

This opinion piece by PCI Board co-founder, Spencer Kim, appeared in the WorldPost on Wednesday, August 14, 2019

A Bitter Pill for South Korea and Japan

Peacefully resolved, today's dispute could be a catharsis in which both sides come to grips with the past.

AUGUST 14, 2019 [SPENCER KIM](#)

THEWORLDPOST

Spencer Kim is chairman and CEO of CBOL Corporation, a California aerospace company, and co-founder of the nonprofit Pacific Century Institute, which fosters understanding among the peoples of the Pacific Rim.



South Koreans participate in a rally to denounce Japan's new trade restrictions on South Korea. August 13, 2019 in Seoul, South Korea. (Chung Sung-Jun/Getty)

For the last few weeks, Korea and Japan have been involved in a very ugly dispute. Last Saturday, thousands of people [marched](#) through Seoul, protesting what they called an “economic invasion” of the peninsula by its island neighbor. Last month, citing “national security,” Japan [restricted](#) exports of chemicals to South Korea that are vital for its giant electronics companies like Samsung. Since then, many South Koreans have [boycotted](#) Japanese products and companies, and this week, the South Korean government [announced](#) it would remove Japan from its “white list” of trusted trading partners.

To many outsiders, the dispute between the two countries — both allies of the United States and hosts to American troops — must seem a confusing, self-destructive confrontation. (Last week, President Donald Trump [said](#) the two countries should “sit down and get along with each other.”) But the tit-for-tat dispute is rooted in old history: hard feelings (in Korea) about Japan's brutal colonization of the peninsula and a desire (in Japan) to pass over or even justify its expansionist past.

Peacefully resolved, this dispute could be a catharsis in which both sides come to grips with the past; this would require each to swallow a bitter pill of self-evaluation. Then, they could jointly prepare for a daunting and challenging future as neighbors in one of the world's most dynamic regions.

What is that future? Korea and Japan must be able to clearly see ahead:

- The rise of China as a political, military and economic power — and its vision as a preeminent regional power willing to use its power in raw ways to influence the countries on its periphery — will become the dominant security issue for North and South Korea as well as Japan.
- The post-World War II order, in which the U.S. was sucked into a vacuum in Northeast Asia and created a security architecture based on its nuclear umbrella, will come to an end, either slowly or abruptly. The U.S. remains, as it always will, 5,000 miles away. Trump has asked the first questions about the utility of America's role in the region. As economic and military power equations shift, the U.S. role will increasingly be reevaluated.
- The “third industrial revolution” is going to transform the economics and society of the region. Artificial intelligence, 5G telecom, faster connections between things and people, automation, 3-D printing, genetic engineering, climate change and big data will require intricate supply chains, excellent education and rapid feedback loops.
- Both Japan and Korea face an [aging population trend](#). Japan also has a government debt of [237 percent](#) of gross domestic product, by far the highest in the G20 (for comparison, the United States is at 106 percent and South Korea 40 percent.) Social and economic distribution policies in both countries need to be addressed creatively.

South Korean President Moon Jae-in is often [portrayed](#) by his conservative domestic opponents as bumbling through this Japan dispute, driven by emotion rather than strategic vision. But I would argue that he knows full well that South Korea, if it is to prepare for its future, has to take the initiative now to demonstrate it is an equal to Japan and not to be bullied. Passiveness or reactivity will not do.

In dealing with North Korea, Moon's policy of first peace, then integration, is driven more by pragmatism than nostalgia. So are his attempts to transform South Korea's economy to emphasize small and medium businesses and to establish an economic vitality independent of the *chaebols* — the large business conglomerates that make up an outsized portion of the national GDP but often curtail the creativeness and competitiveness of smaller enterprises that will be needed as the technological landscape changes. If Korea and Japan are ever to be the pillars of a Northeast Asian security architecture that maximizes their political and economic dynamism and their independence from Chinese domination, they will have to do so as equal partners focused on symbiotic goals and cooperating with each other. Korea can no longer be perceived as Japan's inferior, either in Japanese or Korean eyes.

“If Korea and Japan are ever to be the pillars of a Northeast Asian security architecture, Korea can no longer be perceived as Japan's inferior, either in Japanese or Korean eyes.”

But to fully get the past behind them, Koreans will have to eventually come to the bitter realization that their own leaders at the end of the 19th century — preoccupied with squabbling and factionalism and lacking the vision to see the full impact of modernization — were culpable in making their country weak and ripe for Japanese colonization. That mistake of factionalism — even the factionalism of north-south — cannot be repeated if Korea is to be strong enough to influence events to its own benefit.

In Japan, much is made of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's [desire](#) to replace the country's post-World War II pacifism with military normalization. Indeed, if Japan is to prepare for a future where hard truths prevail, it will need the full panoply of economic, political, diplomatic and military tools available to other developed countries. And if Japan is to be Korea's future partner, Korea will need a fully equipped Japan.

But Abe's path to military normalization, as currently defined, is fundamentally diseased. And only bitter medicine can cure it. Japan was morally and pragmatically wrong to embark on its policy of imperialistic expansion in the first half of the 20th century. Abe and his conservative supporters [want to argue](#) that somehow Japan had the moral right to do what it did, and its only mistake was a pragmatic one — taking on a foe too powerful — and that the colonization of Korea, the original sin on the imperial march, was somehow justified by Korean weakness.

Abe and his allies are tired of South Korea's historical complaints. The current Korean resistance to the lingering sense of some Japanese that its historical imperialism was justified is [galling](#) to many in Japan. However, for those who want to remember the imperial past nostalgically, the bitter pill has to be taken. If Korea and Japan are to maximize a future in which they are inextricably interwoven by geography and economy, everyone in Japan has to realize their Korean partners will have to be their equals in the venture.

The Russians have an old proverb: "Forget the past and lose an eye; dwell on the past and lose both eyes." It is very important to remember, meanwhile, that the future always comes whether you're ready or not, whether you want it or not. Korea and Japan need both eyes open.