



# South Korea-Japan relations under two presidents

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## Introduction

South Korea and Japan have had a rocky relationship ever since the period of Japanese colonial rule, which lasted from 1910 to 1945. South Korea and Japan normalised bilateral relations in 1965 in a treaty involving Japanese investment loans and an economic cooperation package for South Korea intended to cover any claims that might arise from South Korean nationals. Nonetheless, South Korea sees many historical issues as still unresolved.<sup>1</sup> This has been a problem for the United States, which has a formal military alliance with both Japan and South Korea. Historically, it has been difficult for the US to get South Korea and Japan to cooperate on common security issues, which has become particularly important when confronted by the North Korean nuclear threat.

In the past two years, however, there has been a shift in the relationship, which has led President of South Korea Yoon Suk-yeol to seek a rapprochement with Japan. This followed the presidential term of Moon Jae-in, during which Japan and South Korea experienced a low-point in bilateral relations linked to disputes over historical issues. This brief discusses and analyses developments in the South Korea-Japan relationship during the presidential terms of Moon Jae-in and Yoon Suk-yeol, and assesses the impact of the current state of the bilateral relationship on security issues in the region.

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<sup>1</sup> Ju, 'The Japan-Korea Dispute Over the 1965 Agreement'.

<sup>2</sup> Armstrong et al., 'A New Moon Rising in South Korea's Election | East Asia Forum'.

<sup>3</sup> Moon Jae-in "Address by President Moon Jae-in on the 62nd Memorial Day" (June 06, 2017)

## The Moon Jae-in presidency, May 2017 to May 2022

President Moon Jae-in replaced the conservative Liberty Korea Party (LKP) President Park Geun-hye (2012–2017), who was impeached, convicted and removed from office following a corruption scandal in early 2017. President Moon is a liberal progressive who ran his campaign through the Democratic Party on a platform to crack down on widespread corruption, address social inequality and engage with North Korea by reopening avenues for dialogue.<sup>2</sup> Moon had previously lost the 2012 presidential election but the LKP was left weakened following Park Geun-hye's impeachment, which allowed Moon to win in 2017 by a 17 percent margin. President Moon envisaged that South Korea would promote a certain level of patriotism as one of the core values of his administration.<sup>3</sup>

## Confronting Japan

Several commentators on South Korean politics have observed that criticising Japan for its historical insensitivities has been a political tool used by many South Korean politicians to increase their approval ratings since the establishment of democracy.<sup>4</sup> Historical animosity towards Japan runs deep in South Korea, and is even characterised by some analysts as a core part of the South Korean identity.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Glosserman, Brad, and Scott A. Snyder, Glosserman and Snyder, *The Japan-South Korea Identity Clash: East Asian Security and the United States*, 99.

<sup>5</sup> Deacon, Chris, Deacon, *(Re)Producing the 'History Problem'*, 791.



From the start, Moon set out that his administration would pursue a two-track approach to Japan, building good relations in areas of security and economic cooperation, on the one hand, while confronting Japan on historical issues, on the other. Having campaigned on a promise to renegotiate the “comfort women” agreement,<sup>6</sup> Moon told then Prime Minister Abe Shinzo over the phone that the South Korean people could not emotionally accept the agreement.<sup>7</sup> Moon addressed the issue in his speeches, stating that he would strive to “restore the honour and dignity of the victims” for all those forced into sexual slavery and forced labour by the Japanese Imperial Army.<sup>8</sup> This hardline rhetoric heightened the collective memory of the South Korean population, increasing the level of animosity South Koreans felt towards Japan.<sup>9</sup> Thus, while in the end Moon did not keep his campaign promise to renegotiate the comfort women agreement, he did demand that the Japanese government “sincerely apologise” to the South Korean comfort women.<sup>10</sup> After Abe Shinzo rejected this request, stating that the matter had been “resolved” and was “irreversible”, this stirred further anti-Japanese sentiment in South Korea and demanded a response.<sup>11</sup> Moon therefore de facto ended the agreement by shutting down

the foundation set up by Japan to compensate the South Korean comfort women.

The drive to confront Japan is therefore not unique to Moon, but has been a core issue for his liberal progressive presidential predecessors. The ideological foundation of the liberal progressives stems from the pro-democracy movement of the 1980s, of which Moon Jae-in was part. The movement centred around democracy and anti-colonialism, which still influences its policies. This can take the form of nationalism in both domestic and foreign policy, which has been interpreted by some western observers as alienating both the US and Japan.<sup>12</sup> However, other observers argue that the foreign policy aim of the liberal progressives is for South Korea to be autonomous from great power influence, which stems from the historical view that great power influence, whether Japanese imperialism, the division of the Korean peninsula or US support for South Korean dictators, has had negative effects on the South Korea.<sup>13</sup>

Moon’s liberal progressive presidential predecessors almost always steered away from a decision to confront Japan due to perceived mutual external threats, such as

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<sup>6</sup> “Comfort women” is a term that refers to women forced into prostitution by Japan’s Imperial Army in occupied territories. The “Comfort women agreement” was reached during the Park administration (2012–2017). It stipulated that Japan would set up a fund amounting to 1 billion Japanese Yen to compensate the South Korean Comfort women. The then foreign minister, Kishida Fumio, and his South Korean counterpart, Yun Byung-se, stated that the matter was now “finally and irreversibly resolved”. See Kang, ‘Resolving the Japan - Korea “Comfort Women” Conflict’. Stangarone, ‘The Comfort Women Agreement 5 Years On’.

<sup>7</sup> Yoshida, ‘Abe and Moon Agree to Work on “future-Oriented” Ties in First Phone Chat’.

<sup>8</sup> Moon Jae-in ‘President Moon’s opening remarks at the New Year press conference’, 10 January 2018.

<sup>9</sup> Lee and Schoff, ‘Navigating Rocky Japan–South Korea Relations’.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, ‘Japan’s Efforts on the Issue of Comfort Women’.

<sup>12</sup> Kelly, ‘Moon Jae-in’s Foreign Policy Reorientation | Lowy Institute’.

<sup>13</sup> Park, ‘The Foreign Policy Outlook of South Korean Progressives’.





the North Korean nuclear threat.<sup>14</sup> However, Moon used the 2018 Winter Olympics in Pyeongchang as a platform to successfully initiate and engage with North Korea through dialogue. Two senior North Korean representatives were sent to the Olympics, paving the way for the planning of high-level summits between North and South Korea. The first meeting between Moon and North Korea's Supreme Leader, Kim Jong-un, was held at Panmunjom, resulting in an easing of tensions on the Korean peninsula and agreements to continue dialogue.<sup>15</sup> This changed the dynamics for South Korea regarding the perceived threat from North Korea at the time, as tensions were alleviated allowing dialogue to continue. Moon was therefore able to pursue the ideological goal of confronting Japan.

At the beginning of Moon's presidential term, through agreements made in the autumn of 2017, his administration and Japan were more aligned on managing the North Korean nuclear threat by implementing more sanctions.<sup>16</sup> However, one of Moon's core campaign objectives was to engage in dialogue with North Korea to bring it in from the cold. The Moon administration's approach to North Korea was similar to Kim Dae-jung's sunshine policy of engaging with North Korea through dialogue to foster trust between the two states. Japan, on the other hand, continued to refrain from any dialogue with North

Korea for two reasons: Japan wants to see genuine measures of denuclearisation and resolution of the cases of abduction of Japanese citizens by North Korea. These two issues must be resolved before any talks can be pursued between Japan and North Korea.<sup>17</sup> The progression of high-level talks between Moon and Kim opened the door for US President Donald J. Trump to initiate high-level summits with Kim, as Japan and Abe watched from the sidelines with no scheduled talks with the North Korean leadership. After Trump's meeting with Kim Jong-un in Hanoi in February 2019, South Korea and the US agreed to postpone all military exercises for the foreseeable future. This was done to avoid antagonising North Korea, which views such exercises as an act of aggression.<sup>18</sup> Thus, South Korea's and Japan's interests seemed at that time to be no longer be aligned to the same degree as at the beginning of Moon's presidential term.

## Japan-South Korea relations in a downward spiral

In the autumn of 2018, the South Korean Supreme Court handed down a decision that allowed individuals who had been subjected to forced labour during the colonial period to sue the companies they had worked for. The affected companies, Mitsubishi Heavy Industries and Nippon Steel, were ordered to compensate any victim who had won legal

<sup>14</sup> Glosserman, Brad, and Scott A. Snyder. *The Japan-South Korea Identity Clash : East Asian Security and the United States*. p.102, New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2015.,

<sup>15</sup> Botto and Lee, 'President Moon Jae-in and the Politics of Inter-Korean Détente'.

<sup>16</sup> The Japan Times, 'Abe, Moon Agree to Push for Stronger Pressure on North Korea through New Sanctions'.

<sup>17</sup> Botto, 'Moon Jae-in: Putting North Korea at the Center', *Joint U.S.-Korea Academic Studies ; For further reading on the abduction issue see 'Abe Shinzo and the North Korean Abduction Issue'*, *The Diplomat*

<sup>18</sup> Panda, 'US, South Korea Call Off Foal Eagle and Key Resolve Exercises, Announce New Exercise'.



redress. The verdict also stipulated that company assets in South Korea could be seized by the court and sold to compensate the victims. The assets comprised patents and trademark rights held by the Japanese companies' subsidiaries in South Korea.<sup>19</sup> Japan argued that the issue had already been settled by the 1965 agreement, and thus the verdict went against international law. However, the South Korean Supreme Court argued that individuals were still within their rights to seek compensation for crimes committed against them in colonial times.<sup>20</sup> The ruling was premised on the view that Imperial Japan's colonisation of the Korean peninsula under the 1910 treaty of Annexation should be seen as illegal under the South Korean Constitution of 1948, which therefore opened up the possibility for individuals to bring lawsuits for compensation.<sup>21</sup> However, observers argued that the Supreme Court's decision would not hold up if brought up for international adjudication on the matter.<sup>22</sup> The Supreme Court decision goes against how previous South Korean administrations have

perceived the issue. The former liberal progressive, President Roh Moo-hyun (2003–2008), formed a committee to review the issue, which concluded that the 1965 agreement had settled the matter.<sup>23</sup> In recent years, some lower courts have gone against the Supreme Court decision by dismissing similar cases, viewing the issue either as resolved by the 1965 agreement or as having passed the statute of limitations.<sup>24</sup> Japan approached the Moon administration to resolve the issue through diplomatic engagement, but Moon responded that Japan needed to foster a “more humble attitude towards wartime issues” and that Japan should not “politicise” the situation.<sup>25</sup> Moon had already politicised the issue, however, by frequently using colonial imagery, and by not immediately dismissing the issue as resolved. Instead, he sought to engage with the matter once again through diplomatic talks with Japan.<sup>26</sup> Moon was also reluctant to intervene in court matters to resolve the issue, as a matter of the principle regarding the separation of powers between the government and the judiciary.<sup>27,28</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Yoon, ‘The Moon Jae-in Administration’s Diplomacy with Japan and Korea-Japan Relations’, 4.

<sup>20</sup> Hurst, ‘Forced Labor Court Decision Opens Rift in Japan-South Korea Ties’.

<sup>21</sup> Shim, ‘Court Tells Mitsubishi Heavy Liquidation Is Nigh’.

<sup>22</sup> Ju, ‘The Japan-Korea Dispute Over the 1965 Agreement’.

<sup>23</sup> Jo, ‘Turning Point in Korea-Japan Relations and Challenges in Korea’s Diplomacy with Japan’.

<sup>24</sup> Yoon, ‘The Moon Jae-in Administration’s Diplomacy with Japan and Korea-Japan Relations’.

<sup>25</sup> Lee, ‘South Korea’s Moon Urges Japan Leaders Not to “politicise” Forced Labour Issues’.

<sup>26</sup> Moon ‘Address by President Moon Jae-in on Korea’s 75th Liberation Day’; *See also*: Hanssen

et.al. ‘The Identity Politics Driving the Japan–South Korea Trade War.’

<sup>27</sup> Yoon, ‘The Moon Jae-in Administration’s Diplomacy with Japan and Korea-Japan Relations’.

<sup>28</sup> However, the principle of the separation of powers has been questioned in South Korea in the past decade. A South Korean president has the power to appoint a Chief Justice to the Supreme Court with the consent of the National Assembly for a maximum of one six-year term. The Chief Justice can in turn submit recommendations to the president on the appointment of new judges to the Supreme Court.<sup>28</sup> This happened at the beginning of Moons presidential term in 2017, when he appointed a new Chief Justice, Kim Myeong-soo, who in turn nominated ten judges to the Supreme Court. (The Dong-a Ilbo, ‘Candidate Kim Myung-Soo Must Make the Judiciary Work for the People’).



This was subsequently followed by prosecutions brought against 11 former or sitting judges, including the previous Chief Justice, Yang Sung-tae (2011–2017) in 2019, who was accused of having colluded with the disgraced Park administration by delaying deliberations on the verdict concerning forced labour victims.<sup>29</sup> Scholars have also alluded to the politicisation of the justice system in South Korea, whereby the political ideology of the incumbent administration can influence court rulings and even reverse precedents set by former constellations of the Supreme Court.<sup>30</sup> Evidence of this issue, according to one observer, is the different rulings delivered by lower courts on similar cases on forced labour mentioned above.<sup>31</sup> While there have been no reports of collusion between the Moon administration and his Chief Justice on this matter, the factual circumstances are that the president has the ability to select a sympathetic Chief Justice who in turn has the power to nominate new judges to the Supreme Court. This in turn can have an impact on rulings that favour the ruling administration's policies.

Seemingly with little or no potential to resolve the issue diplomatically, Japan responded to the verdict by removing South Korea from its so-called whitelist of trusted trading partners, which primarily affected trade in chemicals that are critical to the

production of semiconductors. Japan's statement on the removal referred to "security concerns" as Japanese officials accused South Korea of illegally sending the materials to North Korea.<sup>32</sup> Moon swiftly issued a statement in which he declared that South Korea "would never lose to Japan again", continuing use of colonial imagery that put Japan in an antagonist position vis-à-vis South Korea.<sup>33</sup> The South Korean public reacted with voluntary boycotts of Japanese brands, notably Uniqlo and Asahi beer. In a survey conducted in late 2020, 70 percent of South Korean respondents stated that they had participated in the voluntary boycotts of Japanese brands.<sup>34</sup> South Korea also responded by removing Japan from its own whitelist, and announced that it would also withdraw from the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA).<sup>35</sup>

The GSOMIA, which allows the South Korean and Japanese intelligence services to share information on North Korea, was seen as a breakthrough in relations when it was signed by the Park administration. Moon refused to renew the agreement right up until the last few hours before it was due to expire in November 2019. Heavy pressure from the US, however, led Moon to put withdrawal from GSOMIA on hold.<sup>36</sup> This sequence of events damaged South Korean-Japanese relations as neither side could successfully engage with the other due to their firm stances on core issues.

<sup>29</sup> Kim, 'Judges under Attack | Fifteen Eighty Four | Cambridge University Press'.

<sup>30</sup> Cha, 'Judicial Politics'.

<sup>31</sup> Kim, 'Judicial Independence in South Korea Revisited'.

<sup>32</sup> Maizland, 'The Japan-South Korea Trade Dispute'.

<sup>33</sup> Moon, 'Opening Remarks by President Moon Jae-in at Emergency Cabinet Meeting'.

<sup>34</sup> Na-young, 'Over 70 Pct of S. Koreans Joined Boycott of Japanese Goods'.

<sup>35</sup> Botto and Lee, 'Overcoming Obstacles to Trilateral U.S.-ROK-Japan Interoperability - Korea Net Assessment 2020'.

<sup>36</sup> Matsuo, 'Korea-Japan GSOMIA Survives Amid Disputes over Historical, Trade Issues'.



When Abe Shinzo stepped down as prime minister in the autumn of 2020, there was hope for a reopening of constructive dialogue with Japan. Abe had been seen by the South Korean government as especially difficult to engage with due to his hardline stance on historical issues.<sup>37</sup> Moon tried to arrange a summit meeting with Abe's successor, Suga Yoshihide, during the Olympics in Tokyo 2021, but the two sides failed to settle on an agenda. Japan was adamant in its stance that South Korea must resolve the issue of the seizing and forced liquidation of Japanese corporate assets before any talks could be held.<sup>38</sup>

Moon's approach to Japan ultimately failed because he pushed the confrontation on historical issues further than many of his predecessors. His focus on achieving a peace agreement with North Korea affected his handling of South Korea's relationship with Japan. Unlike his liberal predecessors, Moon did not recoil from confronting Japan for the sake of mutual security interests. During Moon's presidential term, South Korean-Japanese relations spiralled downwards to what many observers considered the lowest point in decades.

## **The Yoon Suk-yeol presidency, May 2022 to May 2027**

With no previous political experience, Yoon Suk-yeol made a name for himself as the Prosecutor General appointed by then President Moon Jae-in in 2019 to weed out corruption in the government. However, when Yoon started to investigate Minister of Justice Cho Kuk for abusing his position, he quickly fell out with the Moon government.<sup>39</sup> Nine months after starting his political career in 2021, Yoon won the South Korean presidential election for the conservative Peoples Power Party. He assumed office on 10 May 2022. His campaign was based on continuing his hardline anti-corruption work, as well as attracting young men sympathetic to anti-feminist policies, such as the pledge to close the Ministry of Gender Equality.<sup>40</sup> His foreign policy contained clear globalist sentiment, pushing South Korea towards a values-based foreign policy. However, even with Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine as a backdrop, foreign policy issues were seemingly not a high priority among voters.<sup>41</sup> In the end, Yoon won the presidential election by a razor thin margin of 0.7% over the liberal progressive candidate, Lee Jae-myung.

Yoon Suk-yeol set out from the start to mend South Korea's ties with Japan. Before the election, he had argued that the need to normalise Japanese-South Korea's relations

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<sup>37</sup> Ferrier, 'Abe Shinzo's Legacy in South Korea'.

<sup>38</sup> Yoon, 'The Moon Jae-in Administration's Diplomacy with Japan and Korea-Japan Relations'.

<sup>39</sup> Yeo, 'What to Expect from the Incoming South Korean President's Domestic and Foreign Policy Agendas'.

<sup>40</sup> Lee, 'Proposal to Abolish Gender Equality Ministry Reemerges as Key Issue Ahead of Elections'.

<sup>41</sup> McCurry, 'South Korea Election Contenders Neck and Neck, According to Exit Polls'; Chun, 'South Koreans Could Learn a Lot From the War in Ukraine - 38 North'.





was of “strategic importance”. He became president at a turbulent time, at the tail-end of the pandemic and just after Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Key security issues for South Korea arose from these events. The pandemic had exposed the impractical dependency on China through global supply chains and there were fears that the Russian invasion could have ripple effects for Asia, with China looming over Taiwan.<sup>42</sup> In his inaugural speech, Yoon pointed out that “our region cannot be exempt from threats that endanger the peace of other regions”, indicating his awareness of the impact distant conflicts had on South Korea’s own security.<sup>43</sup> Yoon therefore announced, in an article published in *Foreign Affairs* before the election, that South Korea must make a “global pivot”, meaning that South Korea could no longer focus only on affairs that directly affected the peninsula. Indeed, according to Yoon, South Korea needed to take on a bigger global role that befit its economic size.<sup>44</sup> In order to pursue such a global pivot, South Korea would need to actively engage with “like-minded states” that share universal values of “freedom and liberalism.” South Korea has therefore pursued a values-oriented foreign policy under Yoon, which explains the reason for reconciliation with Japan that, as Yoon put it,

“shares the same universal values” as South Korea.<sup>45</sup>

This set the trajectory for what could be expected for his presidential term. By courting the Japanese government early on in various speeches, Yoon tried to push cooperation on future-oriented issues such as security and the economy to the forefront. However, to achieve a stable relationship with Japan, Yoon needed to handle the forced labour issues that arose during Moon’s presidency. The South Korean Supreme Court was still considering whether to sell Japanese company assets, a decision which hinged on future verdicts in the matter.<sup>46</sup> In a surprising turn of events, Yoon stated that Japan had “transformed from the militaristic aggressor of the past, into a partner that shares the same universal values with us. Today Korea and Japan cooperate on issues of security and the economy. We also work together to cope with global challenges”.<sup>47</sup> Yoon followed up on this speech by announcing that South Korea would set up a foundation funded by the South Korean companies that had benefited from the 1965 treaty with Japan, which would resolve the issue of compensation for South Korean forced labour victims.<sup>48</sup> The proposal was met with a positive response

<sup>42</sup> Yoon, ‘South Korea Needs to Step Up’.

<sup>43</sup> Yoon, ‘Inaugural Address by President Yoon Suk Yeol’.

<sup>44</sup> Yoon, ‘South Korea Needs to Step Up’.

<sup>45</sup> Yoon, ‘Address by President Yoon Suk Yeol on 104th March First Independence Movement Day’.

<sup>46</sup> Arin, ‘Forced Labor Victims File Suit to Seize Mitsubishi Assets’.

<sup>47</sup> ‘Address by President Yoon Suk Yeol on 104th March First Independence Movement Day’.

<sup>48</sup> The 1965 treaty on normalisation of bilateral relations between South Korea and Japan granted South Korea US\$ 300 million in cooperation

funds and US\$ 200 million in low-interest loans. The cooperation funds were to settle any claims that might arise from victims of the colonial rule, giving the South Korean government the responsibility to distribute the funds. The cooperation funds were in line with the terms stipulated in the 1951 San Francisco Treaty, which Japan signed following the post-1945 defeat, granting other affected states compensation for grievances their nationals had suffered under the rule of Imperial Japan. However, neither North Korea nor South Korea were eligible to participate in the negotiations, leaving them unable to claim compensation as a



from both Japan and the US, which opened the door for Yoon to travel to Japan for a high-level summit with Japan's Prime Minister Kishida Fumio.<sup>49</sup> Yoon was the first South Korean President in 12 years to travel to Japan for an official meeting. As the high-level meeting between Yoon and Kishida took place, North Korea test-launched an intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM).<sup>50</sup>

Yoon had criticised the preceding Moon administration for focusing too much on peace talks with North Korea, thereby neglecting other areas of diplomacy that needed tending to, such as more intense development of South Korea's ties in the Indo-Pacific region.<sup>51</sup> It was therefore no surprise that Yoon chose to reverse the engagement policies with North Korea and opt for what analysts have called a traditional conservative style.<sup>52</sup> The conservatives are generally sceptical about engaging with North Korea and support the use of sanctions until North Korea denuclearises. Only then could there be meaningful engagement between a conservative South Korean government and North Korea. This is more aligned with Japanese policy.<sup>53</sup> The conservatives' foreign policy has been characterised by some observers as mostly driven by the anti-communist sentiment passed down from the authoritarian pre-democratic era. They view North Korea as an existential threat, which puts the security partnership with the US at the forefront. This

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result of the San Francisco Treaty. The 1965 treaty stipulates that any issues that arose during the occupation were completely and finally settled. See Ju, 'The Japan-Korea Dispute Over the 1965 Agreement'.

<sup>49</sup> Pohlkamp, 'The Weight of History'.

<sup>50</sup> Yeo, 'South Korea-Japan Rapprochement Creates New Opportunities in the Indo-Pacific'.

<sup>51</sup> Yoon, 'South Korea Needs to Step Up'.

also means that South Korean conservatives aim to maintain a stable relationship with Japan on cooperation on future-oriented matters.<sup>54</sup>

In the 12-month period after Yoon was elected, North Korea conducted a record breaking 90 cruise and ballistic missile tests, compared to eight tests in 2021 and four in 2020 when Moon was still in office.<sup>55</sup> While the Covid-19 pandemic might have played a role in the lower number of missile tests, there are reasons to assume that Yoon's election and his North Korea policy also had an impact on North Korea's behaviour. Thus, from Yoon's perspective, the looming nuclear threat from North Korea increased the reasons for South Korea to pursue a deeper alliance structure with "like-minded" states such as Japan, which shares the security threat from North Korea.

## Normalising relations with Japan

Yoon was able to normalise the relationship between Japan and South Korea at a high-level summit with Kishida in Japan. During the meeting, both parties agreed to reinstate the GSOMIA, although this was not without a domestic backlash as public opinion, and progressives in particular, criticized Yoon for yielding on the forced labour issue without

<sup>52</sup> Yeo, 'What to Expect from the Incoming South Korean President's Domestic and Foreign Policy Agendas'.

<sup>53</sup> Byun, 'Yoon to Bolster Cooperation with US Japan in Dealing with China, N. Korea'.

<sup>54</sup> Lankov, 'Conservatives vs. Progressives'.

<sup>55</sup> Dotto, Lendon, and Yeung, 'North Korea's Record-Breaking Year of Missile Testing Is Putting the World on Edge'.



any real commitments from Japan.<sup>56</sup> The blossoming relationship allowed the normalisation of trade and exchange as both South Korea and Japan relented on their respective whitelist bans. However, Yoon's reconciliation with Japan was not primarily focused on normalising trade or ending historical issues. Instead, the aim was seemingly that South Korea together with Japan should address the common security issues that had emerged from global events in recent years.<sup>57</sup>

### Trilateral cooperation

In December 2022, Yoon launched his administration's strategic document for the Indo-Pacific. The strategic document realigns South Korea with the Indo-Pacific visions of Japan and the US. South Korea's Indo-Pacific strategy sets the course not only for a global pivot, but also for a clearer stance on the great power rivalry between the US and China. While not taking as firm a stance as the US on halting China's regional ambitions, South Korea's strategic document recognises the need to uphold a rules-based maritime domain, which has been challenged somewhat by Chinese incursions in the East and South China Seas.<sup>58</sup> However, Yoon leaves the door open for cooperation with China if it upholds international norms and the rules-based order, as China is characterised in the document as a "key partner for achieving prosperity and peace in

the Indo-Pacific".<sup>59</sup> Yoon's policy clearly pivots South Korea's alliance structure towards cooperation with the US and Japan rather than China, and sends a clear message about which way it leans when engaging with security issues in the region.

Development of the bilateral relationship between Japan and South Korea could be argued to have reached a historic high by mid-August 2023, when a trilateral summit between Japan, South Korea and the US was held at Camp David. The US has long tried to push Japan and South Korea to engage in trilateral security cooperation but failed due to unresolved historical issues and the lack of domestic political support.<sup>60</sup> The Trilateral summit produced several documents, such as the Camp David Principles, in which the three countries state areas of common security and economic cooperation. In their Joint Statement, Japan, South Korea and the US highlighted geopolitical competition, Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and nuclear provocations.<sup>61</sup> The statement also discusses China's ambitions in the South China Sea but falls short of naming China the geopolitical competitor in the Indo-Pacific region. This can be interpreted as having been removed by Japan and South Korea to avoid any repercussions from China. The US, however, is under no illusions about what constitutes its competition in the region.<sup>62</sup>

<sup>56</sup> Stent, 'South Korea's Political Bifurcation Will Stifle Any Trilateral Agreement'.

<sup>57</sup> Kaizuka, 'Japan-South Korea Cooperation'.

<sup>58</sup> Kim, 'Assessment of South Korea's New Indo-Pacific Strategy'.

<sup>59</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 'Introducing the Indo-Pacific Strategy | Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Korea'.

<sup>60</sup> Atlantic Council Experts, 'Experts React: The US-Japan-South Korea Summit Was "Historic." But What Did It Accomplish?'.

<sup>61</sup> House, 'The Spirit of Camp David'.

<sup>62</sup> Lewis and Pamuk, 'Biden Administration Singles out China as "biggest Geopolitical Test" for U.S'.



The deliverables from the summit have been characterised as somewhat loosely structured but agreements to regularise joint military exercises and set up a hotline for consultations on handling joint security issues are seen as a breakthrough from the perspective of where Japanese-South Korean relations were just a few months before.<sup>63</sup> These deliverables show that the trilateral states view their security concerns as intertwined, which will allow for a powerful response to their handling.

While the countries' commitments to cooperate hold great meaning, the significance of the summit lies in the efforts to institutionalise trilateral cooperation. The process of institutionalising the trilateral partnership is not tied to any treaty, but rather depends on the three states embracing routinised trilateral meetings and regular military exercises, and abiding by the norms stipulated in the Camp David Principles. The intention is for cooperation to go beyond any presidential election (especially in South Korea and the US), or at least make it harder for any future government to withdraw.

## Concluding remarks

This brief set out to analyse the development of South Korean relations with Japan under the previous Moon and current Yoon administrations. Although still controversial, the turn during the Yoon administration has had positive effects on the public's

perception of Japan. Opinion polls show a positive development in the South Korean public's attitude to Japan following diplomatic efforts by Yoon and Kishida.<sup>64</sup> This bodes well for the continuance of relations between the two countries. Trilateral engagement also allows Japan and South Korea to continue to develop deeper ties not only with each other, but also with the US to create a powerful partnership in East Asia to balance China's growing ambition in the region.

However, several events could negatively affect the relationship. The 2024 US presidential election could have an impact on the trilateral partnership established under Yoon if Trump were to return to office. More recently, the South Korean (liberal progressive) opposition was able to retain its majority in the National Assembly in elections held on 10 April 2024. While Yoon does not need the National Assembly's approval to set his foreign policy agenda, according to some commentators, an emboldened opposition could affect his future engagement with Japan.<sup>65</sup> The election outcome indicates that there will be a progressive government after the next election. With historical issues left unresolved, an incoming progressive government could undermine the progress made by Yoon.

A major curveball could be the recent change of North Korean policy on South Korea. In January 2024, Kim Jong-un declared that

<sup>63</sup> Daniel Sneider, '2023 in Review: The Deepening of Trilateral Cooperation'.

<sup>64</sup> Sohn, Kim, and Park, 'Diverging Perspectives on Improving Bilateral Relations: Analysis of the 2023 Korea-Japan Joint Opinion Poll'; The Japan

Times, 'Record 44% of South Koreans Have Good Impression of Japan, Survey Says'.

<sup>65</sup> Yeo, 'Will South Korea Change Course Following Yoon's Election Loss?'





North Korea would no longer seek peaceful reunification with South Korea, declaring it principal enemy number one. This comes at a time when North Korea and Russia have strengthened their ties through North Korea's exports of munitions to Russia.<sup>66</sup> This development could lead an incoming progressive government to accept that the circumstances are right to call for historical issues with Japan to be set aside in order to jointly deal with a more assertive North Korea. On the issue of North Korean support for Russia, South Korea has been identified as a potential supplier of arms to Ukraine. Despite South Korea's current ambition to become a recognised global actor, however, domestic law prohibits a South Korean government from exporting arms to conflict zones, including Ukraine.<sup>67</sup> The EU have few, if any, tools to influence South Korean-Japanese relations. However, the importance of a stable East Asian region should be promoted and carefully monitored, as it is in the EU's interests that two important allies in the region get along.

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<sup>66</sup> Snyder, 'Why Is North Korea Turning More Aggressive?'

<sup>67</sup> *ibid.*



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