



Korea and Japan: Decisive Political Turns¹

William H. Overholt

Copyright ©William H. Overholt, 2010

Contrasting political events in Korea and Japan underline a fundamental shift. Korea is rising. Japan continues to fall. In Japan four prime ministers have resigned in four years, and public support for the Democratic Party of Japan at 14% signifies repudiation of the second ruling party in eight months. In Korea, two solid parties reached a standoff in mid-term elections that normally go overwhelmingly to the opposition. Hatoyama's fumbling of the Futenma base controversy and Korean cohesion after North Korea sank the ship Cheonan are only ripples on top of deeper tidal movements. South Korea's leaders have been coaxing a reluctant public into the modern world while Japan's leaders have been cultivating reactionary interest groups and cosseting bad habits.

A dozen years ago both Japan and South Korea were melting down financially. Both had low birth rates and prospective population declines. Homogeneous populations displayed an insular mentality that endangered their previous success because of competition from more cosmopolitan societies like China and India in an increasingly globalized world. In both, traditional Confucian paternalism kept women largely out of the work force. Korea was poorer and had deeper social and economic problems, as well as the special problem of North Korea.

From their weaker position, however, Korean leaders have dragged their country forward while Japanese leaders have not. Koizumi reformed sufficiently to avert Japanese economic catastrophe and got strong public support in an election that repudiated opponents of reform. But his successors empowered the most reactionary factions of his party under Abe and Aso, eschewed further fundamental reforms, and re-employed legislators earlier expelled for opposing reform. Koizumi's success, despite his threats to "destroy the LDP," entrenched a corrupt dominant party for additional years. When the LDP finally fell in 2009, the successor Democratic Party of Japan repudiated Koizumi's most fundamental reform, the curtailment of the Postal Savings Bank that channeled the country's savings into wasteful patronage projects, and eloquently denounced globalization at a time when Japan desperately needed stimulating connections to a globalized world.

By contrast, in Korea Kim Dae Jung's successors have built on his reforms. Korea evolved into a true competitive democracy, with an actively engaged citizenry goading parties that presented coherent alternatives while old interest groups dominated Japanese politics and citizens remained largely devoid of policy influence.

Unlike post-Koizumi Japanese leaders, Korean presidents have steadily pressed economic reform on a reluctant public. Unlike Japan, the former Hermit Kingdom has gradually accepted globalization. With a fertility rate of only 1.1, against 2.1 needed for demographic stability, Korea has enriched its labor force with Vietnamese, Pakistanis, Indians, Filipinos and Central Asians. Large numbers of science and technology Ph.D.s have helped turn Korea into a regional research and development center; over 85% of Korean professors at top universities have Ph.D.s from the U.S. High quality medical care and a cosmopolitan outlook have expanded medical tourism. Meanwhile Japan strongly resists the imperative to import foreign workers, and advanced foreign degrees can hinder a Japanese career. The number of Japanese students and scholars abroad is miniscule compared to Koreans, Chinese and Indians.

¹ This is the original text of an article that was abridged and published in the South China Morning Post (SCMP) on June 7, 2010. SCMP did not get the abridgement or title approved by me.



THE OVERHOLT GROUP
Strategies for Asia
WWW.OVERHOLTGROUP.COM

Two decades ago Korea was the world's greatest bastion of male chauvinism. Men lorded it over their wives. Few women held high business or government positions. The government ended official conferences with kisaeng parties where attractive young women fed men their dinners and then played erotic games. But, starting about 15 years ago, the government vigorously empowered women. A new inheritance law gave women equal rights. Quotas provided women a foothold in key parts of the power structure; they organized themselves and fully exploited the opportunity. Large numbers of highly skilled women entering the workforce have enhanced economic growth. Kisaeng parties have (regrettably, for this writer) largely disappeared, while some women's groups have quietly organized mirror-image versions where men serve them. Meanwhile, despite some progress, the Japanese workplace remains organized in such a way that Japanese women who want a career must largely eschew family life.

Wide-ranging consequences follow. Korea has stable, purposeful government, while Japan has a revolving door and directionless leadership. A Korean economy that many once feared would become the highly compressed meat in a sandwich between giant neighbors China and Japan has instead used its relationship with China to begin eating Japan's lunch. Hyundai cars are displacing Toyotas at the top of the reliability charts. Samsung and Apple are crushing Sony. Samsung computer chips are overshadowing Japanese IT competitors. China can't begin to approach Korean levels in research and development, patents, and sophisticated services. New Korean firms are becoming important players; E.Land, with 3200 outlets in China, has become the leading purveyor of women's fashion there. Korean classical musicians are everywhere. In Asia a "Korean Wave" leads women to mimic the appearance of Korean actresses.

Korea's gradual, globalizing success is also altering geopolitics. At the beginning of this decade, the Bush administration tried to restore Japan's role as the fulcrum of all U.S. foreign policy in Asia while conversely the Rumsfeld Pentagon dismissed Korea with contempt. Today nobody makes that mistake. Public support South Korea a solid, albeit opinionated, ally that keeps its commitments. It is actually revising its agreement with the U.S. to prolong American operational control of its armed forces in time of war. South Korea's rising influence is as consequential as Japan's decline.

*William H. Overholt is Senior Research Fellow at Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government and author most recently of **Asia, America and the Transformation of Geopolitics**.*