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Japan and South Korea's bilateral relations

A comparative analysis of the role of identity politics in Japan and South Korea's official discourse

Topic and Research Question

Recent years have shown a steady decline in Japan-South Korea relations, with most experts considering 2019 as the all-time low in the post-war era. (Tatsumi, 2021) However, traditional International Relations theories seem to be insufficient in explaining the declining relations, as Japan and South Korea seemingly have a lot in common, from facing the same threats from non-democratic regimes in the region to shared values of democracy and economic cooperation. The general scarcity of research that would focus on these middle powers without setting them as only pawns reacting to larger threats or greater powers suggests an alternate approach might widen the academic understanding of the identity of a country and *how* that identity is first constructed, and later how it influences foreign policy and bilateral relations between countries.

The research question thus stands as: What is the role of identity politics in explaining contemporary Japan-Republic of Korea relations? Given the shared history of the two countries that are the focus of this thesis, their geographical proximity and their need to respond to similar challenges in their setting, this thesis aimed to contribute to poststructuralist research on identity politics and its power to change foreign policy.

State of the Art

When it comes to Japan-South Korea bilateral relations, it has been the subject of analysis in realist research mostly in a larger scope of either the power triangle between the US, Japan and South Korea, with regard to the rise of China, or as a bilateral relation in the face of North Korean threats. (Glosserman and Snyder 2015, Cha 1999)

In contrast, liberal scholars focus on factors like economic cooperation, international institutions and democratization. (Friedberg 2005, 12) Katagiri (2018) posits that Japan would find China, Russia and North Korea as possible threats, and strive to find solutions through international organizations, trade, investment and promoting democratic values in cooperation with other democracies in the region. (Katagiri 2018, 327) However, relations between Japan and South Korea are declining, despite all the supposed factors that should bring them together.

With the insufficient explanations coming from traditional IR theories, constructivist scholars suggest alternative ways to study Japan-South Korea relations. Son (2014) calls for a deeper analysis of identities and norms that middle powers adhere to and highlights constructivist views on why Japan-South Korea relations have been called only a "virtual alliance" at best. (Son 2014, 91-92) Deacon (2021) also calls for more research in critical constructivist or poststructuralist realm to analyze Japan-South Korea's relations. (Deacon 2021, 3-4)

Methodology and Approach

As this thesis derived from poststructuralist thought, similarly, the epistemic goal of this thesis was to add to research that studies the processes that have an effect on Japan-South Korea relations, particularly the way that discursive acts construct a national identity which in turn influences foreign policy. This was done by using a three level eclectic analytical framework.

The first level is based on Wodak's (2009) Critical Discourse analysis, particularly the macro level, which is made up of strategies of identity construction and the argumentation schemes (topoi) that are used to implement these strategies. The second level of analysis is the self-identification of a country, which influences the interest of the country, which then determines its foreign policy. This is based on Wendt's (1999) classification of identity into four types, however, based on Ku (2016), only role identity and type identity were used, as these are most relevant to this particular case. The third level of analysis is Tekin's (2010) three level Othering analysis – the axiological, praxeological and epistemic. Only the first two were used in this thesis, as the epistemic level has little explanatory value in the context of this thesis.

The design of the research is based on Hansen (2006) and his model of comparing discursive encounters between the Self and their Other, and in addition the Other's "counter-construction" of Self and Other within a discursive encounter. This is done across two main cases: the trade dispute and the comfort women issue combined with the issue of forced labor during the war. Each event then had multiple discourse encounters included and analyzed.

Main Facts

In the case of the trade dispute, South Korea used

discursive strategies to portray itself as a victim of Japan's aggression. South Korea adopted the so-called role identity, which is threatened by the Other and must employ policies to protect itself. The axiological level of analysis showed that the value assigned to Japan was negative, and that of an aggressor who is repeating the same mistakes of the past. Japan constructed their identity as that of a rational country, operating strictly within the constraints of international law and treating South Korea as any other of their partners. Over time, Japan's position became more aggravated, and Japan began outright accusing South Korea of breaching international law. Japan thus also adopted its role identity, with the intent to "save face" and where the value of the Other is negative, as South Korea was portrayed as irrational and emotional.

In the case of discourses centered around the comfort women issue and the forced labor issue, Japan was framed as the aggressor, unable to learn from past mistakes and refusing to apologize. South Korea again adopted its role identity, with the intent of protecting both its ontological and traditional security, and its perception of Japan was negative and the praxeological level would show distancing and confrontational behavior. Japan showed a slight change in rhetoric in 2015, with the official apology for its war crimes, however as South Korea later denounced the 2015 agreement, hostile discourse resurfaced again and Japan constructed its own identity as the rational country, and maintained the position that the issue had been resolved "finally and irreversibly" in the 2015 agreement. Both countries thus persisted to adopt their role identities, and framing the Other as negative.

Results

The analysis showed a trend of identity influencing policy and vice-versa, which fits into poststructuralist thought and the concept of constitutive identity. Perhaps the most interesting part of this analysis, is the fact that a trade dispute should exist within the realm of economic policies but instead, it was used as a portrayal of Japanese aggression in the framing of Japan by South Korea. Meaning that even in a matter that did not have anything to do with Japan and South Korea's ongoing issues regarding their past (that of a colonizer and colonized), the historical problem of Japanese colonization was persistent in the way that South Korea portrayed Japan.

These findings correspond with the poststructuralist premise of this thesis. Furthermore, identities of both countries proved to be fluid, constructed through discourse but also subject to change through discursive acts. An example of this was a shift in foreign policy of South Korea towards Japan in 2018, when South Korea's new Foreign minister denounced the 2015 agreement with Japan, and both countries shifted back into uncooperative behavior. The identity had an influence on foreign policies of the countries, which in turn influenced identity again, proving a constitutive relationship between them.

This thesis thus contributed to explaining how identities of countries are constructed, and changed through discourse, and how the identity influences foreign policy. Future implications might include a need for more research done in the poststructuralist realm, to explain strained bilateral relations between countries that, by all accounts, should be cooperative, and a need to broaden the scope of discourse analyses, either by analyzing original texts, not translations, or by including other actors besides political elites.

References

All references can be found in the full version of the MA thesis available at <http://othes.univie.ac.at>.

About the Author

Miriama Gombíková holds a Bc. in East Asian studies and Japanese language from the Comenius University in Bratislava, Slovakia. She also completed a year abroad studying Japanese and International Relations at Ryukoku University in Kyoto, Japan. She is currently based in Bratislava.



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