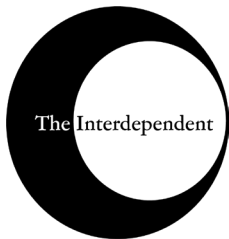


A Raindrop in a Raging Fire? Soft Power as a Tool for Japan-South Korea Reconciliation



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Abstract

Japan and South Korea have experienced rising tensions for generations. Beginning with the Japanese annexation of Korea in 1910, contemporary relations are shaped by mutual mistrust. Nevertheless, both countries face common security threats, namely North Korean and China; and both are pushed by the United States to cooperate on an international level. It is increasingly important for Japan and South Korea to take steps toward reconciliation. Analyzing the significant barriers to rapprochement, this article explores soft power as a potential method for improving relations between the two countries.

Keywords

South Korea; Japan; Soft Power; Reconciliation; Japan-South Korea Relations; *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*; NGOs

“Gosh! How can I remember something that goes back 80 years?” This was the line that forced Uniqlo, a Japanese clothing company, to recall a controversial advertisement in autumn of 2019.¹ In the ad, 12-year-old American fashion designer Kheris Rogers asks 97-year-old American fashion icon Iris Apfel how she dressed as a teenager, and in response Apfel comments: “I can’t remember that far back!” For Korean audiences, the response was translated to the opening line above.² Eighty years prior, Apfel was a teenager in Astoria, Queens, but at the same time, an ocean away, Korea was living under oppressive Japanese rule. In response to the ad, a South Korean student made a parody video which ended up gaining viral recognition in South Korea.³ In the parody, the student asks his grandmother what her life was like at his age. The grandmother, who was one of many forced laborers at Japanese factories during World War II, responded that her life was incredibly difficult, and that she will never forget. The message was clear: Japan was asking who could remember 80 years back, and South Korea was offering a resounding “we remember.”

The Significance of Japan-South Korea Relations

Japan and South Korea have maintained a tense relationship for generations. The nations have normalized their perpetual tension, and contemporary relations show no sign of significant improvement. The Japanese and Korean terms for “simple” are pronounced very similarly: the former sounds like *kantan* and the latter *gandan*. This is one of many surface-level similarities that compel non-Japanese or non-Korean people to perceive a commonality and general cordial association between the two nations. The reality, however, is that the relationship between the two states is not, and never has been, *simple*. These regimes share a history of conflict that has systematically broken down trust and left citizens of both populations wary of the other.

Despite contemporary coordination across several fields, including “coordination on North Korea, joint disaster-relief planning, and overseas development assistance,”⁴ Japan-South

1 Sangmi Cha, “Uniqlo Ad Sparks Protest and Parody as South Korea-Japan Dispute Flares,” *The Japan Times*, 22 October 2019, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2019/10/22/business/japans-uniqlo-pulls-ad-south-korean-fury/>.

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.

4 M.E. Manyin, “Managing Japan-South Korea Tensions,” Council on Foreign Relations, December 2015, 3, https://www.cdn.cfr.org/sites/default/files/pdf/2015/12/Discussion_Paper_Korea_Japan_Manyin.pdf.

Korea relations rest on a knife's edge, rooted in the historical conflict alluded to in the Uniqlo controversy. Japan's and South Korea's fragile ties have the potential to snap as tensions mount, putting both Japanese and South Korean citizens in danger of facing any potential fallout. Their relations are consequential even beyond the reaches of the states in question. Japan and South Korea are currently the United States' key Northeast Asian allies, two relationships that are increasingly significant to the US as tensions in the rest of the Asia Pacific region continue to rise. Mark Manyin, an Asia Affairs specialist at the US Congressional Research Service, identified five key points that outline why positive Japan-South Korea relations matter to the United States, those being:

1. *Opportunity costs:*⁵ The risk of Washington needing to play a role in conflict prevention, containment, and/or settlement in response to the deterioration of Japan-South Korea relations has the potential to generate enormous costs on all sides of the trilateral relationship. Beyond any financial expenditures, Washington being put in a position to respond or intervene would reduce the effectiveness of US, Japan, and South Korea trilateral operations, as well as any partnerships therein.
2. *The danger of a naval clash:*⁶ Though few predict Japan-South Korea conflicts leading to military action, it cannot be ruled out entirely, specifically in the case of territorial disputes.⁷
3. *Lost opportunities for policy coordination on North Korea:*⁸ Manyin observes that “[coordination on North Korea] is arguably the area where the most cooperation is currently occurring,”⁹ and these efforts are significant as they serve to counter China's goals with Pyongyang. Interruption of the tentative cooperation between Japan and South Korea would jeopardize current efforts to maintain a regional balance of power regarding North Korea.

5 Ibid., 4.

6 Ibid.

7 Togo Kazuhiko, “Japan's Territorial Problem: The Northern Territories, Takeshima, and the Senkaku Islands,” National Bureau of Asian Research, May 8, 2012, <http://www.nbr.org/research/activity.aspx?id=247>.

8 Manyin, “Managing Japan-South Korea Tensions,” 4-5.

9 Ibid.

4. *Lost opportunities for greater policy coordination on China:*¹⁰ The US relies on Japan and South Korea as its only allies neighboring China, with which the US has growing tensions. It is important for the US to maintain their regional influence, and tensions between Japan and South Korea have the potential to “[inhibit] America’s capacity to shape China’s rise in constructive ways.”¹¹
5. *The opportunity for a new order in Northeast Asia:*¹² Northeast Asia is currently experiencing significant dynamic shifts. Japanese and South Korean populations are steadily aging and Chinese power is on the rise, whereas US power has experienced a relative decline. As efforts to shape the future of this region increase on all sides, the US is best served in maintaining trilateral relations with Japan and South Korea.

However, despite the relations between Japan and South Korea being of importance not only within the region but in the US as well, tensions only continue to rise. In this article, I consider the factors barring Japan-South Korea reconciliation and argue that utilizing a soft power approach may lead to the bettering of Japan-South Korea relations.

Defining Soft Power

Traditional notions of power are rooted in physical might. Said metric provides a concrete and definitive lens through which to identify and value the power of state actors: the more a state can boast in military and economic resources, the more power it can be said to possess. Power as described here, rooted in predominantly physical resources, is “hard power.” Those who can be termed ‘offensive realists,’ like John Mearsheimer, argue that militaristic hard power is the only legitimate power a state can wield, as it has historically been the driver of hegemonic might.¹³ However, this thesis aligns more closely with an outlook on power that better accounts for the complexities of international politics, namely that of political scientist Joseph Nye, who argues

10 Ibid.

11 Victor Cha and Karl Friedhoff, “Ending a Feud Between Allies,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, November 15, 2013, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/ending-feud-between-allies>.

12 Manyin, “Managing Japan-South Korea Tensions,” 5-6.

13 John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2014), 29–54.

“proof of power lies not in resources, but in the ability to change the behavior of states.”¹⁴

Nye argues that factors such as technology, education, and economic growth are becoming more significant factors in the power landscape, overpowering the historic emphasis on military might and conquest.¹⁵ This perspective highlights persuasiveness in contrast with the conventional emphasis on militarism. Nye proposes that there is an alternative form of power: soft power. As Nye defines it, soft power is “the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments.”¹⁶ Soft power, according to Nye, “arises from the attractiveness of a country’s culture, political ideals, and policies.”¹⁷

Addressing Soft Power Criticisms

Still, soft power is not without its detractors, and criticisms fall under the common umbrella of determining soft power to be, well, too soft. Some argue this softness creates two primary concerns: 1) the effects of soft power, if any, are difficult to measure, and 2) effective persuasion under soft power is not compelling. With regards to the first criticism, Margaret Seymour writes that “soft power is hard to quantify, and thus it is hard to measure its success. Hard power, focused more on measurable resources (money, soldiers, bullets), is a straightforward counting game, and so are the results of its applications. Soft power aims to change attitudes, which is a hard ‘thing’ to which to assign a number or level.”¹⁸ This criticism is understandable, given the inability to rely on standard numerical quantification to determine the effectiveness of soft power the way we have historically been able to do for hard power. However, this perspective views soft power only through the lens of immediate change and seeks to link the effects to tangible objects. While there are methods to track soft power in real time (for example, through public opinion polls and subsequent policy shifts), soft power is best determined, according to Nye, “by careful

14 Joseph S. Nye, “Soft Power,” *Foreign Policy*, no. 80 (Autumn 1990): 155.

15 Ibid., 154.

16 Joseph S. Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: Public Affairs, 2004), X.

17 Ibid.

18 Margaret Seymour, “The Problem with Soft Power,” Foreign Policy Research Institute, September 14, 2020, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2020/09/the-problem-with-soft-power/>.

process tracing of the sort that historians do.”¹⁹ Rather than immediate results rooted in tangible objects, soft power lays the groundwork for generational change. This, however, does not negate its validity or applicability.

Secondly, there is the question of soft power’s feasibility. Christopher Layne has criticized the concept of soft power for not being compelling in its premise, stating that “the problem with Nye’s conception of how soft power operates is that public opinion does not make foreign policy, the state’s central decision makers do.”²⁰ Layne does not recognize the link between public opinion and foreign policy, instead attributing any political shifts to hard power, stating that “during the heyday of the USA’s post-World War II hegemony, US dominance in international politics rested firmly on the foundation of the USA’s hard power. The willingness of other states to acquiesce in US hegemony was not a function of ‘legitimacy’ but a consequence of the USA’s preponderance.”²¹ This argument makes the mistake of giving weight only to hard, military power, and is overly rigid and simplistic, ignoring “direct effects, matters of degree, [and] types of goals and interactions with other causes,”²² in the words of Nye. The impact of public opinion on the elites that determine foreign policy cannot be dismissed as insignificant. Nye supports this by offering the following:

Public opinion in other countries can create an enabling or disabling environment for specific policy initiatives. For example, in regard to Iraq in 2003, Turkish officials were constrained by public and parliamentary opinion and unable to allow the American 4th Infantry Division to cross their country. The Bush administration’s lack of soft power hurt its hard power. Similarly, Mexican President Vicente Fox wished to accommodate George W. Bush by supporting a second UN resolution authorizing invasion, but was constrained by public opinion. When being pro-American is a political kiss of death, public opinion has an effect on policy that Layne’s simple proposition does not capture.²³

In addition, the wider-reaching goals of a state, such as democracy, or human rights, have historically been seen to be influenced by public culture and ideas. This illustrates that there is precedence for effective soft power. Professor Giulio Gallarotti argued that globalization trends,

19 Inderjeet Parmar, Michael Cox, eds., *Soft Power and US Foreign Policy: Theoretical, Historical and Contemporary Perspectives* (London: Routledge, 2010), 218.

20 Ibid., 56.

21 Ibid., 72.

22 Ibid., 218.

23 Ibid., 218-19.

the rising threat of nuclear warfare, the growth of democracy in world systems, sensitivities to economic fates, and the growth of international organizations have all contributed to the “diminishing utility of hard power.”²⁴ The argument, in short, is that it is becoming progressively riskier for nations to seek influence on the basis of hard power. Increasing globalization leads to cross-border collaboration, evident even in Japan’s and South Korea’s many joint operations. With a more vigilant eye to the economic fate of one’s country, the democratic backlash of inciting military violence, and the threat of nuclear warfare (with which Japan already has experience), nations are incentivized to remain in the good graces of international organizations and sustain collaboration with other nations. All this is best done through a soft power approach, which is subtler and creates ties that are not forged on coercion based on a nation’s physical resources. However, even Nye conceded that the effectiveness and longevity of any power resource depends on the context.²⁵

Japanese Annexation of Korea

The overarching issue at the root of Japan-South Korea tension is arguably the Japanese annexation of Korea, which began in 1910 and is at the heart of the controversy of the aforementioned Uniqlo advertisement. The groundwork was laid as the Russo-Japanese War drew to a close with the signing of the Treaty of Portsmouth.²⁶ The war was brief, from 1904 to 1905, and began with Japan setting its sights on Korea as a “bridgehead for Japanese expansion.”²⁷ Korea, at that time, had been a vassal of China since 1644, but Japan was able to win a successful war against China for the region, which forced China to abandon its control over Korea and grant the Liaotung Peninsula in South Manchuria to Japan, including the Naval base of Port Arthur.²⁸ This drew the attention of Russia, which was building its Southern Manchurian Railway that relied on Port Arthur as a valuable point of connection to the natural resources it was pursuing. This was the leading

24 Giulio M. Gallarotti, “Soft Power: What It Is, Why It’s Important, and the Conditions for Its Effective Use,” *Journal of Political Power* 4, no. 1 (2011): 25-47.

25 Nye, *Soft Power*, 12.

26 Geoffrey Jukes, *The Russo-Japanese War 1904-1905* (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2002).

27 *Ibid.*, 3.

28 Jukes, *Russo-Japanese War*.

cause of the Russo-Japanese War, which ended with Russia ultimately building their railway under Japanese supervision. However, the aforementioned signing of the Treaty of Portsmouth and the unexpected victory of Japan restructured the power dynamics in the Northeast Asia region.²⁹ Japan now found itself an emerging power.

As the Russo-Japanese War ended with Japan successfully gaining a foothold on the Korean peninsula, Japan rushed to impose its agenda over the region. It entailed seizing the opportunity provided by the shifting power dynamics that came with the end of the Sino-Japanese War to create “Asian unity under Japanese leadership.”³⁰ By Japanese accounts, this agenda did not initially entail annexation. In his speech on July 28, 1907, Itō Hirobumi, Japan’s first Prime Minister and the first Resident-General of Korea, openly stated that “Japan sees no need for annexation. Annexation is very troublesome and Korea needs self-rule. We will be satisfied to see our two flags flying side by side.”³¹ Accordingly, the Japanese did not immediately annex the nation and instead installed what they deemed “improvements” in Korea, all with the motivation of Japanese-Korean unity. Soon thereafter, however, the Japanese government determined annexation to be the best next step, and only three years after Hirobumi’s speech, the Japan-Korea Annexation Treaty was put into effect.

Regarding the motivations of the annexation, Toyokichi Iyenaga, an academic, offered the following explanation in 1912:

Japan was prompted to take the decisive step of annexing Korea for reasons that are easily understood. They are: (1) to insure her own national safety; (2) to assure enduring peace in the Far East by eliminating one of the most fruitful sources of disturbance; (3) to promote the welfare and prosperity of the Koreans; (4) to do away with the disadvantages, administrative and financial, of a dual system of government, the residency general and the Korean government; (5) to consolidate the identical interests of Japan and Korea in the Far East by the amalgamation of two peoples whose similarity in race and past culture makes such a task possible.³²

29 Ibid.

30 Stewart Lone, “The Japanese Annexation of Korea 1910: The Failure of East Asian Co-Prosperity,” *Modern Asian Studies* 25, no. 1 (February 1991): 144-45.

31 As quoted in Lone, “The Japanese Annexation of Korea.”

32 Toyokichi Iyenaga, “Japan’s Annexation of Korea,” *The Journal of Race Development* 3, no. 2 (October 1912): 201.

In summary, Japanese sentiment surrounding the annexation of Korea was centered on “gifting” Koreans the benefits of superior Japanese systems and culture. It became a crime to teach from non-approved texts, and over 200,000 Korean documents were subsequently destroyed.³³ From the Japanese perspective, the Korean justice and educational systems were seen as “of the most primitive order,”³⁴ necessitating Japanese intervention.

Even following Korea’s emancipation in 1945, the Japanese government maintained a firm grasp on the narrative surrounding Korea’s annexation. In the 1950s, Japanese historian Ienaga Saburo was even sued by the National Ministry of Education following his publication of a high school social studies textbook that painted a critical picture of the Japanese Imperial Army.³⁵ Even in contemporary Japan a board within the Ministry of Education is known for painstakingly reviewing textbooks and ensuring that only government-approved textbooks, which oftentimes take a strictly pro-imperial approach, are allowed into schools.³⁶ This historical revisionism and the systematic erasure of Korean culture and language during the annexation period have given rise to an issue that remains central in contemporary Japan-South Korea relations: historical memory.

The Complications of China and North Korea

Of course, Japan-South Korea relations do not occur in a vacuum. Historically, and geographically, China and North Korea have been key players in Japan-South Korea relations and continue to drive a wedge between the two nations.

Concerning North Korea: North Korea’s threat of nuclear warfare is significant to all in the East Asia-Pacific region, and the current Seoul administration has aimed to address North Korean tensions through advocating for sanctions exemptions that would allow for inter-Korean cooperation, such as the reopening of the Kaesong Industrial Complex or the Mount Kumgang

33 Hong Beom Rhee, *Asian Millenarianism: An Interdisciplinary Study of the Taiping and Tonghak Rebellions in a Global Context* (Youngstown: Cambria Press, 2007), 13.

34 Ibid., 208.

35 Jordan Sand, “Historians and Public Memory in Japan: The ‘Comfort Women’ Controversy,” *History and Memory* 11, no. 2 (Fall/Winter 1999): 118.

36 Ibid.

tourist site.³⁷ On the more conservative side of the issue, on which Japan falls, there is insistence that sanctions relief must only come after denuclearization, or at least proof of steps towards denuclearization.³⁸ The question at the root of this issue is whether sanctions relief will compel denuclearization, or vice versa, and the current Tokyo and Seoul administrations have fallen on opposite sides of the issue.

Concerning China: Andrew Yeo observes that “China’s rise, and more specifically its increasing militarization of the South China Seas, has fueled mistrust, and its neighbors remain unconvinced by Chinese claims to peaceful rise and development.”³⁹ However, Japan and South Korea are not unified in their approach to dealing with China. In 2019, citing China’s rapid increase in military spending and increased deployment of assets in waters surrounding Japan, Japan’s Defense Ministry named China as Japan’s most serious security concern, over North Korea, for the first time.⁴⁰ Following this, Japan took part in the Free and Open Indo-Pacific strategy and the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, two initiatives born of strategic competition with China,⁴¹ underscoring Japan’s public view of China as a threat. South Korea, however, prioritizes the threat of North Korea, despite also being under Chinese threat. This priority means that South Korea is reluctant to take any visible stance against China, the nation that “remains the key to mitigating the threat from North Korea.”⁴² This unwillingness to openly acknowledge the threat of China causes many in the Tokyo administration to perceive South Korea as ambivalent, furthering the mistrust between the two nations.

In outlining this four-way dynamic, it is interesting to note that China, the leading power among the four, is motivated to maintain this current state of Japan-South Korea relations. This wedge is strategically beneficial to a hegemonically-oriented China, which views South Korea as

37 Hyung-Jin Kim, “SKorea’s Moon Could Seek Exemption of UN Sanctions on NKorea” *AP News* (January 14, 2020), <https://apnews.com/a38da362d176402226844fec7c13d5cb>.

38 Kathryn Botto, “Overcoming Obstacles to Trilateral U.S.-ROK-Japan Interoperability,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, March 18, 2020, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/03/18/overcoming-obstacles-to-trilateral-u.s.-rok-ja-pan-interoperability-pub-81236>.

39 Jung H. Pak, “Trying to Loosen the Linchpin: China’s Approach to South Korea,” Brookings, July 2020, <https://www.brookings.edu/research/trying-to-loosen-the-linchpin-chinas-approach-to-south-korea/>.

40 Botto, “Overcoming Obstacles.”

41 Ibid.

42 Ibid.

“a critical part of its effort to establish its preeminence in Northeast Asia.”⁴³ It is likely, then, that China has intentionally exacerbated this divide.

Contemporary Relations

At this point it is clear that Japan-South Korea relations are being challenged from multiple angles. It is important, then, to examine how these factors have come together to paint a picture of contemporary Japan-South Korea relations, which is characterized by ongoing turmoil and failed attempts at reconciliation. When the Japanese government has taken steps towards reconciliation in recent years, through such efforts as contributing money to the South Korean government’s “Reconciliation and Healing Foundation” and revising textbooks to be more transparent concerning Japanese wrongdoings, the South Korean government and general public were disappointed with the efforts. Polls have even shown that South Korean leaders receive higher support when they express dissatisfaction towards Japan.⁴⁴

The historical grievances at the heart of these failed attempts at reconciliation have also given way to new issues, namely the 2019 Japan-South Korea trade dispute. This dispute was triggered by Japan removing South Korea from its trade whitelist in August of 2019.⁴⁵ The Japanese government claimed that this was done in an effort to mitigate concerns surrounding alleged South Korean exports of sensitive chemical materials to North Korea.⁴⁶ This motive was called into question almost immediately, however, considering two recent 2018 verdicts by the South Korean Supreme Court ordering the Nippon Steel Corporation and Mitsubishi Heavy Industries to pay compensation to South Koreans forced to work in its factories during Japanese annexation.⁴⁷ South Koreans felt they were being punished for the ruling with their removal from the trade whitelist, and responded in kind by “removing Japan from its own trade whitelist and subsequently threaten[ing]

43 Pak, “Trying to Loosen the Linchpin.”

44 Wonjae Hwang, Wonbin Cho, and Krista Wiegand, “Do Korean-Japanese Historical Disputes Generate Rally Effects?” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 77, no. 3 (August 2018): 695.

45 Botto, “Overcoming Obstacles.”

46 Stephen Ezell, “Understanding the South Korea-Japan Trade Dispute and Its Impacts on U.S. Foreign Policy,” *Information Technology and Innovation Foundation*, January 16, 2020, <https://itif.org/publications/2020/01/16/understanding-south-korea-japan-trade-disputewdr43w3r43e-and-its-impacts-us-foreign>.

47 Botto, “Overcoming Obstacles.”

to withdraw from the General Security of Military Information Agreement, an intelligence-sharing pact with Tokyo.”⁴⁸ This pushed Japan-South Korea relations to a new all-time low.

Overcoming the Past

In figuring out how Japan and South Korea might achieve reconciliation, one can consider the example of France and Germany. Like Japan and South Korea, France and Germany share a contentious history. The two countries opposed each other in three catastrophic wars, ranging from 1870 to 1945 (the France-Prussia War and the two World Wars).⁴⁹ If the two nations were to have followed in the footsteps of the previously laid out Japan-South Korea relationship, debates over historical memory and responsibility may have continued to affect high diplomacy to this day. However, the Franco-German relationship serves as an illustration of a successful and long-lasting rapprochement. French scholar Alfred Grosser has even gone so far to say that the 1944 French mindset of “no enemy but Germany” shifted to “no friend but Germany” by as early as 1968.⁵⁰ In national polls taken only twenty years after the German defeat, the French public named West Germany as “the best friend of France.”⁵¹

Germany and France worked in tandem in their rapprochement efforts, illustrating a shared pro-reconciliation mindset. The driving societal model in this period was *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, “overcoming the past.”⁵² Germany has cemented its stance of remorse with nationwide commitments to promoting education on World War II and taking responsibility for Germany’s role in the war and in the Holocaust. Holocaust education is a mandatory component of German school curricula, and most German students visit a concentration camp prior to their graduation. This and other efforts have been appreciated by Germany’s neighbors, including France.⁵³ By continuously taking

48 Ibid.

49 Yangmo Ku, “International Reconciliation in The Postwar Era, 1945-2005: A Comparative Study of Japan-ROK And Franco-German Relations,” *Asian Perspective* 32, no 3 (2008): 5-37.

50 Jennifer Lind, “The Perils of Apology: What Japan Shouldn’t Learn from Germany,” *Foreign Affairs* 88, no. 3 (May/June 2009): 139.

51 Ibid.

52 Ibid.

53 Ibid.

visible steps toward restitution and rapprochement, and paying respect to preserving historical memory, Germany has become a soft power leader in Europe. Soft Power 30, a global ranking of countries' soft power published by Portland Communications, has found Germany to be number three for 2019, and it has held at least a top five position for several years.⁵⁴

The promotion of this model was carried out, in part, through such initiatives as the 1963 Elysée Treaty, a treaty of friendship between France and West Germany, setting up regular high-level consultations not just on matters of defense, but also on matters of education and youth issues. These efforts continued on the ground, with French and German civil society organizations working to bring about the perceptual shifts necessary for *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* and, ultimately, reconciliation. Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) such as the *Bureau International de Liaison et Documentation*, the *Comité Français d'Echanges avec l'Allemagne Nouvelle*, and the *Deutsch-Französisches Institut* at Ludwigsburg were “dedicated to the elevation of Franco-German understanding through publications about contemporary affairs in both countries [and] also aimed to foster bilateral reconciliation via a continuous dialogue on current affairs.”⁵⁵

The successful reconciliation between France and Germany through the soft power of high diplomacy and NGOs, viewed in contrast to ongoing Japanese and South Korean tensions, illustrates that Japan and South Korea lack an effective civil society bridge, which hinders rapprochement. Supporting this idea, Yangmo Ku hypothesized that a presence of vocal and vibrant pro-reconciliation civil society organizations is critical in attempts at rapprochement. This falls in line with Joseph Nye's view on NGOs as possessing considerable soft power and as being instrumental in facilitating governmental rapprochement. Japan and South Korea would have a greater chance of successful reconciliation if national leaders actively pursued this goal and were supported by a network of pro-reconciliation NGOs that outweighed civil society centered on nationalist ideals, as was the case in France and Germany. Pro-reconciliation civil societies could work to inform the publics of both nations on contemporary affairs and foster open dialogues on rapprochement which would help dissolve tensions. It is key, then, to consider what obstacles

54 “Germany,” The Soft Power 30, Portland Communications, 2019, <https://softpower30.com/country/germany/>.

55 Ku, “International Reconciliation in The Postwar Era,” 16.

are in place between Japan and South Korea that do not allow for the success and prominence of leaders and NGOs supporting reconciliation. In this next section I will make the claim that the primary obstacle to thriving pro-reconciliation narratives in Japan and South Korea lies in the fact that the national identities of both nations have been constructed in opposition to each other.

Nationalism and National Identity

Following Japan's annexation of Korea, the futures of both countries was left uncertain. For South Korea, the end of World War II entailed a welcome emancipation from Japanese colonization, but for Japan, defeat in the war meant both internal strife and external threats, as well as the added tragedy of the United States' unprecedented use of nuclear warfare. For both countries, it was necessary to rebuild and reconsider their national identities. In this period of grappling with imperialism and colonialism, the nations' identities were inextricably linked together. Japan and South Korea, defeated and freed, underwent a process of identity formation in which they defined themselves against the "other."⁵⁶

South Koreans, having spent generations under Japanese rule, emphasized *Koreanness* in contrast to Japanese influence, and, as such, Japanese occupation can be considered a key component of South Korea's identity-building, leading to visible and enduring anti-Japan sentiment in Korean nationalism. This is evident in the previously mentioned fact that South Korean politicians win points for aligning themselves against Japan.⁵⁷ It is to the point now that "South Korean national identity cannot be extricated from its relation to the ubiquity and ordinariness of Japanese antagonism."⁵⁸

Similarly, Japanese national identity sets up a direct contrast between Japan and South Korea. After World War II the Japanese were divided over how to deal with memories of their atrocities. Many were deeply ashamed of Japan's actions during the war, with one young soldier

56 Jungmin Seo, "Diagnosing Korea–Japan Relations through Thick Description: Revisiting the National Identity Formation Process," *Third World Quarterly* (June 25, 2021).

57 Hwang, Cho, Wiegand, "Korean-Japanese Historical Disputes," 695.

58 Jerry Won Lee, "Legacies of Japanese Colonialism in the Rhetorical Constitution of South Korean National Identity." *National Identities* 16, no. 1 (2014): 1-13.

notably saying that “if he were guilty of the sort of atrocities that were being reported, it would be better if he were executed than if he were to come home.”⁵⁹ Many Japanese citizens went so far as to try to collect the remains of Chinese and Korean forced laborers who had died in Japan so that their bodies could be returned to their families and home countries. However, there was also a significant number of Japanese whose post-war ideology can be seen as the early roots of contemporary Japanese nationalism. These people “deplored such a ‘self-flagellating’ view on history” and tried to “deny or downplay Japanese atrocities to foster what they characterized as a healthy sense of national pride.”⁶⁰ This narrative won out in Japan’s national identity-building.

To regain its international standing, then, it became imperative to Japanese nationalists that Japan define itself as a more peaceful and more advanced neighbor of the “backward and recalcitrant” South Korea.⁶¹ This brand of Japanese nationalism is held together by two conflicting narratives: one of pacifism, and another one of pride in a violent national history. The persistence of Japanese and South Korean national identities being rooted in opposition to each other points to a lingering fuel in the fire of nationalism in each respective country. By further analyzing the nationalism of both nations, one can see how South Korean resentment towards Japan for their historical subjugation and Japanese aims for modernization and Westernization stand out as the root causes.

Modernization and Westernization

Contrary to South Korea, Japan views the past as something to be quickly moved past and, if not forgotten, at least not dwelt upon. This is arguably due mostly to the fact that many Japanese elites have been eager to adopt a Western sense of modernity for generations, and view dwelling on the past an inhibitor to those ends.⁶² A quote from Fukuzawa Yukichi speaks to that desire:

59 Thomas U. Berger, *War, Guilt, and World Politics after World War II* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 137.

60 Ibid.

61 Seo, “Diagnosing Korea–Japan Relations.”

62 Ibid.

We do not have time to wait for the enlightenment of our neighbors so that we can work together to forward the development of Asia. It is better for us to leave the ranks of Asian nations and cast our lot with civilized nations of the West [...] We simply follow the manner of the Westerners in knowing how to treat them [Korea and China]. Any person who cherishes a bad friend cannot escape his notoriety. We must simply erase from our minds our bad friends in Asia.⁶³

In this sentiment, however, Yukichi's way of "othering" China and South Korea can be viewed as "internal Orientalism,"⁶⁴ Orientalism being a Western ideology that objectifies Asian cultures and empires. In their quest to modernize, Japanese people wanted to distance themselves from such overt internal Orientalism, and thus faced a dilemma: "how to become modern while simultaneously shedding the objectivistic category of Oriental and yet not lose an identity."⁶⁵ As Japan rushed to meet the insatiable demand for new technologies and social transformations characteristic of modernity, it oscillated between "the peril of being overcome by modernity and the impossible imperative of overcoming it."⁶⁶

Looking to the Future

When considering the ingrained complexities of nationalism and conflicting national identities, it becomes clear that there is no easy path to reconciliation for Japan and South Korea. While the previously discussed historical conflicts are at the heart of contemporary debates between Japan and South Korea, national narratives designed to bring together the citizens of one nation while driving them away from the other are the catalyst for ongoing resistance to reconciliation. Even if Japan were to take steps to provide an authentic apology, it is safe to say that "a formal acceptance of Japan's apology [by South Korea] would be ceremonial at best."⁶⁷

Instead, it will be important to address ingrained resentment first, and to redefine each nation in the eyes of the other. In the Franco-German case, the shared European identity and shared Americanization carried reconciliation efforts forward, but extra steps will be required

63 As quoted in Seo, "Diagnosing Korea–Japan Relations."

64 Ibid.

65 Ibid.

66 Ibid.

67 Lee, "Legacies of Japanese Colonialism."

for Japan and South Korea, beginning with “a straightforward recognition of the source of the problems—the national narratives that constitute the essence of the national identities of the two nations.”⁶⁸ Japanese and South Koreans inherit these narratives, which are “retold and re-enacted by successive generations,”⁶⁹ feeding into each country’s nationalist ideals and further damaging reconciliation prospects. This then raises the question of how to reverse a national narrative and drive sustainable change, for which I will return to the idea of soft power.

Soft power has the potential to generate visible perceptual shifts and reconstruct a nation’s international reputation. For example, after its defeat in World War II, Japan used the character *Hello Kitty* to re-sculpt itself in the global public eye.⁷⁰ The friendly character gained lasting international popularity, and in being associated with her “smallness, muteness, and blankness,” Japan began to be perceived with the same innocent traits. In this way, *Hello Kitty* built up Japan’s “arsenal of performed innocence that justifies retreat from responsibility.”⁷¹

In order for soft power initiatives to begin easing Japan-South Korean tensions and opening the door for reconciliation, however, said initiatives will need to “facilitate the reformulation of national identities in a manner that presents the other not as an ontological enemy, but as a tolerable and understandable neighbor.”⁷² While this would be no easy feat, it is not implausible, and could be a solution for addressing the deeply-rooted mutual negative perceptions that are currently blocking reconciliation.

Soft power would be most effectively utilized by fostering pro-reconciliation NGOs. In facing this goal, Japan and South Korea could develop initiatives modeled after the previously discussed efforts between France and Germany. For example, a coalition of French and German historians worked together to create textbooks for both countries. Japan and South Korea could follow this model as a way to ensure that citizens of both nations receive a consistent education on bilateral relations. This would also build trust between the nations, as issues concerning historical

68 Seo, “Diagnosing Korea–Japan Relations.”

69 Ibid.

70 Christine Yano, “Hello Kitty and Japan’s Kawaii Diplomacy,” *East Asia Forum*, October 9, 2015, <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2015/10/10/hello-kitty-and-japans-kawaii-diplomacy/>.

71 Ibid.

72 Seo, “Diagnosing Korea–Japan Relations.”

memory would be diminished generation by generation if schools in both countries approached historical issues on even footing.

A coalition of Japanese and South Korean scholars would bring discussions on this topic closer to the general public and ensure that opinions on these aspects of shared history can be informed by sources outside of government figures, who have been seen to propagate “othering” sentiments as a way to earn the trust of citizens who have grown up surrounded by deeply ingrained nationalistic ideologies that pit them against the opposing country. There have already been small but effective steps taken towards this goal. For instance, in Japan, efforts from NGO *Kyokasho Net 21* (Textbook Net 21) led to low utilization rates of a history textbook with overt nationalist ideology.⁷³ Another example is the Truth Commission Network for Forced Labor, formed in 2005, which conducts fact-finding research on Korean victims of Japanese forced labor and “consists of Japanese civic groups and researchers who are opposed to the conservative direction in which Japan is moving and who work toward achieving reconciliation with South Korea.”⁷⁴

The underlying goal in these civil society efforts would be to develop a common ground between the two nations, as contemporary Japan-South Korea relations hinge on isolating their differences and building on the foundation that they are naturally opposing bodies. If pro-reconciliation NGOs between the two countries were to flourish, citizens of both nations may come to forge a new and more positive understanding of the other country, potentially shifting the current trend of electing politicians who embody anti-Japanese and anti-Korean sentiments.

The existing pro-reconciliation civil society organizations indicate that the seeds of tension resolution are already being sown. Of course, this is not clear-cut evidence of inevitable Japan-South Korean reconciliation, but rather an illustration that the soft power initiatives that could potentially turn the tides in this relationship are already beginning to take shape.

73 Ja-hyun Chun, “The Role of Japan’s Civil Society Organizations and the Deteriorating Relationship between Japan and South Korea,” *International Journal* 71, no. 1 (March 2016): 104.

74 Ibid.

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