

Notes on Strategy

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Mines for UNESCO World Heritage Designation

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Historical Memory and Collective Reconciliation: Implications of Japan's Nomination of the Sado Mines for UNESCO World Heritage Designation

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On February 2, 2022, the Japanese government nominated the gold mines on Sado Island in Niigata Prefecture for inscription on the UNESCO World Heritage List. In pursuing world heritage status for Sado Island, Japan resorted to the expedient method of omitting its dark imperial history. The Japanese government also limited its historical depiction of the Sado mines to pre-1864, as a heritage of the Edo shogunate. In fact, approximately 2,000 Koreans were forced into hard labor at the Sado mines, and Japan's deliberate elision of such negative traces from its wartime past will serve as another flash point of conflict between Korea and Japan. Two years ago, Japan sought World Heritage status for sites from its Meiji Industrial Revolution, including the Hashima Island coal mine and Nagasaki Shipyard. Its nomination was accepted by UNESCO on the condition that Japan would faithfully depict the full history of these sites, including its wartime abuse of forced laborers. UNESCO's emphasis on the importance of balanced historical description is in tandem with its effort to illuminate past atrocities and unjust behaviors of imperial countries, and also prevent the repetition of such actions. In other words, history education

is perceived as the new foundation for reconciliation, cooperation and communication between countries. However, as witnessed in Japan's partial historical presentation of the Nagasaki Shipyard, UNESCO's noble intentions are at times unreciprocated in the real world. Therefore, there is a need to reconsider the implications of such practices in the context of international politics.

The collapse of Cold War bipolarity based on ideological conflicts brought about a heightened global uncertainty, and past history (collective historical memory) became the bedrock for reshaping the future vision of the global community. The Sado mines have global political significance as historic sites that can provide a shared foundation of knowledge for Korea and Japan. Historical disputes, either domestic or international, must be recognized as important political means for restoring divided and fragmented social communities by reshaping a constructive vision for the future. Rather than viewing historical debates as negative conflicts or issues to avoid, we must perceive them as a formative process for resocialization and thus, become more actively engaged in reconstructing the past.

History as an important means to mitigate political uncertainty

Increased political volatility and uncertainty after the end of the Cold War gave rise to implacable confrontations between Korea and Japan on historical issues such as comfort women

and forced labor. There have been continuous efforts to resolve historical conflicts and reinterpret history as an attempt to transform the divided community of both countries into a new community with shared normative values, interests and identity. Koreans widely view Japan as a belligerent country owing to the history of violence and pillage by imperial Japan that occurred a century ago, and the sexual slavery and forced drafting of laborers that was carried out under wartime Japan. This hostile image makes it difficult for Koreans to overcome their anxiety about the prospect of Japan's imperial resurgence.

Against this backdrop, relations between Korea and Japan have increasingly been characterized by conflict and tension since the advent of the administration of Shinzo Abe, which strived to legalize collective self-defense rights, abrogate the prohibition on military exports, and revise the nation's Peace Constitution. In addition, the increase in hostility, conflict, competition, and uncertainty brought about by imperial Japan's history of aggression requires a new public knowledge base for the reconciliation, cooperation and stability of the East Asian region. Shared memory serves as a key component of such public knowledge.

A shared knowledge of history constitutes nonviolent means for overcoming the mutual distrust of Korea and Japan in relation to identity, interests and intentions, and also for escaping the vicious cycle of uncertainty. This would entail the reconstruction of public memory. Notwithstanding the

democratic peace theory that democracies do not go to war with one other, there exists an implicit possibility of armed conflict between Korea and Japan near Dokdo Island. While Japan is acknowledged as a democracy by global society, oddly enough, such recognition has had little impact in steering Korea-Japan relations on a cooperative path of peace and stability.

After witnessing slavery in the US, sharp racial conflicts in South Africa, and genocide in Rwanda, global society has recognized and systemized historical truth and historical sharing (historical investigation and reflection to reveal the wrongdoers and their actions) as an important tool for restorative justice, reconciliation, and cooperation. In other words, the clarification of historical truth and the resulting accumulation of historical knowledge shared by global society constitute an important mechanism for the stability of the international system. The shared recognition of a historical experience by two countries provides a framework that enables a particular country to better understand the counterpart and its intentions, and also predict its future actions which are necessary in a diplomatically volatile relationship.

Is it impossible for the Sado mines to become a symbol of reconciliation and cooperation?

It is difficult to efface the impression that Japan, in its bid to have world heritage status conferred on the Sado mines,

excluded its 20th century imperial heritage as a means to avoid sharp escalation in the historical conflicts between Korea and Japan. When a certain group resorts to narrowing its historical perspective to a specific period, it is highly likely the group in question will undergo the exclusive process of creating a future that reflects the group's intended image of the past. This signals the start of a distorted process that incapacitates the democratic principle of checks and balances, which should have been practiced by the Japanese citizens during its past imperial process. A history shared by all the parties involved requires the establishment of a normative standard of mutual legitimacy with an equal assessment of each party at the same level, without one party owning a forgotten historical memory. Attempts to induce a selective memory of a certain period make it difficult to convert historical memories into shared knowledge.

The history of the Sado mines is an important educational site that elucidates the rightful and wrongful behaviors of a country in our global society. Japan is simultaneously constituted of its modernization heritage, which it remembers with pride, and also its past actions of human rights abuse and democratic disruptions. Koreans and other Asians that were suppressed and forced into labor at the hands of imperial Japan comprise a historical aspect, albeit a grim one, of the Sado mines that are ostensibly a source of national pride. Such ambivalent sites of history must serve as a venue for public education and shared history in order for

Korea and Japan to establish collective identity and interests with equal benefits. That is to say, both countries can participate in the process of securing the historical legitimacy of each other's claims and intentions. The process would of course entail an in-depth search for truth through historical debates to gain acknowledgement of historical legitimacy from members of global society. This process is essentially the way shared knowledge and norms are established.

The rise of China and US-China rivalry, the end of the Cold War, North Korea's nuclear development, disruptions in the global supply chain and intense economic competition engendered by the COVID-19 pandemic have all heightened uncertainty in the East Asian region. In addition, Japan's economic crisis — referred to as the “lost decades” — and its relative decline in regional leadership, coupled with South Korea's economic development and political and military growth, have increased the need for a new order in East Asia. Amidst such political instability, the Sado mines should be established as a historic site for reconciliation and communication that presents future norms, values and visions to be shared by global society. This could be fostered through discussions on the historical truth of the Sado mines, and by including all of those who played a part in the history of Sado. The discussions should aim to determine the wrongdoers, the extent of their (unjust) actions, and the victims of such wrongdoings. The true significance of UNESCO's World Heritage designations lies in fostering sites for historical reconciliation and global communication.