

**Leif-Eric Easley, "Steps Toward the Future Instead of the Past: Improving Relations between Japan and South Korea," *JoongAng Daily* (with *International Herald Tribune*), September 8, 2006, page 7.**

What do North Korea's missile tests and a visit to a Shinto shrine have in common? They both occurred on a national independence day. But more importantly, these events demonstrate the serious need to improve relations between Japan and South Korea.

North Korea test fired seven missiles on what was the Fourth of July in the United States. Pyongyang was likely looking to provoke Washington into taking new diplomatic initiatives outside the stalled Six-Party Talks. Instead, North Korea's actions were met with unanimous condemnation and sanctions from the United Nations Security Council. Despite the apparent international unity in responding to North Korea, Seoul's official statements after the missile tests directed more criticism at Tokyo than Pyongyang.

The administration of South Korean President Roh Myoo-hyun labeled Japan's draft resolution at the UN an overreaction. Officials in Seoul drew attention to a hypothetical discussion among leaders in Tokyo about whether Japan has the right under its pacifist constitution to strike North Korean missile installments if an attack on Japan is imminent. The Roh administration suggested that Tokyo is looking for excuses to strengthen the Japanese military, and thus promised to closely monitor the situation, knowing well about "Japan's aggressive tendencies" and its "history of using self-defense as a pretext for invasion."

This harsh rhetoric for Japan contrasted sharply with Seoul's lack of words for Pyongyang. South Korea avoided official condemnation of the North, despite how Pyongyang embarrassed the Roh engagement policy by deciding to test missiles instead of inter-Korean rail links. South Korea's unconditional engagement policy may now be changing, since continued lack of reciprocity from the North has contributed to historically low public support for Mr. Roh's Uri Party. But rather than directly address North Korea's military aggressiveness, human rights abuses and uncooperative and illegal practices, the Roh administration finds it more politically advantageous to turn its sights on Japan.

South Korean leaders playing the anti-Japan card is nothing new, but doing so is particularly irresponsible when a unified South Korea-Japan-United States strategy, with cooperation from China, is urgently needed to deal with North Korea. Unfortunately, the controversy over Japan's Yasukuni Shrine is only feeding the flames of anti-Japanese nationalism in South Korea.

Japanese Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro made his most recent visit to Yasukuni Shrine on August 15th, the day of Japan's surrender in World War II, celebrated as Independence Day in South Korea. Yasukuni has intricate ties to Japan's military past and the museum next door whitewashes Japan's colonial

aggressions. The symbolism and revisionist history of Yasukuni rile the passions of neighboring populations that suffered from Japanese imperialism. Mr. Koizumi's decision to visit the shrine on this particular day, just weeks before he steps down as Prime Minister, is a statement that Japanese should honor their war dead regardless of international protest. Koizumi's refusal to bend with foreign pressure has frustrated Korean and Chinese leaders to the point where they avoid meeting with their Japanese counterparts, seriously impeding regional cooperation in East Asia.

Diplomatic band-aids might be applied to the Japan-South Korea relationship in the coming weeks. Both sides might consider the upcoming change in Japanese leadership as a face-saving opportunity to resume high level dialogue. But what can be done to remove the historical irritants in this important relationship and strengthen it for the long-term?

First, South Korea should fully recognize the value of its hard-earned democracy and economic prosperity and base government legitimacy on these instead of ethnic nationalism and a regional history of suffering and resentment. South Korea, a successful country by numerous global measures, no longer needs a victim's national narrative. A rivalry with Japan over semiconductors or on the soccer field is healthy, but overemphasis on a tragic past is not.

Early 20th century Japan was a country that built a military for conquest and domination. This military engaged in unspeakable atrocities across East Asia. The Japanese government propagandized its people and forced them to the verge of starvation. Such history cannot and should not be forgotten. But it should be recognized that for 60 years Japan has been a peaceful and generous nation, focused militarily on self-defense and regional stability while providing the impetus and foreign aid for regional economic development. Japan today looks nothing like it did in the 1930s; it poses no threat of invasion to its neighbors and is a responsible and contributing member of the international community.

There is, however, a country in the region with an aggressive military posture that commits atrocities against innocent people. That country is North Korea. South Korea must recognize that its engagement policy to fundamentally transform North Korea would benefit from Japan's active support. Advancing peace and prosperity on the Korean Peninsula is well worth Seoul putting its history with Tokyo into the past.

For its part, Japan needs to demonstrate it deserves South Korea's trust. To do so, Tokyo can avoid raising historical antagonisms, clarify the role of its military forces, and resolve territorial disputes. This is a tall order because none of these issues have quick fixes and pushing progress on any one might strain Japan's relations with neighbors before improving them. Nonetheless, all three need to be addressed for the sake of deeper cooperation and regional stability.

On historical antagonisms, Japan might decide to build an alternative war memorial to Yasukuni Shrine, suitable for visits by the Japanese Emperor and Prime Minister, as well as foreign dignitaries. On the role of the Self-Defense Forces, Japan might amend Article 9 of its constitution to normalize its military and contributions to international security, while continuing to forswear offensive military forces. On territorial disputes, Tokyo could pursue a treaty approving of Seoul's administration of

Dokdo/Takashima provided that Japan-South Korea joint ventures are established with equal shares in natural resource development, fishing and other economic activity in currently disputed waters.

Taking these steps requires significant will on the part of Japanese and Korean leaders. The next Japanese prime minister and South Korean president must resolve to build trust between their nations and overcome domestic opposition to write an end to the history problem. They should certainly be encouraged and supported by Washington. Looking to keep both countries as strong allies in East Asia, the United States has every interest in Japan and South Korea taking steps toward the future instead of the past.

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