

Korea-Japan Relations in the Post-Abe Era

Abe's Korea basing liberated Korea from Japan's neo-colonialism

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One of Shinzo Abe's legacies inherited by Suga Yoshihide is the Korea bashing. Korea bashing is essentially a by-product of Abe's racism; it is closely related to Abe's refusal to admit wartime crimes committed by Japan against Koreans. Korea bashing has taken the form of trade war in which Abe has paid a high price. Ironically, Abe's Korea bashing has allowed Korea to confront Japan as a sovereign nation and liberate itself from Japan's new form of colonialism realized in close collaboration with the pro-Japan Korean conservatives

It is hoped that the new prime minister of Japan, Yoshihide Suga revises Japan's traditional perception of Korea, accepts Korea as equal partner, gives up the misleading myth of the Japanese people's racial superiority and works hand in hand with Korea for the creation of peaceful, prosperous and just Asia.

Japan's Korea policy has evolved by two phases, namely, the phase of "Korea controlling" which had lasted 64 years (1948-2012), and the phase of "Korea bashing" which begun in 2012, the year when Abe Shinzo took power. (2012-).

Korea Controlling

The first phase was actually the continuation of 35-year Japanese colonial period (1910-1945). Japan could control Korea largely owing to the dedicated collaboration of Koreans who had served the Japanese interests; they were the pro-Japan intellectuals, civil servants, policemen, business men and military personnel including Park Chung-hee who was a Japanese army officer in Manchuria. They participated proactively in confiscating land and factories, capturing Korean patriots who resisted Japanese army, conscripting teen age girls for sex slavery and Korean workers for labour slavery.

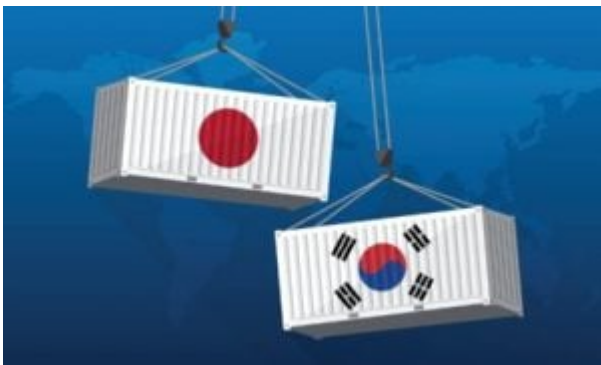
The irony of Korea's post-WWII history was the continuation of the Japanese colonialism which may be called Japan's neo-colonialism imposed on South Korea. It began in 1945 when the U.S. army ruled South Korea through a military government. Having no knowledge of Korea, the American military government hired pro-Japan Koreans who had served the Japanese colonial government. Syngman Rhee established the first Korean government in 1948 and inherited the same pro-Japan Koreans to run the government. The Korean people protested for hiring these people who were traitors as far as they were concerned. They formed a committee to single out the traitors, but the pro-Japan police destroyed the documents containing the list of traitors and pro-Japan Koreans were able to create a solid foundation to rule Korea.

In 1962, General Park Chung-hee became president after a coup d'état. He was a faithful admirer of Japan; he signed with his own blood the declaration of his dedication to the glory of Japan. He was also very close to Nobusuke Kishi, grandfather of Abe Shinzo.

In 1965, Park Chung-hee signed the Korea-Japan Basic Treaty of normalization for which Korea received \$US300 million as grants and US\$ 200 million as loans. These funds were provided as Japan's economic aid. In fact, almost the totality of this money was spent for the construction of social infrastructure, the Pohang Iron and Steel Company and the acquisition of raw materials. It is true that these funds have contributed to the take-off of the Korean economy. But, at the same time, it made Korea's economy subservient to the Japanese economy.

There was another episode which demonstrated further the subservient status of Korea. In 1963, Park Chung-hee received US\$ 66 million from Nobusuke Kishi to establish the first Japan-funded Korean political party, the Democratic Republican Party of Korea (DRPK).

Image on the right is from Money and Markets



From thereon, Japan could dictate the Korea's public policies. The economic development model was that of the Meiji era based on the collusion between large corporations and the government. Japan provided technologies; Japan invested in Korea taking advantage of cheap labour; Japan created value chain for the benefit of Japanese enterprises. Thus, Japan has played important role in the process of Korea's economic development, trade and technological development. However, in rerun, Korea was made subservient to Japan. After decades-old trade with Japan, Korea has never had trade surplus with Japan. In other words, Korea has been the object of Japan's neo-colonialism.

Japan's neo-colonialism in Korea was possible owing to the collaboration and complicity of pro-Japan Korean conservative force composed of former Korean collaborators, their descendents and a large number of Japanese who adopted Korean names. There were several tens of thousands of Japanese who stayed in Korea for good after the end of WWII. It appears that some of the founders of large corporations are Japanese and their descendents who did not return to Japan.

The pro-Japan conservative force is the linear descendents of the DRPK created by Park Chung-hee in 1963 with the money given by Nobusuke Kishi. Since then, the conservative force formed political parties of different names and ruled Korea for 58 years through variety of authoritarian regimes including police dictatorship, military dictatorship, CIA dictatorship made possible by complete control of corrupted courts and media.

The complicity between Japan and the pro-Japan conservatives has resulted in the development of a corruption community and the fruits of economic development have been concentrated in the hand of the conservative vested interest groups depriving the Korean people of their right to share the fruits of economic development.

As long as the conservative force kept power, the Korea-Japan relations have been relatively calm and the subservient status of Korea vis-a-vis Japan has been stable. It is true that there have been occasional frictions in the Korea-Japan relations, but these frictions have been solved by Korea's conceding to Japanese claims. The typical case was the inter-foreign minister agreement on the issue of the comfort women in 2015. Even President Park Geun-hye, daughter of General Park Chung-hee wanted to receive Japan's government's admission and apology for the sex slavery. But under Japan's pressure, she gave in and produced a document which any right minded Koreans could not accept.

However, when progressive Moon Jae-in took power in 2017, the Korea-Japan relations had to go through radical change, because the pro-Japan conservatives who had been subservient political partner of Japan were no longer there to support Japan's Korea controlling. Hereon, Japan's Korea policy changed from "Korea Controlling" to "Korea Bashing".

Korea Bashing

When Moon Jae-in took over the power in 2017, Abe Shinzo found himself in a rather difficult position for the simple reason that his faithful Korean supporter were out of power. Abe was concerned with two principal sources of Japan-Korea frictions: the North-South peace dialogue and the dispute related to Japan's war crimes.

To understand the Japan-Korea friction surrounding the North-South peace dialogue, it is useful to point out that, in South Korea, there are, in fact, two Koreas, the pro-Japan conservative Korea (PJK) and pro-Korea Korea (PKK). The core of PJK may be composed of about 1% of the population, that is, about fifty thousand powerful individuals. However, for last 58 years, it has been ruling Korea through dictatorship, fear politics and, at time, rigged elections.

Now, when PKK deals with Japan, it is dealing with Japan (J) plus the PJK. The PJK acts as if it were a part of Japan. This is particularly so, when the issues of the peace dialogue and the colonial history are concerned.

The alliance J-PJK resists the North-South peace dialogue with such force that one wonders why. Here is why. Abe's Japan prefers permanent tension in the Korean peninsula, because it has facilitated the electoral wins of the far-right conservative party, the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), led by Abe. Shinzo. Moreover, the peace on the Korean peninsula and the possible unification of Koreas may be a security threat for Japan.

Now, as for the pro-Japan Korea conservative, PJK, the North-South tension has been one of the best electoral allies. Besides, the tension brings a lot of bribe money deriving from the transactions of weapons. Unfortunately for PJK and Abe, the North-South peace dialogue meant the end of political and financial advantages.

There was another reason for Abe's decision to punish the progressive government of Moon Je-in. This reason was more important than the North-South peace dialogue. It was the issue of the interpretation of Japan's colonial past. Japan wanted to forget the wartime crimes of imperial Japan. The devoted pro-Japan Koreans also wanted to forget the past because they did all the dirty works for these crimes.

That is, Japan and PJK were co-offenders of these war time crimes.

The pro-Japan governments of Lee Myong-bak (2007-2012) and Park Geun-hye (2013-2017) wanted to forget the past because of their guilty feeling or the fear of revenge by the former patriots and their descendents. As for Abe, he does not want to admit Japan's war crimes, because, in his mindset, the Japanese being the Yamato-race (race of the divine emperor) could not and did not commit such crimes.

The wish of Japan and PJK to forget their war time wrong doings has resulted in the rewriting of school history text- books. In fact, both in Japan and Korea under PJK, the story of the crimes of sex slavery and other horror stories were taken out from the school history textbooks. Moreover, the Japanese invasion is reported to be motivated for the development of poor Korea.

It is interesting to add that Japan has been funding generously "scholarly works" in Korea conducted by the "New Right" pro-Japan assembly of far-right intellectuals and even some of the misled Christians in order to hide Japan's war crimes and at the same time to justify and glorify Japan's Korea invasion. Another function of the New Right movement has been that of making Koreans feel inferior to Japanese.

As it is shown above, the Japan-Korea relations had been relatively stable for the simple reason that the PJK was acting as colonized servants and doing what Japan had asked to do. This has suddenly changed. The government of Moon Jae-in took power and spoiled the whole thing for the alliance J-PJK. Korea has begun to behave as an independent country, not a country subservient to Japan. This has profoundly annoyed mighty Abe Shinzo and the whip of Korea bashing begun to hit hard the country of morning cal, which has come less calm.

Abe Shinzo decided to bash Korea because Moon Jae-in asked Abe to admit one of Japan's wrong doings in the past, namely, the labour slavery of armies of Korean workers. During WWII, Abe's grandfather, Nobusuke Kishi, conscripted 670,000 Koreans and forced them to work as slaves in Japanese mines and factories. There was no pay for the workers; they had to live under living conditions so bad that every year 25,000 workers had to be replaced because of deaths and diseases. After the war, some of the victims claimed compensation for their work and suffering. But, the Japanese government refused, because, by paying the compensation, Japan had to admit its crimes, which Abe would not accept.

The victims went to the Japanese court with no results. Then, they appealed to the Korea courts. And, on October 30, 2018, the Supreme Court of Korea ordered the Nippon Steel & Sumitomo Metal and the Mitsubishi Heavy Industries to pay the victims. These companies were the principal Japanese companies which enslaved Korean workers during WWII. It was reported that these companies were ready to pay, but Abe ordered them not to do so. This was the starting line of the trade war between the two countries.

The Japan-Korea negotiation for the payment of compensation lasted a year with no results. Then, on July 1, 2019, Abe shot the first salvo of the trade war. He restricted the exports of three chemicals – fluorinated polyimide, resists and hydrogen fluoride – essential for the production of semiconductors. The Korean producers of semiconductors and mobile phones including the Samsung Group and the LG as well as SK depended heavily on the imports of Japanese chemicals.

Abe's declaration of the trade war was undoubtedly the retaliation to the Korean Supreme Court ruling. But, Abe wanted to ignore the ruling, because, if he accepted the ruling, he

was admitting the labour slavery. Abe needed some other reasons for the justification of his trade war. He thought that he found the reason; this was provided by no other person than Suga Yoshihide, the new prime minister of Japan who was then the Chief Cabinet Secretary came up with unbelievable story; he said that the trade war was needed in order to prevent South Korea from sending some strategic technologies to North Korea. But, it turned out that it was rather Japan that had been smuggling such technologies into North Korea for money.

Seeing that Korea was insisting on honouring the Supreme Court ruling, Abe shot the second salvo of the trade war. On August 2, 2019, Abe put South Korea off the “White List” which is the list of countries which enjoy the privileged trade treatment. Korea reacted promptly. On August 12, 2019, Korea eliminated Japan from Korea’s White List. Such action of Korea would have been just impossible under the government of pro-Japan conservatives, for the conservatives think that the only way to keep power and perpetuate all sorts of privileges is to please Japan.

Abe seemed to think that Korea would give up its claims. He was right in part, for the pro-Japan conservative media led by the Chosun Ilbo, the Joong-ang Ilbo and the Dong-ah Ilbo (the Cho-Joong-Dong) were advising the progressive government of Moon Jae-in to give in. On its part, the pro-Japan conservative party, the Unified Future Party (now Party of People’s Strength) was arguing that, if Korea does not give in, the Korean economy would be ruined.

But, in the Korea-Japan trade war, Japan lost for two reasons: the proactive reaction of Korean enterprises and people’s united movement of “Boycotting of Japanese Goods!” (BJG).

At first, Korean producers of semiconductors and other telecommunication producers were much worried, but they could overcome the difficulties through the development of their own technology of the three chemicals on the one hand, and on the other, the diversification of the sources of product imports. The results are surprising. Korea has become almost self sufficient in the production of the three chemicals.

Thus, Korea became free, at last, from economic and political dependence on Japan.

Many Koreans are saying that Korea is finally liberated from Japan’s neo-colonialism.

The Japanese producers of these chemicals relied much on Samsung and other Korean companies for their exports. The exports of the chemicals has decreased so much that they were having serious problem of decreasing product sales. One solution was to relocate their plants to Korea. In fact, a number of Japanese firms moved to Korea.

Image below is from Oriental Review



Abe's trade war does not seem to hurt Korean firms. In fact, 84% of Korean firms doing business with Japanese firms say that they are not affected; 91% say that their competitiveness is not weakened.

The more serious negative impact of Abe's trade war with Korea was Korean people's spontaneous movement of BJG. The Korean conservative media, the Cho-Joong-Dong, was stating that the BJG would last only a few weeks. But it lasted more than one year, it is still going on.

By August, 2019, the sale of Japanese cars in Korea dropped by 57%; the sale of Japanese beer fell by 97%; the sale of Japanese cosmetics was cut down by more than 60%. Above all, Korean tourists who account for more than 25% of Japanese tourism fell by 90%. In some Japanese regions, Korean tourists account for as much as 80% of total tourism of the regions. Thus, the adverse impact of Abe's ill conceived trade war with Korea has imposed very high cost on Japan.

There is another cost of Abe's trade war, namely, Japan's loss of the bilateral cooperation for the exchange of confidential military information. In 2016, Korea – under the conservative government of Park Geun-hye – and Japan signed the Global Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA). By virtue of this agreement, each country should share military information.

What Japan wanted was the information on the movement of North Korea's armed forces, especially the handling of ICBM which can threaten Japan. Given its geographical situation, South Korea knows the state of North Korea's missile launching before Japan. Therefore, the GSOMIA is very precious to Japan. On the other hand, the military information provided by Japan to Korea has little usefulness. In short, the agreement is much more important to Japan than it is to Korea. But, because of Abe's trade war against Korea, on August 23, 2019 Korea said it could withdraw from GSOMIA. If this happens, Japan would lose precious military information on North Korea. Nonetheless, Korea was generous enough to renew the agreement for one more year.

To sum up, the post-WWII Korea-Japan relations have evolved so far from Korea-controlling to Korea-bashing.

But the post-Abe Korea-Japan relations should be one of mutual respect and mutual cooperation. The pro-Japan (PJK) conservative force in Korea is still there but it is not strong enough to exert any significant influences on the bilateral relations between the country of morning calm and the country of rising sun.

With Suga, it may be possible to open a new era of Korea-Japan relations of peace and cooperation. But, such relations require some preconditions.

First, Suga should change Japan's perception of Korea. Up to now, as indicated above, Japan has treated Korea subservient inferior country. Japan should accept it as a sovereign country and treat it as equal. Korea has become a global middle power; it is 12th global economic power; it is one of the leading military powers in Asia, it is highly respected for its contribution to global trade and security; it is envied for its success in the antivirus war.

Above all, owing to the leadership of Moon Jae-in, Korea has become one of the few people-friendly democracies.

Second, Suga should refrain from trying to intervene in Korea's internal policy and international relations through the pro-Japan conservatives. It is true that the PJK has been uncontested force; it has been effective collaborator for the continuation of Japan's neo-colonialism. But, in all probability, it will have difficulty in helping Japan. It is advisable for Japan to keep distance from the PJK. In this way, the Korea-Japan relations can be mutually beneficial.

Third, Suga should accept the Kono statement. In August 1993, Kono Yohei who was the Chief Cabinet Secretary of Japan made a statement in which he explicitly admitted and apologised for the sex slavery against Korean teen-age girls. Abe does not recognize the Kono statement and the truth of the crime is omitted in the school textbooks. It is advisable to make school history textbooks faithful to the history. This allows a fresh start of the Korea-Japan relations. Some people argue that one can separate the issue of war-time crimes and economic relations. Such argument may look attractive, but unless the issue of the war-time crimes are cleared up, it is difficult to develop bilateral relations based on trust.

Fourth, Japan should not hinder the North-South peace dialogue. It is about the time to stop relying on the North-South tension for electoral wins and financial gains.

Fifth, Suga should recognize the heavy price Japan had to pay for the ill conceived trade war with Korea. It is hoped that Japan and Korea declare the end of the trade war and promote mutually beneficial trade.

To close, we are all behind the new Prime Minister, Suga Yoshihide for his task of restoring peaceful, stable, prosperous and especially racism-free Japan.

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