

The New Normal in Korea-Japan Relations

Session: Session 4
Date/Time: April 27, 2016 / 13:30-15:00
Moderator: Anna Fifield, The Washington Post
Speakers: Park Cheol Hee, Seoul National University
Ren Xiao, Fudan University
Scott Snyder, Council on Foreign Relations
Soeya Yoshihide, Keio University

Session Sketch

Session 4, titled “The New Normal in Korea-Japan Relations,” discussed whether South Korea-Japan relations have finally arrived at a new level after the long-awaited summit meeting last November and the subsequent comfort women deal a month later. The panelists examined positive signs and factors to a rebounding ROK-Japan relationship as well as potential obstacles to the bilateral relationship moving forward.

The moderator of the session, Ms. Anna Fifield, Tokyo bureau chief for *The Washington Post*, began by providing an overview of the recent developments in Korea-Japan relations, which has changed very much in the last six months. With the summit meeting and the comfort women deal giving green light to bureaucrats to work towards improving bilateral relations, the North Korean nuclear test acted as glue that brought the two nations closer regarding security cooperation. However, is this rosy situation the new normal in ROK-Japan relationship, or is this just temporary?

Prof. Park Cheol Hee, professor at the Graduate School of International Studies, Seoul National University, noted that South Korea and Japan reaching the comfort women deal was a good sign and its implementation is now the issue. The U.S. constantly urging for better bilateral relationship was also a positive factor, and the North Korean threat was indeed helping both states to discuss cooperation. In addition, people-to-people exchange remained

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in good shape. He cautioned the audience that there could be unexpected obstacles to implementing the deal properly and warned that it was a wrong move for Japan to be obsessed with relocating the comfort girl statue. Also, now that the opposition party won the South Korean general election, Prof. Park said that we need to watch whether this result would work as a barrier to further improvements.

Next, Prof. Ren Xiao, professor at Fudan University, agreed that the comfort women deal eliminated one obstacle to improved ROK-Japan relationship but we need to wait and see whether it will be fully implemented. He insisted that neighboring countries in the region are hoping to see Japan completely condemn its imperial past and its invasion campaign. If Japan can do so, Prof. Ren said that regional states would agree to leave history issues behind. He also stressed that Japanese politicians and the country as a whole should act more responsibly. Prof. Ren pointed out that the DPRK security threat and the presence of the U.S. are driving factors for enhanced ROK-Japan relationship.

Mr. Scott Snyder, senior fellow and director of the program on U.S.-Korea Policy at the Council on Foreign Relations, assessed that ROK-Japan relationship has unfortunately changed from abnormal to old normal, not the 'new' normal. Progress to new normal status, Mr. Snyder argued, depends on the implementation of the comfort women deal. He noted that majority of the Japanese people expects the deal will fail, but the South Korean view is divided along partisan lines. He also said that a good ROK-Japan relationship has become more important to the U.S. in the context of the rebalance, and the U.S. should also do more to foster a cooperative environment for bilateral cooperation as well as enhanced trilateralism.

Finally, Prof. Soeya Yoshihide, professor of political science and international relations at Keio University, noted that hypothetically the foundation of new normal in this bilateral relationship goes back to the 1990s. The comfort women issue was first officially raised and there were efforts aimed at reconciliation between both governments during that period. He stressed that there are five levels in the complex structure of ROK-Japan relationship. Fundamentalists, the public, practitioners and diplomats, the government, and politicians in

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South Korea and Japan were interacting with each other across the strait. For the national interest of both nations as well as regional and global order, Prof. Soeya emphasized that ROK-Japan relationship is critical. He suggested that both governments should try once again to discuss and sign the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA). Concluding his comment, he stressed that Japan's enhanced security role based on its right to self-defense should work as a plus to South Korea and the Korean Peninsula, but there is a chance that sections of the Japanese public and politicians might be reluctant to take on that positive role.

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