“Abe’s refusal to engage with S. Korea marks end of Japan’s status as peaceful country,” says Haruki Wada

Japanese historian delivers keynote address at academic conference titled “South Korea-Japan Relations: Beyond ‘Anti-Japan’ and ‘Anti-Korea’”

Haruki Wada, professor emeritus at the University of Tokyo, came out in strong criticism of Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe for his policy of not playing nice with South Korea.

Wada voiced his concerns during the keynote address at an academic conference on Japan held at the conference room of the building of the Korea Federation of Banks, in Seoul, on Aug. 26, which was organized by the Institute for Japanese Studies, at Seoul National University.

“Recently, experts on Japan and government officials have been saying that the 38th parallel is being drawn across the East Sea and that Japan needs to be ready to isolate South Korea and even cut off relations with it. That would mean the dissolution of Japan’s ties in Northeast Asia and the establishment of a maritime bloc between Japan, Taiwan, and the US in opposition to China, Russia, South Korea, and North Korea. In short, Abe’s policy of not dealing with South Korea spells the end of Japan as a peaceful state,” Wada said during the address.

Wada said that Abe’s pursuit of an aggressive stance toward South Korea, including punitive trade measures, could be traced to his resentment about the comfort women agreement with South Korea, which he was pressured to reach by the Obama administration in the US, and by his shock at the Korean Peninsula Peace Process, promoted by the Moon administration in South Korea.

When Abe became prime minister of Japan for the second time on Dec. 26, 2012, he announced that he would issue his own statement, to replace the Kono Statement. But the Obama administration asked Japan to take action on the comfort women issue, leaving Abe with no choice but to initiate secret negotiations with South Korea on that issue in late 2014. That process likely fed into Abe’s resentment of South Korea, Wada contended.

In 2015, a phrase about “sharing basic values such as liberty, democracy, and human rights” was dropped from the section about South Korea in Japan’s diplomatic bluebook. The South Korean and Japanese foreign ministers announced the comfort women agreement in Seoul on Dec. 28, 2015, but Wada said that Abe had “stuck barbs in the agreement that made the South Korean government bleed after swallowing
it.” Abe claimed that the agreement represented a “final solution” despite the lack of any evidence that he was behind it, tenaciously pushed for South Korea to promise not to bring up the issue at international events, and refused to send any message of apology.

Inter-Korean reconciliation and Moon’s attitude toward N. Korea a thorn in Abe’s side

“The inter-Korean summit and the following North Korea-US summit in 2018 delivered a double shock to Abe. The problem was that Moon had brokered the meeting between Trump and Kim and that Trump had immediately accepted without consulting with Abe,” Wada said.

“Moon’s behavior contrasted with Abe’s constant pressure on North Korea over the issue of the Japanese abductees. North Korea’s refusal to negotiate the abductee issue while continuing dialogue with South Korea and the US put Abe into an extremely awkward position.” Abe’s resentment for these changes, Wada believes, eventually led to his punitive trade measures against South Korea.

Wada stressed that there’s no possibility of the Japanese public accepting proposals recently made by some groups in Japan to cut off relations with South Korea or to stabilize relations with China and strengthen the alliance with the US on the grounds that South Korea doesn’t matter.

Wada was one of 79 progressive Japanese intellectuals who released a statement titled “Is South Korea the Enemy?” on July 25, shortly before Japan announced that it was dropping South Korea from its white list of countries that enjoy streamlined screening for exports of strategic materials.

Discussion participants at a Seoul National University Institute for Japanese Studies conference on Aug. 26 at the Korea Federation of Banks building in Seoul’s Myeong-dong neighborhood.

“This crisis should be viewed as a blessing in disguise”

Another speaker at the academic conference, called “South Korea-Japan Relations: Beyond ‘Anti-Japan’ and ‘Anti-Korea,’” was Kim Hyun-chul, director of the Institute for Japanese Studies at Seoul National University and former economic secretary at the Blue House. “Japan’s Ministry of Economy, Trade, and Industry made a mistake with this economic retaliation,” Kim said, emphasizing that this crisis should be viewed as a blessing in disguise, since it offers an opportunity to carry out R&D in parts and materials, develop new industries, and work on the New Southern Policy and the peace economy.

“Samsung and Hyundai, the countries targeted by Japan’s retaliatory measures, are global conglomerates that have superior buying power compared to their mid-sized parts and materials suppliers in Japan. These Japanese companies are expressing their irritation at the Japanese government as they look for ways out of their dilemma, such as building more factories in South Korea and rerouting exports through overseas factories,” Kim said.

“So far, things like shared benefits for large corporations and SMEs, industry/academia/research collaboration by companies and universities, and government fostering of the component and material industries have been discussed, but we need to look at this is a crucial opportunity to address all at once all the things that haven’t been put into practice yet,” Kim said.

“With research and development (R&D) policy, we need to go beyond the existing approach of providing research funding and designate specific material and equipment categories, continuing the R&D all the way up to the development stage and expanding it into other areas,” he advised.

Arguing that Japan’s economic retaliation committed the error of undermining a “Northeast Asian prosperity framework” where South Korea, China, and Japan all gain through a division of labor, Kim proposed that Seoul work to overcome the situation going forward through its New Southern Policy and the inter-Korean peace process.

The incomplete 1965 system

“Seoul’s aim should be to overcome this incomplete 1965 system”

Nam Ki-jeong, a professor at the Seoul National University Institute for Japanese Studies (IJS), stressed that the current crisis is rooted in the so-called “1965 system” based on the Treaty on Basic Relations and Claims Settlement Agreement signed by the two sides in 1965, adding that Seoul’s aim should be to overcome this “incomplete” system and clearly establish the illegal nature of Japan’s colonial occupation of Korea.

“In terms of interpreting the South Korea-Japan Treaty on Basic Relations, the South Korean government is operating on the understanding that the colonial occupation was illegal, while Japan is basing its position on the interpretation of the occupation as having been lawful,” Nam explained.

“That difference was never resolved, and the issue was put to bed with an ‘agreement on the unagreeable,’“ he said.

“But with Japan having already expressed an apology and remorse for the colonial occupation in the Kim Dae-jung/Keizo Obuchi joint statement of 1998, and acknowledged in the Kan Naoto statement of 2010 that the occupation was against the wishes of the Korean people, all that remains is to state the illegality of colonial rule in writing for South Korea and Japan to share,” he suggested.

Nam predicted, “We can enter a new South Korea-Japan relationship by putting the illegality of the colonial occupation in writing and strengthening the foundation for the 1965 system, which is currently being threatened.”
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“If South Korea as well can recognize Japan’s past efforts to apologize for history and the people and government of Japan can accept the illegality of the colonial occupation, we could adopt an approach that doesn’t involve demanding any further compensation," he suggested.

“On that basis, we can move toward a normalization of diplomatic relations between North Korea and Japan and a final resolution of the matter of colonial rule by South and North Korea and Japan," he predicted.

Remarking on the holding of an exhibition of a comfort woman statue at a recently opened triennial event in Japan’s Aichi Prefecture, Kim Hyo-jin, also a professor at IJS, said, "It would be a more persuasive strategy to emphasize the issue of freedom of expression rather than commenting on the Japanese objections to the statue."

“We need to consider whether we aren’t actually providing the anti-Korean contingent in Japan who are using the peace statue as an excuse to attack the exhibition with more of a basis for opposing it the more we emphasize the comfort woman statue," she suggested.

“Japanese civil society remains very strongly resistant to censorship, and this could be crucial basis for solidarity," she stressed.

By Park, Min-hee, staff writer

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