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**Japan and South Korea:**  
From Adrift, Crisis to Reset

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## Introduction

Japan and the Korean Peninsula endured a fraught history marked by colonial domination under the guise of Japan's annexation of Korea between 1910 and 1945. With the culmination of World War II in Japan's defeat and the consequent liberation of the Korean Peninsula, the latter was subsequently divided into North and South. Against the backdrop of the Korean War (1950–1953), Japan signed the San Francisco Peace Treaty in 1951 and later, as part of the postwar settlement process, finally entered into diplomatic normalization with the Republic of Korea (hereafter, South Korea) in 1965 after almost 14 years of negotiations. It is also important to note the instrumental role played by the United States, an ally to both nations, in fostering collaboration both bilaterally between Japan and South Korea, as well as trilaterally among Japan, South Korea, and the US.

In recent years, Japan-South Korea relations have plummeted to what has been characterized as their “postwar low.” However, in this context, the term “postwar” refers to the period following the 1965 normalization of diplomatic relations between the two countries. The postwar relationship between the two can be delineated into three distinct phases: a “foundation” phase grounded in the Cold War-era Treaty on Basic Relations Between Japan and the Republic of Korea concluded in 1965 (first phase), a post-Cold War phase of “development”

marked by the Japan-South Korea Joint Declaration of 1998 (second phase), and, lastly, a phase of “drift and disarray” in the post-Joint Declaration era (2000s–2010s) (third phase).

The latter half of the third phase, characterized by drift and disarray into the second decade of the 2010s, culminated in an outright “crisis.” The legal foundation established during the 1965 normalization of diplomatic relations (Japan-Republic of Korea Claims Agreement) was shaken, and without a comprehensive vision or action plan like the 1998 Joint Declaration, the relationship began to drift. Structures built since the post-Cold War 1990s were systematically undermined. Historical grievances (particularly disputes over the plight of “comfort women” and wartime labor) resurfaced, spilling over into the security and economic arenas. The most forward-looking developments were social and cultural exchanges on the part of younger generations centered on pop cultural elements like manga, films, and literature, which began to flourish with South Korea's relaxation of restrictions on Japanese mass culture in 1998. Politics, however, has not kept pace. Nevertheless, as of 2022, Japan-South Korea relations have begun to mend and improve, suggesting that the relationship could be characterized as having entered a fourth “reset” phase in the 2020s.

In this article, I begin with an overview of the recent trajectory of Japan-South

Korea relations, specifically, the tumultuous third phase characterized by “drift and disarray” during the Abe (or Abe-Suga) era of the 2010s. The second administration of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe (2012–2020) and the subsequent tenure of Yoshihide Suga (2020–2021) confronted some of the most challenging moments in bilateral ties between the two countries. In South Korea, conservative and progressive forces remain in a closely contested balance. Throughout the Abe-Suga period, Japan engaged with both the conservative leadership of Park Geun-hye (2012–2017) and the progressive administration of Moon Jae-in (2017–2022). Although both the Park and Moon governments clashed with Japan over historical issues, the years from 2018 to 2019 under Abe and Moon were particularly contentious, with disputes extending beyond historical grievances to encompass security and economic confrontations. This escalation was largely a consequence of negative linkage politics pursued by both sides, culminating in a complex diplomatic crisis. Such was the gravity of these frictions that the postwar bilateral relationship was feared to be on the brink of collapse, marking it as an unparalleled nadir in postwar bilateral relations.

In the subsequent section, which surveys the current situation and contemporary challenges, I delve into the relationship as it stands in the 2020s, specifically in the years following the Abe-Suga era, under the stewardship of Prime Minister Kishida. October 2021 saw the advent

of a new Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) administration led by Fumio Kishida. Although the LDP is fundamentally a party that aligns with conservative ideologies, Kishida, although he previously served as the Foreign Minister during Abe’s second tenure as prime minister, belongs to a political lineage that diverges from Abe. Whereas Abe hailed from the Seiwakai faction influenced by Nobusuke Kishi, Kishida, in contrast, comes from the Kouchikai faction, which is in the liberal lineage of former Prime Minister Shigeru Yoshida. While firmly grounded in the realism of the LDP, Kishida seeks to mend relations with Japan’s Asian neighbors.

On the other side, in South Korea, the March 2022 presidential election saw the victory of the conservative People Power Party candidate, former prosecutor Yoon Suk Yeol. Since assuming power that May, the Yoon administration has ardently pursued the reinvigoration of US-South Korea and Japan-South Korea ties. Initially cautious, Kishida has nevertheless displayed a positive inclination towards dialogue, earnestly advancing rapprochement with South Korea. The concerted efforts of leaders from both nations led to President Yoon’s state visit to Japan on March 16, 2023 a significant milestone that coincided with the resumption of bilateral summit talks in Tokyo after a 12-year hiatus. Barely two months later, on May 7, Prime Minister Kishida reciprocated with a visit to South Korea, re-establishing shuttle diplomacy between the two neighbors. In mid-May,

in the run-up to the G7 Hiroshima Summit, President Yoon, as an invitee, visited Japan, providing an opportunity for trilateral dialogues among Japan, South Korea, and the US.

As described above, the Japan-South Korea summit between Kishida and Yoon March 2023 signaled that postwar Japan-South Korea relations have entered a fourth phase characterized by re-engagement and reconciliation, one that seeks a renewed architecture for bilateral ties in a new era. In this article, after reviewing the trajectory of Japan-South Korea relations and contemporary challenges, I will examine prospects for the 2020s.

### **Recent trajectories: Japan-South Korea relations in the Abe-Suga/Park-Moon era (2012–2022): Drift, disarray, and crisis**

During the Abe-Suga era, specifically under the administration of Shinzo Abe (December 2012 to September 2020) and Yoshihide Suga (September 2020 to October 2021), Japan-South Korea relations encountered one of its most challenging eras as the two Prime Ministers interacted with two distinct South Korean administrations, namely the conservative leadership of Park Geun-hye (February 2013 to March 2017) and the more progressive regime of Moon Jae-in (May 2017 to May 2022).

#### **(1) The Abe/Park era (2012–2017)**

During the Abe/Park era, both Japanese and South Korean leaders hailed from conservative political backgrounds, fostering hopes among some for a rapprochement in bilateral relations. Prime Minister Abe's grandfather, Prime Minister Nobusuke Kishi, and his uncle, Prime Minister Eisaku Sato, along with President Park Geun-hye's father, President Park Chung-hee, were instrumental in normalizing diplomatic relations between Japan and South Korea. With the backing of the United States, progress was made in the trilateral security cooperation between Japan, the US, and South Korea in connection with North Korea. Nevertheless, disagreements over historical grievances precluded strategic harmony from the very outset.

Firstly, regarding strategic and security cooperation, in December 2013, the second Abe Cabinet was the first to formulate a National Security Strategy. Positioning South Korea as a security cooperation partner of paramount importance, immediately following the US in rank, the strategy signaled a keen interest in nurturing Japan-South Korea ties. However, South Korea's strategy prioritized US-China relations, with President Park choosing to visit China immediately after the US, resulting in the relegation of Japan to a secondary position to China for the first time. Conversely, with the advent of the Kim Jong-un regime and the advancement of

North Korea's nuclear and missile development, the US Obama administration took the lead in promoting Japan-US-South Korea security cooperation. As a result, in 2014, the three countries signed the Trilateral Information Sharing Arrangement (TISA), a mechanism brokered by the US for Japan and South Korea to indirectly share information on North Korean missiles. This agreement was set to evolve into the Japan-South Korea General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA).

However, historical grievances served as significant obstacles to advancing the relationship. During the Park administration, several points of contention arose, notably Prime Minister Abe's December 2013 visit to the Yasukuni Shrine and his August 2015 statement on the 70th anniversary of the end of World War II (the Abe Statement). Nonetheless, the most significant challenge was formulating a response to the comfort women issue, whose re-emergence was precipitated by a ruling by the Constitutional Court of the Republic of Korea in August 2011. From the perspective of the Japanese government, the involvement of the Japanese military had already been acknowledged in 1993 under the Miyazawa administration, with a statement issued by Chief Cabinet Secretary Yohei Kono (the Kono Statement). Furthermore, the Asian Women's Fund was jointly established in 1995 as a government-civilian initiative intended to facilitate programs to provide compensation to former comfort women

from countries including South Korea, Taiwan, the Philippines, Indonesia, and the Netherlands, lasting until 2007.

Unsatisfied with these efforts, however, several South Korean civic groups initiated lawsuits in a movement that soon gained international traction, with advocacy at the United Nations and in the US, leading to the 2011 Constitutional Court ruling in South Korea, which urged a more proactive response from the South Korean government. In the face of this issue, the Abe and Park administrations found themselves mired in a contentious relationship from the outset. Nevertheless, in 2014, the Abe administration decided to uphold the Kono Statement. Subsequently, in December 2015, Foreign Ministers Yun Byung-se and Fumio Kishida (then a member of Abe's Cabinet) reached a new agreement on the comfort women issue.

These efforts to resolve historical disputes led to further advancements in security cooperation. The US Obama administration, seeking to bolster dialogue between Japan and South Korea, played a mediating role, most notably during the trilateral summit on the sidelines of the Nuclear Security Summit in Hague in March 2014. The Obama administration also backed the 2015 comfort women agreement, and the Japan-South Korea GSOMIA was finally ratified by the end of 2016. Pursuant to the comfort women agreement, the Reconciliation and Healing

Foundation was established in 2016, modeled after initiatives in Germany and other countries, with the intention that this foundation would oversee collaborative projects between Japan and South Korea. However, the execution of this agreement was interrupted midway when, in March 2017, President Park Geun-hye was impeached before completing her term.

### **(2) The Abe-Suga/Moon era (2017-2022)**

The tenuous restoration of Japan-South Korea relations, accomplished with so much effort, faced new challenges with the inauguration of the progressive Moon Jae-in administration in May 2017, plunging the relationship into what has been called a “postwar low.” The situation was further exacerbated by US President Donald Trump, inaugurated in January 2017, and his perceived neglect of alliances and Japan-US-South Korean collaboration.

The Abe/Moon era grappled with three central issues: North Korea, historical grievances, and strategic challenges. The North Korean issue was the most pressing concern. The Kim Jong-un regime’s nuclear testing and its first intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) launch test in 2017 triggered the third North Korean nuclear and missile crisis. While on the surface, the Japan-US-South Korea collaboration seemed intact, the reality was a relationship of

shared space but divergent dreams. Adhering to the so-called “Three No’s” policy reportedly conveyed to China that same year, the Moon administration distanced itself from the US-South Korea missile defense, including Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD), as well as from Japan-US-South Korea military cooperation. From 2018 to 2019, historic first-time summit-level talks between President Trump and Chairman Kim Jong-un took place on three occasions (in Singapore, Hanoi, and Panmunjom), facilitated by President Moon. The Moon administration took the initiative in convening three Inter-Korean Summits in April, May and September 2018, consistently pushing for a dialogue-based approach. In contrast, while not outrightly rejecting dialogue, the Abe administration maintained a pressure-oriented stance towards North Korea, urging President Trump to adopt a more cautious approach. While the Trump administration tackled North Korea employing both dialogue and pressure, substantive results in denuclearization remained elusive.

Beyond their approach to North Korea policy, a growing chasm between Japan and South Korea became particularly conspicuous in matters of historical grievances and strategic issues. The bilateral relationship from 2018 to 2019 moved beyond mere drift and disarray and into a state of crisis. Born out of the negative linkage politics that both nations unfurled, this was a multifaceted diplomatic crisis spanning historical,

economic, and security dimensions.

The discord between Japan and South Korea stemmed once again from historical grievances. In January 2018, President Moon Jae-in articulated his position on the comfort women issue. Espousing a victim-centered approach, he revisited the 2015 comfort women agreement. While professing respect for the agreement, the South Korean government effectively neutralized it by dissolving the Reconciliation and Healing Foundation, which had been funded in part by the Japanese government. Subsequently, the issue of wartime laborers resurfaced. At the end of October 2018, South Korea's Supreme Court rendered a verdict on the matter, instructing related Japanese companies to pay damages to former wartime laborers. The Japanese government holds the view that claims, including those from wartime laborers, were "finally and irrevocably settled" with the 1965 Claims Agreement, a perspective affirmed by South Korea's Roh Moo-hyun administration in 2005. The Japanese government viewed the South Korean Supreme Court's decision as a "violation of international law," one that, if enforced, would prompt Japan to resort to retaliatory measures. South Korea thus found itself caught between a rock and a hard place, obligated to honor both the 1965 Korea-Japan Treaty and South Korea's Supreme Court ruling.

Further exacerbating Japan-South Korea relations was an incident between their

militaries in 2018. In early October, the entry of a Japanese Maritime Self-Defense Force vessel into Busan was refused for the first time. The maritime ensign it had traditionally flown, which by rights should be respected under international law, sparked controversy when it came under opposition from South Korean civic groups for evoking wartime memories of the Rising Sun flag. In a subsequent incident in December of the same year, a South Korean naval vessel allegedly directed its radar at a Japanese P-3C patrol aircraft, which escalated into a diplomatic row between the two nations. In other words, historical grievances and diplomatic mistrust had spilled over into the sphere of Japan-South Korea defense cooperation.

The strategic divide between Japan and South Korea deepened. As the strategic competition between the US and China, economic and technological security concerns, and the Indo-Pacific Strategy and the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QSD; encompassing Japan, the US, Australia, and India, often referred to as Quad), came into sharper focus, the Moon administration advanced its own New Southern Policy. Nevertheless, it maintained a deliberate distance from both the US-China rivalry and the Indo-Pacific Strategy, thereby widening the gap with Japan. In December 2018, during Japan's review of its National Defense Program Guidelines, South Korea's ranking as a security partner (outside the context of the Japan-US alliance) was downgraded from first

place (as per the 2013 National Security Strategy) to fourth, trailing Australia, India, and ASEAN. While this modification primarily reflected Japan's strategic pivot towards the Indo-Pacific Strategy, the influence of the Japan-South Korea discord cannot be denied.

The distrust between Japan and Korea eventually escalated into a diplomatic crisis from the summer to autumn of 2019. That summer, the Abe administration announced a strengthening of export controls targeting South Korea. In July, regulations were tightened on strategic materials related to semiconductor manufacturing, and in August, South Korea was removed from Japan's so-called whitelist. From Japan's perspective, these were measures concerning economic security and export control and did not violate World Trade Organization (WTO) rules. However, the sudden manner of the announcement of these measures, coupled with statements by certain Japanese politicians linking them to historical disputes, bred misunderstanding in South Korea. As a countermeasure, the Moon administration decided to sue Japan at the WTO, downgraded Japan in its own export control categories, and even advocated for the termination of the Japan-South Korea GSOMIA. The Trump administration, which had previously been on the sidelines, intervened proactively in light of the GSOMIA issue. In November of the same year, with US mediation, South Korea "temporarily" suspended the termination of

GSOMIA, and Japan agreed to take part in dialogues concerning export controls. Consequently, Japan-South Korea export control dialogues (at the Director-General level) took place in December 2019 and March 2020. However, South Korea's hopes of being reinstated on the whitelist remained unfulfilled, leading to the discontinuation of the dialogues in May.

As detailed above, although the immediate crisis was averted, the Japan-South Korea relationship reverted once more to a state of drift, compounded by the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020. In August 2020, Prime Minister Abe, citing health concerns, unexpectedly announced his resignation, prompting the subsequent inauguration of the Yoshihide Suga administration that September. Having supported the Abe administration for many years in his capacity as Chief Cabinet Secretary, Prime Minister Suga continued Abe's policy line, and high-level dialogues between the two nations ceased. Although the advent of the Biden administration in the US in January 2021 saw a renewed emphasis on Indo-Pacific Strategy and strengthening the trilateral cooperation between the US, Japan, and South Korea, the mending of Japan-South Korea relations remained at a standstill.



## **Current situation and contemporary challenges: The Japan-South Korea relationship in the Kishida/Yoon era (2022–Present): Reengagement and reconciliation**

From 2021 to 2022, new leadership and administrations emerged in both Japan and South Korea—Prime Minister Fumio Kishida of Japan’s LDP (from October 2021) and President Yoon Suk Yeol of South Korea’s conservative People Power Party (from May 2022)—setting Japan-South Korea relations on a path to the restoration and improvement of ties.

In contrast to the Moon administration, South Korea’s Yoon administration demonstrated its proactiveness in repairing Japan-South Korea ties from its very inception in May 2022. From a strategic vantage point, the Yoon government of South Korea’s role as a “global pivotal state” and its Indo-Pacific strategy underscored the significance of bilateral cooperation between the US and South Korea and between Japan and South Korea, as well as the trilateral collaboration among all three states. Consequently, it positioned the rehabilitation of the significantly damaged Japan-South Korea relationship as a top issue on its foreign policy agenda. Although the Kishida administration demonstrated some initial caution, a series of talks at the ministerial level,

including between Japan’s Foreign Minister Yoshimasa Hayashi and South Korea’s Foreign Minister Park Jin, as well as subsequent high-ranking and practical dialogues, have seen the Japanese stance shift progressively to a more proactive engagement.

A significant factor behind these developments was the support and encouragement of the Biden administration in the United States, which is a mutual ally of both Japan and South Korea. The US has led the way in championing trilateral cooperation between the US, Japan, and South Korea and creating platforms for dialogues between the leaders of Japan and South Korea. The inaugural trilateral summit between Presidents Biden and Yoon and Prime Minister Kishida took place in June 2022 on the sidelines of the NATO Summit in Madrid. Subsequently, in November of the same year, another trilateral summit was conducted during the East Asia Summit (EAS) in Cambodia. This occasion also marked the first formal Japan-South Korea summit between Kishida and Yoon.

In response to President Yoon’s announcement of the Indo-Pacific strategy guidelines (officially announced in December 2023) during the EAS, both President Biden and Prime Minister Kishida offered their support, leading to the adoption of the Phnom Penh Statement on Trilateral Partnership for the Indo-Pacific. The declaration represents a comprehensive document

promising cooperation not only on the North Korean issue but also in the domains of the Indo-Pacific, Ukraine, and global engagements, emphasizing collaboration not just in military aspects but also in economic and technological security, as well as regional development.

Following the establishment of a foundation for strategic cooperation among the US, Japan, and South Korea, significant steps were taken to resolve longstanding issues in Japan-South Korea relations in the spring of 2023. First and foremost, on March 6 of the same year, President Yoon made a crucial decision regarding the long-contested issue of wartime laborers, effectively resolving a matter of paramount concern. In a move that honored both the 1965 Treaty and South Korea's Supreme Court ruling, a third-party compensation mechanism was adopted, not through compensation by the sued Japanese companies but via a South Korean foundation, in favor of the plaintiffs and victims. Accepting this arrangement, the Japanese government welcomed President Yoon's visit to Japan on March 16, when the leaders of the two countries held a summit in Tokyo. This meeting, the first of its kind since 2011, marked the resumption of shuttle diplomacy between Japan and South Korea, which had been on hiatus for 12 years.

The summit, on March 16, served as a turning point, resolving the three primary issues under contention—wartime

labor, export controls, and the Japan-South Korea GSOMIA agreement—and reopening a path for renewed cooperation between Japan and South Korea across various fields. A second summit took place on May 7 when Prime Minister Kishida visited Seoul. The third meeting occurred between May 20 and 21, when President Yoon visited Japan to participate in the G7 Hiroshima Summit as a G7 partner country. For the first time, both leaders jointly visited a monument dedicated to Korean victims of the atomic bombings at the end of World War II, located within the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Park.

In 2016, President Obama visited Hiroshima to pay respects to the victims of war and the atomic bombings. This was often called the "Hiroshima moment" of reconciliation for US-Japan relations. President Yoon's visit this time signified a "Hiroshima moment" for Japan-South Korea relations. Following the G7 Summit, President Biden hosted a standalone summit at Camp David on August 18, marking a significant milestone in Japan-US-South Korea relations. This event, the fourth meeting between the leaders of the three countries, was unique in being the first standalone trilateral summit, underscoring a collective aim to elevate diplomatic cooperation to a new level. In adherence to commitments established in Phnom Penh, the three countries affirmed their intention to solidify collaboration by institutionalizing dialogue at multiple levels, including regular summits and

ministerial consultations, with a view to confronting global issues ranging from Ukraine to the Indo-Pacific region. How much implementation can be achieved? How sustainable can it be? These are the key questions to determine the success of the trilateral process. The future trajectory of Japan-South Korea bilateral relations will continue to attract attention, evolving in parallel with the deepening of trilateral cooperation.

## Conclusion

As outlined above, the Japan-South Korea relationship has entered the fourth phase: a “reset or reengagement toward recovery, renewal, and reconciliation.” October 2023 marked the 25th anniversary of the Japan-South Korea Joint Declaration of 1998 (the Kim Dae-jung–Obuchi Declaration). President Yoon’s administration is aiming to craft what they termed as a “Kim Dae-jung–Obuchi 2.0” relationship, symbolizing a new era of ties between the two nations. Japan is likely to reciprocate this sentiment. As both nations grapple with a challenging security environment, it is essential to recognize their shared values of liberal democracy and their commitment to upholding a rules-based international order. As equal and advanced partners, Japan and South Korea need to collaborate with the global community. Strengthening their bilateral foundation and implementing various agreements is an essential first step in fostering this new era of Japan-South Korea relations. The cooperative spirit led by both Prime

Minister Kishida and President Yoon, as well as that of other leaders from both nations, is now being tested.

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