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Korea-Japan Relations after the Yoon Suk-yeol & Kishida Shuttle Diplomacy Restoration: Implications, Prospects and Challenges

Choi Eunmi, Research Fellow
The Asan Institute for Policy Studies
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Korean President Yoon Seok-yeol and Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida have held six summits over the past year and are committed to improving bilateral relations. The restoration of shuttle diplomacy between the Korean and Japanese leaders is significant for three reasons. First, it demonstrates their firm commitment to improving bilateral relations; second, it clearly communicates the official position and direction of the two governments at home and abroad; and third, there is expected to be a practical follow-up at the government level and positive spillover effects at the private level. As such, the two leaders' willingness to restore shuttle diplomacy is leading to meaningful steps to improve Korea-Japan relations, and the conflicted relationship between the two countries is slowly recovering.

However, public opinion in both countries is somewhat divided on the current state of bilateral relations. According to a poll conducted by the Yomiuri Shimbun and the Hankook Ilbo in May 2023, both publics are positive about the current state of relations between Japan and South Korea, but have different assessments of the Korean government's resolution of the forced labor issue relating to the Korean Supreme Court ruling and the Japan-Korea summit that led to this outcome. In other words, while citizens of both countries are positive about the current state of relations between Japan and South Korea "from the perspective of the outcome," they are divided on the assessment of "the process leading up to the outcome," with South Koreans being negative and Japanese being positive. This shows that while many people in both countries agree on the goal and outcome of improving bilateral relations, there are significant differences in their understanding and perception of the process. This means that, first, public opinion in both countries is positive about the current state of bilateral relations; second, the differences in historical perceptions between the two countries may be exacerbated by their different assessments of the process of improving relations; and third, the current state of improving bilateral relations is fraught with instability.

Moreover, the forced labor issue cannot be completely resolved because there are victims and bereaved families who oppose the solution proposed by the Korean government to the forced labor issue related to the Supreme Court ruling. In addition, there are still many other points of conflict between Korea and Japan, such as the contaminated water issue from Fukushima, the comfort women issue, the UNESCO listing of the Sado Mine, the Japanese history textbook

issue, etc. What should be done to develop bilateral ties without losing the current momentum at this turning point of improving Korea-Japan relations?

What is needed is to maintain “the virtuous cycle” in the improving bilateral relationship. One of the possible reasons that Korea-Japan relations have moved at a rapid pace since March has been the continuity guaranteed by a series of processes leading to "next steps," reflecting expectations for the continued improvement of the two countries' ties. In other words, the process of improving relations was continuously shared, the strong will of the two leaders was expressed, and efforts were made to gain sympathy and support for improving Korea-Japan relations. It is necessary to maintain this momentum.

For this to happen, first, the leaders need to express a strong will for Korea-Japan cooperation to remain unshakable, despite political instability. Second, they must establish a stable and continuous cooperation base for the creation of common interests between the two countries. Such a direction and action plan for cooperation can be presented in a Yoon Suk Yeol-Kishida Joint Declaration (tentatively: The Yoon Suk Yeol-Kishida Korea-Japan Future Vision), which follows The Kim Dae Jung-Obuchi Joint Declaration (New Korea-Japan Partnership Declaration in the 21st century).

The reason why The Kim Dae Jung-Obuchi Joint Declaration from 1998 is still talked about 25 years later may be because it contains mutual respect, mutual recognition, and a willingness to move forward while facing the past. Nevertheless, this spirit has not been kept over the past decades, as various conflicts, including historical issues, have faced new confrontations and changes from the domestic political situation within the two countries.

Therefore, the (tentative) Yoon Suk Yeol-Kishida Korea-Japan Future Vision should reflect on the past decades of Korea-Japan relations, the common recognition that the history of conflict and confrontation should no longer be repeated, and the direction and vision to move forward together. Considering the significance of the leaders' remarks and agreements, the expression of common awareness and the strong will of the leaders of the two countries will be a meaningful first step toward opening new Korea-Japan relations. The two governments can confirm the common perception of their countries to open the future, and further consider signing a "gentleman's agreement" based on good faith so that this spirit of agreement can continue.

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<https://www.asaninst.org/?p=89568>)



Choi Eunmi

Center for Regional Studies

Dr. CHOI Eunmi is a research fellow at the Asan Institute for Policy Studies. Dr. CHOI received her M.A. and Ph.D. in Political Science from Korea University. Previously, Dr. Choi was a research professor of the Center for Japanese Studies at the Institute of Foreign Affairs and National Security (IFANS) of Korea National Diplomatic Academy (KNDA), a visiting researcher at University of Michigan (USA), Waseda University (Japan) and the Sejong Institute, and a researcher at Ministry of Foreign Affairs of ROK. Her main area of research interest is Korea-Japan Relations, Japanese Diplomacy, and multilateral cooperation in Northeast Asia. Currently, Dr. Choi is a member of the advisory committee to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of National Defense, and National Security Office.