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The New Korean Government's Diplomatic Tasks for Improving Korea-Japan Relations

Choi Eunmi

Research Fellow

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With the inauguration of the new Korean government, expectations for an improvement in the strained Korea-Japan relationship are growing. President-elect Yoon Seok-yeol has emphasized the importance of Korea-Japan relations and has actively taken steps to improve said relations by sending delegations to the U.S. from April 3-11 and Japan from April 24-28 during the presidential transition period. Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida also met with the Korean delegation and mentioned that “Improving Korea-Japan relations is an urgent matter, it cannot be delayed any longer.” Since the two leaders have expressed their willingness to improve relations, there are expectations for positive changes between the two countries. However, considering the various stumbling blocks, including forced labor issues and comfort women issues, and the wide gap between the two countries and strong public sentiment, it will not be easy to find a way to satisfy both sides.

Nevertheless, considering the losses caused by worsening Korea-Japan relations, efforts to improve relations cannot be neglected. Moreover, because of the ongoing conflict, the economic and security aspects of bilateral cooperation are increasingly unstable. Korea and Japan have to cooperate to resolve the issue of North Korea's nuclear and missile provocations and transnational threats such as climate change, pandemics, and disaster management. Also, the two countries have to cooperate to promote market economy and democracy amid intensifying competition between the United States and China.

In this situation, the new government was given the task of improving strained Korea-Japan relations, preparing solutions to disputes, and leading future-oriented cooperation. This Asan Issue Brief diagnoses and analyzes the current state of Korea-Japan relations and sets out recommendations for the new government's policy toward Japan.

1. Current Problems between Korea and Japan: Diagnosis and Tasks

Korea-Japan relations have often been strained and confrontational over the last over 50 years since the normalization of diplomatic relations in 1965. However, it is hard to recall a time when issues in overlapping fields like politics and economics or economics and security have been so enmeshed and negatively affected public sentiments. There are many disputes such as

forced labor, comfort women, export regulations, the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA), contaminated water from Fukushima, and Japan trying to list the Sado Mines as a UNESCO heritage site. These have seen people in both countries have deeply negative feelings towards each other. Anti-Korean and anti-Japanese sentiment have a negative effect on Korea-Japan relations, and these negative public attitudes support their respective governments' hardline policy against each other. In other words, there are still many difficulties to overcoming the current strained situation. The leaders' willingness and desire will not suffice alone.

The problem is that while the relationship between the two countries was deteriorating, efforts to resolve the conflict were insufficient and any tangible results were not achieved. Rather, the Korea-Japan relationship was exploited for domestic political purposes and exacerbated public anti-Japanese and anti-Korean sentiment. The Moon administration's two-track approach of separating history and non-history issues was not followed. The Korea-Japan Comfort Women Agreement of 2015 was officially recognized by the two governments, but the main contents were not followed through on. As a result, the comfort women issue remained ambiguous, neither resolved nor unresolved. The Korean Supreme Court's ruling on forced labor in 2018 had a huge impact on Korea-Japan relations, and the Korean government declared that it respected the judiciary's ruling and would not intervene in civil cases. However, it attempted to consult with the Japanese government on the ruling but failed to produce results.

The bigger problem is that no efforts have been made to reach a social consensus to solve the problem, and no organization has been established to handle the issue after the Supreme Court ruling. The Japanese government also did not consider the cause and nature of the conflict, instead maintaining its uncompromising position that "Korea should solve the problem," and did not consider different opinions within Japan. Among these, the level of understanding between Korea and Japan has diminished, and the conflict gradually worsened.

Moreover, it is also a problem that direct communication between the two leaders has not taken place. As of April 2022, with the exception of summit meetings which were held on the sidelines of international events, it has been 11 years since the last Korea-Japan leaders' summit in Kyoto between President Lee Myung-bak and Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda. The fact that there has been no summit between the two countries for such a long time demonstrates the current strain in Korea-Japan relations. Although holding a summit does not necessarily mean a friendly relationship, it is difficult to offer a positive assessment given the fact that there has been no formal exchange between the leaders for 11 years while various issues and problems to be solved have only grown in the meantime.

2. Policy Recommendations for the Realization of the ‘Kim Dae Jung-Obuchi Joint Declaration 2.0 Era’

In 1998, Korean President Kim Dae-jung and Japanese Prime Minister Keizo Obuchi signed a joint declaration for “A New Korea-Japan Partnership towards the 21st Century,” which came to known as the Kim-Obuchi Joint Declaration. President-elect Yoon Seok-yeol has pledged to create a future-oriented Korea-Japan relationship by beginning the ‘Kim-Obuchi Joint Declaration 2.0 Era.’ It presents a desire to revive the spirit of the Kim-Obuchi Joint Declaration and to start a new chapter in Korea-Japan relations by inheriting and updating it. Reflecting on the spirit of the original declaration, which represented a milestone in Korea-Japan relations, the desire and willingness to begin future-oriented Korea-Japan relations can be positively evaluated.

However, it is impossible to ignore the fact that many things have changed since 1998. At that time, there were several reasons why the declaration was possible. First, President Kim Dae-jung and Prime Minister Keizo Obuchi had similar political ideologies and a willingness to develop Korea-Japan relations. Second, Korea and Japan regarded each other as priorities when considering foreign policy. Third, there was an increasing need for bilateral cooperation due to external threats such as North Korea’s nuclear provocation and the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis. In that sense, even if the two leaders are currently willing to improve relations in 2022, the political environment and public opinion of the two countries are not favorable for doing so.

Moreover, Korea has developed significantly over the last 20 years, and the international status of Korea and Japan has changed. Furthermore, in Japan, Kishida’s cabinet was inaugurated last October, but former Prime Minister Abe is still influential as the head of the largest faction in the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP). This could impede Korea-Japan relations because influential politicians in the LDP are critical of Korea. The political environment in Korea is not favorable for the new government either. Even when the new government is inaugurated, the opposition Democratic Party holds 171 of the 300 seats in the National Assembly as of April 28, 2022. In addition, Korea-Japan relations are not being prioritized during recent election campaigns in both countries, such as Korea’s local elections in June and Japan’s upper house elections in July. Some politicians may actually exploit anti-Japanese and anti-Korean sentiment for their electoral campaigns. If this happens, both leaders may be rather passive in their friendly actions toward each other. Another impediment may be Japan's position that the past is the past, and that Korea needs to move beyond what Japan considers to be already resolved issues. Therefore, how to elicit Japan's cooperation and response to the improvement of Korea-Japan relations will also be an important question for Korea's new government.

There are also other domestic and international developments affecting both countries in 2022. Unlike during the 1990s, the U.S.-China conflict is deepening amid China’s rapid growth and rise. Also, the values of democracy and market economy are threatened in many parts of the world. Korea and Japan, which are both U.S. allies, share the same values and similar worries. Despite their similarities, Japan and Korea have different policies toward China and North Korea. In other words, Japan is keeping in line with the United States, but Korea needs China’s

cooperation in resolving the North Korea issue and in its economic relations. Meanwhile, Korea's role and status in international society has grown as a result of its rapid development and economic growth. That is, the previously vertical relations between Korea and Japan are changing horizontally, forming a new structure. The problem is that this structure is leading Japan to balance against Korea's growth rather than cooperating with Korea.

In this way, many things have changed compared to the 1990s. Firstly, the international situation and the status of the two countries has changed dramatically. The linkage of historical, economic and security issues has also grown more complex. Lastly, anti-Japanese and anti-Korean sentiments are growing deeper by the day. All of these issues are challenges for the realization of the 'Kim-Obuchi Joint Declaration 2.0 Era.' The new government has to make an effort to overcome these obstacles.

First, in order to improve Korea-Japan relations, a “step-by-step approach” is needed to build up from the basics, not a “bulldozer approach.” Second, resolving historical disputes is not something that can be done through negotiation alone, so mentioning a “comprehensive resolution” or “grand bargain” would be counterproductive. Third, it is necessary to restore trust between the two leaders through the restoration of shuttle diplomacy and regular high-level talks. Fourth, public-private cooperation such as the establishment of a Task Force to improve Korea-Japan relations is needed.

The new government's dispatch of a delegation to Japan from April 24-28 is a breath of fresh air for the bilateral relationship. There are still many difficulties, but this year there are some important opportunities for the improvement of Korea-Japan relations such as the 20th anniversary of the Korea-Japan World Cup and the 20th anniversary of the television drama series ‘Winter Sonata,’ which was the origin the Korean Wave in Japan. Also, 2025 is the 60th anniversary of the normalization of Korea-Japan relations. It is hoped that the next administration takes advantage of this momentum to lead a new transition in Korea-Japan relations and usher in a more advanced Kim-Obuchi Joint Declaration 2.0 Era.

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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.