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JAPAN-SOUTH KOREA RELATIONS IN 2012: THE NEED TO STRENGTHEN THE FOUNDATIONS

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South Korean politics has been called a history of discontinuity. This is due to the fact that the country has carried out drastic changes with new presidents spurning the political forces of their predecessors. Even though the democratization of the 1980s consolidated the practice of peaceful regime change by way of direct elections of presidents to a five-year term, a dramatic style of policy shift has continued in South Korea.

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In recent years, the country has been witnessing a move away from the progressive policy of pursuing North-South reconciliation advocated by the leftist administrations of Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun, and toward a pro-growth strategy under the moderate-conservative administration of Lee Myung-bak.

What then will be the defining theme – or what South Koreans call “the spirit of the times (*Zeitgeist*)” – in the presidential election scheduled for next year? The October election for mayor of Seoul provides a clue. With its two candidates respectively backed by the most promising candidates from the ruling and opposition parties in the presidential election, the mayoral race pretty much looked like a proxy for the presidential election. The winner was Park Wonsoon, a leftist civic leader. He was originally a joint opposition candidate, but ran the race as an independent after refusing to join the largest opposition party, the Democratic Party.

The slogan that captured people’s minds in the Seoul race, which also served as a vote of confidence for President Lee, was “a breakaway from existing parties.” Lee has been highly regarded internationally for his strong leadership, as exercised in strengthening the alliance with the United States, consistently applying a hardline policy toward North Korea and engaging in active economic diplomacy. However, he has been harshly criticized at home for pursuing pro-conglomerate policies, failing to address widening social disparities and favoring cronyism and nepotism. Demanding a real sense of national wealth rather than further development of the state, South Koreans are growing frustrated.

Korean political experts say education and welfare are the *Zeitgeist* of the next presidential election; voters in their 50s and younger are concerned with education, while those in their 60s and older are concerned with welfare. Growth is no longer a myth but a tangible need – a sign of South Korean society having entered a mature phase and become individualistic. South Koreans, tired of the existing political forces, are demanding drastic reform. What would appeal to voters in the presidential election is neither North Korean policy nor a growth strategy, but a feasible manifest. Such a Korean spirit of the times will inevitably make the next administration lean toward the left.

However, the 18th South Korean president to be elected next year is destined to play a role distinct from his/her predecessors as he/she will face a (lineal) transfer

of power in dictatorial North Korea, with which the South shares an ethnic soul. The transfer will become visible when the country celebrates in 2012 the 100th anniversary of the birth of national founder Kim Il Sung. This will make the situation on the Korean Peninsula unstable for a certain period of time. Japan needs to further strengthen relations with South Korea with contingencies on the peninsula in mind.

Japan and South Korea have wasted precious time under the Lee administration. With his basically pro-Japan stance, Lee has made clear his intention to handle the history problem, a pending bilateral issue, with “quiet diplomacy.” Japan, however, missed an opportunity to deepen strategic dialogue with South Korea due to dysfunctional diplomacy under the Liberal Democratic Party and diplomatic confusion under the Democratic Party of Japan, which took power from the LDP. The sole achievement Japan can boast of in the past four years is the agreement that Prime Minister Noda recently reached at his meeting with Lee to expand the size of the bilateral currency swap agreement to \$70 billion.

Japan should make efforts to strengthen the foundation of its bilateral relationship with South Korea while Lee is still president. Japan has lacked diplomatic clout in dealing with South Korea, simply keeping busy reacting to events. Such a defensive stance provides a way for other countries to play a diplomatic card against us. The history issue is a good case in point. It is necessary to turn passive diplomacy proactive in order to build up the foundations. The safest area to start with would be economic relations. Another important issue that the two countries need to discuss in detail is policy toward China. How far should we coordinate in countering Chinese intervention in the event of a contingency on the Korean Peninsula? Political dialogue is required to address such issues.

In 2015, Japan and South Korea will mark the 50th anniversary of the normalization of their diplomatic relations. With little likelihood that the values of liberal democracy and market economy will be reversed, the Korean history of discontinuity seems ready to produce dynamic moves toward unification. How will Japan deal with this neighbor? Such is the challenge posed by the power transitions on the Korean Peninsula in 2012. 

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