail below.

Ministerial Visit to South Korea

As indicated by the ministerial visits to South Korea by Former Prime Minister Taro Aso and Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama, the two countries have made significant progress in taking this bilateral relationship to the next level. The government-sponsored public opinion polls conducted in Japan also confirmed this fact – approximately sixty percent of respondents held positive views toward South Korea, which was six percent higher than the previous year. Similarly, public opinion polls conducted by the daily newspapers *Dong-a Ilbo* and *Chosun Ilbo* in South Korea also indicate that nearly seventy percent of South Koreans would welcome a visit by the Japanese Emperor to South Korea. As the maintaining

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of good personal relationships between leaders is pivotal in defining bilateral relations and discussing relevant issues, the increased personal exchanges between the leaders of Japan and South Korea in 2009 should be viewed in a positive light. In this regard, President Lee Myung-bak's expected visit to Japan this year will further consolidate bilateral relations in 2010.

Strengthening Economic Cooperation

The promotion of the Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA) between Japan and South Korea can be another area for building economic cooperation between these two neighboring countries. Although the EPA received a great deal of attention from both governments through various forms of consultation, it has not yet reached the phase of actual negotiations. Foreign Minister Katsuya Okada pointed out the importance of the resumption of EPA negotiations in that a free trade agreement between Tokyo and Seoul will develop the bilateral relationship to a more future-oriented partnership. It is time for both countries to move forward and make a commitment for closer economic cooperation.

Promoting Regional Cooperation

Since the inauguration of the Hatoyama government in September 2009, a strong emphasis has been placed on engaging with East Asian countries in the region, which include China, Mongolia, Russia, and South Korea. As reflected in the idea of an East Asian Community, closer regional cooperation in diverse areas will yield mutual benefits for all countries involved. In this regard, trilateral cooperation among Japan, South Korea, and China is indispensable in realizing the rise of a regional

community in East Asia. The Fukuoka Summit and Beijing Summit were remarkable opportunities to share the common vision for regional stability and prosperity. Likewise, the East Asia region is ready to take on more progressive steps toward a regional community by arranging informal and flexible meetings to discuss regional issues besides summit meetings. China, Japan, and South Korea should look beyond the interests of the three in addressing a broader range of challenges facing East Asia in the 21st century. Maintaining a close bilateral relationship between Japan and South Korea is an important step toward regional cooperation among East Asian countries that share common interests and visions.

Globalizing Japan-South Korea Relations

Japan and South Korea emerged as influential actors in an international community where the national interests of different countries are increasingly connected in promoting global peace and prosperity. These two countries have been closely working together in providing developmental assistance to developing countries in Asia. Japan is hoping to increase its share of Official Development Assistance (ODA) to address new developmental challenges in the developing world, which in turn contributes to strengthening global collaboration in the increasingly interconnected community of states. In this regard, Japan and South Korea have already been involved in various collaborative development projects such as joint agricultural assistance to Cambodia and the provision of job training and agricultural assistance to Afghanistan. In addition, the two governments are discussing another collaborative project in Pakistan. The rebuilding of Afghanistan has also been under consultation between Foreign Minister Okada

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and United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon reflecting their common interests and goals at the broader level.

Normalizing Relations with North Korea after Resolving the Nuclear Crisis and Other Issues

The continued nuclear crisis on the Korean Peninsula arising from North Korea's nuclear ambitions poses another great security challenge for both Japan and South Korea. Resolving the North Korean nuclear issue constitutes one of the top priorities in Japanese foreign policy along with Japan-U.S. relations. The issues involved in the ongoing nuclear tensions on the Korean Peninsula should be dealt with carefully. The Japanese government has pursued a comprehensive approach to the North Korean nuclear problem in order to address all relevant issues including Pyongyang's missile program and its abduction of Japanese citizens. By resolving the North Korean nuclear crisis and other issues comprehensively, the Hatoyama government is hoping to normalize diplomatic relations with Pyongyang in the near future.

Broadening Cultural Exchanges

Lastly, cultural exchanges between Japan and South Korea are a critical component in the bilateral relationship. Koryu Matsuri, an annual Japan-Korea exchange festival, is the best example of this bilateral collaboration in the cultural aspect. This year, the main event of Matsuri will take place in Seoul. Koryu Matsuri represents a remarkable collaboration between these two neighboring countries in the sense that it requires close cooperation in all aspects of the festival ranging from the planning of programs to the actual presenta-

tion of the performance. In addition, the Japanese government is planning to provide Japanese and South Korean high school students with an opportunity to participate in an array of events supported by POSCO, the South Korean steel conglomerate, and community services in Pohang. Acknowledging the importance of cultural exchanges in further strengthening Japan-South Korea relations, these two governments are promoting more collaborative and participatory activities in cultural realms.

The year 2010 will mark new progress in the bilateral ties. In this regard, the notion of common interests is pivotal in developing a cooperative and future-oriented bilateral relationship between Japan and South Korea. Both Tokyo and Seoul should be more conscious about forging common interests in bilateral relations as this is a major step forward in strengthening bilateral cooperation as well as in increasing mutual benefits.

Remarks by Discussants

Following Ambassador Shigeie's talk on the current issues in South Korea-Japan relations, several discussants from South Korea raised a few questions. The Japanese parliamentary obstacles in realizing the Hatoyama government's new initiative for an East Asian Community was one of the topics covered. Moreover, the possibility of the Japanese Emperor's visit to South Korea was also covered. The views expressed throughout the discussion by the South Korean discussants on the major issues in bilateral relations and Japanese regional foreign policy are summarized below.

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1. *Bilateral Relations between South Korea and Japan*

(1) Diverging Views

The possibility of the Japanese Emperor’s visit to South Korea in 2010 would make for a real landmark in South Korea-Japan relations. Amid the heated debate over this possible visit, there have been two diverging views voiced on the future development of the bilateral relationship. Some have argued that both Seoul and Tokyo need to move forward to a future-oriented relationship, assessing that the current level of cooperation between the two governments is not sufficient given their convergence of interests. On the other hand, the discussants noted that such an argument calling for the move to a future-oriented relationship largely fails to take into account the complexity of bilateral relations, domestic political situations, and the lack of intensive discussions on a common vision for the future. In the eyes of the critics, the notion of a future-oriented relationship needs to be more clearly elaborated, addressing the web of shared and conflicting strategic interests between these two countries and its implications on how South Korea and Japan perceive the future of their respective countries as well as bilateral relations. Wary of the lack of genuine dialogue on a shared vision for the future and also aware of the lack of domestic consensus in both countries on how this bilateral relationship should evolve in the long term, they put forward a cautious view that South Korea-Japan relations should be developed at a slower pace.

(2) Building Mutual Trust for the Future

There is a persisting division in the assessment of South Korea-Japan relations in both countries. Yet, it was noted that the strategic interests of South Korea and Japan do con-

verge on the more critical issues in the region—the unification of the two Koreas and the rise of China. The unification of the Korean Peninsula will drastically change the political, economic, and security environment in East Asia and the rise of China will also transform the power structure at regional and global levels. It is widely agreed that these regional issues will inevitably have spillover effects upon the countries in the region. To manage these challenges, a high level of coordination among regional powers is critical since these problems cannot be addressed unilaterally.

Considering these regional challenges, which will fundamentally change the political, economic, and security landscape of the East Asia region, it is advisable for both South Korea and Japan to overcome the polarization in the assessment of South Korea-Japan relations to address these common challenges together. Therefore, building mutual trust between Seoul and Tokyo is an important step toward this goal. Whether or not this bilateral relationship can move forward in the long term largely depends on the trust level between these two governments in dealing with emerging challenges together amid the changing regional order. Without the improvement in mutual trust between Seoul and Tokyo, it will be difficult for both countries to remain mutually cooperative as well as primary regional partners in the long term.

2. *Japan’s Regional Foreign Policy*

(1) Resolving Dilemma between “New” Thinking and “Old” Practice

Since the inauguration of the Hatoyama government in September 2009, the dilemma between his new vision and the continuing old practice has dominated discussions on Japa-

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nese foreign policy. The new idea of an East Asian Community has been rigorously put forward under his leadership as Hatoyama sets out to pursue diplomacy of fraternity in the region while the Japanese government's stance regarding its wartime past has remained unchanged. The ongoing controversy around territorial disputes and history textbook issues between Japan and its neighbors in Northeast Asia can block this attempt at integration in East Asia. The longstanding historical and territorial issues have placed Japan against its Asian allies whose support for the creation of an East Asian Community is indispensable. Considering these root sources of tension and conflict, it is imperative to examine what approaches Japan is willing to pursue in order to realize its new vision for creating an East Asian Community. Without reconciliation over the issues of territorial and history textbook disputes, it will be difficult for the Hatoyama government to realize its new vision. The continued tensions over these issues will fundamentally undermine the mutual trust that backs the deepening and widening of regional cooperation among East Asian countries.

(2) Rising Security Dilemma

The controversy over territorial and historical disputes is not the only difficulty facing foreign policymakers in Japan. Maintaining the balance between the traditional U.S.-Japan alliance and the new idea of an East Asian Community poses another sensitive challenge. Creation of an East Asian Community implicitly implies the exclusion of the United States reflecting the marginalized influence of Washington on regional matters. Hatoyama's initiative could unintentionally trigger the weakening of Japan's bilateral ties with the United States, which has already been experiencing

difficulties over the relocation of the U.S. Marine Corps Air Station Futenma in Okinawa. The strategic interests of the United States to maintain its dominance in East Asia amid the rise of China will inherently clash with Hatoyama's pursuit of an exclusionary East Asian regional community. Moreover, if bilateral relations between Washington and Beijing continue to worsen, Japan is likely to encounter additional challenges against its strategic effort to construct an exclusively East Asian regional community. The question of what role Japan will play *vis-à-vis* the United States and China will become more difficult to answer with a rising China and an increasingly strained relationship with the United States.

(3) Strengthening Cooperation with a Rising China

Given the growing rift in U.S.-China relations, it is often argued that Japan needs to make a strategic choice to align with either the United States or China. However, the perception that Tokyo should choose between these two powers fails to reflect the changing global environment where the rigid traditional Cold War concept of allies is less applicable given the ever increasing level of economic interdependence across the community of states. Instead, Japan is advised to cooperate with both sides rather than bandwagon with one of these two global powers. In this regard, the Hatoyama government is advised to address the contending issues with Japan's neighboring countries, particularly in the areas of territorial disputes and the controversy over history textbooks. Addressing these issues will ensure that the growing uncertainty in regional security and the rising security dilemmas do not unhinge Japan's bilateral relations with its immediate neighbors. In addition, faced with the new reality that China's economic power will soon

exceed Japan's economic influence in the foreseeable future, Japan needs to redefine its role in the region. The increased level of cooperation with China, rather than competition, will ultimately contribute to promoting peace and prosperity in the East Asian region.■

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