

Japan's Strategic Interests on the Korea Peninsula and Resolving the History Friction

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Abstract. Seoul and Tokyo then can reach to an agreement on a broader strategic issue as well based on the restored confidence. Tokyo then can take a more softer stance in dealing with the thorny modern history issue, trusting that South Korea is not determined to side with China in the latter's expansionist ambition. Resolution of the Korea-China ancient history friction will bring about a spiral of benign repercussions.

Keywords: history friction, win-win solution

1 Introduction

Japan was not a major player for a dozen centuries in making of the regional order before their Meiji Restoration in 1868. During the pre-medieval period, though, Japan was not a self-secluded country. Exiled Baekche generals were commissioned as commanders of Japan's national defense against a possible allied intrusion of Tang (China) and Shilla, the pro-China Korean kingdom. Toyotomi Hideyoshi's invasion of Chosun (Korea) in 1592 was not successful as Ming China intervened to help out its neighboring tributary state. In 1895 and 1905, Japan won historic victories over Qing Manchu and Russia in turn, elevating its status as a new Asian great power. Japan's rare but violent interaction with continental powers always ended in disastrous failures or in unprecedented shock. Historically the Korean peninsula each time worked as a bridge to project power into Japan for Chinese or nomadic conquerors. For Japan the ideal situation across the strait was a friendly regime balancing the continental powers or at least having a neutral (meaning not hostile to Japan) Korean government

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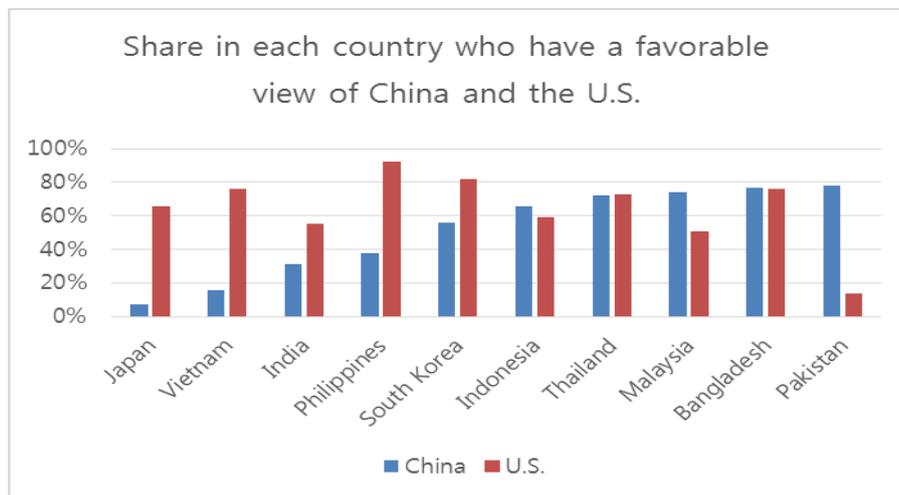
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2 The preferred outcomes of the prolonged inter-Korean standoff for Japan

Tokyo's foreign policy goals toward the peninsula have remained consistent: maintaining stability and preventing another Korean war to occur. Slower post-war recovery of the South compared to the North in the 1950s alarmed the LDP (Liberal Democratic Party) leaders, which led to the historic 1965 normalization with Seoul and the subsequent massive economic aid for the South. South Korea took after Japan's pre-war development model, namely state-directed export-oriented economy. Globally inter-connected and appraised Seoul reveals a clear contrast with the failing state run by reckless and anachronistic Communists in Pyongyang

Until Seoul comes up with a reliable blueprint for Tokyo that a unified Korea serves or does not hurt Japan's national interest, Tokyo would not willingly support it. Complaints on the part of Tokyo mostly come from that its quasi-ally South Korea is siding with Chinese in the history offensive. Some Japanese right-wingers reveal their disappointment saying they are confused whether South Korea is a friend or a foe. Seoul has been working hard to economically isolate North Korea by forging a united front involving China.⁴ China's rise definitely complicates Tokyo's strategic calculation on the future of unified Korea.

2.1 Figures



But share of Koreans having favorable view of the U.S. is larger than those Koreans having favorable view of China. Share of pro-US Koreans is bigger than that

⁴ Hideshi Takesada, "Chosen hanto ga chukoko ni nomikomareru hi [When the Korean peninsula is overrun by China]," *Voice*, no. 438, (2014 June), pp. 78-87.

in Japan. Korea's alliance with the US itself will keep anchoring Seoul's diplomatic maneuvering between China and the U.S. inside the free world.

Tokyo does not need to worry about a unified Korea tilting toward Beijing. In this regard, a unified Korea will be blessings for Japan than to be poison.

3 Tokyo-Pyongyang contacts: a lingering game changer option for Japan?

North Korea's nuclear arsenal is the existential hurdle before the two. Japan needs to prepare for the visible and larger game in its unwanted clash with China over Taiwan and disputed islands in the East and South China Sea. Tokyo-Pyongyang contacts, even if happens, therefore are not necessarily a prelude to Japan's two Koreas policy. Tokyo can envision a larger benefit in having a unified Korea, should some conditions be met

4 Unified Korea in the benefit calculus of Japan

In Japan's past history, a unified Korea did not pose serious security threat. It was not about a unified Korea, but an emergence of hostile Korea-China alliance that worried Japanese leaders. Seoul would not abandon its alliance with Washington, Japan's benefit table in the event of the Korean unification will include the following

First, fear of Pyongyang's nuclear proliferation and stockpiling of chemical and biological weapons will disappear.

Second, the peace on the peninsula will help Japan better deal with the territorial dispute with China.

Finally, unified, non-nuclear Korea will bring more wealth to Japan through greater trade and investment opportunities with safer Korea.

5 Soured Seoul-Tokyo ties amid the trumpeting history awareness calls

There have been ups and downs in the bilateral relations between Korea and Japan. Koreans now prefer recovery of the soured bilateral relations with Japan. PM Abe does not seem to care about international opinion and repeated warning calls from its closest ally, the U.S. As a realist politician, power and national interest come before moral and international friendship. Seoul needs a more creative and flexible approach should it were to resolve the worsening ties

6 A win-win-win solution for all parties in Northeast Asia

Here presented a detour proposal. President Park has held that history is to soul what territory is to a body. The phrase is taken from a book authored by an influential scholar-premier during the latter part of Koryeo dynasty. Lee Ahm allegedly wrote "Book of Danduns (*Dangun Segi*)", in which he described Ancient Joseon kingdom as a powerful balancer in Asia, comparable to the UK in the post-Wesphalian Europe. The representative Korean literature, "Romances of Three Kingdoms" recounted that Ancient Chosun was established in BCE 2333 as a sovereign state. It was when Sumerian or Egyptian kingdoms prevailed in the West. Historians' credit on Premier Lee Ahm's book however is sharply divided in Korea. Mainstream historians avoid quoting *Dangun Segi* as an authentic writing of Koryeo kingdom period because it conflicts with their views inheriting Japanese interpretation. During the occupation, Japanese government-funded historians concluded that ancient Chosun was a mere myth. Japanese Government-General ordered their historians to reduce length and scale of Korean ancient history and describe Koreans dependent on foreign powers from genesis. It was said to cultivate historical defeatism among Korean identity and thus effectively dissuade anti-Japanese sentiment.

Yonsei University, being protected by American missionaries, during that time was a haven for those Korean scholars studying Korean identity. Korean language and original history was taught and preserved under watchful surveillance of Japanese police. When Korea was liberated by the US intervention, there were two sharply different historian groups in Seoul: One was those educated by Japanese government-historians and the other was those who refused to join the colonial socialization process and kept original Korean identity. The leader of the latter, Jeong Inbo, was unfortunately was kidnapped by the North Korean army during the Korean War and sent to the North. After the Korean War, the students of Japanese colonial education ironically dominated major university's history education. *Dangun segi* which detailed powerful dominance of Ancient Chosun over Chinese kingdoms therefore was treated untrustworthy in Seoul. On the other hand, civil society has been beefing up criticism on South Korea's mainstream historians, labeling them as traitors and followers of colonial legacy.

A problem the Korean National Assembly has recognized is that South Korean textbooks exclude the minority arguments. Minority historians have long claimed that their views must be included in the textbook so that the Korean government can effectively dispute the Chinese expansionist claim ironically quoting Korean textbooks. Distorted Chinese historical irredentism will surface when Seoul contend with Beijing over legal status of post-crisis pro-China regime near the Yalu river. Critics urges that at least Korean textbooks should not justify Chinese claims that Chinese colony predated Koguryo. They warn that otherwise the History Compilation Committee will be accused of violating its own constitution that Korea is the only legal entity over whole peninsula. An US-based Korean historian, Hongbem Rhee, President Obama's personal advisor educated at the University of Pennsylvania and Harvard, recently concurred to the minority view, facing a fierce objection from mainstream Korean historians. The reason why President Park deliberately quoted the controversial book is not clearly known to the public. It could be interpreted as a mild and diplomatic criticism on the part of the president over the different historical

revisionist moves taking place in China and Japan. President Park inherited his father's understanding that history and identity are key non-materialistic elements in national cohesion and morale. It was late President Park who glorified General Yi Sunshin and built memorials for national heroes and even the Tonghak peasant forces which fought Japanese in 1895. Daughter President Park's sister has also recently mentioned those controversial history books and the Dean Rhee, implying that Korea's original identity is threatened by some Korean historians themselves.

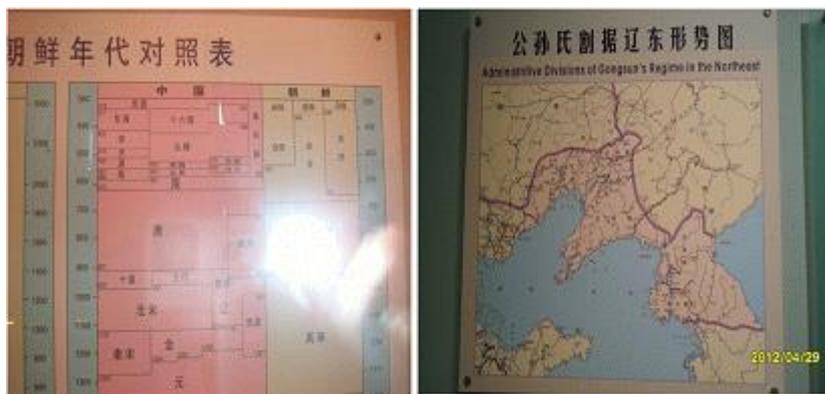


Fig. 1. The Current Status of China's Northeast History Project

Notably, Beijing startled Koreans all of sudden in 2003 that Koguryo (BCE 57-AD 668) belonged China, departing Chinese traditional view of Korean history. To many strategists in Seoul, China's absurd claims over ancient Korean kingdoms are much graver threat to the Korean identity than Dokdo issue. Especially, Chinese argument that it possessed colonies inside North Korea between BC 108 and AD 313 is perceived very threatening by Korean military strategists. Critics view it as a precursor of future territorial irredentism (fabricated) justifying its occupation of North Korea in the event of latter's political turmoil. It is rumored in town that China's PLA has an invasion plan called "Chik Plan", meaning that North Korea is a baby chicken to be protected whatsoever, even by force if necessary, under a patronage of China (meaning mother chicken). Considering the geostrategic value of the buffer state, North Korea, Beijing is likely to intervene should ROK-US allied forces come close to Pyongyang.

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