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The Future of ROK-Japan Relations

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On October 9, 2009, South Korean President Lee Myung-bak and Japanese Prime Minister Hatoyama Yukio met in Seoul for the ROK-Japan Summit. This summit took place only two weeks after the two leaders had held their first bilateral summit at the United Nations headquarters in New York on September 23. The day after the ROK-Japan Summit, they met once again in Beijing for the trilateral summit between South Korea, China, and Japan. It is notable that the two leaders of South Korea and Japan had three talks within three weeks of the inauguration of the Hatoyama administration. Significantly, three issues have been the main focus of these talks—the global agenda, cooperation between Korea, China, and Japan, and ROK-Japan relations.

It is evident that bilateral relations are becoming more linked to regional and global multilateral relations as international politics become more complex and more complicated. In this age, summits are held increasingly more. This reflects the way national leaders are trying to actively participate in global society and shows the current trend of international politics in a more globalized era.

Looking ahead, how many times will the two leaders of South Korea and Japan face each other in a year? First, there are the two annual ROK-Japan “shuttle summits” that are planned. Then there is the South Korea, China, and Japan summit which since last year will be held regularly. Presently, the leaders meet once a year at each of the following regional

meetings: Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), ASEAN+3, and East Asia Summit. They also meet biennially at the Asia-Europe Meeting. In addition, the two leaders meet at the United Nations General Assembly and other United Nations’ conferences such as the United Nations Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen, which will take place in December 2009. Moreover, there is the G-20 Summit which from 2009 will be held annually. Thus, the leaders of the two countries will be in close proximity at least seven times this year as a result of the globalization of international politics and the enhanced status of South Korea at the international level.

The recent ROK-Japan Summit shows Prime Minister Hatoyama’s will on foreign policy, stressing on Asia and the improvement of ROK-Japan relations. The fact that the Prime Minister chose Seoul as his first visit for a bilateral summit implies that he views ROK-Japan relations as the starting point for Japan’s wider foreign diplomacy. As a matter of fact, Hatoyama, right after he was elected as the leader of the Democratic Party of Japan, visited Seoul and emphasized friendship and fraternity with President Lee Myung-bak.

Until recently, South Korea had not been that significant for Japan. However, recently two factors drove South Korea to become a more significant player in Japan’s diplomacy. The first is the Japan’s East Asia balancing strategy. As China now has already grown too strong for Japan, the aim of this is simply to “balance” against China through closer ties

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with South Korea. The second factor is South Korea's rise as an attractive partner, which has the capability to strengthen Japan's global policy momentum. This partnership can deal with various global issues such as environment, development, and human security issues, because South Korea shares the same values of free market and democracy while also exhibiting a similar level of economic development with Japan. Since South Korea sees Japan in a similar way, the long-term prospects for relations between them are now at a more positive point than ever before.

Corresponding to these changes in bilateral and international circumstances, the agenda of the ROK-Japan Summit tackled East Asian regional issues including the North Korea nuclear issue. Additionally, the issue of creating an East Asian economic union was discussed as well as seeking ways for South Korea and Japan to cooperate more at the global level. Unlike the previous discussions which mostly dealt with territorial disputes, history controversies, national security, and economic relations between the two nations, the current discussions have dealt with far more broader issues. The recent summit was successful in how it brought the issues of ROK-Japan relations, major issues in East Asia, and global agendas onto the table while also finding agreements and creating a consensus between the two.

Although the summit did not address any specific or individual issues, its most notable points were the Prime Minister's statements on Japan's colonial rule in Korea and Emperor Akihito's proposed visit to South Korea. Hatoyama made it clear that his stance on Japan's diplomacy toward South Korea is to face up to history and then build upon that for more future-oriented relations. Hatoyama's current

stance is consistent with his past remark that he would respect the Murayama statement, which had expressed Japan's deep remorse and heartfelt apology for its colonial rule. However, he was rather cautious about the issues of extending voting rights to Korean-Japanese and Emperor Akihito's proposed visit to South Korea. This visit, possibly to take place in 2010, has stirred up some controversy as it will coincide with the 100th anniversary of Japan's annexation of Korea. In general, he clearly voiced his support for Japan to face up to its past history. However, he also candidly confessed the presence of difficult obstacles at the implementation level. These obstacles include the sentiment of the Japanese people and the complex domestic politics of Japan.

The Japanese Emperor's proposed visit to South Korea is a highly sensitive issue in Japan because of the controversy surrounding the political role of the Emperor. There are those in Japan who remember Emperor Hirohito's visit to China in 1992. Because of the way that visit served as an exit strategy for a diplomatically isolated China in the aftermath of the Tiananmen Square incident, there has been opposition to any possible political role for the Emperor. For South Korea, its government should exercise extreme caution when inviting a Japanese Emperor during what will be the centennial year of Japan's annexation of Korea. The Japanese government continues to display ambiguity on the matter of the legality of the annexation despite its officially expressed remorse. Taking into account realities on both sides, this attempt to mark the Japanese Emperor's visit to South Korea as a critical juncture that initiates 'a grand reconciliation' between the two, although meaningful, may bring about a public backlash. This is particularly so when there is not enough societal

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support or understanding in South Korea and Japan.

In regard to the significant but long unsolved North Korea nuclear issue, the two parties have agreed on a consensus for the initiative which President Lee Myung-bak calls the “Grand Bargain.” Praising it as a “correct and precise remedy,” Hatoyama expressed his strong support for the initiative. Since South Korea and Japan are geopolitically the most proximate to any North Korean attack, the nuclear issue requires close policy cooperation between Seoul and Tokyo. Currently, North Korea is avoiding direct talks with South Korea and Japan, while it is open to dialogue with the United States and China. It is important, therefore, that the South Korean government – through the close cooperation with Tokyo – takes the leading role on the issue of North Korea and expands its influence in the international community. By bringing the issue of Japanese citizens abducted by North Korea into the “Grand Bargain,” Seoul is showing more consideration than before for Japan’s position. However, it is questionable whether the abduction issue can stay in the package if the four nations (South Korea, China, Japan, and the United States), or even five nations including Russia, start to coordinate on the package of the “Grand Bargain”.

There are merits to the direction and vision of an East Asian Community proposed by Hatoyama. However, the problem lies in the fact that the specific details and the process in which to realize this community are lacking. There are also many ambiguities that need to be clarified. The DPJ’s East Asian Community strategy can be viewed as Japan’s attempt to counter and check the rising superpower, China. While emphasizing values of liberal democracy and the market system on the one

hand, Japan has continuously advocated a broad East Asian Community that incorporates Australia, New Zealand, and India as a counterbalance to China. It remains to be seen whether or not the Hatoyama administration will continue this existing policy, or propose a new policy with a different concept and strategy. In order for Hatoyama’s vision of an East Asian Community to succeed, however, he first needs to find the answer to why Japan has been unable to solidify its leadership in East Asia, despite the fact that it has developed strong regional ties from early on through its trade, investment, developmental aid, and environmental capabilities. Furthermore, cooperating with South Korea’s “pragmatic diplomacy,” and China’s “harmonious diplomacy,” Hatoyama needs to present the vision, philosophy, and principles for his diplomacy of *Yuai* or fraternity so that those three East Asian nations will be able to build up a regional community based on mutual trust.

The global issues that South Korea and Japan must bilaterally manage have become diverse. From economic and financial cooperation to overcome the current global financial crisis to climate change, development and human rights, South Korea and Japan have many areas of mutual interest. In this respect, the need for cooperation between the two countries is becoming even greater. At the ROK-Japan Summit, the two leaders discussed deeply on how to cooperate with each other to make the G20 summit, which will be held in South Korea, and the APEC Summit, which will be held in Japan next year, more successful and more constructive. South Korea and Japan are two advanced countries that represent Asia. They both are at similar levels in economic development, and share norms and culture. This is exemplified in the similar

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political and economic systems.

Befitting their international prestige, it is a natural direction for both countries to hold a sense of responsibility and pursue a global diplomacy that contributes to issues that confront the global community. Through mutual cooperation, South Korea and Japan must devise a system encompassing a division of labor with regards to each issue on the global agenda. This joint effort will make a significant contribution to the international community.

2010 is a significant year for two reasons. Not only does it mark the 100th anniversary of Japan's forced colonization of Korea, but South Korea will also be hosting the G20 Summit and the South Korea-China-Japan Summit. South Korea and Japan need to treat the arrival of 2010 as an opportunity to finally overcome the antagonism that has plagued ROK-Japan relations due to past historical issues. From a future-orientated outlook, South Korea and Japan must work together to develop peace and prosperity on the Korean Peninsula and in the East Asia region, and reorganize the global order. ■