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Still Distant Neighbors

South Korea-Japan Relations Fifty Years After
Diplomatic Normalization

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Introduction

Over the past half century, South Korea and Japan have established themselves as firm and reliable allies of the United States, contributing to peace and stability in the Asia-Pacific region. Japan has done much to aid South Korea economically, and South Korea, positioned on the front line of threats emanating from North Korea backed by China and the Soviet Union, has contributed to Japan's security. South Korea and Japan have also become economic powerhouses and models of free markets and international trade. As of 2013, Japan had the world's third-largest nominal gross domestic product (GDP) at \$4.9 billion, and Korea ranked fourteenth at \$1.3 billion.¹ Bilateral human, economic, and cultural exchanges between Korea and Japan have increased significantly over the past fifty years. Korea and Japan traded \$85 billion in goods in 2014, 385 times the figure from 1965.² Approximately ten thousand visitors traveled between the two countries in 1965, whereas in 2014 the number was over five million. Moreover, since 1998, cultural exchange between South Korea and Japan has boomed. The "Korean wave" (or *hallyu*)—which describes the overseas popularity of Korean soap operas, songs, and movies—is widespread in Japan, and Japanese novels, manga, and anime are becoming popular in South Korea, especially among the younger generations.

Despite increasing cultural exchange and deepening economic interdependence between the two countries, serious disagreements remain. Instead of steady progress toward a better relationship, Korea-Japan relations have shown a pattern that begins with improved ties but is followed by serious deterioration. Historical and territorial controversies often cause these recurring conflicts. This cycle reflects the incomplete nature of the 1965 Treaty on Basic Relations, which did not fully resolve historical controversies and territorial disputes. Given the deteriorating security situation in East Asia and the emergence of an assertive China, the United States has an interest in repairing Korea-Japan relations.

Anniversary Tragedies Rather Than Anniversary Blessings

In 2015, South Korea and Japan mark the fiftieth anniversary of diplomatic normalization, but the two countries are also going through an unprecedented stalemate in their relationship. Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and South Korean President Park Geun-hye assumed power in December 2012 and February 2013, respectively, but the leaders did not hold a bilateral summit until November 2, 2015. Although Park and Abe met a few times in multilateral settings, including during a U.S.-South Korea-Japan trilateral summit on the sidelines of the 2014 Nuclear Security Summit (NSS), this delay is unusual because top-level Korea-Japan summits traditionally occur immediately after a new leader in either country assumes power. The Park-Abe relationship contrasts sharply with the recent friendliness between the Korean and Chinese governments; Chinese President Xi Jinping and Park have already held six bilateral meetings since early 2013. In Japan, anti-Korea sentiment has hit record highs during the last few years, with the number of Japanese viewing South Korea unfavorably hovering in the 50 percent range.³

Indeed, the Korea-Japan relationship has been stuck in a cycle between hopes for improved relations and repeated downturns caused by historical and territorial disputes. Between 1995 and 1997, South Korea and Japan entered a collision course on many fronts. Territorial controversies emerged when both countries set up maritime boundaries after exclusive economic zone negotiations. In late 1997, after several years of tough negotiations, Japan unilaterally abolished an existing fisheries agreement. In 1995, Takami Eto, a Japanese cabinet member, made a controversial remark that Japan's colonization of Korea benefited Koreans. Eto subsequently resigned, but the remark sparked harsh criticism of Japan in South Korea. Then-President Kim Young-sam even claimed that he would "fix the mentality of the Japanese." In a show of anger and dissent, he demolished the National Museum inside the Gyeongbok Palace; the museum had served as an administrative center for Japan's colonial authorities. The incident led to large withdrawals of Japanese investment from South Korea in the middle of the Asian financial crisis of 1997, when Korea was already experiencing economic hardship. The Korea-Japan relationship improved only after South Korean President Kim Dae-jung and Japanese Prime Minister Keizo Obuchi jointly declared a new partnership in 1998. The two leaders began to encourage cultural exchange between their countries. This opening provided unprecedented access to diverse cultural products—such as movies, pop music, and other media, which had been banned in South Korea prior to the 1998 joint declaration, and it enhanced mutual understanding of mindsets, lifestyles, and traditions in both countries.

The fortieth anniversary of normalization in 2005 was another calamitous year. In February 2005, Shimane, a small prefecture in Japan, declared Takeshima Day, commemorating the one-hundredth anniversary of Japan's annexation of the Dokdo islets, known as Takeshima in Japan. The declaration caused outrage in Korea. Then-South Korean President Roh Moo-hyun warned of a "diplomatic war" with Japan.⁴ Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi's annual visit to the controversial Yasukuni shrine—which commemorates those who died serving the Japanese Empire, including over one thousand convicted war criminals—also emerged as a serious issue. Controversies over whitewashed descriptions in Japanese textbooks of Japan's actions during World War II prompted the Korean government to establish the Northeast Asian History Foundation to challenge the Japanese interpretation of

history. Then, in 2005, the Asian Women's Fund—set up by the Japanese government to compensate the women and girls, known as comfort women, who were forced into sexual slavery by the Imperial army—announced that it would be dissolved in 2007. The announcement seemingly signaled to Korea that Japan no longer intended to apologize for the comfort-women issue and other historical controversies.

The period between 2005 and 2007 was disastrous for Korea-Japan relations. Amicable ties between the countries resumed only after South Korean President Lee Myung-bak came into office and shifted policy toward strengthening South Korea's partnerships with the United States and Japan. Tokyo responded favorably to this initiative. The Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ), which defeated the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) to lead the government in 2009, also played a pivotal role in enhancing ties with South Korea. In 2010, on the hundredth anniversary of Korea's annexation to Japan, Japanese Prime Minister Naoto Kan acknowledged, in a Korea-specific statement, that colonial domination had taken place against the will of the Korean people.

Domestic Politics and South Korea-Japan Relations

Domestic politics in Japan have played an important role in relations with South Korea. Since the 1990s, Korea-Japan disputes have mainly emerged from conservative political backlash within Japan against reconciliatory initiatives. In 1993, under the Kiichi Miyazawa cabinet, Chief Cabinet Secretary Yohei Kono made a statement acknowledging the Japanese military and government's involvement in the forced mobilization of comfort women before and during World War II. That same year, Prime Minister Morihiro Hosokawa offered an apology for Japanese aggression. In 1995, Prime Minister Tomiichi Murayama introduced a "no war" resolution in the lower house of the National Diet and issued the so-called Murayama statement, which admitted the suffering and victimization caused by Japanese invasions during World War II. He also established the Asian Women's Fund. Many Asian countries, including Korea, welcomed these initiatives.

Soon, however, the conservative right in Japan began to rebut these statements and actions intended for reconciliation. They strongly opposed acknowledging Japan's past aggression and wanted to call World War II the "Greater East Asian War," an expression used by Imperial Japan. Far-right conservatives also displayed antipathy toward acknowledging the forced mobilization of comfort women and opposed the Kono and Murayama statements. This political backlash divided Japanese politics.

From 1998 to 2005, relations between Korea and Japan improved. The two countries reopened their cultural doors in 1998, and from then on, the Korean wave prevailed in Japan. The friendly mood reached its peak when the two countries cohosted the soccer World Cup in 2002. Visits between Korea and Japan also increased sharply during this period.⁵

Then, in 2005, the conservative right in Japan brought territorial issues to the fore with the Shimane prefecture's establishment of Takeshima Day. Korea and Japan have been quarrelling over the ownership of Dokdo/Takeshima since the end of World War II, but Korea currently controls the islets. The conservative right also continued to encourage Japanese prime ministers to visit the Yasukuni shrine. A comic book titled *Manga Kenkanryu (Hating the Korean Wave)* even appeared in 2005.⁶ This conservative upsurge in Japan led to another period of turbulence in Korea-Japan relations between 2005 and 2007.

In 2009, a weakened LDP and the emergence of the DPJ as the ruling party of Japan provided political grounds to improve ties between Korea and Japan. Japanese Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama called for the formation of the East Asian Community, a trade bloc, signaling his desire for better ties with Korea and China. His successor composed the Kan declaration, which emphasized the need for favorable ties with Korea. Korea-Japan relations were progressing until December 2011 when South Korean President Lee and Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda held a summit meeting during which they disagreed over the comfort-women issue. Although Noda was a DPJ member, he differed ideologically from previous DPJ leaders by taking a tough, conservative stance on territorial and historical issues. When Lee visited Dokdo/Takeshima in August 2012, the bilateral relationship between Korea and Japan began to nosedive again.⁷

The LDP's Abe, elected at the end of 2012, viewed the DPJ's handling of foreign relations as defeatist. During his election campaign, Abe argued that Japan should not compromise on territorial issues and said that he would visit the Yasukuni shrine if he were elected. He also denied that the Japanese

military forcefully mobilized comfort women during the colonial era and called for the revision of the Kono statement. Although Abe did not turn all of his rhetoric into action, he did visit the Yasukuni shrine, causing yet another dip in Korea-Japan relations.

Attempts to Fix the Relationship Under Park and Abe

Since Park and Abe assumed power, the two leaders have had many opportunities to improve South Korea-Japan relations. Nevertheless, Park insisted that Japan should make the utmost effort to resolve the comfort-women issue before relations between the two countries could improve. She also remained suspicious of Abe's personal understanding of Japanese history. Indeed, Abe was initially reluctant to step back from his convictions that comfort women were not forcefully mobilized and that the Kono statement should be revised or repealed. Both leaders were headed toward a troubled relationship from the beginning.

The problems began on Park's first day in office. Abe, who could not attend her inauguration, sent a special envoy, Deputy Prime Minister Taro Aso. Although the move may have been an attempt to avoid confrontation, the personal encounter between Park and Aso ended in a bitter row. Aso quarreled over history issues with the newly elected president. He cited the American Civil War, arguing that although Northerners and Southerners lived in the same country, they did not share the same historical understanding about the Civil War. As an extension, he suggested, Korea and Japan, divided by the sea, could hardly share historical perspectives. This remark made Park furious. In response, Park stated on March 1, 2013—Korea's Independence Movement Day—that the relationship between the Japanese imperial aggressor and the victimized Korea would not change, even one thousand years after the colonization.

In April 2013, Abe stated that the definition of invasion remained undecided in an academic sense, implying that he had no intention of demonstrating repentance for Japan's role in World War II.⁸ He also declared that the Kono statement should be revised or at least critically reviewed. Following these statements, 168 LDP politicians, including four cabinet ministers, visited the Yasukuni shrine on April 23, 2013, during its spring festival.

Despite these controversies, by August 2013, Park began displaying a more moderate attitude toward Japan. On August 15, National Liberation Day (*Gwangbokjeol*), Park said that Japanese people, unlike Japanese politicians, had favorable feelings toward Korea. She also said that Japan should properly address the historical issues. This was a signal that the Korean government was willing to improve the relationship as long as Abe dealt with the comfort-women issue. In the fall of 2013, both governments began looking for ways to break the stalemate. Through official and informal talks between the two sides, the parties almost agreed to a summit meeting. However, any hope of such a summit was dashed when Abe abruptly visited the Yasukuni shrine on December 26, 2013.

From the beginning of 2014, U.S. President Barack Obama began encouraging both Korea and Japan to hold a summit meeting at the earliest possible opportunity. Yet, both Park and Abe missed the chance to meet at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland. Abe attended Park's speech, but they did not exchange words. In March 2014, Obama arranged a trilateral meeting during the National Security Summit in The Hague. During the meeting, Abe greeted Park in Korean, but she responded coldly. Still, the two leaders did agree on two points. One was establishing a director-general-level dialogue to address the comfort-women issue. The other was the beginning of security cooperation dialogue between the countries' defense ministries. However, both parties have since failed to upgrade their relationship in any meaningful way.

Moving Toward the Two-Track Approach

While South Korea-Japan relations have been troubled, the Park administration has developed friendly ties with China. From the beginning of her administration through August 2015, Park held six meetings with Chinese President Xi. This created an impression in Japan that Korea was tilting toward China at Japan's expense.

Nevertheless, Xi's state visit to Korea in July 2014 allowed Park to reorient Korea's position between Japan and China. During the visit, Xi spoke at Seoul National University, where, referring to Abe's unapologetic stance on historical issues, he urged Korea to join China in criticizing Japan. However, Korean journalists and opinion leaders viewed Xi's call as an intrusion into Korea's diplomatic decision-making.⁹ Though many Koreans agreed that Seoul should view Abe's government with caution, they did not support China's proposal to form a political alliance against Japan. Hence, Xi's speech served to moderate the Park administration's stance on Japan out of the concern that China could exploit Korea-Japan tensions.

Indeed, South Korea has so far refrained from taking an overly critical stance on the gradual transformation of the Japanese military. The Korean public sees Japan's moves toward collective self-defense and upgrading of its defense posture as a shift toward a remilitarized Japan. The Korean government, however, did not oppose the move outright. Instead, South Korea has repeatedly sought confirmation that Japan will consult with and obtain approval from South Korea prior to deploying any Japanese Self-Defense Force troops on the Korean peninsula, including in North Korea.

China's softened attitude toward Japan over the last few years has also helped accelerate South Korea's gradual moderation toward Japan. Xi and Abe met briefly on the sidelines of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit in Beijing in November 2014. The two leaders agreed to respect the principles of a strategic, mutually beneficial relationship. This meeting did not come as a surprise to Korea since Xi, as host of the APEC summit, had an obligation to receive the Japanese leader. Still, the meeting presented a challenge for Korea as Park became the only leader who had not held a bilateral meeting with Abe.

In April 2015, Xi met with Abe at the Bandung Conference, and a sense emerged in Korea that it was becoming diplomatically isolated. The Korean government had assumed that China-Japan relations would remain chilly for the time being and had expected Xi to hold off on meeting Abe until after August 2015, when the Japanese prime minister was scheduled to make a highly anticipated statement on the seventieth anniversary of the end of World War II. Meeting Abe after he had expressed remorse in a major statement would have appeared more politically palatable to Xi. After meeting Xi, Abe made a state visit to the United States and had a cordial meeting with Obama. During his address to the U.S. Congress, Abe apologized for Japan's aggression during World War II. However, he did not explicitly apologize for Japan's colonial domination. Koreans perceived this chain of events as Abe's attempt to isolate Korea while strengthening Japan's ties with the United States and China.¹⁰ At the same time, Korean media criticized the Park administration's inflexible approach toward Japan, urging the Korean government to be more proactive.¹¹

After this, the Park administration began to moderate its stance on Japan, and in May 2015, Korea and Japan agreed to hold talks at the ministerial level. That same month, Park met Japanese business

leaders who were in Seoul for the annual Korea-Japan Economic Association conference. She also met senior Japanese leaders acting as goodwill envoys, including former Prime Minister Yoshiro Mori on June 1. Korean Foreign Minister Yun Byung-se visited Tokyo on June 21 for a meeting with his Japanese counterpart Fumio Kishida. The next day, on the fiftieth anniversary of the Treaty on Basic Relations between South Korea and Japan, Park attended a reception at the Japanese embassy in Seoul while Abe attended celebrations at the Korean embassy in Tokyo.

Searching for Diplomatic Breakthrough After the Abe Statement

Recent opinion surveys attest to the miserable state of relations between Japan and South Korea. According to a survey by *Yomiuri Shimbun* and *Hankook Ilbo*, 73 percent of Japanese respondents said that Korea was an unreliable country.¹² At the same time, both sides believed that the Korea-Japan relationship should be a priority. According to a survey conducted by the East Asia Institute and Genron NPO, 63.5 percent of the Japanese respondents felt that Korea was an important country.¹³ A survey from the Asan Institute for Policy Studies found that 70.1 percent of the Korean respondents supported the idea of a summit between Korea and Japan.¹⁴

However, many Japanese seem to believe, incorrectly, that Korea is tilting toward China.¹⁵ Korea is certainly making friendly gestures toward China, but the Park administration has also shown that it is willing to hold high-level talks with Japan. Moreover, Korea is in no position to move away from the United States, the ultimate guarantor of its security, and Japan, an important U.S. ally.

Many Japanese also erroneously believe that Korea is not a mature democracy due to multiple cases of intervention by South Korean courts in Korea-Japan relations. For example, the Korean constitutional court ruled in the summer of 2011 that the Lee government's failure to resolve the comfort-women issue with Japan was unconstitutional, thereby forcing Seoul to take a tough stance against Tokyo at a time when relations between the two countries had improved.¹⁶ The court decision led to severe deterioration in Korea-Japan relations by the end of Lee's presidency. Judicial intervention has convinced the Japanese public that Korea does not have goodwill toward Japan and that rule of law is not firmly rooted in Korea. However, in Korea, separation of powers means that the executive branch cannot meddle in judicial affairs even if the judicial rulings harm Korea-Japan relations. Therefore, Japanese observers should actually interpret the courts' interventions as reflection of Korea's robust democratic system.

In South Korea, the mass media portrays Japan in an overtly negative light. The media has inaccurately described Japan's attempt to introduce the right of collective self-defense as a return to pre-World War II militarism. The right to collective self-defense, which is the right to defend an ally if it comes under attack, is not logically related to militarism, which is a foreign policy conducted with aggressive military means. The only connection between the two concepts is that Japan has had to reinterpret its pacifist constitution to allow for collective self-defense. Yet, Korean media exaggerates the move as a step toward militarism. Japan is merely shifting its defense policy to assist U.S. security activities in the region as China becomes increasingly assertive. This new defense posture could enable Japan to assist the Korean peninsula in times of crisis. In this sense, it is necessary to correct the image of Japan in Korea to make way for an improved relationship.

Additionally, many Koreans believe that Japan has never apologized or has not apologized sincerely enough to Korea, even though Japanese leaders have officially done so many times.¹⁷ The public perception in Korea is fueled by far-right outbursts in Japan against the apologies. This small, but vocal minority—exemplified by LDP politicians, including certain cabinet members, who have made controversial remarks—has made the apologies seem less convincing to South Koreans.

It was in this context that Abe's statement on August 14, 2015, drew much attention from the Korean public. Abe used words that Koreans wanted to hear: colonial domination, invasion, repentance,

and apology. In addition, Abe stated that his cabinet would uphold previous cabinets' positions "without wavering" (*yuruganaku*). Despite these facts, many Korean commentators did not give the Abe statement high scores. Although the statement appeared to address Chinese concerns, it failed to go into details about Imperial Japan's colonial rule, agitating its Korean audience. In particular, Abe argued that the Russo-Japanese War "gave encouragement" to the people under colonial rule in Asia and Africa, but he failed to mention that Japan colonized Korea after that war. The statement, therefore, violated the spirit of the 2010 Kan declaration, which stated that Japanese colonial rule was against the will of the Korean people. In addition, Abe said that the burden of apologies should not pass to the next generation and that his generation should be the last to offer official apologies.

Although it was uneasy with the Abe statement, Korea responded with a great deal of restraint. The Korean government's official position was that the Japanese government should show willingness to improve ties between Korea and Japan with action-oriented programs. This position was motivated by the Korean government's understanding that a Park-Abe summit would need to occur in 2015 to prevent further deterioration in Korea-Japan relations.

On November 2, 2015, Park and Abe finally held a meeting on the sidelines of the trilateral summit in Seoul. Although the meeting did not settle all the pending issues between the two sides, the leaders did agree to resolve the comfort-women issue by expediting ongoing negotiations. Although this meeting may not end the distance between neighbors, it provided a chance to improve bilateral relations after two rocky years.

Policy Recommendations

To improve their relationship, first, both South Korea and Japan should view bilateral disputes from a regional angle. Korea and Japan are both U.S. allies, and therefore, their relationship has implications for U.S.-Korea-Japan trilateral cooperation in Northeast Asia. Second, Korea and Japan should develop mutual public relations campaigns. The Korean and Japanese publics are frustrated with the troubled ties between their governments. Although Korea has long held grievances against the Japanese government, anti-Korean sentiment has also been on the rise in Japan over the past few years. Each country should develop public relations campaigns for the other country's public. Both governments should also support civic initiatives that expand people-to-people exchange and exposure to culture. Finally, the two countries should accelerate the negotiations on the comfort-women issue. Today, only forty-seven former comfort women are alive, and their average age is eighty-nine, which limits the time for reconciliation. Resolving this issue after the survivors die will be difficult for both Seoul and Tokyo. In an interview with the *Washington Post*, Park said that considerable progress had already been made and that negotiations were in the final stage.¹⁸ The two sides should not waste time further and should push forward to conclude a final agreement.

Japan, on its own, should frame the comfort-women issue from a standpoint of universal human rights and women's rights. Instead of denying that it forced women into sexual slavery, Japan should remind the world that it has actively tried to resolve this issue and is willing to do more to relieve the suffering of the comfort women.

South Korea should demonstrate its willingness to hold talks with Japan and work through historical controversies. The Park administration should promote a two-track approach. Park should continuously show willingness to hold additional summit meetings with Abe. Korea should reaffirm that it can go beyond historical controversies and appreciate Japan's efforts if the Japanese government proposes a reasonable solution. Most importantly, the Korean government should be ready to declare unambiguously that it would not raise the comfort-women issue again once it is settled.

The United States should facilitate improvement in South Korea-Japan relations. The United States can hardly be a bystander in the relationship between its allies in the Asia Pacific. Although a forceful intervention or mediation may be risky, the United States should not take sides. In addition, the United States should continue to encourage Korea and Japan to improve their relationship since continued fractious relations between Korea and Japan could help China expand its sphere of influence in the Asia-Pacific region. The United States can facilitate communication and reconciliation between Korea and Japan. The United States should advise Japan not to provoke Korea with distorted interpretation of history. In particular, the United States should urge Japan to resolve the comfort-women issue lest it stand as a major diplomatic barrier between Korea and Japan. Also, the United States should encourage Korea to collaborate with Japan on security issues. A normal relationship between Korea and Japan would provide a chance for greater cooperation and stability in East Asia and the Asia Pacific.

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