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## Japan-South Korea Relations: Current Status and Issues

By MURATA Koji

Japan's diplomacy vis-à-vis its Asian neighbors has been in dire straits for the last few years. Japan-China relationship is the most strained. Japan-South Korea relationship is also fraught with difficulties, but it is not as serious as Japan-China relations. Where does this difference stem from?

First of all, China is a nuclear power and clearly a great power as evidenced by its permanent membership in the U.N. Security Council. It is also a growing power, which makes many Japanese apprehensive. But South Korea is not the kind of power which worries Japan because, to put it in a nutshell, South Korea does not have the veto power to prevent Japan from becoming a permanent member of the U.N. Security Council. Japan is not so afraid of South Korea's existence—conversely, perhaps that is what irritates South Korea.

Secondly, Japan and South Korea share the same values of freedom and market economy; Japan and China do not share the same values. It is true that some serious unresolved issues exist between Japan and South Korea—the history textbook controversy, the territorial issue of Takeshima or Tokdo, as it is called in South Korea, and the Yasukuni shrine visit, to name a few. But even these issues are not expected to undermine the relationship established through civil society exchange and mutual economic dependence nurtured ever since diplomatic relations were normalized between the two countries forty years ago. In spite of the exchange of heated words between political leaders of Japan and South Korea at times, South Korea is steadily opening up to Japanese culture while the amazing “Korean boom” continues unabated in Japan. Having said that, there are still many points the two countries need to consider carefully.

Firstly, nationalism and populism are expanding in both Japan and South Korea. These are trends over and above the current colorful political leaders of the two countries, President Roh Moo-hyun and Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi.

Secondly, US-South Korea relations is showing signs of uneasiness. Even if there are tensions in Japan-South Korea relations, they won't become serious if US-Japan relations and US-South Korea relations are stable. However, if a rift appears and deepens in US-Korea alliance with regard to their policies towards North Korea or the restructuring of the US military bases in

South Korea, it will have a ripple effect on Japan-South Korea relations.

How should we deal with these issues?

There are of course no quick remedies.

The most important thing is for our two countries, or our two peoples, to continue multi-level exchanges in various fields and continually confirm the fact that we share the same fundamental values, both politically and economically. In contemplating the international relations of the 21st century, what is as important as, or perhaps more important than, geopolitical interests and a sense of ethnic solidarity is sharing the same sense of values.

Another important thing is for Japan and South Korea bilaterally, and US, Japan and South Korea trilaterally, to proceed with policy dialogues at government level and semi-government level. The days when diplomacy could be left to diplomats and experts are long gone. This is especially true between democratic nations. However, popular opinion can at times become overly excited, and there are always some politicians who pander to such public opinion. So carrying on level-headed dialogue at working level, apart from public opinion and politics, is an important safety valve for democratic diplomacy.

**(This is the text of an article by Prof. MURATA Koji, Professor in the Department of Political Science at Doshisha University, which was originally posted in the JITOW ("Japan In Their Own Words") column of the English-Speaking Union of Japan on July 12, 2006.)**