

December 18, 2014

# Collapse of Big-Power Self-Confidence in Japan's Diplomacy

By KATO Akira

Ever since the Meiji Restoration in 1868, the Japanese people had long maintained awareness of its status as the only big power in Asia. However, as we enter the 2010s, such awareness became a thing of the past. Not only the Chinese, of course, but also almost all the Japanese think that China has now become a big power or a leader of Asia, superseding Japan. Besides, even the Koreans think that they have exceeded Japan in such areas as IT technology and globalization. In China and South Korea, a hard-won sense of triumph over Japan seems to be quite prevalent among peoples. Almost all the Japanese including myself, either consciously or not, have maintained awareness that Japan is a big power or a leader of Asia. That was the very reason why the Japanese could afford psychologically to regard China and South Korea as disadvantaged relative to Japan, and to show compassion for them as seen in the case of the comfort women issue.

It is no coincidence that the issue of comfort women surfaced dramatically with a rush during Japan's bubble era. Back in those days, a sense of national greatness among the Japanese was at its pinnacle. It was then sincerely believed that the U.S. and Japan would sooner or later spawn a bigemonic system, an era of "Amerippon." Meanwhile, China still remained a developing country, and South Korea, who had recovered its national strength barely enough to host the Olympic Games, was still no comparison with Japan in economic performance. Such economic predominance over China and South Korea afforded psychological empowerment and a sense of superiority to Japan, generating a self-justifying cause among those claiming to be "conscientious Japanese" to show compassion for the comfort women. Also, it is no coincidence that the Asahi Shimbun retracted its false reports on the comfort women issue this year. Asahi's editorial policy that was harsh toward the Japanese government but overly committed to China and South Korea was only premised on nothing but Japan's sense of national greatness and superiority.

Now that such premise is no longer plausible, compassion for the disadvantaged which Asahi had long embodied has also been lost. Besides, many Japanese could no longer afford to take a benevolent attitude toward criticism from China and South Korea. The Asahi bashing is an epitome

of Japan's irritation derived from its removal from the status as a big power. Likewise, those gathering in "Zaitokukai," a citizen group advocating exclusionist nationalism in Japan, would keep up vociferous hate speech precisely because they are frustrated by the feeling that Japanese are more disadvantaged and inferior even to the disadvantaged Chinese and South Korean. Japan is no longer a big power or a leader of Asia. The question of how to accept this status quo has no easy answer. The Abe administration and LDP (the Liberal Democratic Party of Japan) are beefing up efforts to strengthen its economic and military power with an aim to regain a "strong Japan."

But, there is no way whatsoever for Japan to overwhelm China in terms of hard power such as economy and military. So-called the pacifist, on the other hand, insist that Article 9 of Japan's Constitution be awarded a Nobel Peace Prize, hoping that Japan could barely feel superior by way of exercising soft power as a peace-loving country. But strangely enough, no one could logically demonstrate why Article 9 merits a Nobel Peace Prize. Anybody across the political spectrum finds it difficult to accept the fact that Japan has become second in Asia. The current position of Japan is not a "middle power" during the Cold War era as advocated by Professor SOEYA Yoshihide of Keio University. During that era, Japan was a middle power from the global viewpoint, but was the only big power in Asia. However, Japan has now slipped down from status as a big power in Asia as well. The Japanese, who have lost confidence in themselves, are facing a crucial moment whether to advance a closed-door policy going against, for example, nuclear power generation or participation in TPP, or again to move up the development ladder through an open-door policy such as re-starting nuclear power generation and speeding up participation in TPP.

**(This is an English translation of the article written by Mr. KATO Akira, Professor of J. F. Oberlin University, which originally appeared on the e-forum "Hyakka-Somei" of CEAC on November 18, 2014.)**