

“Polish-German Relations Since 1945:

A Source of Inspiration for Future Korean-Japanese Relations?”

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The conference was co-organized by the Asan Institute for Policy Studies, and the Polish and German Embassies in Seoul, with the aim of exploring the relevance of Polish-German reconciliation in advancing Japan-Korea relations. In essence, it can be said that the Polish-German relationship and the Korean-Japanese relationship are both inextricably linked by a complex and traumatic history defined in large part by the Second World War. The conference was attended by dignitaries from Germany and Poland who have been deeply involved with the reconciliation process and by experts from South Korea, the United States, and Japan.

The main objective of the conference was to see whether the Polish-German reconciliation experience could offer inspiration for Japanese and Koreans to overcome their historical legacies and mutual distrust. Indeed, one highly credits the Asan Institute’s efforts to take the initiative to address these entwined issues and to enhance prospective reconciliatory relations.

The Session I: Political Dimension of Polish-German Relations was opened by the Polish and German speakers’ discussion on their historical path to reconciliation with realism. Rather than only emphasizing the successes of European reconciliation, the speakers defined their case as one that has been full of mistakes and further acknowledged their bilateral relations to still being on a rocky-patch.

Among the various motivating factors for reconciliation, the speakers emphasized the common security, economic, and ideational interests resulting from the demise of the Soviet Union as the indispensable driving forces behind their endeavors, while, at the same time, accentuating and highly crediting the proactive role of the

non-governmental organizations and actors with shared religious values that had an influence on the rapprochement process. To be concrete, without these factors, Poland's desire for democratization, a liberal market economy, to join an integrated Europe under NATO and the EU, and German reunification would not have been possible.

One speaker called for developing a new Asian identity and history, and to create common institutions in Asia. This was legitimized and advocated based upon a shared history of Buddhism and Confucianism between Japan and Korea. By praising South Korea as a country that has deep roots in respect for the rule of law and democracy, the two countries' rich historical and philosophical background would allow the countries to more actively embrace a united Asian identity. Furthermore, rather than touching upon each specific issue in the so-called 'history problem' between the two countries, the attempt seemed to have been made to implicitly urge South Koreans to understand Japan's colonization of Korea by placing the two in the larger context of the historical development of colonialism led by Western powers.

On the other hand, a speaker expressed skepticism in achieving genuine reconciliation between Japan and Korea in the short-term. The Korean speaker elaborated that the absence of an apology by the Japanese government, as well as the absence of political courage from both governmental leaders, has also hindered reconciliation, thereby remaining the major obstacle to ameliorating these tense relations.

In Session II: Historical Experience and Political Rapprochement, knowledge and wisdom were shared by the European speakers based upon their pragmatic experiences without imposing them upon their Asian counterparts. The European reconciliation experience implies that it would still be premature to expect Japan and Korea to achieve full reconciliation over historical issues. In contrast to post-Cold War Europe which presented strong incentives for the parties concerned to achieve reconciliation for survival, there are no such imperatives in Northeast Asia. In this regard, one of the central questions raised in the session was, "Why can't Japan and South Korea accomplish reconciliation when Germany and Poland could?" One might conclude that the crucial factor here is the presence or the absence of the ultimate imperative without which national survival would be at risk.

In Session III: Coming to Terms with the Past, much of the discussions were focused specifically on war reparations and compensations. In particular, it was examined how feasible the Japanese government's position is to settle the historical issues with the Korean victims through financial compensations.

The speakers first discussed historical experiences of their home countries such as how Germany made financial compensations to Polish victims and how Germany has made ongoing efforts at atonement through various schemes including humanitarian aid and educational programs. A Korean participant of the conference made a comprehensive proposal towards full-fledged reconciliation where he urged for the need for the Japanese government to offer financial compensation to each Korean victim, including forced laborers. Furthermore, an American panelist pointed out the deficiency of the San Francisco Peace Treaty.

It was also noted that the recent erection of the comfort women bronze statue in front of the Japanese Embassy in Seoul and the Korean government's refusal to remove it signifies that both governments face a daunting task ahead.