

# POLICY BRIEF

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## Can the Rapprochement in Japan-South Korea Relations Continue? Some Challenges Ahead

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After several decades of tense interactions, Japan-South Korea relations seem to have entered a new era of rapprochement, particularly following the August 2023 trilateral summit in Camp David hosted by the US president, Joe Biden. While the tangible outcome of this meeting is somewhat arguable, the symbolism was nonetheless significant: that Japan and its closest neighbor, South Korea, racked by decades-long animosities over the history issue, particularly Japan's wartime memories and the Comfort Women issue, have come close to realizing what Victor Cha identified as a quasi-alliance structure (the "tripod") with the US acting as the pivot linking both Japan and South Korea.<sup>1</sup>

This is not to suggest that the formal alliance between Japan and South Korea is imminent. Indeed, the age-old issues of history and territory persist that would make any talk of a formal alliance controversial, effectively foreclosing any political discussion over the issue from taking place.<sup>2</sup> With the Japanese government complaining about the South Korean military exercise in the waters around the disputed island of Takeshima/Dokto as recently as August 2024, the bilateral relationship still faces numerous obstacles.<sup>3</sup>

But the overall relations are on a much firmer ground than in previous years, if not decades, thanks in no small part in having a conservative administration in South Korea under Yoon Suk-yeol, who, since inauguration, has shown great enthusiasm in repairing

1 Cha, Victor D. "Abandonment, Entrapment, and Neoclassical Realism in Asia: the United States, Japan, and Korea." *International Studies Quarterly* 44.2 (2000): 261-291.

2 Indeed, given how territorial issues are about historical claims dating back from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the two issues are normally intertwined.

3 Nihon keizai shimbun, "Nippon seifu, Kankoku-gun no Takeshima kunren ni kōgi," Nihon keizai shimbun, August 21, 2024. Available at <https://www.nikkei.com/article/DGXZQOUA21AYUOR20C24A8000000/?type=my#AAAUg jQwMA>. Accessed on August 22, 2024.

Seoul’s relationship with Tokyo. Furthermore, the Biden administration’s keenness in fortifying US-Japan and US-South Korea alliances in the face of growing threat perception deriving from Chinese behavior in the South China Sea, as well as the general deterioration in the geopolitical balance of power since Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 no doubt gave further impetus to the thawing of Japan-South Korea relations.<sup>4</sup>

Thus, the bilateral relationship is improving, albeit with potentials for flare-ups to haunt future relationships constantly lurking in the background. This means that the current rapprochement is potentially quite fragile—and by implication a valuable asset in confidence-building—if the governments in Seoul, and particularly Tokyo, are so interested. There are going to be many challenges ahead. The issue is whether Tokyo’s relations with Seoul have matured enough to the extent that the two neighbors can overcome any future shocks to the relationship, including the outcome of the US presidential election in November 2024.

***The Essence of Japan-South Korea Relations***

Given the persistent tensions between Japan and South Korea, it is no surprise that the analyses of the bilateral relations have centered on the very mechanisms for how the tensions emerged; and how the history issues have always been an impediment to better relations for some time. Indeed, the differences over history have been taken-for-granted as a major,

recurring, factor in the tumultuous relationship, to the extent that the differences in historical perspectives were seen to define the very dynamic of Japan-South Korea relations.

The deterioration in the postwar bilateral relations started immediately after the Second World War, with the then-Japanese prime minister, Yoshida Shigeru, urging the American government to help Japan “get rid” of Koreans who were seen to be involved in black markets and were perceived to be one of the sources of social unrest in the immediate postwar years.<sup>5</sup> Such Japanese sentiment rested on a long-held Japanese condescension against the Koreans dating from the prewar era, manifested in a deadly episode with the infamous massacre of Koreans following the September 1923 Great Kanto Earthquake when vicious rumors circulated that Koreans and Chinese were poisoning the wells, prompting the Japanese vigilantes to hunt them down and murder them.<sup>6</sup>

As such, the decades-old Japanese condescension towards the Koreans had provided a particularly negative psychological landscape for postwar Japanese policy makers that were reflected in the normalization process through the 1950s and the 1960s—a sentiment that has haunted the bilateral relations ever since. Indeed, the series of difficult interactions have created a sense within Japanese leadership that South Koreans are, by definition, “difficult” to deal with, and that they are always quick to invoke the “history card,” while the South Koreans were conditioned into thinking that the Japanese are petulantly unrepentant towards

4 Center for Strategic and International Studies, “The Camp David U.S.-Japan-Korea Trilateral Summit: An Exchange among CSIS Japan and Korea Chairs,” August 23, 2023. Available at: <https://www.csis.org/analysis/camp-david-us-japan-korea-trilateral-summit-exchange-among-csis-japan-and-korea-chairs>. Accessed on 22 August 2024.

5 Taku Tamaki, *Deconstructing Japan’s Image of South Korea: Identity in Foreign Policy* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), pp. 100-1

6 The Japanese politicians seem to find it particularly difficult to recognize this atrocity even to this day. This includes the current Governor of Tokyo, Koike Yuriko. See *Asahi Shimbun*, “Koike should not continue to snub Korean quake massacre service,” *Asahi shimbun*, August 30, 2024. Available at: <https://www.asahi.com/ajw/articles/15407563>. Accessed on September 16, 2024.

the sufferings of Koreans under Japanese imperialism predating the Second World War. Such mutual misapprehension has led to a vicious circle of invectives to the extent that such *quid-pro-quo* has been understood to be the inescapable reality of bilateral relations.<sup>7</sup>

Less than ten years after the end of the War, a major territorial- and fishing dispute erupted between the Japan and the South Korea. This was in response to the South Korean government led by President Rhee Syngman unilaterally imposing a maritime line of control. The so-called “Rhee Line” delineated in 1952 was seen in South Korea as necessary to prevent uncontrolled fishing by the Japanese fishermen, while the Japanese felt that Rhee was over-reacting, meting out punishment for the prewar militarism.<sup>8</sup>

The 1950s proved to be a particularly tumultuous decade. The following year in 1953 saw the infamous “Kubota Remark” in which Japan’s chief negotiator to the normalization talks, Kubota Kanichirō, stated that the Japanese colonialism in Korean peninsula also brought about positive outcomes—a sentiment that was widely shared among the Japanese conservatives at the time,<sup>9</sup> but was also interpreted as another example of Japanese attempt at whitewashing history by the South Koreans.<sup>10</sup> Thus, the mutual skepticism that exists between Japan and South Korea today had its roots in the 1950s, suggesting that the uneasy relationship between the two countries is deeply ingrained.

It was only after the assumption of power by Park Chung-hee in 1961 that the relationship improved—primarily due to the pragmatism

of Park and his conservatism, being amenable towards establishing relations with Japan to kick-start postwar reconstruction and economic development. Furthermore, being a military dictator made it easier for him to push through with normalization in 1965. Yet, it was also the case that the Japanese, while receptive towards Park’s pragmatism, still considered him to be a military dictator, thereby reinforcing the negative images of South Koreans.<sup>11</sup>

What these episodes from the 1950s and the 1960s tell us is that the Japan-South Korea relations have become a clash of realities in which the *Japanese* realities of boisterous South Koreans clash with the *South Korean* realities of an unrepentant Japan to reproduce a downward spiral of mutually-negative images that has been a persistent feature of bilateral relations, at least until very recently.

### ***The Clash of Realities and Identity Politics Between Japan and South Korea***

The persistence of mutually-negative images that seem to govern Japan-South Korea relations has created a “political reality” for both Tokyo and Seoul. On the one hand, the Japanese feel that the South Koreans are always invoking the history issue to discredit and delegitimize the Japanese, while, on the other hand, the South Koreans feel that the Japanese remain unrepentant towards the past. The oft-quoted “future-oriented relationships” can mean different things to different actors. For the Japanese, it is primarily about the South Koreans foregoing their perceived obsession with the past, while for the South Koreans, it is about the Japanese being sincere about the

7 Taku Tamaki, “It Takes Two to Tango: The Difficult Japan–South Korea Relations As Clash of Realities.” *Japanese Journal of Political Science* 21.1 (2020), pp. 1-18.

8 Tamaki, *Deconstructing*, p. 101.

9 Wakamiya Yoshibumi, *Sengo 70-nen hoshu no Ajia-kan* (Tokyo: Asahi shimbun shuppan, 2014).

10 Wakamiya, *Sengo 70-nen*; Lee Chong-sik, *Sengo Nikkan kankei-shi* (Translated by Okonogi Masao and Furuta Hiroshi) (Tokyo: Chūō kōron, 1989).

11 Wakabayashi, *Sengo 70-nen*.

Korean sufferings under the Japanese rule. While “future-oriented relationships” can be construed as a mutually convenient slogan for trying to propel the relationship forward, the inherent disconnect as Tokyo and Seoul interpret the phrase in a fundamentally different ways enflames the already-tense relationship.

Japan-South Korea relations as a clash of realities means that the relationship has taken on a semblance of identity politics—on the one hand, that the Japanese identity of a future-looking proactive pacifist has no choice but to deal with a backward-looking South Koreans, while, on the other hand, the South Koreans feel that the Japanese are always condescending towards them, and this explains Japan’s persistent denial of wartime responsibilities.<sup>12</sup> This is effectively an issue of mutual non-recognition between Japan and South Korea; and the negative emotions that emerge out of the mutual sense that the “other” is not willing to recognize one’s own identity fuels mounting mutual resentment, creating a vicious circle of anxiety and disappointment.<sup>13</sup>

Considering Japan’s relations with its Asian neighbors as a politics of identity is nothing new. Numerous studies have considered Japan’s similar dynamic with China, though a similar treatment of Japan-South Korea relations is still in its infancy.

### ***Academic Studies on Japan’s Relationship with Its Asian Neighbors***

Academic studies on Japan’s relations with its Asian neighbors have focused primarily on Japan-China relations and how the issues of the past have evolved into identity politics. These works mainly consider the bilateral relationship as one of perceptions and misperceptions: that actors form perceptions about other actors, and any negative images that an actor formulates about the “others” will frame the “reality” of the relationships.<sup>14</sup> Thus, from the Japanese perspective, the perceived threat from China makes China into a dangerous “other” against which Japan needs to enhance its security<sup>15</sup>—something that is also reflected in policy-oriented literature urging Japan to secure the seas, as losing the seas means surrendering the land.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, the lingering history issue also helps to paint Japan’s negative images of China as an actor determined to delegitimize Japan internationally, thereby formulating an image of China as a threat to Japan’s international reputation.<sup>17</sup>

Compared to studies on Japan’s relations with China, the Japan-South Korea relations do not enjoy as much spotlight, despite the relationship being seen as an important relationship. But there are studies that take similar theoretical trajectory to the existing Japan-China literature, with the notable ones framing the relationship as one of perceptions and misperceptions. These studies consider the current animosities between Japan and South Korea to have deep

12 Tamaki, “It Takes Two to Tango.”

13 Karl Gustafsson, “Recognising Recognition Through Thick and Thin: Insights from Sino-Japanese Relations.” *Cooperation and Conflict* 51.3 (2016): 255-271. A similar dynamic is also present in the current Japan-South Korea relationship.

14 See Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1976).

15 Hagström, Linus, and Ulv Hanssen. “War is Peace: The Rearticulation of ‘Peace’ in Japan’s China Discourse,” *Review of International Studies* 42.2 (2016), pp. 266-286.

16 Kanehara Nobukatsu, *Senryaku gaikō genron* (Tokyo: Nihon keizai shimbun shuppansha, 2011).

17 Gustafsson, “Recognising Recognition.”

historical roots stemming from the colonial era, tracing the roots of mutual animosities to the immediate years following the Meiji Restoration. Thus, the very early relationship between Meiji Japan and Korea started with a conflict over the recognition of the Japanese emperor as the sovereign (the so-called “accreditation incident”), along with Japan’s steady erosion of Korean sovereignty which followed the 1876 Kanghwa Incident.<sup>18</sup> The subsequent, Japanese, images of Korea have been largely negative, whereby the Japanese considered Koreans to be ignorant to the dangers of Western imperialism, unwilling or too uncivilized to appreciate Japan’s prewar liberationist ideology, reinforcing the negative images of the Korean “other” as needing to be forced into becoming more submissive towards the Japanese “liberators.”<sup>19</sup>

Even in the postwar period, the negative images of South Korea persisted in Japan, and *vice-versa*. The dispute over the Rhee Line, along with the tumultuous relationship during the normalization negotiations mentioned above led to the reinforcement of mutually negative images across the Tsushima strait that continued to define the bilateral relationship.<sup>20</sup> The very dynamic of the perceptions and misperceptions between Japan and South Korea comprised of an admixture of familiarity due to centuries-old history of cultural and political exchange coexisting with what was understood to be an unforgivable obsession with the past (the Japanese perception of South Korea) and an adamant refusal to countenance the past

mistakes (the South Korean perspectives on Japan).<sup>21</sup> These negative images governed the mutual “realities” for both Japan and South Korea to the extent that the current sensitivities between the two countries need to be considered a clash of not only identities and images, but also of realities.<sup>22</sup>

The persistence of the history issue between the two neighbors and how the territorial disputes are intertwined with the conflict over the past shows that the mutually negative images of one another still form the diplomatic realities for Japan and South Korea. The issue of the past, for instance, is not just about differences in historical interpretations, but it is also one of identity: how the official story about the past represents the “correct” national sense of being and self-righteousness means that any denial from the “other” is seen as an affront to national identity and self-worth. This is why the history issue has become so ingrained into the bilateral relationship, with negative depiction of the Japanese- or South Korean “other” is often closely intertwined with the differences over wartime memories.<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, because the historical memories are closely related to national identities and the peoples’—not just the elites’—sense of “who we are,” once the territorial issue is enmeshed with the history conflict, the animosities become not only political but often emotive involving the both the Japanese- and South Korean public, thereby, reinforcing and even amplifying the sense of injustice inflicted by the purportedly

18 Duus, Peter, *The Abacus and the Sword: The Japanese Penetration of Korea, 1895-1910* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

19 Kimura, Kan, “Fuketsu’ to ‘Osore’,” in Okamoto Koji (ed), *Kindai Nippon no Aja-kan* (Kyoto: Minerva, 1998), chapter 4.

20 Lee, *Sengo Nikkan kankei-shi*.

21 Chung Dae-kyun, *Ilbon no imeji: Kankoku-jin no Nippon-kan* (Tokyo: Chuo koron, 1998); Chung, *Kankoku no imêji: sengo Nippon-jin no ringoku-kan* (Tokyo: Chuo koron, 1995).

22 Tamaki, “It Takes Two to Tango.”

23 Chris Deacon, “Mnemonic Encounters: The Construction and Persistence of International “History Wars” and the Case of Japan–South Korea Relations.” *International Studies Quarterly* 68.3 (2024). Forthcoming.

unrepentant- or adamant neighbor.<sup>24</sup>

### ***The Bilateral Relations: On the Mend?***

Thus, the bilateral relations are prone to history issue, which is effectively a form of identity politics that have deep roots in history and the mutual sense of injustice felt by both Tokyo and Seoul. Given the inherent instability in bilateral relations, the current, improved, atmosphere is notable. This is particularly the case as the recent history of bilateral relations has been one of stop-and-go: a marked improvement soon soured by the relapse of history- and territorial issues.

There was a brief rapprochement in the early 1980s, as Prime Minister Nakasone Yasuhiro chose South Korea as the destination of his first foreign visit. This seemingly small gesture nonetheless indicated Nakasone's willingness to improve relations with Seoul; and the then-president, Chun Doo-hwan, having assumed power through military coup and being a conservative himself helped to improve relations. However, the subsequent relapse of the textbook issue in 1987 soured the relationship again.

The bilateral relations entered another short bout of goodwill after a former political prisoner, Kim Dae-jung, assumed presidency in 1998. His sympathetic view towards the Japanese—nurtured in part through the Japanese government exerting pressure on the South Korean government to release him following kidnapping by South Korean intelligence agents in the 1970s—helped to encourage rapprochement. Kim's call to propel

the relationship in a “future-oriented” direction resonated well with the Japanese government's long-standing desire to pursue its own version of “future-oriented diplomacy.”<sup>25</sup> The improved atmosphere ushered in the first wave of “*Hallyu* boom” in Japan, but the warmth soon cooled as the territorial issue over Takeshima/Dokto resurfaced in 1995.

The most recent decade has been one of similar stop-and-go. The initial hopes after the December 2015 agreement on Comfort Women for an irreversible improvement in relations were dashed as a conservative president, Park Gyun-he, was deposed and replaced by a progressive administration led by Moon Jae-in—who professed his anti-Japanese sentiments publicly. This episode had the unfortunate effect of reinforcing Japanese skepticism towards the South Koreans, as it was understood by Prime Minister Abe Shinzō as a “betrayal,” portraying the South Koreans as constantly breaching promises.<sup>26</sup>

The recent thaw in relations following the election of Yoon Suk-yeol's overtures to Japan aided by a common threat perception from China's flexing of military muscles in the South China Sea and the full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russia has been a welcome development. The Biden administration has also devoted much effort at maintaining this rapprochement, inviting both President Yoon and Japanese prime minister, Kishida Fumio, to Camp David for a tripartite summit in August 2023 that helped to boost the tripod of military alliance structure in Northeast Asia. The challenge is to keep the relations warm; and the ball is now in Japan's court to reciprocate more forcefully

24 Bukh, Alexander. *These Islands are Ours: The Social Construction of Territorial Disputes in Northeast Asia* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2020).

25 It needs to be noted that the meaning of “future-oriented” relationship depends on “who” says this, as the Japanese- and South Korean versions differ in nuance and in the pre-requisites: that the Japanese want South Koreans to put the past behind; while the South Koreans want the Japanese to fully admit its wartime record. See Tamaki, “It Takes Two to Tango.”

26 Abe Shinzō, Abe Shinzō kaikoroku (Tokyo: Chūō-kōron shinsha, 2023), pp. 170-73.

as Japan seems to have been less enthusiastic compared to the Yoon administration.<sup>27</sup> The recent registration of a disused gold mine on the Japanese island of Sado as a UNESCO World Heritage site is another indication that the relationship remains warm enough, as the mine not only represents Japan's modern mining technology, but its history also involves laborers from the Korean peninsula during the war years, effectively turning the heritage site into another relic of Japan's wartime record.<sup>28</sup>

Thus, the bilateral relationship is in a sweet spot whereby the bilateral relationship is enjoying positivity—no doubt in part prompted by geopolitical pressures, but also due to having a conservative president in South Korea who is more amenable towards pursuing rapprochement with Japan. Yet, the lingering issues are just below the surface, as evidenced by Japanese protest at South Korean military exercises around the disputed Takeshima/Dokto in August 2024. This means that it is imperative on both sides to maintain the relationship in its current, positive, status for as long as possible.

### ***The Challenges Ahead***

The recent agreement between the two governments to help each other's nationals evacuate from conflict zones is another indication of the prevailing goodwill between Tokyo and Seoul.<sup>29</sup> But given the roller-coaster ride of often turbulent relations over the years,

such *bon homie* cannot be taken for granted for too long. The current geopolitical tensions following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and what seems like an emergence of a Russia-China-Iran "axis" provide both an opportunity, as well as potential challenges, for the Japan-South Korea relations going forward.

The opportunities are exemplified by the August 2023 Camp David summit which brought together the tripod of US-Japan and US-South Korea alliances. The recent evacuation agreement, as well as the South Korean acquiescence over the Sado gold mine being registered as UNESCO World Heritage site mentioned above, provide a further set of confidence-building measures between the two neighbors that would help to boost goodwill across the Tsushima straits.

But the flip-side of these positive developments is that the history issue is never far below the surface. Indeed, the Sado gold mine case shows how a "good news" for Japan might imply "bad news" for South Korea, and *vice versa*. Furthermore, the territorial issue over Takeshima/Dokto is always lurking in the background, ready to sour the relationship—as happened at the tail-end of Lee Myun-bak's presidency when his visit to the islands was met with fury by the Japanese government which considered it an act of betrayal.<sup>30</sup>

Another potential trap in the current rapprochement lies in foreign infrastructure

27 Daniel Sneider, "Japan-South Korea-US Relations Thawed, but Not Warm Enough," East Asia Forum, <https://eastasiaforum.org/2023/08/31/japan-south-korea-us-relations-thawed-but-not-warm-enough/>. Accessed 29 August 2024

28 *The Economist*, "What a Japanese Gold Mine Says about Its Approach to History," *The Economist*, August 22, 2024. Available at: <https://www.economist.com/asia/2024/08/22/what-a-japanese-gold-mine-says-about-its-approach-to-history>. Accessed 29 August 2024.

29 *Nihon keizai shimbun*, Nikkan, "dai-sangoku deno kokumin-taihi e oboegaki kokan: shunō ga kyōryoku kakunin," *Nihon keizai shimbun*, September 3, 2024. Available at: <https://www.nikkei.com/article/DGXZQOUA032070T00C24A9000000/>. Accessed September 18, 2024.

30 Kee-seok Kim, "Lee Myung Bak's Stunt Over Disputed Islands," *East Asia Forum*, Available at: <https://eastasiaforum.org/2012/08/19/lee-myung-baks-stunt-over-disputed-islands/>. Accessed on September 4, 2024.

investments. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and its associated foreign direct investment (FDI) push has taken on a geopolitical significance that has been exacerbated since February 2022. This is because Japan's claims to "high-quality" infrastructure exports have become another dimension to Japan's national identity narratives. And within such a context, Japan's Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) vision, for which the "high-quality" infrastructure export is an integral component—is turning out to become another "identity politics" with China.

Take the case of railway technology. Japan's railway know-how, particularly its Shinkansen technology, helps to sustain Japanese national identity as a technological superpower.<sup>31</sup> The Chinese, too, consider railway expertise as a crucial vehicle for outward FDI and as a hallmark of its own technological status.<sup>32</sup> Now, the South Koreans are making inroads in the realm of railway technology in regions that are at the heart of FOIP-BRI geopolitical balance of power and the associated Japan-China identity politics of railway rivalry.

Having signed an agreement with Ukraine for the upgrade of its railways in November 2023, the South Koreans are quietly, but steadily, seeking out further investment opportunities. South Korea seems to be targeting Central Asia—another crucial region for the FOIP-BRI

rivalry—beginning with a June 2024 contract to supply South Korean high-speed trainsets to Uzbekistan, as well as South Korea agreeing in August 2024 to assist Tajikistan in the construction of a cross-border rail link between Tajikistan and Afghanistan. Furthermore, the railways of South Korea and China agreed to improve efficiencies in the flow of freight trains between China and Europe—another infrastructure project at the heart of the BRI.<sup>33</sup> What is striking is that Central Asia is a target region for Japan's FOIP, but the Japanese have yet to make greater inroads, while the South Koreans are steadily making their presence known.

Of course, the enhanced South Korean presence in Central Asia with its outward FDI can be interpreted as complementary to Japanese FOIP vision. However, it is also the case that there is still a possibility that the South Korean attempts can be seen as more threatening to the sense of Japanese technological superiority. This is not to suggest that another identity politics involving infrastructure projects is brewing; but technological agreements are areas in which, if cooperation or coordination are not realized, then a rivalry can easily emerge, adding a further layer to the already vexing admixture of identity politics deriving from the recurring history issue and the territorial dispute.

31 Taku Tamaki, "Railways as Japanese identity: Riding between confidence and inexperience," *Contemporary Japan* (2023), pp. 1-20.

32 Karl Yan, "The Railroad Economic Belt: Grand strategy, economic statecraft, and a new type of international relations." *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 23.2 (2021), pp. 262-279.

33 Jonathan Newton, "Korea Steps in to Help Ukraine Reconstruct Railway," *International Railway Journal*, November 23, 2023. Available at: <https://www.railjournal.com/infrastructure/korea-steps-in-to-help-ukraine-reconstruct-railway/>; *Railway Gazette International*, "Uzbekistan Signs South Korean High Speed Train Order," *Railway Gazette International*, June 18, 2024. Available at: <https://www.railwaygazette.com/traction-and-rolling-stock/uzbekistan-signs-south-korean-high-speed-train-order/66757.article>; *Railway Gazette International*, "South Korea to Support Tajik Railway Project," *Railway Gazette International*, August 24, 2024. Available at: <https://www.railwaygazette.com/infrastructure/south-korea-to-support-tajik-railway-project/67173.article>; and *Railway Gazette International*, "Korail Seals Deal with China Railway to Speed Up Asia – Europe Freight Flows," *Railway Gazette International*, July 18, 2024. Available at: <https://www.railwaygazette.com/freight/korail-seals-deal-with-china-railway-to-speed-up-asia-europe-freight-flows/66948.article>. All articles accessed on September 4, 2024

### ***The Need to Capitalize on the Roller-Coaster Ride***

As such, Japan-South Korea relations are, by definition, a roller-coaster ride. There are good times and bad times. Improvements in relations are frequently followed by downturns. And at the root of the conflict—whether they are over the history issue or they are about the lingering territorial dispute—is fundamentally about identity politics in Japan and South Korea, there are many other potential flash points.

While it might be reasonable to try to devise procedures and agreements to prevent future downturns, it is more sensible to accept that the bilateral relations are going to be defined through ebbs and flows in relations. Indeed, the December 2015 Comfort Women agreement was designed to close that particular chapter in the long history of mutual animosities, but political developments, particularly in South Korea, reopened the wounds, plunging Japan-South Korea relations into yet another trough. Hence, it seems sensible to accept—and indeed expect—that the reality of the bilateral relationship is defined through a mesmerizing cycle of positive- and negative sentiments. The challenge facing Tokyo and Seoul is to learn to hedge against the almost inevitable downturn in relations while the sentiments remain positive.

The current rapprochement is due primary to President Yoon’s sympathetic approach towards Japan, despite his dwindling domestic support in South Korea.<sup>34</sup> Unless the Japanese government can be seen to be more emollient towards the South Koreans, then the inevitable downturn can come back rather quickly, reinforcing the South Korean image of Japan as being arrogant and unrepentant. Furthermore, the current LDP leadership contest to succeed Kishida as the President of the LDP can potentially provide

an impetus for the lingering negative images of South Koreans within Japan. What if an ultra-conservative wins and goes onto become the next prime minister of Japan? Will he or she take South Korean overtures to Japan for granted? It is not as if Kishida has been particularly responsive to Yoon’s conciliatory moves. There is only so much the South Korean government alone can do to improve the relationship. Will the incoming Japanese administration be more accommodating?

These are unknowns; but given that the ups and downs in the Japan-South Korea relations show how the bilateral relations are effectively a clash of realities, the positivity that has recently accrued during the upturn in relations needs to be capitalized on somehow. Perhaps the political will is still lacking in both Tokyo and South Korea. All too often, the media plays down the positive while more than willing to reinforce mutually negative images. Perhaps the stakeholders—the politicians, the businesses, the media, and perhaps the people as well—need to be more aware of the “triggers” for downturn, and *why* some factors trigger uproar on both sides of the Tsushima strait. Knowing why the “other side” feels the way they do and how, should not be considered a “concession” to the other side, but rather, it must be understood as an important hedge against future downturn in relations.

Such confidence building measures by both sides should not remain a pipedream: it is an imperative, given the current geopolitical tensions, particularly the security challenges in Northeast Asia. A major breakdown in relations that we have witnessed in the late-2010s is detrimental not only to the bilateral relations, as it can adversely affect the tripod of relationships involving the US. If the US alliances with Japan and South Korea act as a quasi-alliance between

34 *The Economist*, “Could Japan and South Korea Finally Become Friends?” *The Economist*, September 5, 2024. Available at: <https://www.economist.com/asia/2024/09/05/could-japan-and-south-korea-finally-become-friends>. Accessed on September 11, 2024.

Japan and South Korea, then the bilateral relationship is a crucial ingredient in the current balance of power rivalry between the US and China. And if both Japan and South Korea benefit from their alliances with the US, then a good Japan-South Korea relations should benefit their own alliance commitments to the US as well. This is particularly important given the very close race between the Democratic- and Republican candidates in the US presidential election.

Realizing and accepting that the Japan-South relationships are about a clash of realities that inflame identity politics between Tokyo and Seoul is a necessary step in seeking to devise ways to forge a robust bilateral relationship that is more weatherproof. Alas, given the ingrained nature of identity politics in Japan and South Korea, this still remains a daunting task.