

## AJ Forum 5

# **Relationship of Neighboring Countries within Globalization: Focus on Japan-Korea Relations**

Date: 17<sup>th</sup> June 2006

Venue: Setagaya Campus Library AV Hall

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International relations in East Asia have changed greatly since the 1990s. Let me take South Korea as an example. The key to understanding South Korea, which came into being after the south-north division of the Korean Peninsula, is that it is a product of the Cold War. For South Korea, located in the front line of the Cold War, international relationships became considerably distorted.

This is revealed by the data on each country's share in South Korea's total trade. In the 1960s, Japan's share alone accounted for 40 percent of South Korea's entire trade volume, and the combined share of Japan and the US exceeded 70 percent for a period of time. South Korea, part of a divided nation, was internationally isolated until the 1980s. During this period, South Korea found itself in a distorted situation where it could not build a close relationship with any nations other than Japan and the US. It can be said that the Cold War forced the South Korean people to bear this international isolation. However, at the time the Koreans were resigned to this. They were aware that they could not survive in the international community without making alliances, and thus sought to achieve sustainable development by maintaining a dependent and close relationship with Japan and the US.

However, the end of the Cold War even allowed South Korea to establish a better relationship with Russia and China, with whom South Korea had lacked diplomatic relations, resulting in greatly increased choices for South Korea internationally. It was particularly important for South Korea to be able to build a diplomatic relationship with its neighboring country China. In addition, South Korea was able to achieve economic growth and make its presence felt in international society. Eventually, it developed economic, political, and social relations with many nations in the world.

These changes have reduced the importance of Japan and the US for South Korea. Today, Korean trade with the US and Japan has fallen to 50 percent or less compared with the levels of the 1960s and 1970s. Although this shift in the share of trade is often attributed to the rise of China, in fact China's share is at most only half of the previous maximum share enjoyed by Japan or the US. That is to say, the reduction in Japan's share of Korean trade is not because of the rise of China, but rather because of an increase in the choices available to South Korea.

In other words, globalization has increased South Korea's international choices, leading to a reduction in the importance of Japan and the US, which were vital to South Korea in the past. The

same is true with the movement of people. Despite an increase in the number of overseas travelers that has come with economic growth, the percentage of Korean overseas travelers who visit Japan or the U.S. has decreased as a result of the wide range of available destinations.

Recently, it has often been said that the interaction between Japan and South Korea has contributed to their closer relationship; however the current condition cannot be explained that easily. Both Japan and South Korea have already passed their peak as regards economic growth, and are now in a period of stable growth. With increasing globalization, the importance of Japan has been relatively reduced even in East Asia. In terms of strategic relationships, Japan and South Korea formed a triangular alliance with the US during the Cold War. When the focus of the international community was on the conflict between the two superpowers, namely the US and the Soviet Union, Japan and South Korea could discuss security issues from the same standpoint. However, now the two countries have adopted a different stance on security, as is apparent over the issue of North Korea's nuclear weapons.

The same is true of social exchanges. Japan was once a very important partner for South Korea and vice versa. Now that globalization has been promoted, they each constitute just one of the choices for each country as regards international exchange.

Under these conditions, a different problem has arisen. That is a deterioration of faith in political parties, politicians, and even nations. As a result, politics has to rely on the personal popularity of the president or prime minister of each country. Ultimately, politics has become uncertain, and politicians sometimes try to win public support through nationalistic remarks. For both countries, the other's presence has diminished in the global society, yielding a situation where they are inclined to be critical of each other. If this diminished presence causes some people to feel disdain for the other nation and degrade the relationship, it cannot be said to be a good situation.

Some may argue that this worsened condition will be improved one day when the younger generation gains power. However, an important factor here is the influence on politics of the falling birthrate and increasing population of elderly people. Politically, the sluggish population growth of the generation that will assume future control means that their influence in politics will not increase. Specifically, today's young Japanese will not be able to have as much political power or significance in society as the baby boomer generation has, simply because of its smaller numbers. Meanwhile, South Korea is facing a more serious situation with a lower birth rate than Japan. The 386 generation, who are now in their 40s, is greater in terms of numbers than any other generation, which means it will maintain political power and influence for a long time. The Korean way of thinking will probably become stable with respect to politics and bilateral relations for good or bad. In this sense, we should not expect too much from the younger generation.

Actually, a similar situation can be seen not only in Japan and South Korea but also throughout East Asia. Globalization has not served to reinforce the links among Asian countries but has rather weakened them. Nevertheless, there is something we can do for the region since we are neighboring countries. I think it is now time to consider what we can do for each other. Currently being a neighboring country does not have as much significance as before because of the expanding

international relations. I think that we must consider how we can maintain a friendly relationship, and realize how important it is to maintain international relationships in a composed manner. The coexistence of Asia countries may be difficult if we neglect such structural matters.