



Japan's Strategic Outlook and Implications for Korea-Japan Relations after the Kishida-Biden Summit

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Since the inauguration of the Yoon Suk-yeol administration, there have been both major and minor changes in Korea-Japan relations. Starting with the dispatch of the Korea-Japan Policy Consultative Group to Tokyo, Japanese Foreign Minister Hayashi Yoshimasa attended the inauguration ceremony of President Yoon and agreed to expedite high-level consultations between the two governments to resolve pending issues. People-to-people exchanges began to resume, and operations on the Gimpo-Haneda flight route resumed after two years and three months. In such a positive atmosphere, the expectations of the people of both countries for improving bilateral relations are also higher than ever.

In the meantime, U.S. President Biden's first trip to Asia was South Korea from May 20 to 22 and Japan from May 22 to 24. Also, there was the Korea-U.S.-Japan leaders' meeting at the NATO Summit on June 29 which reaffirmed the importance of trilateral cooperation. At the Korea-U.S. summit meeting, the two countries agreed on the future vision of the two countries' alliance by consolidating the "global comprehensive strategic alliance." At the U.S.-Japan summit, the two countries established each other as a true global partner. Meanwhile, the leaders of Korea and Japan met for the first time at the Madrid NATO summit in late June. Although no bilateral talks were held, the two leaders were able to discuss their shared values and norms and comprehensive cooperation on global issues through the Korea-U.S.-Japan summit as well as the meeting of four Asia-Pacific Partners (AP4: Korea, Japan, Australia, and New Zealand).

Japan's Progress Through the U.S.-Japan Summit

President Biden's first visit to Japan received attention as he officially launched the "Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF)" and held the second face-to-face Quad summit between the U.S., Japan, India and Australia. What is the significance of the U.S.-Japan summit?

First, the summit was held amid intensifying U.S.-China competition, Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and provocations from North Korea. The U.S. reaffirmed its commitment to the Indo-Pacific and Japan committed itself to helping the U.S. balance China's increasing military and economic threat. The two countries discussed global issues such as the international order,

regional security, economic growth, health, and climate change, and Japan positioned itself as a U.S. global partner. This built on last year's summit with former Prime Minister Suga and President Biden. Also, it means that the U.S. and Japan will discuss and act together on global security and economic crises beyond cooperation on regional issues.

Second, compared to the Suga-Biden summit, Japan's direct criticism of China was presented more specifically. In last year's joint U.S.-Japan statement, direct criticism of China was mentioned twice in terms of regional security, but at this summit, it was mentioned six times in terms of international order, regional security, economy and military. The strengthening of the Kishida Cabinet's balancing against China is relevant to the Senkaku Islands issue, rising anti-China sentiment in Japan, awareness of threats from China, and heightened anxiety caused by Russia's invasion of Ukraine. From Japan's perspective, authoritarian China with its rapid economic and military growth could forcibly change the status quo by following the footsteps of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. That is, if the international community fails to stop Russia's invasion, it could lead to China's use of force against Taiwan. Therefore, Japan has strongly condemned Russia's invasion of Ukraine, placed sanctions on Russia, and supported Ukraine on par with the G7 countries.

Third, discussions on strengthening Japan's defense capabilities will accelerate. Outside of the U.S.-Japan summit, Prime Minister Kishida has already expressed the necessity to strengthen Japan's defense capabilities several times. Public opinion is not opposed to this. For example, according to a Yomiuri Shimbun poll taken between June 3 and 5, 72% of Japanese respondents were in favor of "Japan's defense strengthening" while 21% were against it. Also, 53% were in favor of increasing the defense budget while 43% opposed any increase. As such, Japan is expected to take a step-by-step approach to strengthening its defense capabilities and engaging in practical activities based on public support in the unstable regional situation. Discussions on constitutional revision are expected to be revisited in this process.

Implications for Korea

First, Korea-Japan cooperation needs to be strengthened in conjunction with Korea-Japan-U.S. cooperation to deal with North Korean issues. As confirmed at the U.S.-Japan summit, the more unstable the international situation is, the stronger the U.S.-Japan alliance will become. In the process, cooperation between Korea, the U.S. and Japan will also be emphasized. The Yoon administration has also emphasized the importance of Korea-U.S.-Japan cooperation being actively carried out to cope with the North Korean issues. However, Korea-Japan cooperation, the weakest link in trilateral cooperation, is still difficult despite its importance and necessity. In this situation, recently, judgments about North Korea's missile tests from South Korea and Japan have often been inconsistent. The problem is that security on the Korean Peninsula could be threatened if it becomes difficult to properly respond to inaccurate information caused by such differences in intelligence assessments, not which information is

right or wrong. Trilateral cooperation to deal with North Korean issues is essential, and a security vacuum should not be acceptable for the sake of the lives and safety of people.

Therefore, it is necessary to actively consider the normalization of the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA), which is currently in a “conditional extension.” South Korea has already signed a GSOMIA with NATO and 34 countries including the United States and Russia. The GSOMIA between Korea and Japan has the advantage of sharing intelligence more quickly and accurately using various information assets as a way to respond to North Korean threats. Security issues should be judged based on whether they are beneficial to the national interest from a realistic point of view, excluding public antipathy caused by historical conflicts between Korea and Japan. Also, it is necessary not only to have sufficient discussions with experts in related fields, but also to inform and explain accurate information to the public.

Second, it is important to take a step-by-step approach to relieve the tensions between the two countries. Even if the Kishida Cabinet continues over the long-term, it is unlikely that Japan will sharply decrease its current hard-line stance toward South Korea. This is not only because of the Japanese government, but also Japanese public opinion which is quite tough on historical issues with Korea. In other words, the Japanese government’s hard-line attitude toward Korea is supported by Japanese public opinion. In such a situation, it is difficult to expect a sudden change in Japan’s attitude despite the victory in the upper house election. Moreover, Kishida has not shown the leadership needed to persuade hardliners and public opinion in the Liberal Democratic Party to improve Korea-Japan relations. Therefore, rather than expecting a change in Japan's attitude, it is more practical to form an atmosphere for improving Korea-Japan relations and take a step-by-step approach.

Therefore, the two countries should solve pending issues that are relatively less sensitive and easy to resolve, in order to improve relations and to maintain their own interests. In that sense, the two countries should consider the normalization of people-to-people exchanges, the revival of mutual visa exemptions, and the removal of Japan's export regulations. Japan's export regulations against Korea in 2019 have not been removed, despite all three issues such as “discontinued Korea-Japan policy dialogue”, “insufficient catchall control on conventional weapons,” and “insufficient export management organization and personnel” raised by Japan at the time. Even though there are various evaluations of Japan's export regulations, there is no disagreement that these measures have led to distrust between Korea and Japan and increased instability and unpredictability in the economic field.

Therefore, the ongoing export restrictions, which have exacerbated the anxiety and discomfort of both economies and the negative feelings of the people of both countries, should be removed as soon as possible. Moreover, with the recent rise of economic security issues, cooperation between the two countries to stabilize supply chains is becoming more urgent. Continuing unfair measures to limit cooperation between Korea and Japan which have high economic connectivity is not only helpful economically, but also against the economic security trends.

Therefore, Japan should confirm that all the suspicions and problems raised in 2019 have been resolved and remove the economic regulations. This could be a beginning and a catalyst for improving Korea-Japan relations.

The Korean government has made efforts to improve Korea-Japan relation such as launching a public-private consultative body on July 4 to resolve the forced labor issue, the biggest source of conflict between Korea and Japan. It will be difficult to resolve the complicated issues between the two countries, which are related to history and law, politics and diplomacy, domestic and international politics. However, the two countries should be able to incrementally resolve the current Korea-Japan tensions while seeking cooperation on common tasks facing both nations, such as the Ukraine crisis, the U.S.-China conflict, and the North Korean issue.

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