

**Panel:** Never Been Worse? Korea-Japan Relations

**Date/Time:** Wednesday, April 29, 2015 / 13:30-14:45

**Moderator:** Martin Fackler, Tokyo Bureau Chief of the New York Times

**Speakers:** Alexis Dudden, University of Connecticut

Nishino Junya, Keio University

Park Cheol Hee, Seoul National University

Scott Snyder, Council on Foreign Relations

Plenary Session 4, titled “Never Been Worse? Korea-Japan Relations” explored whether the recent deterioration of relations between Korea and Japan was truly the ‘worst’ relations have ever been in history and the reasons that contributed towards decline.

Mr. Fackler, the Tokyo Bureau Chief of *The New York Times*, began by exploring the notion of whether relations have ever ‘been worse’. He points out that they are indeed the worst they have been in his career; there have been no summit meetings in recent years and mutual negative sentiments are remarkable considering the shared ground in cultural identities and strategic concerns of the two nations.

Professor Dudden of the University of Connecticut drew attention to the fact that 2015 is being framed as the seventieth year of South Korea’s liberation from Japanese colonial rule rather than the fiftieth anniversary of normalization of relations between the two nations. She explained that, often, the discourse of historical contentions is in reality not about history but about competing memories. This contributes to why the United States cannot play a role as a mediator in these tensions, as the United States itself is also implicated in this narrative of memory. With regards to the lack of summit meetings, Professor Dudden suggested that Prime Minister Abe visit Seoul to mark the fiftieth anniversary of Korea-Japan normalization.

Next, Professor Park of Seoul National University observed that the current decline of bilateral relations has not been unprecedented, and explained that recent years have echoed the dynamism of the early 1990s. He suggested that relations deteriorate rapidly after a conservative backlash that follows a long, peaceful political period of liberalism in Japan. In this regard, 2015 bears resemblance to 20 years ago. He also notes, however, that 2015 is more concerning, and that the contemporary ‘surge’ of pervasive anti-Korean sentiment in Japan is disturbing. Furthermore, there is a mutual feeling of ‘fatigue’ and indifference towards each other’s nation after years of poor relations. Professor Park positions that this may be an adjustment period stemming from geopolitical changes, and that both nations need more effort and time to understand each other better.

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Dr. Nishino of Keio University followed with a similar observation. Dr. Nishino explained that the rise of China and the differences between Japan and Korea in their perceptions of this fact was a salient factor in worsening relations. While Japan perceives China as a military threat, Korea not only disagrees with this viewpoint, but sees China as an increasingly important partner in the region. Furthermore, opinion surveys in both states show that mutual affinity is also at an all-time low. Dr. Nishino explained that fatigue and frustrations regarding bilateral problems induce indifference and lack of awareness about Korea’s status as an ally nation. He declared, therefore, that leaders should step away from rhetoric and emotion to show the importance of shared Korea-Japan values.

As the final member of the panel, Mr. Snyder provided us with an insight into the U.S. role in Korea-Japan relations. If the United States truly is ‘back’, the best assertion of its power would be to stabilize the decline of bilateral relations between key allies in East Asia. Mr. Snyder argued that this was a matter that takes precedence over TPP negotiations. He also pointed out the inability and lack of understanding among U.S. policymakers and the danger of attempting ‘even-handedness’ in the likes of Ms. Wendy Sherman and her recent comments attributing responsibility to both Japanese and Korean parties.

The panel then explored a number of different aspects of Korea-Japan relations. Firstly, on the point of the harmful effects of misconceptions and misunderstanding between the two nations, Professor Park and Dr. Nishino elucidated the need for both sides to approach each other without prejudice and suspicion. Professor Dudden followed this with a plea for both sides to understand that both Japan and Korea are democracies and that plural opinions exist.

The Q&A session highlighted a range of subjects, spanning from Japan’s constitutional revision to anti-Korean sentiment in popular culture in Japan. Most importantly, however, the session provided insight into why Japanese apologies were considered insufficient. Professor Park explained that while it may be true Japan has ‘formally’ apologized enough, often there are problems in how Japanese apologies are perceived (“they need to say ‘sorry.’ rather than ‘sorry, but’”) and that apologies need to be consistent to carry sincerity. Professor Dudden added to this by quoting Haruki Murakami, who said that apologies should be made until the recipient party “says okay”. The panel also warned that Koreans should be more accepting of and give enough credit to Japanese efforts for reconciliation. Mr. Snyder added that the United States should play the role of the moderator, who “established the guard rails” so that bilateral relations do not deteriorate further.

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Mr. Fackler concluded the session with a summary of the ‘three layers’ of issues in Korea-Japan relations: geopolitical concerns, domestic politics (nationalism) and the interpersonal dynamic of leaders.

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