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## **SEIZE THE OPPORTUNITY TO IMPROVE JAPAN-SOUTH KOREA RELATIONS**

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- The inauguration of the Yoon administration is viewed as an opportunity to improve Japan-South Korea relations.
- Cautious and skeptical views still exist as to whether this willingness will actually lead to improvement because of the weakness of the Yoon administration's domestic political base and the nature of the pending issues between Japan and South Korea.
- In order to bridge this gap, frequent and close communications for rebuilding a trusting relationship between the diplomatic authorities as well as the political leaders of Japan and South Korea are necessary.

*The views expressed in this piece are the author's own and should not be attributed to The Association of Japanese Institutes of Strategic Studies.*

The March 9 presidential election in South Korea saw a change of government, with the conservative Yoon Seok-yeol taking office on May 10. Amid a decade of deteriorating relations between Japan and South Korea, attention is focused on whether the new Yoon administration, which has strongly emphasized the need to improve relations with Japan since the presidential election campaign, will lead to a full-fledged improvement in bilateral relations. However, while some in Japan are positive about the Yoon administration's willingness to improve relations, many remain cautious and skeptical as to whether this willingness will actually lead to improvement. There are two main reasons for this: the weakness of the Yoon administration's domestic political base and the nature of the pending issues between Japan and South Korea.

Let us start with a look at the administration's political base. First, Yoon's support base is not rock solid, as he barely won by 0.73%, the narrowest margin in the history of South Korea's presidential elections. Yoon won 48.56% of the vote to 47.83% for the loser Lee Jae-myung, and he will have to face a large number of opposition forces while running the country's affairs. Second, the progressive opposition party holds a majority of seats in the National Assembly, and it is expected to be difficult for the Yoon government and the ruling party to pass bills given the fierce antagonism between the ruling and opposition parties. The next election for South Korea's National Assembly will be held in April 2024 and, unless there is a major political realignment, the ruling party will remain in the minority for at least two years. There is no guarantee that the ruling party will have a majority in the next election. Third, public support is not high. In July, two months after the inauguration of the Yoon administration, its disapproval rate surpassed its approval rate (28% approval and 62% disapproval in the fourth week of July, according to a Gallup Korea opinion survey). In light of the above, it will not be easy for President Yoon to show bold leadership in improving relations with Japan, one of the most sensitive issues in South Korea.

In addition, there is the difficulty of resolving the wartime labor issue, which is the biggest pending issue between Japan and South Korea. The governments of Japan and South Korea had agreed that the issue was "completely and finally settled" when the two countries normalized their diplomatic relations by concluding the 1965 agreement. However, former workers in South Korea subsequently filed lawsuits against Japanese companies seeking compensation. The Japanese companies were deemed liable for compensation in South Korean Supreme Court rulings in 2018 and their assets in South Korea were ordered seized. If the South Korean administration were to stop the process of seized assets being "liquidated" in accordance with the

rulings, this would be negatively regarded within South Korea as the executive branch going against the final decision of the judicial branch and intervening in the matter. For the Yoon administration to resolve this issue, then, it must seek and implement another solution while respecting the judgment, all the while garnering the plaintiffs' understanding and public opinion. On July 4, the Yoon administration launched a public-private consultative body comprising government officials, plaintiffs, and experts as a framework for discussing a path toward resolving the issue. The body met four times but dissolved without producing any concrete results. It will be a difficult task for the administration, which does not have a strong domestic political base, to form a consensus. Given these circumstances alone, skepticism about the potential for improved relations is understandable.

Nevertheless, the Kishida administration has shown a willingness to view the inauguration of the Yoon administration as an opportunity and has responded to President Yoon's efforts to mend ties with Japan at an early stage. Prime Minister Kishida Fumio extended his congratulations to Yoon on his victory the day after the presidential election, and they also held a telephone conversation the following day (March 11). During the talk, Prime Minister Kishida stated that he would like to "cooperate closely with President-elect Yoon to improve Japan-South Korea relations," recognizing that "when the international community is confronted with epoch-making changes, sound Japan-South Korea relations are indispensable in realizing a rules-based international order and ensuring peace, stability and prosperity in the region and the world. " On April 26, Prime Minister Kishida had a meeting with the policy consultative delegation dispatched by the incoming Yoon administration and made the following statement: "Amidst the current global situation in which the rules-based international order is threatened, there has never been a time when Japan-South Korea strategic cooperation and Japan-South Korea-US strategic cooperation have been needed more, and there is no time to waste in improving Japan-South Korea relations." Although some in the ruling party felt that it was premature for the prime minister to meet the delegation before any concrete moves had been made by the South Korean side on pending issues, not only the prime minister but also the chief cabinet secretary, foreign minister, defense minister, and economic minister met separately with the delegation and welcomed the positive attitude of the Yoon administration on the relationship between Japan and South Korea.

In addition, Prime Minister Kishida dispatched Foreign Minister Hayashi Yoshimasa as a special envoy to President Yoon's inauguration ceremony. During a


courtesy call on President Yoon, Foreign Minister Hayashi delivered a personal letter from Prime Minister Kishida and stated, "there is no time to waste in improving Japan-South Korea relations." Foreign Minister Hayashi also met with Foreign Minister nominee Park Jin and they agreed to "speedily discuss the pending issues between Japan and South Korea, including at a high level, in order to resolve them as soon as possible. " This move can be attributed to the wish of the leaders of both countries that the change of government in South Korea lead to improved relations between the two countries.

Of course, that is not the only issue at hand. As Prime Minister Kishida told Yoon, the rules-based international order faces a crisis due to Russia's invasion of Ukraine and China's attempts to change the status quo by force, so cooperation between Japan and South Korea, two neighboring countries that share the values of liberal democracy, are both allies of the United States, and are the third and tenth largest economies in the world, is indeed an essential requirement. While public sentiment in both countries, where majorities in each are critical and suspicious of the other country, remains a limiting factor in improving relations, the current international situation is acting as a driving force to encourage cooperation between the two countries. In addition, the US Biden administration's Indo-Pacific strategy and the situation in North Korea, which is reportedly preparing to conduct its seventh nuclear test, are also accelerating cooperation between Japan and South Korea as well as among Japan, South Korea and the United States. President Biden's visit to South Korea and Japan in late May provided particular impetus for trilateral cooperation and, on June 29 during the NATO summit, the first trilateral summit meeting in about five years took place, albeit for only a short time.

Although the restoration of trilateral cooperation is progressing at a fast pace thanks in part to US efforts, the situation is not yet conducive to holding a summit meeting on improving bilateral relations between Japan and South Korea. For some time now, Japan has consistently maintained that the South Korean side should first resolve pending issues, including the wartime labor issue, as Prime Minister Kishida and Foreign Minister Hayashi have told the South Korean side: "it is necessary to develop Japan-South Korea relations based on the foundation of friendly cooperative relations that have been built since the normalization of diplomatic relations in 1965." In response, President Yoon has asked the Japanese side to "cooperate together" for improving ties. The gap between the two countries remains wide in terms of what both sides can and should do to resolve pending issues.

In order to bridge this gap, frequent and close communications for rebuilding a trusting relationship between the diplomatic authorities as well as the political leaders of Japan and South Korea are necessary. The July 18 meeting between foreign ministers Hayashi and Park in Tokyo was the start of this process. As trust between the two countries is gradually restored, it will become possible to reactivate bilateral economic and security cooperation, which has declined in recent years. In doing so, Prime Minister Kishida should positively consider lifting the stricter export controls imposed on South Korea from July 2019 onwards because the South Korean side has made efforts to implement corrective measures. This will help the Yoon administration gain public understanding in South Korea when it seeks to improve Japan-South Korea relations.

The Yoon administration is seeking to expand comprehensive cooperation between Japan and South Korea, and the Japanese side should respond by showing a willingness to resume cooperation with the South Korean side. In Japan-South Korea relations, the words and deeds of the leaders of both countries still have a great impact on how the people of both countries perceive each other.

The last full-scale summit meeting between the two countries was the Noda Yoshihiko-Lee Myung-bak meeting in Kyoto in December 2011, and there has been no shuttle diplomacy between the Japanese and South Korean leaders for more than a decade since then. It's true that "there is no time to waste in improving Japan-South Korea relations," but it will actually take a long time to do so as the decade of deteriorating relations has been so long. Now is the time for the leaders and people of both countries to make that step forward. 

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