

The Hard Case of Japan-Korea Reconciliation:  
Global Structural Changes, Perception Gaps in New Norms and Institutions,  
and A Recipe for Public Diplomacy

Yuki ASABA

Among the East Asian cases, Japan-Korea reconciliation is hard to achieve. Even after the diplomatic accord in 2015 on resolving the comfort women issue “finally and irreversibly” at the governmental level, both peoples still have negative perceptions of each other.

The reason for this is mainly attributed to the lack of a genuine apology and due compensation on the Japanese side. However, Japan’s efforts on history issue are, fairly speaking, no less lukewarm than other former colonial powers and invaders in a foreign war: the US towards the Philippines and ROK towards Vietnam. How does Korea (government/people/NGOs) reconcile its own past in the case of Lai Đại Hàn with historical claims against Japan in terms of women’s human rights in conflict?

My claim is that the discord between Japan and Korea lies not in the domestic level (alternation of party in power, generational/ideological changes), but in the perception gaps of global structural changes. On one hand, Japan perceives a rising China as a challenge against the US-led post-war liberal international order based on rules and norms in which Japan has for decades enjoyed peace and prosperity. With the US-China hegemonic rivalry (if not war) inevitable, Japan decides to side with the US. On the other hand, Korea sees the new era of G-2 coming and promising for its geopolitical position of a “middle” power. Although the alliance with the US is the cornerstone of its defense against the North, Korea makes much account of China not only economically but strategically. In short, it is not so much history as different future prospects that make Japan and Korea apart.

Nevertheless, we need not be pessimistic about the possibilities of Japan-Korea cooperation. Properly targeted at, PR strategy does work significantly. My ongoing joint research shows that the right in Japan and the left in Korea is negative towards Japan-Korea security cooperation, but that they become positive once they just watch the 38-second movie on the 38 parallel, an outlet of the US Pacific command’s public diplomacy. Not a “moving” goalpost but “moving” pictures/movies are desperately needed for the proper management of history issue in Japan-Korea overall relations.