

**Leif-Eric Easley, "Managing Generational Change in Korea-Japan Relations: Bilateral Frictions should not Impede Trilateral Efforts," *JoongAng Daily* (with *International Herald Tribune*), February 27, 2007, page 7. Reprinted in *OMNI* as "How to Afford Six Party Progress? Don't Let Generational Frictions Prevent Trilateral Cooperation," February 28, 2007.**

Six-party talks have produced an initial action plan, outlining the first phase for ending North Korea's nuclear weapons programs. It remains to be seen whether Pyongyang will keep its end of the bargain through the multiple phases required for nuclear dismantlement. The immediate question is who will pay the price tag for North Korean cooperation? So far, the answer is "not Japan."

Why is Japan unwilling to contribute aid for the new six-party agreement? The straightforward answer is the unresolved abductions of Japanese citizens by North Korea. This contentious issue must be addressed by Pyongyang, and Japanese leaders may exhibit measured flexibility after Japan's summer elections. However, securing Tokyo's participation in the sharing of financial burden calls for mitigating Japan's strategic anxiety about the Korean Peninsula. Here, Seoul may be more capable than Pyongyang.

Tensions in South Korea-Japan relations, owing to flare-ups over historical responsibility, Dokdo/Takashima, and diverging views on North Korea, have unfortunate consequences. Seoul has been reluctant to engage in U.S.-Japan-South Korea policy coordination and Tokyo has been hesitant about South Korea-Japan-China consultations. Both trilateral groupings are essential for bringing North Korea into the economic fold and maintaining security in Northeast Asia.

Despite their disagreements, leaders of South Korea and Japan face similar challenges: on the one hand, they are concerned with the changing politics of domestic legitimacy; on the other, they must address new uncertainties related to globalization and the external security environment.

Princeton Professor Gilbert Rozman and Korea University Professor Shin-wha Lee have shown how Korean and Japanese leaders have used national identity politics to gain popular support. They also document how identity issues involve complex interactions between domestic and international politics. Populism and historical revisionism at home tend to detract from strategic goals and relations abroad.

To complicate matters further, identity issues cannot be turned on and off like a switch. Identity change occurs under near constant, often chaotic contestation. Eventually, a new consensus may emerge when leaders come to power with worldviews based on formative experiences different from those of their predecessors. Such generational change provides insight into the bilateral frictions between South Korea and Japan.

In South Korea, members the "386" or "demonstration generation" share formative experiences from Korean democratization. In their view, they fought against the previous generation of leadership that had collaborated with Japanese imperialists and later ruled with backing from the United States. Once the "demonstration generation" came into government, they attacked traditional power centers considered responsible for inequalities in Korean society. They steered South Korea toward North Korea and China and away from Japan and the U.S. They established truth committees to expose colonial collaborators. They question the terms of normalization with Japan and are hypersensitive to issues of Korean sovereignty.

In Japan, members of the "apology fatigue generation" differ from predecessors who broke with wartime Japan to focus on economic development. The current generation lived through the Japanese economic miracle and grew tired of apologizing for past wars. They have difficulty understanding Korean objections to the controversial Yasukuni Shrine. They support patriotic education in Japanese schools and deemphasize Japan's historical atrocities. They envision a more internationally engaged and assertive Japan and have upgraded Japan's Defense Agency into a full ministry.

South Korea's "demonstration generation" and Japan's "apology fatigue generation" have made positive contributions to their respective societies, but if they are successful in redefining Korean and Japanese national identities, relations in Northeast Asia will suffer. The next wave of political actors, however, may have different ideas.

The Internet can be a bastion for nationalism, but the "internet generations" coming of age in Korea and Japan share key formative experiences. Facing a rising China, they are deeply concerned with economic competitiveness and regional security. They have confidence for more equal partnerships with the United States. They are less emotional and more pragmatic about North Korea's external behavior and internal stability. Relating to the world via cyberspace and popular culture, rather than through the tanks of their grandfathers or factories of their fathers, future leaders in Korea and Japan may work more closely together.

The generations currently in power in South Korea and Japan could improve relations. They could implement more balanced teaching of history and have students read the other country's media. They could cooperate in the waters between them on development of resources and protection of shipping lanes. Seoul could reassure Tokyo it is committed to countering the North Korean nuclear and ballistic missile programs and Tokyo could reassure Seoul it is supportive of Korean reunification.

Perhaps this is too much to expect from the present leadership. But at the very least, Seoul and Tokyo should not allow nationalist politicization of history to inhibit trilateral groupings from dealing with North Korea and regional integration.

Closer U.S.-Japan-ROK policy coordination is a way to demand concrete steps toward North Korean denuclearization. Consultation among South Korea, Japan and China, as the "+3" of ASEAN+3, is key for regional reconciliation and economic cooperation.

By refusing to let generational conflict get in the way of working with Washington and Beijing, Seoul and Tokyo can make the six-party process more feasible. Hopefully the present generation in North Korea will decide to give up its nuclear weapons, and future leaders in South Korea and Japan will actively engage rather than isolate each other.

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