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## **South Korea-Japan Relations: Navigating the ‘Minority Party’ Ishiba’s Second Cabinet and the Post-Sado Mine Memorial Ceremony Disruption**

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The conflict between South Korea and Japan that arose from the Sado Mine Memorial Ceremony on November 24 clearly demonstrated that the present state of South Korea-Japan relations is predicated on an inherently unstable foundation. Despite efforts to improve bilateral relations since last year, Japan has demonstrated a lack of sincerity, and South Korea, having relied on Japan’s constructive engagement, has once again experienced disappointment. The problem is that there are currently no indications that this situation will improve in the near future, and the conditions necessary to meet South Korea’s expectations have yet to be established. In particular, the defeat of the Ishiba cabinet in the House of Representatives election on October 27 has resulted in uncertainty regarding the future of the government and the likelihood of its continued governance. Following the appointment of Shigeru Ishiba as Prime Minister—who had previously expressed understanding of South Korea’s position—there was a notable increase in anticipation within South Korea for a more progressive stance from Japan on historical issues. Nevertheless, it is challenging to anticipate that the Ishiba Cabinet, as a minority party, will adopt a more progressive stance toward South Korea-Japan relations.

Furthermore, since the inauguration of the Ishiba Cabinet, its approval ratings have remained relatively low, and its support base within the party is weak. In light of the forthcoming House of Councillors election and the Tokyo Metropolitan Government Election scheduled for next summer, it seems unlikely that the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) will push forward with policies that could give rise to controversy both within the party and domestically. Although the Ishiba Cabinet is likely to endeavor to preserve the current positive relationship with South Korea, it is unlikely to adopt a different stance on historical issues. This indicates that, particularly in light of the ambiguity surrounding political stability within South Korea-Japan relations, it will be challenging for Japan to address historical issues in a manner that aligns with South Korea’s expectations. Although a consensus has been formed in Japanese society regarding the stabilization and improvement of relations between South Korea and Japan, a widespread belief persists that historical issues have already been resolved. It is

therefore vital to maintain the current momentum for improving relations between South Korea and Japan while consistently emphasizing the importance of political leadership and decisive action in advancing bilateral relations. Furthermore, it is essential to encourage Japan to adopt a more forward-thinking approach in order to advance relations between the two countries.

In the context of the current unstable domestic situation, it would be prudent to prioritize functional cooperation with minimal political influence. This approach would serve to maintain the momentum for South Korea-Japan cooperation and enhance policy coherence. One such example would be the expansion of areas of cooperation between the two countries in fields such as regional development and disaster management—key policies of the Ishiba Cabinet. Furthermore, it would be beneficial to identify common issues, such as defense cost-sharing, that have arisen as a result of the second term of the Trump administration and to enhance mutual understanding of these topics. Moreover, it is essential to institutionalize the exchange of experts who can facilitate communication between the two countries and to encourage strategic dialogue between the government and the private sector. In light of the disruption that occurred at the Sado Mine Memorial Ceremony, it would be constructive to proactively engage scholars, media, and former officials with the aim of enhancing communication between the two countries.

As an example, in the near term, the involvement of private-sector members, such as scholars, the press, and former officials, in the government-led “60th Anniversary of Japan-Korea Normalization Task Force” may be beneficial. Additionally, the activation of 1.5-track public-private dialogues could prove advantageous in narrowing the differences in perception between the two countries. This will facilitate the implementation of meaningful activities between the two nations in celebration of the 60th anniversary next year. Additionally, to overcome the disruption that occurred at the Sado Mine Memorial Ceremony, it may be worthwhile to consider the formation of a “Joint South Korea-Japan Memorial Group for Sado Mine” (tentative name), comprising representatives from governments, academic communities, the press, and civil society from both countries. Such a group could engage in interdisciplinary and intersectoral workshops with the objective of enhancing mutual understanding.

Ultimately, from a medium- to long-term perspective, there is a necessity to activate parliamentary diplomacy and reinforce policy public diplomacy. In light of the recent surge in minority parties in Japan, it would be strategically advantageous to cultivate broad networks not only with the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) but also with the Constitutional Democratic Party, the Democratic Party for the People, the Japan Innovation Party, and other political entities. Given the distinctive features of Japan’s parliamentary cabinet system,

whereby politicians simultaneously serve as ministers and the responsibilities of the government (cabinet, executive branch) and the legislature (parliamentarians, legislative branch) are essentially unified, it is imperative to cultivate networks with these individuals and activate policy public diplomacy to facilitate their comprehension of South Korea's position. To this end, it is vital to engage in exchanges between parliamentarians while also including a diverse range of experts, such as scholars, journalists, and professionals from various disciplines. These individuals should convene to discuss a multitude of subjects and visit locations of historical and cultural significance to the bilateral relationship. Such endeavors will undoubtedly foster mutual understanding.

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