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Korea-Japan Relations in 2015: Can Kishi and Park Chung Hee's Legacies Be Overcome?

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Retro New Year's Addresses

In his New Year's address during the 70th anniversary year of the end of the Second World War, Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzo reflected on some considerably retro thoughts. While recalling the slogan "we can do it," which was the favorite phrase of Daimatsu Hirofumi who coached the Japanesewomen's volleyball team to the gold medalvictory at the 1964 Tokyo Olympic Games, Abe expressed a resolution that "this will be a year of reform." He said that the devotion of the women's team to their country brought success to Japan, and that we should emulate Japan's honorable past that brought it to the center of the world.

Korean President Park Geun-hye, who is doing everything in her power to recover from the scandal over leaked documents, remembers the process of national modernization symbolized in the movie *Gukje Market* which involved dispatching coal miners to Germany, earning foreign currency through the Vietnam War, and saluting the flag on the street. The President's retro style New Year's address was steeped in the patriotism of her four administrative priorities and the three-year plan for economic innovation through which she hopes South Korean's revitalization would be realized.

The future these two leaders desire emulates the wishes of Kishi Nobusuke and Park Chung Hee who led their respective

countries some 50 years ago. Prime Minister Abe is openly confident about being Abe Shintaro's son, but he has also stated that he inherited his maternal grandfather Kishi Nobusuke's DNA. President Park Geun-hye has said that she learned politics from her father and that she got into politics in order to reclaim his political legacy. However, since Kishi Nobusuke and Park Chung Hee subscribed to the 19th century theory of "rich nation, strong military," if Abe Shinzo and Park Geun-hye faithfully follow their political role models then it will be very difficult to improve upon the normalized relationship which was established in 1965 through the mutual understanding of Park Chung Hee and Kishi. Both sides have exerted significant effort towards improving their chaotic relationship since 1965, and on the 50th anniversary of the normalizing relations, both sides should renew their determination to press forward but the prospect does not appear bright.

The Legacy of Kishi Nobusuke

Kishi was a bright economic bureaucrat who led the Japanese industrial policy and a prime figure in the move to invade and govern Manchuria. He was also a successful politician and a post-war Japanese Prime Minister who brought about an economic revival with rapid growth despite being a class A war criminal given the needs of the Cold War. While

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governing Manchukuo, he epitomized the strategy of enhancing national prosperity and defense by strategically launching a planned economy with heavy chemical industrialization which helped expand national defense and create economic opportunities. As Prime Minister of Japan, he carried out national strategies that mainly focused on economic growth and delegated national defense authority to the U.S. due to the limitations imposed by the peace constitution and the pressures of the Cold war. The reason he proceeded with the revision of the US-Japan security treaty despite objections from the Japanese people was that an alliance with the U.S. was a means to obtain national prosperity.

His ultimate goal was Japan's true independence which meant building a rich nation along with a strong army, the latter requiring a revision to the constitution. Kishi tried to revise Article 9 of the constitution in the name of enhancing the alliance and argued that the unconstrained use of arms was necessary for the alliance, but underneath it all he believed that true independence could be achieved only through a self-written constitution and self-reliant national defense. In this respect, rearmament toward a militarily superior country was a moral issue for Kishi.

Kishi expressed his right-wing views and felt it was Japan's mission to convince the world that Japan's aim and actions during the war were legitimate and Manchukuo was a true modern state, as well as the hope of Asia as a testing ground for national harmony and rule of virtue. The reason he made two rounds of visits to Southeast Asia for the first time as a post-war Prime Minister, establishing Asia Development Fund to provide aid, and made contacts with South Korea in earnest was to

secure economic benefits for Japan, just like Japan had built the Greater East Asia Co-Prospersity Sphere in the past. It was also to establish an anti-Communist alliance in Asia on behalf of the United States. In short, Kishi set up objectives including emphasizing economic growth, strengthening the U.S.-Japan alliance, and restoring Asian diplomacy as the middle stage of achieving true independence through the establishment of a "normal country."

Abe inherited his nationalistic passion for a strong Japan from his grandfather. On the very weekend he won the 2012 general election and regained power, he pledged that he would inherit the earlier generation's mission of "true independence" while he visited Kishi's tomb. True independence means becoming a "normal nation" that is equipped with military power and at the same time finds no particular reason to apologize. This is completely opposite from the position of Korea and China who consider sincere apologies for past wrongs as a precondition if Japan is to become a normal nation. For Abe, an important feature of national power is pride (patriotism) and pride is based on the blessings of the past.

Abe's Chance

Prime Minister Abe's time in office in 2006 is a bitter and painful memory in which he focused on many ideological and diplomatic issues claiming a desire to "extricate from the post-war regime" and lost the support of the Japanese people who were calling for economic reforms. With this lesson in mind, when Abe returned to power in 2012 he changed the existing policy order and put the will of the people first by listening to their cries for a stable welfare program and an

economic revival. Support for Abe in Japan broadened following his decisions to pursue the bold monetary easing policy dubbed “Abenomics” and begin negotiations on the Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP) trade agreement. In turn this increased support led to a resounding victory in the upper-house elections in July of 2013 after which Abe established the National Security Council and had the Act on the Protection of Specially Designated Secrets Law passed. Abe also began attending events at the Yasukuni Shrine and received approval from the Cabinet for the right to exercise collective self-defense. All of these actions have revealed Abe’s true colors which is his desire to turn Japan into a “normal nation.”

Amid these moves, the economy began to falter and alarms started sounding when the approval rating of the cabinet began declining. Prime Minister Abe anticipatively deferred an increase in the consumption tax in December of 2013 and then made the crucial decision to dissolve the National Diet and asked the people for a referendum on Abenomics. He was rewarded with a resounding victory in the snap election. With the ruling coalition securing a super majority consisting of over two-thirds of the seats and Abe having no obvious competitor within his party, it appears likely that Abe will win the party election to remain the leader of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) this September. Also, given the lack of a strong opposition party, the chances of the LDP remaining in power for its fourth consecutive year seem strong. But whether or not the goals of becoming a “normal nation” or achieving true independence are possible is another issue. In a parliamentary system, just because the prime minister possesses a majority of seats does not absolutely mean he/she will become a presidential like figure

with great power.

First, it is important to point out that the 52% voter turnout was the lowest in the post-war period. The reason that only half of the voters participated in the election is not that they are apathetic towards politics, but that they do not trust politics. According to a public opinion poll conducted by the *Asahi Shimbun*, 43% of people who did not vote said their reason for doing so was that “even if they do vote, politics will not change,” and 18% felt that “there is no party or politician they want to vote for.” Also in this poll, the reason that people who did not positively assess Abenomics (51%) and those who did not feel the results of any economic revival (75%) voted for the LDP was that they deeply distrusted the opposition parties. 72% of voters who supported the LDP answered that “the opposition party was not attractive.” Voter support for the LDP is not as strong as its overwhelming majority in the Diet suggests.

Despite gaining eleven seats in the election, the opposition Democratic Party still only has 73 seats. And with only one-fourth the number of seats as the LDP, it is very weak. After choosing Okada Katsuya as the leader of the party, the Democratic Party is pulling itself together and “returning to square one.” Given this direction, it is unlikely the Democratic Party will be able to challenge the power of the LDP for some time. Actually, it is the coalition partner of the LDP, the New Komeitoparty, that should be watched. With the destruction of the right leaning New Generation Party that would have supported Abe’s ideological projects, the position of the New Komeito party has strengthened within the coalition and he will be forced to listen more carefully to the party which established limits on the changes in interpretation of the right to collective defense.

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Abe is enjoying his super majority of over two-thirds of the seats in the Diet, but does not have concrete support. His approval rating is held hostage by the economy and opposition party development, and since the ruling coalition includes the New Komeito party which is sour on constitutional amendments, the conditions are not ripe at the moment for Abe to restructure the national security system in order to realize his long-cherished goal of becoming a "normal nation." He will take a long-term perspective and keep the economy on the road to development through Abenomics and score points with the public by strengthening the Japan-U.S. alliance. In the meantime he will continue to use the China and North Korea threats and search for the right timing to implement his plans for a strong military and a constitutional amendment.

Moving Beyond Rich Nation, Strong Army

Abe has waged a four year long political game towards becoming a "normal nation." The reason Abe did not visit the Yasukuni Shrine in 2014 was a political calculation that American criticism and an intense diplomatic battle with China are larger obstacles on the path towards becoming a "normal nation" than disappointing the conservative elements in Japanese society. For this same reason Abe will not search for short-term results during the 50th anniversary of the normalization of Korea-Japanese relations. Abe is at worst receiving demands from South Korea for a forward-looking attitude on the comfort women issue as terms for improving Korea-Japan relations, but even if these demands are not satisfied, because the potential damage to the goal of building a rich country and strong military are not that significant, the likelihood

that Abe will make an apology beyond the level of the Kono Statement is small. The current situation is different from the one faced by Abe's grandfather in which Japan had to hold hands with Korea in order to acquire strategic influence and secure markets in Asia to correspond to the needs of the U.S. during the Cold War.

South Korean President Park Geun-hye is exactly the same. She does not want much from Japan given that 2015 has been defined as the golden time for reform and there is a big push to secure economic development and national security through her four administrative priorities. The current situation in South Korea is also different than it was 50 years ago when Park Geun-hye's father made the decision to conclude the Treaty on Basic Relations between Japan and the Republic of Korea despite the shortage of national self-pride because Japan's economic aid was essential in order to build a prosperous country and powerful military. It can be said that Park Chung Hee and Kishi needed one another; the same does not apply to Park Geun-hye and Abe.

If both countries are being held captive by the notion of a prosperous country thoroughly focused on economic growth and a security concept centered around national defense, then there is not much the two countries can expect from each other, nor much that they can give to each other. But this is quite anachronistic. The concept of national power is changing in the 21st century and hard power consisting of military and economic might is no longer the sole focus. Both countries need to adjust to the reality of international politics and begin holding soft power and networking power, which includes the notions of culture, environmental protection, defining international norms, and

knowledge power, in higher regard. Also, another new trend is seeking sustainable and inclusive growth rather than growth without employment or unbalanced growth, and striving for symbiosis between individual regions and the world. In this context Japan and South Korea need to cooperate on new ideas. On one hand, there is a need for long-term solutions and an effort to separate the comfort women problem from other political issues. On the other hand, this needs to be in parallel with constructive attempts to select and resolve various issues where cooperation is needed in the post-Cold War and globalized era. If both countries cannot move past the “rich nation, strong army” ideology, then the opening of a new era in Korea-Japan relations will have to wait for the retirement of these two leaders in 2018. ■

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