

▶ Chapter 8

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## Japan's Perspective on the Korean Peninsula

### —— Historical Relations and Future Prospects

Kazuo Ogura

Former Japanese Ambassador to the Republic of Korea

Senior Advisor, Japan Foundation

[Key Points]

- When thinking about Japan's Korean Peninsula policy from a long-term perspective that also takes into account the North-South unification issue, it is important to provide an overview of the relationship between Japan and Korea in the context of the history between them, which stretches back more than 1,500 years, and to use this to explore lessons and challenges.
- Another approach to mapping out the medium- to long-term prospects is to draw up a vision for establishing what might be termed a borderless economic and political community in the East Asia of the future, and to consider the course of action for achieving this. It is also necessary to be aware of such issues as shared values, dealing with past history, and disputes with third party countries.
- Considered in the comparatively short term, the question of how to assess and tackle the threat or risk from North Korea is a major problem. Nuclear-related risks, military risks, and political risks can be envisaged; in the case of political risks, one cannot ignore such risks as a worst-case scenario involving the supreme leader.

## Japan's Perspective on the Korean Peninsula

Historical Relations	Future Issues and Prospects
• A borderless neighbor	• Creating a vision for a “borderless” community
• A partner with shared values	• Exchanges aimed at sharing values
• Korea as “other”	• Transition from “enemy” to “other”
• Korea as the seed of political strife	• Initiatives aimed at separation from domestic politics
• Korea overshadowed by the past	• Dealing with the shadows of the past
• The site of disputes with third party countries	• Responses to the China factor

Source: Compiled by the author

### 1. Introduction

What did the Korean Peninsula mean to Japan?

Today, the answer to that question could in most cases be generally summed up as “a place that was a Japanese colony, which gained independence when Japan lost the war, then, in a conflict partly stoked by the East-West Cold War, split into two parts, north and south; whereas Japan established diplomatic relations and has various exchanges with the Republic of Korea, which controls the southern half, it is in a state of conflict – both military and political – with the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, which controls the part of the peninsula north of the military demarcation line.”

However, one has to ask whether it is really acceptable to talk about present-day policy on the Korean Peninsula without looking at why Korea (for the sake of expedience, in this chapter, the term “Korea,” without directional modifiers, indicates the whole of the Korean Peninsula) became a Japanese colony, what the state of relations between Korea and Japan was prior to Japan’s modernization (it is often described as a period of cultural exchange, as typified by the Joseon missions to Japan of the Tokugawa period, but why had this relationship come to exist?), and, furthermore, what was behind Toyotomi Hideyoshi’s plans to invade Korea.

When thinking about Japan’s Korean policy and examining it from a long-term viewpoint that also takes into account the North-South unification issue, it would seem necessary to provide an overview of the relationship between Japan and Korea in the context of the history between them, which

stretches back more than 1,500 years, and to use this as a starting point for exploring lessons and challenges. This chapter re-examines past relations between Japan and Korea from this perspective, looking at what Korea historically meant to Japan, and seeks to identify pointers that could serve as lessons for dealing with modern-day challenges.

## **2. Main Perspectives of This Chapter**

Firstly, when taking an historical perspective, we must first take note that Korea was Japan's close neighbor and had special significance in political, diplomatic, and economic terms.

Flows of people and goods are more frequent between neighboring countries than between countries and areas located further apart, so it is common for such interaction to take a different form from the more usual kinds of exchange across borders, as symbolized by what is termed "border trade."

In such exchanges, nationality and national borders do not necessarily have great significance. To put it another way, it would be fair to say that a state of almost borderless relations existed between Japan and Korea, and could exist again. That is to say, for Japan, Korea was first and foremost a neighbor and partner without borders.

Secondly, to treat someone as a neighbor, one has to share fundamental ideas and values with that person, otherwise it is hard to forge a good relationship. In other words, Korea was (or should be) a partner with whom Japan shared values.

However, this leads into the third dimension. That is to say, a neighbor tends to become a mirror used to ascertain what one is oneself, so for each party, the neighbor becomes the "other" by which it defines itself. In this sense, Korea was Japan's "other."

All of this has a fourth meaning, in political terms. Specifically, there is a tendency for Korea to become the seed of domestic political problems for Japan. Korea is what one might describe as "the seed of political strife."

This fourth point relates to both Japanese and Korean history. That is to say, Japan and Korea have a long history of interaction and, whether they like it or not, they have come to be greatly influenced by the shadows of the past; for that reason alone, it is fair to say that Korean issues tend to become political problems within Japan. To put it another way, Korea is a place where the shadows of the past have historically lingered; this could be described as the fifth dimension.

On the other hand, if we try to retrace the history of relations between Japan and Korea, we can see that their relationship has been greatly influenced not only by both countries' policies and plans, but also by third parties. To put it another way, for Japan, Korea has been the venue for power struggles between third parties. That is the context of the sixth dimension.

### **3. Historical Relations between Japan and the Korean Peninsula**

#### **3.1 A Borderless Neighbor**

Although the backgrounds and reasons differ, the Yamato period, the Baekje and Silla periods, the era of the *wokou* pirates in the early Muromachi period, and the colonial period were all periods in which the flow of refugees, merchants, and/or migrants between the two countries was such that one could describe them as borderless neighbors. The interaction between Japan and Korea during these periods was of a quite different nature from country-to-country relations.

Today, now that Japan and Korea are modern states, this kind of borderless relationship would, at first glance, appear to be impossible. However, in fact, as a result of globalization, exchanges and relationships of all kinds that are entirely separate from formal bilateral relations exist between Japan and South Korea even today. In fields such as culture, sport, investment, trade, and tourism, relationships completely divorced from the political or diplomatic concepts of Japan and Korea have been formed. Under normal circumstances, such relationships could exist not only between Japan and South Korea, but also between Japan and North Korea; indeed, until the 1990s, such relationships did exist between progressive or socialist groups in Japan and relevant individuals in North Korea.

Currently, due in part to international sanctions, people-to-people exchanges between Japan and North Korea are extremely limited, and even people-to-people exchanges with South Korea are frequently suspended or postponed for political or diplomatic reasons. Such exchanges, particularly those in the fields of culture and sport, actually help to alleviate political risk in the long term, in the sense that they correct misunderstandings between and misconceptions about each other,

(Looking at the effects of globalization from a different angle, North Korea has not opened its doors to the international community a great deal, attempting to minimize the impact of such actions, as far as possible. One point on which attention will focus in future will be whether North Korea maintains its fairly closed-doors approach while at the same time cultivating personnel with a global mindset, thereby endeavoring to increase the objectivity of assessments of risk arising from friction between North Korea and the international community. For example, the size of the segment of the North Korean population with international knowledge and experience, as well as the depth thereof, (together with the issue of nuclear development by countries such as Iran, Israel, India, and Pakistan.)

will have a strong bearing on any evaluation of risks posed to the international community by the North's nuclear development .

#### **3.2 A Partner with Shared Values**

The sharing of Buddhist thought between the Baekje kingdom and Japan, and the sharing of Confucian thought during the Edo period could be cited as examples of periods when Japan and Korea shared fundamental values. The sharing of such values helps to deter military tension and the use of force by promoting mutual understanding and respect. Conversely, one factor that could be said to have contributed to the tense relationship between the Silla kingdom and Japan in ancient times was the difference in their views on how to respond to Chinese civilization. In early modern times, the friction between Yi dynasty Korea and Meiji Japan could also be attributed to differences in Japanese and Korean perspectives on how to respond to sinocentrism and, consequently, how to respond to the values of early modern Western civilization.

Today, given that the issues of the past also come into play, opinions probably differ on the importance that Japan and South Korea attach to the shared values of freedom, human rights, and democracy in their relationship, but a broader, deeper discussion of this point is essential to the stability of Japanese-South Korean relations, as well as being crucial in addressing North Korea. For example, the extent to which Japan can establish shared values with North Korea on the subject of humanitarianism will be a key point in dealing with specific topics.

### **3.3 Korea as “Other”**

Because it was a neighbor, Korea was the “other” against which Japan compared itself and became a kind of mirror when Japan was establishing its own identity. In the distant past, for Japan under the Yamato dynasty, Korea played the role of “other” as Japan was forming “national” unity. When, in the Meiji period, Yi dynasty Korea initially rebuffed Japan’s attempts to establish a modern diplomatic relationship, Korea became a “good example of what not to do” for Meiji Japan, in the sense that Korea had turned its back on modernization based on the absorption of Western civilization.

Today, Japan is the “other” for South Korea, in a sense. Japan, as a country still influenced by the past has become fodder for establishing South Korea’s identity, as the kernel that fortifies and consolidates the nation that is the Republic of Korea.

In this regard, North Korea’s hostility towards Japan appears to be more “independent” from its “nationalism.” In addition, North Korean hostility toward Japan also encompasses hostility toward the USA – theoretically, at least – whereas anti-Japanese sentiment in South Korea does not necessarily have an anti-American component. This point must be borne fully in mind when negotiating the normalization of diplomatic relations between Japan and North Korea, for example.

As well as being a neighbor, Korea continued to be “other,” becoming a kind of “marginal figure;” consequently, it became the target of discrimination and prejudice from Japan (the inverse of the way in which pre-early modern Korea despised “the land of the dwarfs,” as it used to refer to Japan). In Japanese-South Korean relations today, we must ask ourselves how symptoms bordering on the

resurgence of this kind of phenomenon will affect Japan-Korea relations and, also how North Korea will be perceived by Japan in the event that relations between the two countries improve and exchanges between them deepen, given that North Korea will, until that point, have been treated by Japan entirely as “other,” rather than as a neighbor.

### **3.4 Korea as the Seed of Political Strife**

From Fujiwara no Nakamaro in the 8th century to Saigo Takamori in the 19th, any time the question of invading Korea has arisen, it has become the seed of political strife within Japan. Moreover, major political changes in Korea – including the Baekje kingdom’s call for military assistance from Japan, the reform movement of Kim Ok-gyun in the Meiji period, and the links between Kim Dae-jung’s democratic movement while in opposition and Japan’s popular democratic movement – have had echoes that reverberated in Japanese politics. Traces of the extent and nature of these reverberations can still be found today.

At one time, the concept of the “threat from the north” became the seed of conflict in Japanese domestic politics, triggering an endless round of debate over its rights and wrongs; going forward, as we address relations between Japan and South Korea, and Japan and North Korea, we must give full consideration to the extent to and manner in which policy issues concerning Korea are influenced by Japanese domestic political considerations and the form that this takes.

### **3.5 Korea Overshadowed by the Past**

Today, the shadows of the past still loom over Japan and South Korea in relation to Japan’s actions during the colonial period; from the perspective of Korea as a whole, these also include the shadows of Toyotomi Hideyoshi’s invasion of Korea, while from Japan’s perspective, there is the question of how to address the fact that Goryeo forces invaded Japan alongside the forces of the Mongol Yuan dynasty.

The diplomacy conducted through the Joseon missions to Japan during the Edo period was made possible by the fact that, after Hideyoshi’s invasion of Korea, the Tokugawa clan overthrew the Toyotomi clan and took power; thus, the shadows of the past have a significant influence here as well.

More recently, one of the key factors that facilitated a very close relationship between the administrations of Kim Dae-jung and Keizo Obuchi was the fact that the Kim Dae-jung administration signified a clean break from the military dictatorship of the past, while the Liberal Democratic Party under Obuchi also distanced itself from the traditional LDP mode by including Komeito and progressive trends witnessed since the Murayama Cabinet.

Thinking about the future relationship between North Korea and Japan, addressing the past is going to be the biggest issue, alongside the issues of abductions and nuclear development.

### **3.6 The Site of Disputes with Third Party Countries**

Historically speaking, moves by China and other third party countries focused on the Korean Peninsula have significantly influenced the relationship between Korea and Japan. When there was the split between China's northern and southern dynasties, or when Chinese authority and influence over Korea was too overwhelming, or when Russia's far eastern expansion was witnessed, or when the Asian strategy of the USA was prominent, Korea became an arena for international power struggles.

Even now, it would be fair to say that this state of affairs remains basically unchanged.

Consequently, Japan's strategy for the future of the Korean Peninsula will likely be coordinated with hypotheses or forecasts of the extent and nature of third country involvement in Korea.

Currently, looking at the situation through the prism of military alliances, Korea is potentially the site of antagonism and conflict between the USA and China, due to the Chinese-North Korean alliance on the one hand, and the US-South Korean alliance on the other. As such, it would be fair to say that Japan faces the question of how it will engage with this state of affairs in future.

## **4. Korea's Future and Japan as Seen from its Historical Prospects**

If we use this review of the long history between Japan and Korea as the starting point for examining the relationship between them in the medium to long term, the following prospects present themselves.

### **4.1 Korea and Japan amid a "Borderless" Community**

Rather than regarding the unification of North and South Korea and the relationship between Japan and Korea as bilateral relationships, mapping out a vision for the future of East Asia as a whole and examining how their mutual relationships should be positioned within that vision offers the opportunity to depict the prospects for establishing a borderless economic and political community in East Asia in the future and to consider the process required to achieve this.

In this process, first of all, Japan and South Korea will likely need to build a solid economic union, whether via an economic partnership agreement (EPA) or free trade agreement (FTA). This could probably be carried out regardless of the state of relations between North and South Korea.

However, the question of which procedure to prioritize next (or which to undertake concurrently) – (1) pursuing radically closer economic relations between North and South Korea; (2) pursuing closer relations between Japan and North Korea; and /or (3) pursuing a deeper trilateral economic partnership between Japan, South Korea, and China – is one that should be assessed carefully.

In this process, multinational corporations could conceivably move forward with economic

partnership in East Asia from a standpoint that differs from that of governments, with legal or political institutionalization following later.

#### **4.2 Shared Values and Japanese-Korean Relations**

If the sharing of common values leaves something to be desired even in Japanese-South Korean relations, it is unrealistic to consider measures aimed at establishing shared values between the whole of Korea and Japan. Based on this perspective, the first thing for which we have to aim is for Japan and South Korea to establish shared values on global issues such as the environment, anti-terrorism measures, and measures against infectious disease, and shore up the foundations for taking joint action in this process. We must attach greater importance to the role that non-governmental organizations (NGOs), non-profit organizations (NPOs), and interaction between such bodies can play in this.

During this period, North Korea and Japan must spare no effort in seeking to establish a shared basic belief in the significance of exchanges in such fields as humanitarian issues, culture, and sport by actively engaging in such exchanges. Moreover, Japan and China too should lay the foundations for establishing a shared approach to exchange in such fields, entirely separate from political and diplomatic affairs.

#### **4.3 Transition from “Enemy” to “Other”**

Currently, Japan and North Korea could be said to have a kind of antagonistic relationship; if it is desirable to alleviate tensions by transforming this into a relationship in which they regard each other as merely “other” (and that is something that itself requires quite a lot of debate, but let us take this as our assumption for the moment), then we must start by asking whether or not we can think of North Korea not as a threat, but as a strategic piece on the chessboard. For example, there is the question of how to evaluate its role as a kind of buffer zone against China’s growing influence.

Moreover, we could explore the potential for achieving stability on the Korean Peninsula as a whole by internationally guaranteeing the status quo of the north-south division, while leaving the banner of north-south unification in place as a long-term possibility. In this connection, we could reappraise the significance of strengthening exchange with North Korea within international organizations.

#### **4.4 Separation from Domestic Politics**

Korean issues cannot be completely separated from Japan’s internal political strife; nevertheless, to minimize the likelihood of internal political strife making diplomacy more complex, the crucial question will be how to deal with the fact that, for example, cooperation between anti-government/anti-establishment elements in the counterpart country and groups in Japan goes

beyond the involvement of civic groups and assumes a strongly party political hue. One way of looking at this is to adhere to the policy that the activities of such anti-establishment groups must follow international rules. One may recall in this respect that for a long time after the Second World War, unofficial – yet still quite political – channels existed in parallel with official channels of interaction between Korea and Japan, and China and Japan and they played a certain role in bridging the gap of communication between the official channels

#### **4.5 Dealing with the Shadows of the Past**

Efforts to deal with the shadows of the past between North Korea and Japan will have to differ from efforts to address the relationship with South Korea in at least two respects. Firstly, there is the issue of US involvement. North Korea fought against the USA in the Korean War, so the positioning of the Japan-US Alliance is likely to be a major problem.

Secondly, the question of China cannot be ignored. This is because victory against Japan in the war is one of the grounds for the founding of both North Korea and China, as well as for the legitimacy of their administrations.

#### **4.6 The Issue of Disputes with Third Party Countries**

Looking at the situation from an historical perspective, it would be no exaggeration to say that the Korean Peninsula was the flashpoint for war between Japan and China. To put it another way, one could say that Korea was the venue for a struggle for supremacy between Japan and China.

Going forward, whether the economic dependence on China of not only North Korea, but also South Korea increases or is maintained at its already high level, there can be no doubt that their economic dependence will deepen further. Whether South Korea's economic dependence on China should be prevented from developing into political dependence is a delicate issue. As long as the relationship between North Korea and China remains fundamentally friendly and courteous, closer relations between South Korea and China could become a good catalyst for China to guarantee the stability of the Korean Peninsula and if so, this is probably not something for Japan to worry about, in general. The problem would be Japan's response in the event that China adopted a strategy of manipulating North and South Korea, exerting political and economic influence over both countries and, through this, seeking to achieve Korean unification or maintain the north-south division in a form that suited China's own purposes.

Considering this possibility, it is vital for Japan to maintain channels for political dialogue and exchange with both North and South Korea.