

January 8, 2024

Are there signs of improvement in the relationship between Japan and South Korea?

By OKAMOTO Hiroaki

I suspect that many people, when asked if they detect any signs of improvement in the relationship between Japan and South Korea, would probably answer that there are absolutely no such signs. I, for one, am fully convinced that Japan and South Korea will never establish a relationship similar to that between the U.S. and Japan. However, I believe that relatively innocuous interactions, such as trade and personal exchanges, as well as business transactions, can be strengthened depending on the attitude of both sides. I will discuss why the relationship between Japan and South Korea was poor and what the status of the relationship is today. The other day, I was invited to a Christmas party hosted by a South Korean business group. This was the second time that I attended the group's Christmas party. At least 200 people were invited both time, but I was the only Japanese guest there. It all started in the spring of last year when a certain Korean-Canadian person introduced me to the group, one of the largest organizations in Canada affiliated with South Korea. I have a personal policy of trying to maintain contact with people I meet, whether or not I feel like it. If something must be done, and nobody is eager to do it, interested in doing it, or nobody is called upon to do it, it is my responsibility to step up to the task.

The consul general of South Korea was also present. Therefore, I greeted him as usual. The consul remembered me and thanked me for my efforts to maintain private-sector exchanges between the two countries. I was able to exchange views with the head of a semi-private South Korean trade research institute, with whom I shared the table. He told me that the relationship between Japan and South Korea, from the viewpoint of South Korea, had been improving significantly. Many people were kind enough to come up to me and speak to me in Japanese. This was partly because I was introduced at the event as a Japanese business organization representative. For this reason, I did not feel out of place even though I was the only Japanese person there. In order to express my appreciation, I invited three people to the Christmas party sponsored by the nonprofit organization of which I am the chairman. I paid for their expenses out of my own pocket, as I did previous year. If we develop channels of negotiation and sources of information in this way, we will have more options when dealing with a situation that really matters. I am eager to do all this because I must get along well with my South Korean counterpart (negotiating partner), a self-proclaimed "civilian ambassador" of South Korea. In fact, the two of us share a history. When a controversy arose over a "comfort women" statue near Vancouver, I was on the front lines fighting on the Japanese side while he was the leader on the

South Korean side. In other words, we were out-and-out adversaries. At the time, the Japanese side won a total victory, but dealing with the aftermath was extremely unpleasant. One of the challenges was to improve the relationship between the two sides, which hit rock bottom.

It was around that time that a parliamentarian in British Columbia, a Taiwanese-Canadian individual, intervened and played a mediating role. Our relationship improved so rapidly as a result that we now contact each other very frequently and even interact on a personal level. I suspect that one of the reasons why Japan and South Korea have a poor relationship is because the two countries are very much alike. We cling to the past and the image we have of each other. It is difficult to alter an image that has been created, but the situation can change considerably in about two generations. The image of South Korea held by Japanese people is influenced, to a greater or lesser degree, by the economic and social disparities between the two countries. However, economic disparities have narrowed since the beginning of this century, and some economic indicators in South Korea surpass even those of Japan. Consequently, Japanese people's attitude toward South Korea, which was somewhat condescending—even though the two countries are so much alike, may be changing. The two countries are now becoming "countries of equivalent standing" in the true sense of the term. I stated at the outset that the relationship between Japan and South Korea would never be like the Japan-U.S. relationship. In the postwar era, the Japan-U.S. relationship began like a relationship between younger and older brothers. Given the difference in strength between the two countries, comparable to that between an elementary school child and a *yokozuna* sumo wrestler, Japan and the U.S. have built a close relationship similar to that between Nobita and Gian. (In the cartoon *Doraemon*, Gian is a bully who always browbeats Nobita.) I believe the relationship between Japan and South Korea is similar to that between younger and older brothers. However, South Korea and North Korea are also siblings, with North Korea being the older brother. Therefore, South Korea has been seeking to overcome its sense of inferiority even to this day. South Korea can stand up to Japan but has difficulty standing up to the U.S. or China.

The relationship between Japan and South Korea has many twists and turns, with the two countries taking three steps forward and two steps back. For example, the Seoul High Court on November 23, 2023 recognized the liability of the Japanese government in a lawsuit filed by former comfort women. According to "sovereign immunity," a concept of international law, a country has no jurisdiction when the defendant is another country or one of its subordinate organizations. However, as the basis of its ruling, the High Court relied on the growing number of exceptions to sovereign immunity. This is a case in which the conclusion has already been determined beforehand. The ruling surprised even the plaintiffs, who did not expect to win. It provoked the Japanese government so much that Foreign Minister Yoko Kamikawa lodged a strong protest against her counterpart in South Korea.

This incident revealed that many malcontents, such as this high court judge, cannot make impartial decisions. This means that the relationship between Japan and South Korea will not be smooth, and the political standing of President Yoon Suk Yeol may also be affected by the outcome of 2024 general election in South Korea. Nevertheless, from what I see in Canada, the sentiment of South Korean people toward Japan is favorable, at least for now. It is crucial that the relationship between Japan and South Korea is oriented toward the future, as the late Prime Minister Shinzo Abe stated so well. Notably, many Japanese women are becoming fans of South Korea; they are citizen diplomats in that sense. This should be respected. If a problem arises between the two countries in the future, it is the responsibility of the parties concerned to solve it. Mature countries should avoid inciting the public through the media.

(This is an English translation of the article written by OKAMOTO Hiroaki, Overseas Business Proprietor, which originally appeared on the e-forum "Hyakka-Somei (Hundred Ducks in Full Voice)" of CEAC on November 28, 2023.)