

The Need for Peace Diplomacy in South Korea

Written by Mi-yeon Hur

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MI-YEON HUR, SEP 13 2019

South Korea's Moon Jae-in government, which once indulged itself with a fast-tracked détente with North Korea, has recently faced a set of diplomatic challenges. The first usual suspect is North Korea's Kim Jong-un government. Since the third U.S.-North Korea nuclear summit ended on June 30, 2019, with no concrete deal, a series of missiles has been launched by Pyongyang, embarrassing the Moon government and jeopardizing future nuclear talks. The Moon government has also been involved in a diplomatic dispute with Moscow and Beijing over their military airplanes' intrusion into the Korea Air Defense Identification Zone (KADIZ), in which Moscow and Beijing denied any airspace violations and argued that the air defense identification zone cannot be claimed by any country.

The most escalating dispute of all time has been with Japan. By scrubbing South Korea from a list of trusted trade partners, the so called "whitelist," Japan plunged relations between the two countries to the lowest point in decades. Japan cited unspecified national security concerns as the reason for this and suggested that South Korea "mishandled" sensitive materials. At an emergency Cabinet meeting, President Moon argued that the restrictions carried "the clear intention to attack and hurt our economy by impeding our future economic growth." President Moon expressed his government's determination to mitigate the crisis and use this situation as an opportunity to make a new economic leap forward.

As various media sources have reported, the trade dispute between Seoul and Tokyo began with the South Korean Supreme Court's decision regarding Korean victims of forced labor during the Japanese colonial occupation. The Supreme Court ruled that these victims of forced labor had the right to seek compensation from Japanese companies, while the Abe government asserted that all outstanding issues concerning Japan's colonial rule had been completely settled by a 1965 treaty that provided South Korea with \$500 million in aid.

The Abe government's export restrictions on South Korea, which allegedly have political intention, infuriated South Koreans. Such anger has prompted ordinary South Korean citizens to voluntarily boycott Japanese products, such as clothing, electronics, cosmetics, beer, and tourism. The "No Japan" campaign, which started as individual action, has now gained ground as a nationwide movement. Major retailers have vowed not to give guidance on Japanese products to customers; the delivery workers' union has participated in the boycott by refusing to deliver all products of popular Japanese fashion brand Uniqlo; and some gas stations and auto service centers have formed an alliance to refuse to fill up or provide service to Japanese cars.

At first, the Moon Jae-in government urged the Abe government to retract the trade restrictions and called for sincere consultations in order to resolve the dispute diplomatically. However, as soon as the Abe government officially approved removing South Korea from the "whitelist," President Moon began to harden his rhetoric toward Japan. He defined Tokyo's measure as a "selfish, destructive act that will cripple the global supply chain and wreak havoc on the global economy." President Moon warned that Japan would have to face the consequences of the trade war it started, declaring that South Korea would "never again lose to Japan."

Recalling the painful colonial past of humiliation, President Moon's speech at the emergency Cabinet meeting was full of nationalist and patriotic sentiments. Although there was an urgent need for President Moon to shore up domestic support and pressure the Japanese government, his use of war discourse fell short of his government's vision for peace on the Korean peninsula and beyond. His remark of never losing to Japan again – in other words,

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winning Japan – confined the trade dispute to only a bilateral confrontation, when the Japanese government's actions against Seoul were unilateral measures that could devalue “the global trade order” that has underpinned global growth and prosperity for decades. The Moon Jae-in government should have found imaginative ways to address the trade dispute, rather than evoking old nationalism and patriotic sentiments that could have destructive effects among its own people and those in the neighboring country, Japan.

In terms of the diplomatic disputes with Japan or others, the Moon government may gain some clue from the ASEAN summit held this month in Thailand. After South Korean Foreign Minister Kang Kyung-wha and her Japanese counterpart, Taro Kono, traded barbs at the ASEAN Plus Three Foreign Ministers' meeting, Singapore Foreign Minister Vivian Balakrishnan took issue with Japan's removal of South Korea from the “whitelist” and said that “Japan should *add* countries to its whitelist, not take them off, as part of building trust and interdependence for the region's co-prosperity.” Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi, voiced his agreement with Mr. Balakrishnan's comment and was quoted as saying that it was regrettable that such issues had arisen when the ASEAN member states were “all one family.”

It will be almost impossible to integrate different countries into a single regional unit, when states are intrinsically geared toward a struggle for power, but state leaders who represent citizens of their respective states, still have responsibility to pursue lasting peace and common prosperity not just to fulfill their moral duty but more importantly to protect their national interests. By envisioning a regional community in which all parties involved share the values of sustainable peace and partnership, the Moon government should consciously move beyond admonishing others and find a way to open a new landscape to resolve and transform conflicts. The Moon government, earnestly and persistently striving to bring peace to its own country by formally ending the Korean War and signing a peace treaty, should also pursue diplomacy for peace when settling international issues.

Peace diplomacy refers to all forms of communications, negotiations, and mediation efforts in international relations to not only find immediate solutions to competing interests and agendas but also create and nurture attitudes, structures, and institutions, namely the outcome of “positive peace,” which sustains just, peaceful, and inclusive societies. To apply this principle, the Moon government needs to ask certain questions: “How can we overcome export curbs and promote Seoul-Tokyo reconciliation at the same time?” “How can we prevent foreign aircrafts from entering KADIZ and, at the same time, create a regional security mechanism that will reduce tensions in airspace?” While recognizing different aspects of complicated situations, the Moon government should identify its goals more clearly and develop integrative approaches to the conflicts it faces.

Enacting peace diplomacy will not be easy on the international stage, where realism prevails. Some people would say that peace diplomacy is naïve; some would advise that it cannot be applied to the Northeast Asian region, where neighbors have a sense of historical grievance and mutual suspicion that have never truly been addressed. Indeed, the Moon government has a good understanding of this harsh reality as well as an intense desire to build “Northeast Asian energy and economic communities” that can expand into a “multilateral security community in the region.” Furthermore, it has already shown its potential to become a peace-builder in the region, making a breakthrough in inter-Korean relations by utilizing the Pyongchang Winter Olympics. For the three remaining years, the Moon Jae-in government is encouraged to seek out “positive peace” by laying the groundwork to resolve structural causes of conflicts in the region through active diplomacy for peace. The Moon Jae-in government, then, will become a true winner on the international scene.

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