

Future of ROK-Japan Relations:
Japan's Political Swing to the Right and Korea's Counterstrategy

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Interviewee

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Since a major rise in national power in the 1990s, Japan has undertaken a number of rightist policy changes in an attempt to adjust its role as a primary actor in international society. In response, many have called for the Republic of Korea to devise counter-strategies that are both firm and cooperative within ROK-Japan relations in order to benefit Korea's needs. On May 15, the East Asia Institute (EAI) invited Young-June Park, professor at the Korea National Defense University, to assess the background of Japan's conservative swing, the prospects for the Abe administration's security policy, and feasible policy recommendations for Korea.

Q1: How can Japan's rightist political swing be explained? What is its future direction?

A1: "Japan's policy shift was derived from four main factors: the growth of Japan's national strength, the emergence of postwar politicians without any war guilt, mismanagement of Japan's war criminals, and the loss of national pride after the rise of China and Great East Japan Earthquake."

- Japan adopted the Yoshida Doctrine after 1945, which emphasized compliance with Japan's postwar peace constitution, dependence on the U.S.-Japan alliance to gain a long-term security guarantee, and economic development as its national strategy. However, as Japan's national power grew and its role as an international actor expanded after the 1990s, Japan sought to take various efforts to expand its policy beyond the traditional Yoshida Doctrine. Japan's efforts can be summarized into three general trends: liberal internationalism, normalization, and nationalism.
- First, according to liberal internationalism, Japan needs to expand its role in issue areas such as development cooperation and increase its soft power within the international community based on Japan's economic, scientific, and technological capacities. The second general trend of normalization suggests that Japan should strengthen its national security capacity in tandem with increased economic power. In a manner similar to Germany, which joined the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and has since contributed significantly to international security issues along with the U.S., Japan hopes to reform its constitution in order for the Japan Self-Defense Forces to play a more active role in UN peacekeeping operations. Lastly, nationalism seeks to establish a strong base for the national security system. Nationalism takes a revisionist view of history in order to glamorize Japanese colonialism, deny Japanese military sex slave issues, and develop nuclear programs to keep China's rise in check. The Liberal Democratic Party, along with the Koizumi, Fukuda, and Aso administrations, has supported the normalization of Japan, while the Democratic Party of Japan and the

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Hatoyama administration supported liberal internationalism. The Abe administration, on the other hand, seems to have moved beyond normalization toward extreme nationalism.

- Japan's shift to right-wing politics can be explained in four aspects. First, with rapidly growing national strength, Japan seeks to pursue a new view of the nation. Second, postwar politicians have emerged who have little sense of Japan's liabilities concerning its war crimes. Unlike older politicians who experienced the Pacific War and, thus, were more wary of Japanese nationalism or militarization, postwar politicians are sentimentally disentangled from history and even display ignorance toward the country's war record. Third, unlike Germany, Japan has failed to effectively deal with its war criminals. Not only did Emperor Shōwa, the greatest war criminal during the Pacific War, evade any responsibility for his war crimes, but most Japanese war criminals that were purged from public service in 1946 successfully launched the Liberal Democratic Party in 1955 upon their return to the political arena after the Treaty of San Francisco in 1952. Japan's mismanagement of its past war crimes has laid the foundation for a revisionist view of history to surface. Fourth, loss of national pride when China's gross domestic product surpassed that of Japan in 2010 and increasing anxiety after the Great East Japan Earthquake in 2011 have contributed toward the right-wing shift. Both events led the Japanese to demand stronger political leadership and, accordingly, to support the Abe administration's nationalist policy.
- In contrast to Japan's move toward right-wing politics, Japanese civil society continues to respect democratic values and to repent for the country's war crimes. For example, a public survey on the Abe administration's constitutional reform shows that 50 percent opposed the changes while only 30 percent supports them. This signifies that the majority of Japan's civil society maintains a moderate stance despite the nationalist inclination of the Abe administration. However, it should be noted that in the beginning the Abe administration abstained from any controversial discourse on history and instead focused on rectifying the weakness of the Japanese yen and promoting "Abenomics," ushering in a resurgence of economic prosperity that had not been seen for twenty years. This created a significant increase in public support for the Abe administration with his approval rating increasing from 59 to 72 percent. It is possible that the Abe administration has minimized moderate voices within the Japanese public by using public support gained from the success of economic policies to carry out nationalist policies, including constitutional reform.
- There are three variables that will determine the future direction of Japanese politics. First, the House of Councillors election in July 2013 might lead to political shifts in Japan. While the Abe Cabinet seeks nationalism, the Democratic Party of Japan, the New Komeito Party, and even the Liberal Democratic Party have expressed their concerns over the administration's excessive nationalist perception of history. The question of which political powers gain a greater voice after the election is likely to determine much of Japan's near future direction. The second variable lies in Japanese civil society's ability to contain the Abe administration's nationalist approach toward constitutional reform and historical problems. The last, and most important, variable is the responses of Western countries such as the U.S. The U.S. and its allies do not outright oppose Japan's constitutional reform or the strengthening of its national security system, but it is sensitive to Japanese military sex slave issues and the Pacific War, because the U.S., Great Britain, and the Netherlands fought against Japan during the Second World War. Thus, the views of political elites and opinion leaders in the Western countries toward the Abe administration's nationalist approach will considerably influence Japan's future political direction.

Q2: What are the prospects for the Abe administration's national security policy?

A2: "Domestically, Japan is expected to strengthen the groundwork for the national security system. On the international level, the Abe administration will strengthen the U.S.-Japan alliance, monitor China, and form transnational networks primarily with the Southeast Asian countries and, more specifically, with Korea, India, and Australia."

- Although the Abe administration cannot completely dismiss the voices from Japanese civil society or allies such as the U.S., it is likely that it will retain its commitment to national security as Abe promised during the election campaign. With a recent public survey revealing a high approval rating for rightist political groups such as the Liberal Democratic Party (47 percent) and the Japan Restoration Party (8 percent) in comparison to the left-leaning Democratic Party of Japan (7 percent), the Liberal Democratic Party is likely to win the House of Councillors election in July 2013. In this case, Abe is likely to prolong his political power for the next three years until the next House of Representatives election in December 2016 and the House of Councillors election in July 2016, thereby ensuring an opportunity to establish the foundation for a consistent policy.
- On a domestic level, the Abe Administration is expected to strengthen its national security system by creating a legitimate national defense force through constitutional reform, attaining collective self-defense rights in order to carry out a joint operation with the U.S., and establishing a National Security Council.
- On the international level, Japan is likely to reinforce its alliance with the U.S. primarily by sharing military bases, expanding combined and joint training, and setting up the U.S.-Japan joint operation planning guide. Second, Japan will likely push forward a containment strategy against China. The Abe administration is taking military threats posed by China seriously and maintains a firm stance against China on maritime territorial disputes such as the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands issue. Therefore, Japan will try to construct a system that checks China closely, based on strengthened U.S.-Japan relations and a more capable national security system. Third, Japan will try to take the initiative in building a network among South Korea, India, Australia, and the Southeast Asian countries. As a measure to contain China, it is necessary for Japan to build constructive networks with countries that share common values. Especially, a close network between South Korea and Japan is even more important not only to contain China but also to respond effectively to threats posed by North Korea.

Q3: What are some feasible policy recommendations for the South Korean government?

A3: "While taking a firm stance against Japan on historical and territorial disputes, South Korea needs to cooperate with Japan on economic and security issues, maintain cultural and educational exchanges, and utilize a track 2 or 1.5 approach."

- While there exist several sources of conflict, such as territorial and historical disputes between South Korea and Japan, Japan seeks to promote active cooperation with Korea in the areas of foreign policy and national security, thereby placing Korea's policy toward Japan into a dilemma.
- It is obvious that the Park Geun-hye administration currently faces considerable difficulty in policy formulation regarding Japan. It is important to first identify Korean national interests, then prioritize an overarching foreign policy goal that best serves the ultimate national interest, and devise a Japanese policy direction as a sub-strategy. South Korea's ultimate goal in its foreign policy should first be to establish conditions for peaceful reunification on the Korean peninsula by resolving the North Korean nuclear problem and inducing the North's domestic policy reform.

The second goal is to prevent conflicts among regional major powers such as China and Japan by establishing an East Asian regional cooperative environment and stimulating economic, social, and cultural exchanges within the region.

- In her presidential election campaign, Park emphasized that while taking a firm stance on historical and territorial disputes against Japan, South Korea should establish peace and cooperation in Northeast Asia to overcome the “Asia Paradox.” This general policy direction has been undertaken by previous administrations and needs to be implemented in the coming administration as well.
- Regarding historical and territorial disputes, South Korea needs to continue to be firm against Japan. On the Dokdo Island dispute, South Korea must approach the problem with tact and focus on the actual contents of the matter rather than with unnecessary salience, especially since South Korea possesses actual control of the island. In dealing with the historical dispute, the Park administration should take a multilateral approach that could gradually correct the Japanese political leadership’s inadequate perception of history. The Collective Action for Mobility Program of University Students in Asia (CAMPUS Asia), a joint project between Korea, China, and Japan, could take the initiative by laying the groundwork for establishing a constructive perception of history within Japanese civil society, including students. Moreover, there needs to be efforts made to build up scholarly capabilities to criticize and point out wrong perceptions of history from within Japan, based on international joint research projects of the Pacific War.
- There are still many issues on which South Korea needs to cooperate with Japan. On an economic level, even though Japan’s economy is said to have weakened, the South Korea-China-Japan Free Trade Agreement has revealed multiple issue areas which call for economic cooperation. The same goes for foreign policy and national security issues. Not only can the existing channels of communication between North Korea and Japan be utilized to induce the North’s denuclearization and domestic reforms, but cooperation with Japan is also necessary to strengthen joint cooperative efforts on North Korean issues among South Korea, the U.S., and Japan. Furthermore, for the sake of expanding opportunities for cultural development and education, the South Korean government needs to maintain active cultural, social, and educational exchanges at the civil society level regardless of political relations between South Korea and Japan.
- There are many difficulties for the current government that may hinder the creation of a policy that could overcome the already strained relationship between South Korea and Japan. Therefore, the most appropriate measure is to utilize a network among policy experts who have worked closely with the government (track 2) or a joint network among government officials and expert groups (track 1.5). A more realistic projection is to continue joint projects such as the Joint Research Project on a New Era of Korea-Japan Relations in order to first maintain conditions for active interaction between experts and the government and then to devise technical policies after 2015.

About the Interviewee

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Young-June Park received his Ph.D. in international politics from the University of Tokyo and is currently a professor at the Korea National Defense University.