

# Korea-Japan Relations during the Period of US-China Strategic Competition: Polarized Politics and South Korea's Policy toward Japan

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**Abstract** | It is evident that disputes and complexities within the bilateral relationship between South Korea and Japan have escalated since the 2010s. The primary factors contributing to this phenomenon encompass the decline of the power disparity and the rise of competition, conflicts over identity, and divergent foreign policy stances toward China and North Korea between the two countries. These sources of conflict have mutually interacted with each other and further exacerbated the discord. Tensions between the two nations nearly exploded as specific events like the Japanese military sexual slavery issue and the forced mobilization issue became entangled with the broader conflict. On the one hand, it became difficult for South Korea to act as one Korea in terms of policy, strategy, and changes in its state identity, which have occurred as Korea's state power has become equivalent to that of Japan. South Korea is experiencing fragmentation, and the rift between conservatives and progressives within South Korea appears larger than the dissimilarities between the two countries. This landscape of "polarized politics" underscores the necessity of adopting a fresh perspective, which places greater emphasis on domestic variables when analyzing Korea-Japan relations.

This article analyzes how polarization in politics has impacted on Korea-Japan relations from this specific point of view. At first, it examines perceptions and strategies adopted by South Korean conservatives and progressives amid the US-China strategic competition. Subsequently, it explores the influence of "polarized politics" on the political dynamics related to three significant issues in Korea-Japan relations: firstly, the Korea-Japan General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) as a symbol of security cooperation; secondly, the North Korea policy as a primary source of contention; and finally, the historical issues serving as immediate triggers for friction.

**Keywords** | Korea-Japan relations, political polarization, US-China strategic competition, Korea-Japan security cooperation, Korea-Japan historical issues

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## Introduction

The Korea-Japan relationship in the post-war era, known for its intricate nature, can be divided into three distinct chronological periods. Korea-Japan relations version 1.0 refers to the “1965 System” that emerged in the aftermath of structural changes such as liberation (decolonization) and the Cold War, which entailed numerous trials and errors. Regardless of subsequent structural changes such as détente in the 1970s and the advent of the New Cold War in the 1980s, the “1965 System” constantly exerted a significant impact on conflict management within Korea-Japan relations. Nevertheless, the advent of Korea-Japan relations version 2.0 was an inevitable consequence given the context of internal and external structural changes, including the end of the Cold War, the democratization of Korea, and political shifts within Japan. The final result of this systemic transition was the “1998 System.” Since then, Korea-Japan relations in fact attained an apex of amity in its history, marked by notable milestones such as the joint hosting of the World Cup in 2002 and the upsurge of the Korean Wave (Hallyu).

However, another monumental structural transformation in the form of a power transition between China and Japan soon unfolded. As a result, South Korea and Japan found themselves engaged in a recurring cycle of trial and error as they endeavored to establish a fresh form of this relationship (Korea-Japan relations version 3.0) in response to the new geopolitical structure. Since 2010, China overtook Japan’s gross domestic product (GDP), and a significant shift in the balance of power within East Asia was observed. At the same time, Korea and Japan happened to enter the lowest point in their bilateral relationship. In 2011, the Constitutional Court of Korea handed down a ruling declaring the South Korean government’s inaction as “nonfeasance” for its failure to make effective efforts to resolve the Japanese military sexual slavery issue. The court further underscored the imperative for the government to engage in diplomatic endeavors aimed at “cooperation and protection of the right of individuals to pursue claims for reparations.”

From that point of juncture, South Korea and Japan entered a period of heightened confrontation. Perhaps disappointed by Japan’s perceived lack of response, President Lee Myung-bak pushed ahead with his visit to Tokdo (Dokdo, Takeshima in Japanese) in 2012, an action that was originally regarded as a diplomatic “taboo.” In 2013, President Park Geun-hye exerted pressure on Japan through her speech on March First Independence Movement Day, saying “The historic dynamic of one party being a perpetrator and the other party a victim will remain unchanged even after a thousand years have passed.”<sup>1</sup> The

endless state of confrontation endured and resulted the virtual dissolution of the swap agreement between the two states and the abrupt cancellation of the long-standing negotiation for Korea-Japan General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA). In fact, conflicts stemming from historical issues essentially paralyzed the overall context of cooperation between South Korea and Japan.

Despite falling short of public expectations, the agreement between South Korea and Japan on the issue of the Japanese military sexual slavery in December 2015, which declared that the issue is resolved “finally and irreversibly,” seemed to revitalize the bilateral relationship. Additionally, South Korea and Japan also signed GSOMIA and marked a new turning point in the security cooperation between the two states.

And yet, there was another trap. Korea-Japan relations once again froze profoundly following the final ruling by the South Korean Supreme Court in 2018. An incident involving a patrol aircraft, which could have easily been relieved as a “minor dispute” between defense authorities, unexpectedly escalated into an emotionally charged conflict, subsequently disrupting security cooperation between South Korea and Japan. Eventually, Japan implemented trade regulations in July 2019 and removed South Korea from the so-called whitelist. In response, South Korea terminated GSOMIA as a countermeasure.

Currently, the mutual perception between South Korea and Japan continues to deteriorate over time. Anti-Korean sentiment and the phenomenon of “Korea fatigue” in Japan persist without any signs of decline. Similarly, South Korea has yet to unravel the web of distrust and dissatisfaction with Japan after undergoing a serious “No Japan” movement.

This “lost decade of Korea-Japan relations” can be characterized by a “complex and multifaceted fracture,” a “long-term, low-intensity, and complex competition,” as well as a “structural crisis” which emerged as a result of a negative chain reaction entangled with identity, security, and economic variables (the nexus of identity, security, and economy) (Son Yǒl 2018; Nam Kijeong 2021; Kil Yun-hyǒng 2019). In this regard, intellectual endeavors have rigorously identified structural causes that transcend general factors, including historical issues such as the Japanese military sexual slavery and forced mobilization, the political

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1. English translation of the speech quoted from “President Park Geun-hye’s 94th March First Independence Movement Day Commemoration Speech” (2013), distributed by Embassy of the Republic of Korea in the US website, [https://overseas.mofa.go.kr/us-en/brd/m\\_4497/view.do?seq=691507&srchFr=&%3BsrchTo=&%3BsrchWord=&%3BsrchTp=&%3Bmulti\\_itm\\_seq=0&%3Bitm\\_seq\\_1=0&%3Bitm\\_seq\\_2=0&%3Bcompany\\_cd=&%3Bcompany\\_nm=](https://overseas.mofa.go.kr/us-en/brd/m_4497/view.do?seq=691507&srchFr=&%3BsrchTo=&%3BsrchWord=&%3BsrchTp=&%3Bmulti_itm_seq=0&%3Bitm_seq_1=0&%3Bitm_seq_2=0&%3Bcompany_cd=&%3Bcompany_nm=), Accessed May 29, 2023.

leaderships of both countries, and the deteriorating public opinions in each state.

The structural causes of the devaluation of Korea-Japan relations include the narrowing gaps in national power between the two states and the persistent state of competition (Nam Kijeong 2021, 107-109; Son Yöl 2018, 149-50; Lee Won-Deog 2019, 7; Sawada 2020, 123-27). In other words, a manifestation of the “Thucydides trap” in Korea-Japan relations has emerged due to the significant reduction in the disparity of state power between the two nations and the reversal of cultural and industrial influence in specific domains between South Korea and Japan. As a consequence, Japan lost its tolerance and adopted a competitive stance towards South Korea. Similarly, South Korea’s incentive to manage conflicts within Korea-Japan relations declined due to the diminishing strategic significance of Japan. These reciprocal dynamics resulting from changes in state power serve as a fundamental cause of the bilateral disputes.

Scholars have also identified changes in identity as a critical factor contributing to the current state of Korea-Japan relations (Park Cheol Hee 2022, 175-76; Son Yöl 2018, 153-59; Sawada 2020, 120-22). The conservative shifts in Japan with a tendency toward historical revisionism intensified beginning in 2010 due to the power shift between China and Japan and the rampant economic stagnation. At the same time, South Korea, experiencing growth in its national power, fortified its self-assertion regarding the “1965 System,” which has served as the fundamental framework for Korea-Japan relations. This divergence in historical perception stems from disparities in national identity. Consequently, the changes in identity have given rise to conflicts between South Korea and Japan, particularly with regard to specific issues such as the Japanese military sexual slavery issue and problems surrounding forced mobilization.

Concurrently, scholars highlight the distinctions in foreign policy stances and strategic approaches between South Korea and Japan as a significant source for the disputes observed between the two states (Kil Yun-hyöng 2019, 232-35; Park Cheol Hee 2022, 176-80; Lee Won-Deog 2019, 8-9; Kimiya 2022, 174-85). These scholars emphasize the importance of disparities between South Korea and Japan in terms of their policies toward North Korea and China, strategic worldviews, and national strategies, which consequently give rise to mutual distrust and conflicts. During the Park Geun-hye administration, “a suspicion of South Korea leaning toward China” emerged as the most extreme expression of contrasting policy orientations towards China between the two states. Undoubtedly, the national strategies of South Korea, as a peninsula state at the intersection of the continent and the ocean and as a divided country, and Japan, as a maritime country, are inherently bound by distinct circumstances. These inherent distinctions

intertwine with the trust deficit between the two countries, thereby leading to conflicts.

These sources of conflict have mutually interacted with each other and further exacerbated the discord and complexity within the bilateral relationship between South Korea and Japan. Tensions between the two nations nearly exploded as specific events like the Japanese military sexual slavery issue and the forced mobilization issue became entangled with the broader conflict. On the one hand, it became difficult for South Korea to act as one Korea in terms of policy, strategy, and changes in its state identity, which have occurred as Korea's state power has become equivalent to that of Japan. South Korea is experiencing fragmentation, and the rift between conservatives and progressives within South Korea appears larger than the dissimilarities between the two countries.

This landscape of “polarized politics” underscores the necessity of adopting a fresh perspective, which places greater emphasis on domestic variables when analyzing Korea-Japan relations. Intellectual discussions concerning the “two-level security dilemma” (Sin Uk-hŭi 2018) and the “two-face game” (Chöng Ki-ung 2020) are outcomes of a similar process of critical analysis. In fact, Korea-Japan relations during the Cold War evolved against the backdrop of political polarization resulting from ideological conflicts between conservatives and progressives (*hokaku tairitsu*) in Japan. This domestic political context in Japan provided a complex mechanism for the development of Korea-Japan relations. Unlike the current confrontation between conservatives and progressives in South Korea, Japan’s “one-and-a-half party system” did not allow for regime change. Nevertheless, the Japanese progressives (*kakushin*) were able to exert notable influence on Japan’s policy towards Korea, owing to public opinion in support of progressive forces and the presence of pro-China members within the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP).

This article analyzes how political polarization has impacted Korea-Japan relations from this specific point of view. At first, it examines perceptions and strategies adopted by South Korean conservatives and progressives amid US-China strategic competition. Subsequently, it explores the influence of “polarized politics” on the political dynamics related to three significant issues in Korea-Japan relations: firstly, the Korea-Japan GSOMIA as a symbol of security cooperation; secondly, the North Korea policy as a primary source of contention; and finally, the historical issues serving as immediate triggers for friction.

## Political Polarization and the Polarity of South Korea's Policy toward Japan

The power dynamic within Asia has undergone substantial transformation in the twenty-first century. Notably, China has maintained its economic growth trajectory and expanded its military capabilities, regardless of the enduring ramifications of the global financial crisis in 2008. This growth stands in stark contrast to the stagnant economies observed in advanced nations. The year 2010 marked a critical juncture for East Asia, as it witnessed a significant shift in regional order. China surpassed Japan as it ascended to the position of the world's second-largest economy in terms of GDP, thereby exhibiting China's elevated status within the international order. In particular, several pivotal events in 2010, including the sinking of Cheonan (Ch'ŏnanham), the shelling of Yeonpyeong (Yōnp'yōngdo), and the Senkaku (Diaoyu in Chinese) dispute between China and Japan, further highlighted the intricate challenges posed by North Korea and China to the regional order in Asia.

Meanwhile, the US grappled with significant fiscal deficits during this period. In September 2011, Republicans and Democrats eventually reached an agreement to reduce the defense budget by 350 billion dollars. This course of action resulted in an inevitable process of "choice and concentration" concerning US engagement in international affairs. The outcome was a clear shift in defense policy with a particular emphasis on the Asia-Pacific region. Given the power transition in East Asia and the series of crises that unfolded in 2010, the initial concept of G2 or joint management between the US and China, which emerged in the early days of the Obama administration, quickly dissipated. Shortly thereafter, the US adopted a new strategic approach towards China, known as the "pivot to Asia" that placed the Asia-Pacific region at the core of its foreign policy priorities (Tokyo Zaidan Seisaku Kenkyūjo 2011). Subsequent to the Trump administration, the Biden administration has likewise pursued the Indo-Pacific strategy and maintained an overall coherent policy stance. Furthermore, the US has actively advocated for a process of decoupling, which entails a strategic removal of China from the global value chain (GVC), in order to hold China in check regarding economic security concerns. The Trump administration initiated the establishment of the Economic Prosperity Network (EPN), and the Biden administration is pursuing the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) while fostering the Chip 4 Alliance initiative in collaboration with Japan, Korea, Taiwan, and the US.

In accordance with these global dynamics, the defense policy of the US has shifted towards a "hub and network" structure. This new security architecture

demands the active sharing of security responsibilities with existing allies in the Asia-Pacific region, while supplementing the main structure through partnerships among regional allies.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, the US is actively reinforcing democratic solidarity by initiating a diverse range of multilateral cooperative measures, including QUAD (Australia, India, Japan, and the US), the trilateral cooperation among the US, Australia, and Japan, AUKUS (Australia, the UK, and the US), and the Five Eyes alliance (Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the UK, and the US).

In this context, the cooperation among the US, Japan, and South Korea signifies a linkage between the US-ROK (Republic of Korea) alliance and the US-Japan alliance. At this point, this trilateral cooperation is perceived as a crucial mechanism of the diplomatic and security strategy pursued by the US. In practice, the foreign ministers of the three nations reached an agreement to establish a dedicated secretariat at the meeting in July 2011 and to initiate a working-level operative group at the meeting in July 2012. In 2014, a military intelligence-sharing agreement was signed among the armed forces of the three states. Subsequently, the number of joint military exercises involving Japan, South Korea, and the US increased through their participation in multinational drills.

The diplomatic and security strategy of Japan is also undergoing a transformation parallel to that of the US. The Japanese government embraced the concept of a “Dynamic Defense Force” in *Defense of Japan (Bōei keikaku no taikō) 2010*, as well as proposed the “Unified Mobile Defense Force” in *Defense of Japan 2013*. These concepts were adopted through cabinet decisions on December 17, 2010 and 2013, respectively, with the aim of establishing a security system capable of addressing challenges posed by China and North Korea. Within this new security framework, Japan placed emphasis on maintaining its amphibious operational capability (a de facto Navy) to enable a swift response to attacks on island territories. It also highlighted the integration of land, sea, and air defense systems to safeguard airspace and territorial waters, including remote islands. Additionally, Japan underlined its intention to reinforce the air force and marines and deepen coordination between the US forces and Japan’s self-defense force (Kwŏn T’ae-hwan and Kim Tu-sŭng 2017, 139). Throughout this process, a growing trend has emerged towards strengthening security cooperation between South Korea and Japan as awareness of the necessity to enhance cooperation

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2. In fact, the Commander of the US Asia-Pacific Command contributed an article advocating for a transition in the alliance structure from the “hub and spoke” model to a “web network” framework (Aoki et al. 2005, 228). Park Cheol Hee (2022, 179) has referred to this new structure as “network balancing” strategy.

with countries that share common values and alliance systems with the US has heightened, thus complementing the US-Japan alliance (Park Young-June 2016, 85).

The key question pertains as to the extent to which South Korea can align itself with the strategic shift of both Japan and the US. There exists a conflict between progressive and conservative factions within South Korean society. The progressive groups aim to develop a cooperative relationship with China, leveraging it as a means to influence North Korea. They propose a grand initiative centered around establishing a peace regime on the Korean Peninsula through reconciliation and cooperation with North Korea. Conversely, the conservative groups advocate for a traditional trilateral relationship among Japan, South Korea, and the US, placing it at the core of their diplomatic orientation. Their stance is driven by a strong aversion towards North Korea and its sustaining ally, China. These conflicts have intensified in the process of escalating strategic competition between the US and China, as well as the ongoing issue of North Korean nuclear weapons.

The diplomatic and security strategy of progressive factions places the highest priority on the establishment of a peace regime on the Korean Peninsula. Therefore, they exhibit a strong inclination to prevent the projection of the US-China conflict onto the Korean Peninsula at all costs. This sense of objective has further bolstered their commitment to enhancing state autonomy. Various slogans and concepts such as “balancer,” “strategic flexibility,” “middle country strategy,” “third zone,” “peace promoter,” and “driver” exemplify well the policy stances adopted by progressives. For instance, Professor Kim Ki-jöng, a prominent figure within the diplomatic circle of the Moon Jae-in administration, provides an analysis of the Roh Moo-hyun administration’s proposition of Northeast Asia balancer as follows:

There were concerns regarding the potential transformation of the Korean Peninsula back into a war front and the possible escalation of inter-Korean confrontation within the confrontational international order. However, it should be noted that the aim was not to alter the existing power structure. The essence of the Northeast Asia balancer theory revolved around serving as a peace promoter for building peace in the region, as a mediator by intervening in conflicts within the region if necessary, and as a creative thinker to propose ideas for the co-prosperity of the region. (Kim Ki-jöng 2022, 77)

This strategic orientation became evident through a complete rejection of rigid diplomacy that uncritically aligns with an unconditional commitment to the ROK-US alliance within South Korea’s diplomatic sphere. For example, Kim

Ki-jöng emphasized the necessity of adopting a diplomatically flexible strategy, affirming that “When we examine the history of international politics, it is apparent that there are no cases where alliances endure permanently. Nonetheless, South Korea should expand its diplomatic latitude on the premise of the evolving nature of the alliance for the time being” (Kim Ki-jöng 2022, 175). Similarly, Professor Kim Chun-hyöng (2021, 491–92), who held the position of Chancellor at the Korea National Diplomatic Academy during the Moon administration, scrutinized the inflexible disposition towards the ROK-US alliance, noting that “There have been instances where the alliance is sanctified while inter-Korean conflicts are taken for granted as a fixed value or even exacerbated.” Kim Chun-hyöng further added, “South Korea must break free from a unilateral relationship with the US, avoiding being dragged by US strategies. It is essential to prioritize national interests and persuade the US to embrace flexible policies concerning North Korea and China.”

The emphasis placed on diplomatic autonomy faced criticism from conservative sides, denouncing it as “a strategy conforming to China and relativizing the significance of the ROK-US alliance” (Park Cheol Hee 2022, 180). However, it is important to acknowledge that the progressive perspective on diplomatic autonomy extends beyond the scope of the ROK-US alliance and encompasses South Korea’s approach to China as well. It is noteworthy that a more cooperative stance arises due to the similarity between the policy stances of progressive groups on inter-Korean affairs and China’s policy towards North Korea.

Simultaneously, it is worth noting that conservative groups themselves express apprehension regarding recent actions undertaken by the US that appear to deviate from international liberal principles. Consequently, they too strive to secure diplomatic flexibility within a framework that upholds the maintenance of the international liberal order. They further advocate for the importance of the deterrence capabilities of alliance powers and democratic solidarity in countering the threat posed by North Korea and China in order to safeguard peace and prosperity on the Korean Peninsula.

For instance, Professor Kim Tae-hyo, the first deputy director of the National Security Office of the ROK under the Yoon Suk Yeol administration, emphasized the paramount importance of the international liberal order. In doing so, he also expressed concerns regarding the US and China, stating the following:

First of all, the cooperative international regime upheld by liberalism appears to be far from the reality of international politics. The US, being the most powerful global hegemon, is undermining the norms and rules of a fair and open free trade global order that it had previously established. At the same time, China is

challenging the Washington Consensus and aspiring to establish a new global order in which it assumes a central position. (Kim Tae-hyo 2019, 63)

Professor Kim Sōng-han (2015, 88), former National Security Advisor of the ROK under the Yoon administration, argued that cooperation among China, Japan, and South Korea “could serve as a form of soft balancing to deter unilateral assertions by the US regarding strategic priorities pertaining to the Korean Peninsula and Northeast Asia.” He also aimed to address concerns regarding the “America First” policy and unilateralism exhibited by the US. Surely, these concerns regarding the US arose from a distrust in the foreign policies adopted by the Trump administration, known as the America First Foreign Policy. The recent positive assessments of the Biden administration are expected to lead the way for the advancement of the ROK-US alliance toward the maintenance and development of international liberalism, with trust in the US at the basis.

In conclusion, progressives castigate conservatives for excessively idolizing alliances, while conservative groups accuse progressive groups of joining the China bandwagon. However, the hasty criticisms exchanged between conservatives and progressives fail to accurately depict reality. Instead, progressives aspire to avert a scenario of confrontation between the US and China, with the aim of establishing a peace regime on the Korean Peninsula. Meanwhile, conservatives place strategic priorities on addressing the threats emanating from North Korea and focus on maintaining and developing the international liberal order grounded in democratic values.

The fundamental divergences between these two groups primarily stem from issues associated with Japan, particularly in relation to bilateral and trilateral security cooperation involving Japan, South Korea, and the US. For example, Kim Ki-jöng expresses his reluctance towards Korea-Japan security cooperation in light of building peace in the Korean Peninsula and Northeast Asia, stating the following:

Continued efforts to foster cooperation with Japan as a neighboring country, with an eye toward the future of the region, hold significant importance. However, it is equally crucial to prevent the emergence of blocs as a structure within the region. It is difficult to accept the antiquated perception held by Japan regarding the ROK-US alliance as a subordinate structure of the US-Japan alliance. An approach toward Korea-Japan relations with the goal of constructing a military alliance must be resolutely rejected. If South Korea, the US, and Japan project an image of a unified military entity, it would be perceived as an anti-Chinese coalition and could become a trigger for the formation of blocs in Northeast Asia. (Kim Ki-jöng 2022, 179-80)

These statements emphasize the critical viewpoints surrounding Korea-Japan security cooperation pertaining to the establishment of peace on the Korean Peninsula and the potential emergence of blocs. Kim Chun-hyöng (2021, 426-27) also expresses concern about the “ROK-US alliance assuming a subordinate role to the US-Japan alliance.” His reservations regarding trilateral cooperation among Japan, South Korea, and the US result from his observations that “the US aggravates tensions between China and itself while demonizing North Korea to legitimize Japan’s rearmament.” Additionally, he noted that Japan’s “shift in diplomatic and security system is leaning toward a more militaristic stance, with exclusive nationalism underpinning it.” In other words, progressive groups demonstrate a strong awareness of the need to prevent the formation of blocs on the Korean Peninsula. They are also concerned that the ROK-US alliance may be absorbed within the framework of the US-Japan alliance as trilateral security cooperation among the three allies intensifies. Thus, their negative stance on security cooperation between Japan, South Korea, and the US, specifically between South Korea and Japan, arises from the aforementioned perspectives (Kimiya 2022).

On the contrary, conservative groups maintain the perspective that security cooperation with Japan is inevitable. Kim T’ae-hyo, for instance, asserted that cooperation between Seoul and Tokyo, built upon shared democratic norms, is imperative.

The future of the ROK-US alliance should be interconnected with the US-Japan alliance, which plays a role as another essential component of regional security. However, South Korea carries a political burden in promoting direct military cooperation with Japan. . . . In order to enhance transparency in defense policies and weapons systems across the concerned nations in the region, it is necessary to foster a value-oriented security framework aligned with democratic norms, including human rights, freedom, and democracy. In this context, South Korea and Japan should be capable of assuming central roles within this framework. (Kim T’ae-hyo 2005, 52-53)

Kim T’ae-hyo argued that South Korea and Japan should overcome political challenges and develop security cooperation, transforming their relationship into a “democratic alliance” based on shared democratic norms. Kim Söng-han further assessed that “trilateral security cooperation among South Korea, the US, and Japan, built upon the basis of the ROK-US alliance and the US-Japan alliance, represents the most agile mechanism for addressing security threats in the region.” Additionally, Kim Söng-han underlined the importance of promoting security cooperation between Seoul and Tokyo within the context of trilateral security cooperation. He pointed out that a “deteriorating relationship

between Korea and Japan could have negative implications for the ROK-US relations,” considering the aspiration of the US to strengthen cooperative relationship among the three states (Kim Söng-han 2015, 83-84). Above all, Kim Söng-han (2011, 40) recognizes Japan as an important strategic asset for the reunification of the two Koreas and the overall security of the Korean Peninsula.

Certainly, it is evident that conservative groups in South Korea are also hesitant when it comes to forging extensive security cooperation with Japan. As mentioned earlier, Kim Tae-hyo shows a keen understanding of the prevailing public sentiment regarding Korea-Japan security cooperation. Likewise, Kim Söng-han (2015, 88) emphasizes the need for a “soft balancing approach aimed at restraining Japan from unilaterally exercising its right to collective self-defense or pursuing an excessively assertive interpretation of the Abe cabinet’s so-called proactive pacifism.”

In essence, the orientations of progressive and conservative groups in South Korea regarding bilateral and trilateral security cooperation involving Japan, South Korea, and the US reveal a notable divergence. However, it is important to note that the passive stance of progressive groups toward Korea-Japan security cooperation does not imply a complete disregard for Korea-Japan relations as a whole or a rejection of the “1965 System.” Nevertheless, it is true that progressives harbor dissatisfaction with the post-war settlement between Japan and South Korea, epitomized by the 1965 Treaty on Basic Relations and its related agreements. For example, Kim Chun-hyöng criticized the agreements between the two states in 1965 as follows:

The lack of consensus on critical agenda items and the hasty conclusion of negotiations can largely be attributed to both the pressure exerted by the US and President Park Chung-hee’s impatience to secure approval from the US for the political power that he seized by force. This haste only temporarily sealed the disputes and resulted in unresolved and contentious issues such as Tokdo, the Japanese military “comfort women” issue, and forced labor (*kangje chingyong*) disputes, leaving behind lingering seeds of conflicts. . . . The Basic Treaty between Korea and Japan, facilitated by premeditated planning and active intervention by the US, carries the implication of a “resurgence of cartels [between the US and Japan] surrounding Asia and the Korean Peninsula,” which were originally rooted in the historical context of the Taft-Katsura “secret treaty.” (Kim Chun-hyöng 2021, 96-102)

Kim Chun-hyöng’s critique points to key issues, including the unresolved disputes on historical issues, the installation of a Cold War structure on the Korean Peninsula, and the perception of Korea-Japan relations as subordinate to US-Japan relations. This critique represents the converging point between

progressives' passive attitude towards Korea-Japan security cooperation and their critical assessment of the "1965 System." However, discontent with the "1965 System" exists even among conservative circles, as reported and observed by Sawada in the *Mainichi Newspaper* (*Mainichi shinbun*) (Sawada 2020, 112, 120-21). It is evident, without the need for further substantiation, that conservatives in South Korea also express concern and criticism regarding Japan's historical revisionism.

The progressive governments of South Korea have consistently recognized and upheld the treaties and agreements related to historical matters between South Korea and Japan. For example, the Roh Moo-hyun administration in 2005 formally announced and concluded that the 1965 Agreement concerning property and claims provided a comprehensive resolution to the issue of forced labor through the efforts of a public-private committee. Similarly, in 2021, President Moon Jae-in affirmed during a New Year's press conference that the 2015 "Comfort Women" Agreement between South Korea and Japan was a bilateral agreement at the governmental level. Thus, it is evident that progressive groups have shown no willingness to dismantle the "1965 System," despite their apparent discontentment with it.

Only the progressive factions exhibit an inclination towards a more fundamentalist perspective, prioritizing a "victim-centered" stance rather than pursuing "improved or normalized Korea-Japan relations." Kim Ki-jöng, for instance, emphasizes a cautious approach to historical issues as follows:

For example, agreements between the governments that solely rely on the framework of international law may not provide sufficient solutions to conflicts pertaining to historical issues. This is due to the nature of history, which is a matter of collective memory and something deeply rooted in the emotions of the state members. In such cases, a protracted period of time is required to find a resolution. (Kim Ki-jöng 2022, 207)

Kim Ki-jöng acknowledges historical issues as intricate matters that demand a cautious approach and entail complicated mechanisms interwoven with domestic affairs, transcending a mere diplomatic agenda. Therefore, he advocates for a more careful approach towards diplomatic settlements when addressing historical issues concerning colonial rule and reparations for past wrongdoings by reacting sensitively to judicial rulings and public opinion. Although this cautious approach may be perceived as lacking the will to resolve the historical problem and even seemingly denying the "1965 System," a closer examination reveals that there exists no fundamental difference between the conservative and progressive approaches, as will be clarified in subsequent discussions.

As shown in preceding discussions, it is challenging to assert that the policy stance towards the US or China adheres to the criteria for distinguishing between conservatives and progressive policy ideologies in South Korea. Both factions value the ROK-US alliance while remaining vigilant against US unilateralism. Likewise, they express doubts about China but show no intention to exacerbate Korea-China relations. While a closer examination may reveal variances in the degree to which conservatives and progressives prioritize ROK-US relations versus Korea-China relations, their shared aspiration remains the coexistence of both relationships to the greatest possible extent.

Instead, the decisive difference between progressives and conservatives lies in their respective stances on security cooperation between Japan and Korea, as well as their policies toward North Korea. Progressive groups exhibit skepticism towards bilateral security cooperation between South Korea and Japan, as well as trilateral cooperation including the US. Their objective is to dismantle Cold War structures and deter the emergence of blocs on the Korean Peninsula, thereby striving for a peaceful coexistence of the two Koreas. In contrast, conservative groups perceive security cooperation between South Korea and Japan, as well as with the US, based on shared democratic norms, as essential for addressing threats emanating from North Korea and its surroundings. The question of Korea-Japan security cooperation, alongside the ROK-US-Japan security cooperation, serves as a decisive criterion for distinguishing conservative and progressive perceptions regarding the international order, in addition to their perceptions of North Korea as either a partner or a threat. These divergent perceptions inevitably result in contrasting evaluations of the strategic value of Korea-Japan relations.

## Korea-Japan Relations Surrounding GSOMIA

Military cooperation between South Korea and Japan has long been regarded as a “taboo” in South Korea due to its national sentiment against Japan’s history of colonial rule over Korea. However, the release of the “Korea-Japan Joint Declaration” in October 1998 provided an opportunity to strengthen security cooperation between the two states, driven by the unstable regional environment in Asia following the end of the Cold War. In response to the sinking of a North Korean submarine by the South Korean Navy in December 1998, a hotline was established between the Ministry of National Defense of South Korea and the Japanese Defense Agency, as well as between their respective military authorities. Subsequently, a joint search and rescue exercise (SAREX) was conducted in the

East China Sea by the South Korean Navy and vessels of the Japanese Self-Defense Forces in August 1999 (Sö Tong-man 2006, 149). Concurrently, several important institutional frameworks emerged as the foundations for trilateral cooperation between Japan, South Korea, and the US, as well as bilateral cooperation between South Korea and Japan. These included the Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization (KEDO), established in March 1995, the Trilateral Coordination and Oversight Group (TCOG), initiated in May 1999 to coordinate policies toward North Korea among Japan, South Korea, and the US, and the six-party talks. Moreover, it is worth noting that South Korea and Japan jointly engaged in Peacekeeping Operation (PKO) in East Timor in 2002, where both countries were simultaneously involved in PKO activities (Sö Sung-wöñ 2011).

Security cooperation between South Korea and Japan has witnessed gradual and robust development, further strengthened through the efforts of the US since 2010. As previously highlighted, a series of notable events in 2010 raised the awareness of the imperative need for security cooperation between South Korea and Japan. Subsequently, both governments undertook specific measures to foster military cooperation, which had previously been hindered by various constraints. In January 2011, during a meeting between the defense ministers of South Korea and Japan, the two parties agreed to make efforts to finalize the “General Security of Military Information Agreement” (GSOMIA), which stipulates the reciprocal exchange of military information and the necessary regulations related to it. Simultaneously, the two ministers concurred on the initiation of negotiations to formalize the “Acquisition and Cross-Serving Agreement.” This agreement seeks to facilitate mutual support in areas such as PKO, humanitarian assistance, and disaster relief activities, including the provision of goods, food, and fuel.

The aforementioned agreements gathered attention as they marked the first instances of formal military cooperation between South Korea and Japan. The former agreement primarily focused on the mutual sharing of information related to North Korea, signifying security cooperation between the two states on the Korean Peninsula. Conversely, the latter agreement embodied characteristics of mutual cooperation in overseas military operations.

The US government also endorsed the forenamed agreements, recognizing the criticality of military cooperation between South Korea and Japan in reinforcing the cooperation system among the three allied nations. Remarkably, Korea-Japan military cooperation took the form of trilateral joint military exercises involving Japan, South Korea and the US. In October 2010, the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force (JMSDF) participated in maritime interdiction

training conducted in South Korea as part of the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI), which aimed to disrupt the trafficking of weapons of mass destruction. Prior to this, in July of the same year, four officers of the JMSDF who were stationed aboard US military vessels observed drill sessions of a joint military exercise between the US and South Korea (Yamamoto 2012, 29). Equally noteworthy, South Korea, for the first time in history, also took part in a joint military exercise between the US and Japan held in December of that same year (“Nichi-Bei kyōdō enshū” 2010).

Nevertheless, it is important to note that progressive groups vehemently protested against the implementation of GSOMIA and the increase in joint military exercises between South Korea and Japan, as well as the US. They argued that such actions could potentially lead to the emergence of a Cold War structure on the Korean Peninsula. In response to domestic opposition and recognizing the need to alleviate concerns, the Ministry of National Defense of ROK framed the joint military exercises conducted in 2011 and 2012 among the three states as humanitarian drills. However, the eruption of historical issues adversely impacted Korea-Japan military cooperation. The stalled negotiations regarding GSOMIA in July 2012 serve as a clear illustration of the intertwining dynamics of domestic confrontations between the “two Koreas” and the resurfacing historical disputes, which acted as an impediment to cooperative endeavors (Sin Uk-hŭi 2018).

Nevertheless, the US demonstrated a firm position on policies concerning the sharing of military information, recognizing them as a fundamental cornerstone of security cooperation among Japan, South Korea, and the US. Acknowledging the challenges in finalizing of GSOMIA between South Korea and Japan at that time, the US established a framework in 2014 that enabled the sharing of military information between South Korea and Japan through a contractual arrangement among armed forces of the three countries. Tensions between South Korea and Japan regarding the issue of Japanese military sexual slavery experienced some degree of alleviation in December 2015 with the “Comfort Women” Agreement, paving the way for subsequent earnest negotiations on the signing of Korea-Japan GSOMIA in 2016. Similar to the previous administration under Lee Myung-bak, the Park Geun-hye administration concluded GSOMIA between South Korea and Japan in November of the same year, despite fierce opposition from progressive factions. The signing of the agreement did not quell the protests from the progressive groups. Fifty-two congressmen, including those from the People’s Party, the Democratic Party of Korea, and the Justice Party, introduced a special act advocating for the suspension of the effectiveness of Korea-Japan GSOMIA (“Chung Dong-young, GSOMIA”

2016).

GSOMIA between South Korea and Japan, which had experienced a period of relative calm, once again became a prominent political agenda in 2019, coinciding with a regime change in South Korea. Following the final ruling on reparations for victims of forced labor in October 2018, the Japanese government urged the South Korean government to address the issue, asserting that the ruling constituted a violation of international law. However, as will be elaborated upon later, the Moon Jae-in administration maintained a restrained stance on the matter. Consequently, Japan concluded that Seoul lacked the will to resolve the issue of forced mobilization, leading to the swift implementation of trade restrictions on South Korea in July. These regulations entailed a transition from a bulk export license to an individual export license for hydrogen fluoride, fluorinated polyimide, and resist exports to South Korea, as well as the removal of South Korea from the “White Countries List” (twenty-seven states) deemed reliable partners for export.

The trade restrictions imposed by Japan in 2019 are commonly perceived as a means to exert pressure on South Korea to resolve the issue of forced mobilization. However, the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry of Japan (METI) provided an explanation stating that the implementation of trade regulations was prompted by “certain inappropriate issues regarding South Korea’s export control and regulations,” implying the possible introduction of sensitive export materials to North Korea or another third country (Keizai Sangyōshō 2019). Indeed, on July 5, Hagiuda Kōichi, the acting secretary-general of LDP, expressed on a television program that strategic materials such as hydrogen fluoride exported to South Korea might have found their way to North Korea and potentially be used to produce chemical weapons (“Kǔng’gō ὄpnūn anbo k’adū” 2019). Furthermore, the timing of the trade regulations being imposed shortly after the sudden P’anmunjȫm summit involving North Korea, South Korea, and the US on June 30, 2019 provided ample clues to interpret Japan’s trade restrictions as a measure aimed at impeding South Korea’s policy toward North Korea.

Moreover, the radar lock-on dispute in December 2018 exacerbated an already prevailing negative public opinion in South Korea regarding security cooperation with Japan. On December 20, 2018, South Korea conducted a humanitarian rescue operation on a distressed North Korean fishing boat, leading to tensions between Seoul and Tokyo. The disagreement centered around whether a Japanese patrol aircraft engaged in a “threateningly low-altitude flight” and whether a South Korean Navy destroyer had locked its fire-control radar onto the aircraft (Choe Ün-mi 2019, 13). This incident highlights the fundamental

divergence in perceptions between the two states regarding the handling of a distressed North Korean ship, with one side viewing it as a subject of humanitarian support and the other harboring suspicions. In the end, this incident further intensified the antipathy of the Moon Jae-in administration towards security cooperation between South Korea and Japan.

Japan's implementation of trade regulations, coupled with the radar lock-on dispute, exhibited a strong linkage to the North Korean issue. Therefore, these measures were widely interpreted as an attempt to exert control over South Korea's policy towards building peace on the Korean Peninsula. Perhaps against this backdrop, South Korea strategically employed the termination of GSOMIA as a countermeasure. Kim Hyon-jong, the second deputy director of National Security Office, stated that "the [South Korean] government would take comprehensive countermeasures after assessing the appropriateness of continuing to share sensitive military information with a country that lacks trust in us and raises security concerns." Subsequently, South Korea promptly announced the termination of GSOMIA ("GSOMIA chongnyo" 2019).

However, South Korea found itself in a defensive position as it faced barriers within the alliance structure (Cho Un-il 2021, 77-79). Consequently, Seoul and Tokyo entered a settlement phase in November 2019 under pressure from the US. South Korea agreed to suspend the termination of GSOMIA and postpone its dispute complaint against Japan at the World Trade Organization (WTO). Japan concurred with convening a director-level meeting to negotiate issues related to trade regulations. Subsequently, the Ministry of Trade, Industry and Energy (MOTIE) of South Korea and METI of Japan held the Export Control Policy Dialogue in Tokyo, Japan in December, following a preparatory meeting. In tandem with these developments, METI of Japan announced a partial amendment to its Guidelines for Handling Bulk Export License on December 20. This revision introduced a Special General Bulk Export License as an alternative to individual licenses for photoresist, a semiconductor material exported to South Korea, thereby partly easing the trade restrictions.

Despite political friction in February 2020 regarding the suspension of the termination of GSOMIA, the South Korean government maintained its decision to delay the termination of GSOMIA in order to exert pressure on Japan to address the issues related to trade restrictions. During a press conference on February 6, Foreign Minister Kang Kyung-wha of South Korea expressed that "There had been dialogues between export authorities, but it is clear that the condition had not yet returned to the desired state before July 1 (export regulations)." She then called for Japan's proactive response and added, "We [South Korea] retain the right to reactivate the termination of GSOMIA at any

time, and we intend to exercise this right based on national interest” (“Ilbon sigan kkülgí e” 2020).

The issue of security cooperation between South Korea and Japan once again became a contentious political matter during the Moon Jae-in administration. Several incidents, such as the controversy surrounding the hoisting of the Rising Sun Flag on vessels of the JMSDF at the Jeju International Fleet Review in October 2018, the radar lock-on dispute in December 2018, Japan’s trade restrictions, and South Korea’s initial termination of GSOMIA in 2019, served as clear examples that disclosed the domestic antipathy towards security cooperation between Seoul and Tokyo, as well as the passive stances of progressive factions. Nevertheless, structural constraints persisted, and South Korea ultimately suspended the termination of GSOMIA under pressure from the US. The Moon administration had to adjust its position to the extent of refraining from sharing military information with Japan while maintaining GSOMIA.

The normalization of GSOMIA under the Yoon Suk Yeol administration was widely anticipated. In June 2022, South Korean Foreign Minister Park Jin emphasized the need for the early normalization of GSOMIA, and the Chief Cabinet Secretary of Japan responded positively, stating that “It would contribute to peace and stability in the region” (“Park Jin ‘Han-Il GSOMIA’ 2022). At the same time, in its July 2022 work report, the Ministry of National Defense of ROK expressed its commitment to pursuing “the normalization of defense cooperation, including high-level exchanges between ministries and armed forces, as well as the restoration and operation of regular meeting groups.” It is reported that Japanese and Korean defense authorities (at the director level) discussed ways to resolve disputes regarding patrol aircraft at a meeting held in August of the same year (“Han-Il, 4-yön mukhin” 2022). However, criticism emerged within South Korea regarding the potential normalization of GSOMIA while Japan’s export regulations were still in effect. Consequently, the Yoon administration adopted its official stance to “determine the timing for normalization based on comprehensive judgment” (“Lee Jong-sup kukpang” 2022).

Separately, trilateral security cooperation among Japan, South Korea, and the US underwent a rapid process of normalization. The visits of President Biden to Seoul and Tokyo in May 2022 served as clear indications of the US’ commitment to reconstructing the ROK-US-Japan cooperation system. During the ROK-US and the US-Japan summits, the three countries agreed to enhance their trilateral cooperation across various domains, with a particular focus on security matters. Following the meeting on May 28 of the same year, a joint statement was released by the foreign ministers of Japan, South Korea, and the US. The meeting was arranged to address intercontinental ballistic missile launches of

North Korea, and the statement displayed their agreement to conduct joint military exercises between South Korea and the US, as well as the US and Japan, and to further advance trilateral security cooperation (Gaimushō 2022).

On June 11 of the same year, the defense ministers of Japan, South Korea, and the US held a meeting and issued a joint statement. During this meeting, the three allies pledged their commitment to cooperate towards achieving the complete denuclearization of North Korea. Additionally, they emphasized “the importance of peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait.” The defense ministers concurrently agreed on “the importance of deepening trilateral cooperation on key issues . . . including information sharing, high-level policy consultations, and combined exercises”<sup>3</sup> (Bōeishō 2022).

There is no noticeable difference in the prioritization of the ROK-US alliance between the Moon administration and the Yoon administration. Under both administrations, the ROK-US alliance has continued to progress. However, a key distinction lies in their approach towards expanding the bilateral relationship between South Korea and the US into a trilateral cooperative framework involving Japan. The Moon administration exhibited a tendency to restrain the development of trilateral cooperation, maintaining an extremely passive stance on security cooperation with Japan. Meanwhile, the Yoon administration is pursuing the simultaneous advancement of the ROK-US alliance and security cooperation among Japan, South Korea, and the US. Moreover, the Yoon administration shows a willingness to promote sensitive security cooperation with Japan within the framework of trilateral security cooperation alongside the US.

## Korea-Japan Relations Surrounding North Korea Policy

The Lee Myung-bak administration announced a proposal for a package deal known as the “grand bargain” strategy. Under this strategy, North Korea would receive firm security guarantees and extensive support from the international community in exchange for dismantling a key component of its nuclear program. The goal of this strategy was to prompt North Korea to relinquish its nuclear weapons as a prerequisite, with the assurance of security and support to follow. This approach also demonstrated South Korea’s commitment to upholding a

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3. English translation of the phrase referred to “United States-Japan-Republic of Korea Trilateral Ministerial Meeting (TMM) Joint Press Statement” (2022), distributed by the US Department of Defense website, <https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/3059875/united-states-japan-republic-of-korea-trilateral-ministerial-meeting-tmm-joint/>, Accessed June 9, 2023.

global blockade until North Korea completely abandons its nuclear weapons (Yun Tög-min 2009, 14). The subsequent Park Geun-hye administration maintained a similar policy stance toward North Korea and further implemented a unification strategy in preparation for a potential North Korean contingency, placing the discourse that “Unification is the Jackpot” at the forefront.

The Moon Jae-in government, which took office in May 2017, initially faced challenges posed by North Korea’s nuclear tests and missiles launches. The government responded decisively, leveraging international partnerships for support. During the first Korea-Japan summit held on July 7, following the G20 Summit, the leaders of Japan and South Korea agreed to maintain close dialogue, foster cooperation in diverse domains, and reinstate previously suspended “shuttle diplomacy” to establish a forward-looking Korea-Japan relationship. Prime Minister Abe Shinzo expressed his positive anticipations, noting South Korea as “the most important neighboring country that shares strategic interests.” At the subsequent Korea-Japan summit held on September 7, following North Korea’s nuclear tests, the two leaders affirmed their commitment to close coordination between Seoul and Tokyo, as well as with Washington, in addressing North Korea’s provocations.

As Korea-Japan relations progressed smoothly, cracks began to emerge when the South Korean government sought dialogue with North Korea. In July, South Korea announced the Berlin Initiative, proposing scenarios for a peace regime and a new economic initiative on the Korean Peninsula. As part of this effort, the South Korean government temporarily suspended joint military exercises with the US in order to encourage North Korea to engage in dialogue.

However, Japan maintained its hardline policy towards North Korea and instead sought to restrain South Korea’s actions. A “decisive scene” unfolded at the summit between South Korea and Japan in February 2018. Prime Minister Abe stressed the importance of South Korea conducting joint military exercises with the US as scheduled. In response, President Moon Jae-in reacted angrily, asserting that it was a matter of South Korea’s sovereignty and internal affairs.

In 2018, as the denuclearization and peace process on the Korean Peninsula gained momentum through consultations between North Korea and the US, as well as inter-Korean dialogues, the Japanese government maintained a firm stance. Japan made it clear that it would not change its stance until North Korea confirmed a genuine commitment to denuclearization through concrete actions. Additionally, Japan preserved its hardline policies aimed at pressuring North Korea to carry out CVID (complete, verifiable, and irreversible denuclearization) and address issues related to short- and medium-range missiles and biochemical weapons. Furthermore, Japan emphasized its uncompromising stance by

incorporating these hardline policies into the joint declaration of the US-Japan summit in April. By adopting a position that stood in stark contrast to South Korea's approach toward Pyongyang, Japan aimed to exert influence and check the policies pursued by Seoul. It is worth noting that Japan's "anti-North Korea campaign" was "facilitated through personal ties between Prime Minister Abe and President Trump, as well as through connections between high-ranking officials like Bolton and Yachi" (Nam Kijeong 2021, 99).

A sense of disappointment permeated South Korean society, and a prevailing narrative of casting Japan as a disruptive force in the region surged. For example, Kil Yun-hyöng (2019, 226), a reporter for the daily newspaper *Hankyooreh News* (*Hangyöre sinmun*), observed that "Japan was complicating the process of resolving issues with North Korea by presenting demands that were deemed unfeasible. These demands encompassed crucial agenda such as abductions, nuclear weapons, and missiles." Simultaneously, a discourse known as "Japan passing" spread quickly. Kil Yun-hyöng states as follows:

The only solution to this discord lies in shaking off Japan's constraints and dismantling the Cold War structure in East Asia through the resolution of the North Korean nuclear issue. If North Korea and the US reach a meaningful agreement to address the North Korean nuclear problem, Japan will have no alternative but to align itself accordingly. . . . If a viable resolution to the North Korean nuclear issue emerges, Japan will actively pursue the normalization of its relationship with Pyongyang and strive not to fall behind amidst the profound shifts in the regional order in East Asia. (Kil Yun-hyöng 2019, 242)

In fact, the discourse of "Japan passing" is deeply rooted in the beliefs of progressive groups, who draw on their past experiences of the Sunshine Policy of the Kim Dae-jung administration and the six-party talks, where their efforts to establish peace on the Korean Peninsula were hindered by Japan's hardline policy against North Korea regarding the issue of abductions.

While South Korea showed consideration for Japan by sending the head of the National Intelligence Service to promptly share information after the Panmunjom Declaration in April, mentioning the issue of abduction victims to Kim Jong-un and encouraging dialogue between Japan and North Korea, its level of effort and policy coordination was not as extensive as it was with the US. The Moon administration might have relied too much on the optimistic belief that Japan would naturally cooperate if negotiations between Pyongyang and Washington showed progress. However, as the optimism waned and turned into pessimism, the perception of Japan within South Korea began to cool.

The establishment of peace on the Korean Peninsula presents an opportunity

for a complete reorganization of the external and security strategies of the US and Japan, rather than China or Russia. This is due to the transformation of North Korea from a virtual enemy to a potential partner. Consequently, both the US and Japan cannot be but cautious in their approach. President Kim Dae-jung pursued a peace process on the Korean Peninsula with a quadrilateral framework involving South and North Korea, Japan, and the US, with the belief that the normalization of Japan-North Korea and US-North Korea relations was essential in dismantling of the Cold War system on the Korean Peninsula. His administration encouraged the restoration of Japan-North Korea relations and sought to enhance Korea-Japan relations, viewing diplomatic ties as valuable assets. Similarly, the Moon Jae-in administration embraced a peace process on the Korean Peninsula, but with a trilateral framework involving the US and the two Koreas, reminiscent of the discourse of “Japan passing.”

In contrast, the Yoon Suk Yeol administration forewarned hardline policies towards North Korea, with President Yoon even alluding to the possibility of preemptive strikes during the 2022 presidential election campaign. In his speech on the National Liberation Day of the same year, President Yoon mentioned the “audacious initiative” and specifically used the expression “denuclearization of North Korea” instead of “denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula.”

The audacious initiative that I envision will significantly improve North Korea’s economy and its people’s livelihoods in stages if the North ceases the development of its nuclear program and embarks on a genuine and substantive process for denuclearization.

We will implement a large-scale food program; provide assistance for power generation, transmission and distribution infrastructure; and carry out projects to modernize ports and airports for international trade. We will also help enhance North Korea’s agricultural productivity, offer assistance to modernize hospitals and medical infrastructure, and implement international investment and financial support initiatives. (Yoon Suk Yeol 2022)<sup>4</sup>

This initiative aligns with the aforementioned “grand bargain” strategy pursued by the Lee Myung-bak administration, but with added emphasis on providing compensation for each stage of North Korea’s denuclearization. However, it is important to note that the Yoon administration is more focused on denuclearizing North Korea, reinforcing trilateral security cooperation among Japan, South Korea, and the US to address the North Korean threats, and

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4. English translation of the speech quoted from the official translation from “Address by President Yoon Suk Yeol on Korea’s 77th Liberation Day” (2022), distributed by the Office of the President, Republic of Korea website, <https://eng.president.go.kr/speeches/k4bSEz3J>, Accessed June 9, 2023.

responding to the North Korean human rights issues. In fact, the Yoon administration is actively working towards establishing the North Korean Human Rights Foundation, as mandated by the North Korean Human Rights Act enacted in 2016. In September of the same year, the Yoon administration also revived the Council on North Korean Human Rights (Pukhan In'gwǒn Chǒngch'aek Hyōbūihoe), an intragovernmental consultative body dedicated to addressing North Korean human rights issues, after a hiatus of two years and three months.

The Yoon administration is rebuilding the framework of policy coordination among Japan, South Korea, and the US regarding North Korea. In particular, South Korea and Japan have been narrowing the gap in their policy stances through key agreements reached in diplomatic meetings. In May 2022, the foreign ministers of Japan, South Korea, and the US held a meeting where they expressed strong objection and coordinated responses to North Korea's missile launches. They emphasized the importance of the complete denuclearization of North Korea, and gained South Korea's support for resolving the abductions of Japanese citizens by North Korea. Similarly, during a meeting between the foreign ministers of Japan and South Korea in July of the same year, they further confirmed their shared objectives. The meeting in May was specifically scheduled to address North Korea's intercontinental ballistic missile launch. As countermeasures, the three nations agreed to conduct joint military exercises between South Korea and the US, as well as the US and Japan. They also emphasized the need to strengthen defense cooperation among the three states. Additionally, the three foreign ministers expressed their willingness to provide humanitarian aid to North Korea if requested, considering the severity of the COVID-19 crisis in the country (Gaimushō 2022). At a subsequent meeting held in September, they further affirmed their commitment to mutual assistance in addressing threats posed by North Korea, while also extending support from the US and Japan to South Korea's "audacious initiative" ("Han-Mi-II oegyo changgwan" 2022).

Meanwhile, Pyongyang escalated its level of criticism against the Yoon administration's policies. At the same time, North Korea enacted a new law regarding the use of nuclear weapons on September 8. Chairman Kim Jong-un declared, "There will be no abandonment of nuclear weapons, no denuclearization, and no negotiations or bargaining chips to trade in the process" ("Haek mugi pōpc̄ehwa" 2022). In fact, the "audacious initiative," a diplomatic strategy aimed at encouraging inter-Korean and US-North Korea dialogue through humanitarian assistance for the COVID-19 crisis, has essentially failed. The situation bears resemblance to previous administrations under Lee Myung-bak and Park Geun-hye.

As such, a recurring pattern comprising two distinct trends becomes evident. One involves the conflicts between South Korea and Japan in relation to the peace process on the Korean Peninsula, as well as diverging policies toward North Korea. The other entails inter-Korean conflicts due to the adoption of hardline policies toward North Korea, along with the development of policy coordination among Japan, South Korea, and the US in addressing the challenges posed by North Korea.

## Historical Issues and Korea-Japan Relations

In 2011, the Constitutional Court of Korea handed down a ruling declaring the South Korean government's inaction as "nonfeasance" due to its failure to make effective efforts to resolve the Japanese military sexual slavery issue. The court further underscored the imperative for the government to engage in diplomatic endeavors aimed at "cooperation and protection of the right of individuals to pursue claims for reparations." Despite falling short of public expectations, the agreement between Tokyo and Seoul on the issue of the Japanese military sexual slavery in December 2015, which declared that the issue is resolved "finally and irreversibly," seemed to revitalize the bilateral relationship.

However, the issue of forced labor emerged as a diplomatic concern when the Supreme Court's decision mandated reparations for the "anti-humanitarian" practice of forced labor, citing the illegitimacy of Japan's colonial rule. As a result, Korea-Japan relations swiftly became strained. The Park Geun-hye administration attempted to circumvent the trap by postponing the final ruling of the Supreme Court, but this course of action proved to be impractical. The Park administration's strategy of delaying the final ruling sparked a controversy known as the "judicial manipulation" affair and became an exemplary case of deeply ingrained corruption within the regime that underwent subsequent political transitions. Consequently, Korea-Japan relations once again experienced another significant setback following the final ruling issued by the South Korean Supreme Court in 2018.

The Moon Jae-in administration adopted a strategy known as the "two-track approach" to actively promote cooperation in various domains while addressing historical issues separately. This strategy considers the distinctive nature of historical problems, which require a long-term perspective and inevitably entail conflicts. The decision to adopt the "two-track approach" was influenced by a critical reflection on the Park Geun-hye administration's adherence to the "one-track approach," which compelled the conclusion of agreements between Japan

and Korea on the Japanese military sexual slavery issue and GSOMIA. These agreements were reached under pressure from the US, which sought to restore trilateral cooperation among Japan, South Korea and the US. Kim Ki-jöng provides following analysis to shed light on the policy intentions underlying the Moon administration's "two-track approach.

When alternative solutions from other members of the state prove to be more appropriate than those put forth by the government, it becomes necessary for the government to take a step back by segregating the agenda from the realm of diplomatic discourse. . . . In reality, the [Korea-Japan "Comfort Women"] Agreement served more as a diplomatic settlement rather than an actual "solution" to the problem. . . . From the viewpoint of legal philosophy, an agreement was far from a "solution" as it failed to address the intricate issues concerning the balance among state power, inherent rights of human being, and a victim-centered approach. The Moon Jae-in administration desired to establish future-oriented cooperation with Japan and intended to draw a line whereby South Korea undertakes a review of the agreement while refraining from total termination. . . . The Moon administration had to consider the potential positive implications of progress in Japan-North Korea relations, which could facilitate peace initiatives on the Korean Peninsula. At the same time, it was concerned about the adverse consequences that hasty diplomatic settlement in historical issues could entail." (Kim Ki-jöng 2022, 207, 212)

As discussed above, the Moon administration contemplated the potential side effects of diplomatic compromises on historical issues. Consequently, the government resolved to prioritize the principle of a victim-centered approach and sought to strengthen cooperation between Japan and Korea in other realms by upholding existing agreements and preserving the status quo.

Building upon these perspectives, the South Korean government made an announcement in December 2017 and affirmed that the "Comfort Women" Agreement reached in 2015 was an unjustifiable outcome. However, the government opted against terminating the agreement or initiating renegotiations with Japan. Concurrently, the South Korean government added that it welcomes any supplementary measures taken by Japan to address the grievances of the victims, while refraining from making explicit demands. These words and actions indicated a distinct endeavor to seek a middle ground between a victim-centered approach and the 2015 Agreement.

Nonetheless, a significant complication arose in 2018 when earnest denuclearization efforts towards achieving peace on the Korean Peninsula were in progress. Historical issues resurged as a diplomatic agenda due to the final ruling in October 2018 regarding reparation for forced mobilization. Surprisingly, the South Korean government immediately made the decision to dissolve the

Reconciliation and Healing Foundation just a month later in November. The dissolution of the foundation was widely interpreted as an act nullifying the 2015 Agreement between South Korea and Japan. Furthermore, this course of action conveyed a misleading signal to Japan, suggesting that South Korea was overturning the table and actively seeking an alternative resolution.

For the “two-track approach” to effectively operate, it is imperative that the counterpart country shares a mutual recognition of the necessity to address historical issues and other cooperative matters separately. This condition can only be met when there exists an expectation that historical conflicts can be managed and resolved, even if it requires a more protracted timeframe. In other words, country B can place trust in country A and respond to proposals for cooperation in other domains when country B observes country A’s strong determination and proactive measures towards historical problems. However, the “two-track approach” undertaken by the Moon administration presupposed the “preservation of the status quo” concerning historical issues and exhibited a bystander-like stance. Consequently, it fell short in actively pursuing a diplomatic resolution to the historical problem. Professor Nam Kijeong also provided an evaluation of the reality of the Moon administration’s “two-track approach” as follows:

It [the two-track approach] basically operates within the scope of “peace diplomacy” (*hwap’yōng oegyo*) and can be perceived as an endeavor aimed at regulating Korea-Japan relations through “passive responses that refrain from what should not be done” rather than “active responses that undertake what should be done.” (Nam Kijeong 2021, 93)

Owing to the limitations of the “two-track approach,” the South Korean government adopted a passive stance in addressing the issue of forced mobilization, eliciting protests from Japan and gradually eroding trust between the two nations. As previously mentioned, a “decisive scene” in Korea-Japan relations occurred in February 2018, exacerbating the mutual distrust between their respective leaders. From the perspective of South Korea, growing disappointment towards Japan stemmed from the perceived lack of cooperation in the denuclearization and peace process on the Korean Peninsula. Conversely, Japan was frustrated as South Korea seemingly channeled its diplomatic efforts and capabilities primarily towards inter-Korean dialogues and US-North Korea negotiations, which held greater policy priority during that time, thereby marginalizing historical issues between Japan and Korea. The resultant “vacuum” in South Korea’s policy toward Japan became a tangible reality in both North Korean problems and historical issues.

The Japanese government strongly criticized the South Korean government's lack of response, stemming from its absence of a clear policy towards Japan. In fact, Seoul wasted an excessive amount of time before presenting detailed suggestions. When a fund plan and "Moon Hee-sang's proposal" were unveiled in early 2019, Chōngwadae (the Blue House) expressed a negative stance. Finally, the vice foreign minister of South Korea delivered a resolution proposal to Japan, suggesting the establishment of a joint fund with contributions from both Korean and Japanese enterprises. It was already problematic that a proposal, which had previously received a negative feedback from Chōngwadae, was eventually put forward, and furthermore, was delivered belatedly.

As a result, Japan reached the conclusion that the South Korean government lacked the willingness to resolve the issue of forced mobilization. Consequently, Japan implemented sudden trade regulations on South Korea in July 2019. This presented a unique opportunity for South Korea to escape from its defensive position, as international public opinion criticized Japan's trade regulations, which infringed upon the principle of separating the economy from politics. However, South Korea found itself pushed back into a defensive stance once again upon terminating GSOMIA. Later, South Korea and Japan reached an agreement in November 2019 under pressure from the US to convene a director-level meeting concerning trade regulations. In return, South Korea agreed to suspend the termination of GSOMIA and postpone its dispute complaint against Japan at the WTO. The sequence of actions served as a catalyst for initiating the resolution of historical issues.

In 2020, the South Korean government made efforts to resolve historical issues in light of the improved ambience in Korea-Japan relations, driven by pressure from the US. This change in policy stance resulted from South Korea's strategic thinking to reinvigorate the peace process on the Korean Peninsula against the backdrop of the Tokyo Olympics, which were scheduled for 2020. An article published in the *Asahi Newspaper* (*Asahi shinbun*) on October 31, 2020, reported that in the spring of the same year, Seoul informally broached a plan to Tokyo, suggesting that "the South Korean government would preserve reparation funds ex post if the defendants, the Japanese companies, agreed to provide reparations," but Japan declined this proposition. Specifically, the news article indicated that the South Korean government unofficially proposed that "it would preserve the entire amount [of reparations] if the Japanese companies [as defendants] responded to the reparations," but the Japanese government rejected the proposal, stating that "Japan could not accept the proposal as the legal rulings against the Japanese companies would still be enforced, regardless of whether the South Korean government preserved the entire expenditures of

companies” (“Il öllon ‘Han’guk, kangje tongwön paesang” 2020). Although a high-ranking official from Chōngwadae denied the report, calling it groundless, there is a strong likelihood of its veracity, particularly considering that Japan presented a counter-proposal in November.

Efforts behind the scenes to overcome these challenging circumstances continued. However, a powerful external variable emerged—the coronavirus disease. As the COVID-19 pandemic indicated a prolonged duration, the Tokyo Olympics were postponed. Moreover, President Xi Jinping’s planned visit to Japan was also postponed. Then, Japan enforced a travel ban on South Korea. In response, South Korea implemented corresponding measures, effectively cutting off human exchange between the two countries. Adding to the mounting tension, South Korea and Japan engaged in emotional confrontations in June 2020 regarding the Director-General selection process of the WTO. Japan had already imposed trade regulations on South Korea, leading to a widespread sense of crisis in Japan. Concerns were raised that if a South Korean candidate were to be elected, Japan would find itself in a precarious situation. Consequently, Japan opted to boycott the South Korean candidate.

The inauguration of Suga Yoshihide’s cabinet in September 2020, coupled with the postponed Tokyo Olympics scheduled for 2021, provided opportunities for the Moon administration to adopt a more active approach towards historical issues (Yoon Suk Jung 2021). Following the ruling on reparations for victims of the Japanese military sexual slavery in January 2021, President Moon Jae-in promptly attempted to assuage Japan’s concern through a press conference and a speech commemorating the March First Independence Movement Day. President Moon Jae-in held a New Year’s press conference on January 18 and expressed his concern, saying that it is not appropriate to “realize the ruling with liquidation in a compulsory manner.” Concurrently, he acknowledged that the 2015 “Comfort Women” Agreement between Japan and Korea was an official agreement between the two states and advocated for the search of solutions based on the provisions of the agreement (Moon Jae-in 2021a). These remarks during the press conference showcased the Moon administration’s strong determination in the sense that President Moon eagerly expressed reservations about compulsory liquidation, departing from the previous stance that administrative interference in judiciary rulings violates the principle of the separation of powers.

If the judgment on reparations for forced mobilization is linked to the 1965 Agreement concerning property and claims between Japan and Korea, the judgment on reparations for victims of Japanese military sexual slavery is associated with the 2015 “Comfort Women” Agreement between the two

governments. Resolving these issues while refraining from the liquidation of the ruling necessitates acknowledging the demands of the victims (a victim-centered approach) within the framework formed by the two agreements. In this sense, the president's statements during the press conference helped address Japan's apprehensions regarding the South Korean government's intent to overturn existing agreements and propose a new round of negotiation.

Furthermore, in his commemorative speech on March 1, President Moon Jae-in emphasized that Korea and Japan "must be able to overcome the history of the once unfortunate past and cooperate for the future."<sup>5</sup> He stressed the need for simultaneous engagement in inter-Korean, US-North Korea, Japan-North Korea dialogues, as well as cooperation in navigating the post-COVID-19 global landscape with the Tokyo Olympics serving as a significant turning point (Moon Jae-in 2021b). However, due to a lack of trust in the Moon administration, the Japanese government concluded that engaging in negotiations with the current regime would be counterproductive as the regime nears its end. As a consequence, Japan declined South Korea's proposal for a summit and instead intensified pressure by demanding that "South Korea should bring a specific proposal."

What if the presidential press conference in 2021 had been held at an opportune moment, such as immediately after the final ruling on the issue of forced mobilization in October 2018? South Korea could have effectively conveyed a clear message outlining its direction for resolving the problem, emphasizing the utilization of diplomatic negotiations within the framework of existing agreements. This could have facilitated the advancement of cooperation between South Korea and Japan in other domains, sustained by a basis of mutual trust. However, the Moon administration's "two-track approach," which relied on passive policy stances aimed at maintaining the status quo, hindered the diplomatic resolution of historical issues.

In contrast, the Yoon Suk Yeol administration is advocating for a "comprehensive approach" with a notable emphasis on fostering stronger Korea-Japan relations (Yoon Suk Jung 2022, 3). The approach aims to simultaneously and comprehensively address pending issues between the two nations, encompassing historical, economic, and security matters. Drawing from the Moon administration's efforts on the issue of Japanese military sexual slavery, the Yoon administration established a public-private committee in July, specifically tasked with solving the issue of forced mobilization. It is reported that various potential solutions were explored, including the "assumption of obligation by a third party" and the

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5. English translation of the phrase quoted from "Address by President Moon Jae-in on 103rd March First Independence Movement Day" (2022), <https://www.korea.net/Government/Briefing-Room/Presidential-Speeches/view?articleId=211292>, Accessed June 8, 2023.

establishment of a “Korea-Japan joint private fund.” It is assumed that the proposed solutions put forth by the committee were discussed during a meeting between the foreign ministers of South Korea and Japan in September 2022 (“Han-Il oegyo changgwan” 2022).

However, the Yoon administration’s comprehensive approach encountered strong limitations due to Japan’s strategy of presenting the resolution of the forced mobilization issue by the South Korean government as a prerequisite and an “entry point” for the complete restoration of Korea-Japan relations. In August of the same year, Japanese Foreign Minister Hayashi Yoshimasa dismissed the demand made by South Korean Foreign Minister Park Jin to lift trade regulations on Korea during their meeting, stating that the issue of forced mobilization and trade regulations are distinct and separate matters (“Han’guk ‘hwait’ü isüt’ü” 2022).

Furthermore, the capability of Japan to take measures that can effectively appease public opinion in South Korea remains uncertain. South Korean public opinion perceives both an apology and the active participation of Japanese companies in a private fund designated for the victims of forced mobilization as minimal expectations (Yoon Suk Jung 2022, 8). At the same time, there are concerns that hastened diplomatic negotiations, prioritizing the restoration of Korea-Japan relations over the crucial process of building domestic consensus with victims and society, may give rise to undesired ramifications (“Kangje chingyong haeböp” 2022).

As described earlier, the solutions put forward for the issue of forced mobilization under the Moon Jae-in administration’s “two-track approach” and the Yoon Suk Yeol administration’s comprehensive approach exhibit limited disparities. As previously noted, the Moon administration pursued a solution while respecting the 1965 Agreement and the 2015 “Comfort Women” Agreement between Japan and Korea. Subsequently, around the summer of 2019, the Moon administration proposed the establishment of a joint fund between the two countries and conveyed its intention of payment by subrogation. The solutions presented under the Yoon administration align closely with this scope. However, the comprehensive approach signifies a progression in Korea-Japan cooperation through proactive efforts to address historical issues, while the “two-track approach” indicated passive responses to historical issues focused on preserving the status quo, contrary to its practical implications. This contrast indirectly highlights the varying levels of urgency between conservatives and progressives regarding the need to improve Korea-Japan relations.

## Conclusion: Is Political Polarization Eligible for a Stable Japan Policy?

During the Cold War era, the trajectory of Korea-Japan relations was notably shaped by the ideological conflicts between conservatives and progressives within Japan. The US adopted a “division of roles” approach as its Cold War strategy, seeking to bolster the deterrence capabilities of “anti-communist frontline states” such as South Korea, Taiwan, and South Vietnam, with Japan assuming the pivotal role of a “base state” within the anti-communist bloc. South Korea also pursued a course of solidarity with other anti-communist states, utilizing various linkage strategies to a significant extent. However, Japan grappled with the policies pursued by the US and South Korea amidst the disputes between the two ideological camps. As a result, Korea-Japan relations unfolded in diverse manifestations as Japan endeavored to impede the “internalization of the Cold War” (the confrontational dynamics of the Cold War manifesting in domestic political conflicts; *naengjön ūi kungnaehwa*). Conflicting viewpoints on matters of security, economic cooperation, and Japan’s approach to North Korea emerged as typical examples characterizing the intricate dynamics of Korea-Japan relations.

During the period of the US-China strategic competition, a contrasting pattern has emerged. The US and Japan have effectively synchronized their external strategies within the structure of “division of roles” without experiencing major conflicts. Conversely, the extreme confrontation between conservatives and progressives in South Korea has destabilized the country’s level of engagement in this role-division system, thereby exacerbating the complexity of Korea-Japan relations. These dynamics also have ramifications for ROK-US relations in certain instances.

As examined previously in this article, progressive forces within Korean society strive to avoid confrontations between the US and China with the objective of establishing a peace regime on the Korean Peninsula. In contrast, conservatives prioritize strategic aims focused on addressing the threats posed by North Korea, as well as emphasizing the importance of upholding and advancing the international liberal order based on democratic values.

The divergent external strategies adopted by conservatives and progressives in South Korea elucidate broader disparities in the country’s policies toward Japan and North Korea, in contrast to its approach toward the US and China. On the one hand, progressive groups exhibit a passive disposition when it comes to pursuing security cooperation between South Korea and Japan, as well as among Japan, South Korea, and the US. They perceive such cooperation as

potentially dividing the Korean Peninsula into blocs. On the other hand, conservative groups recognize the indispensability of the trilateral cooperation and security partnership between South Korea and Japan. Consequently, progressives tend to undervalue Korea-Japan relations in a general sense, while conservatives tend to overvalue their significance.

However, South Korea's policy toward Japan is significantly influenced by structural factors, including the ROK-US alliance, the nation's geopolitical position as a peninsula, and anti-Japanese public opinion. An exemplary case of this dynamic can be observed in the decision to suspend the termination of the GSOMIA in the light of the ROK-US alliance system, despite the demands from progressive groups for dismantling the agreement. It becomes evident that even if the Yoon Suk Yeol administration intends to foster security cooperation between South Korea and Japan, the initiation of full-fledged efforts is challenging due to the prevailing anti-Japanese public opinion.

Despite the so-called failures in managing conflicts stemming from historical issues within Korea-Japan relations in recent years, it was the Moon Jae-in administration that made significant efforts to propose potential resolutions, such as the joint fund plans and the third-party payments. South Korea was inevitably compelled to address historical problems between the two nations at a certain level, necessitating a compromise between a victim-centered approach and the reality of managing ROK-US relations. Additionally, it was difficult to overcome the structural constraints imposed by the "1965 System" and preexisting agreements and arrangements between South Korea and Japan, even under the progressive government. Therefore, if the Yoon administration remains attuned to public opinion, the solution proposed by this administration is unlikely to surpass those put forth by the Moon administration.

The case of the Moon administration unequivocally demonstrates the infeasibility of establishing a peace regime on the Korean Peninsula solely using the framework of North Korea, South Korea, and the US. It is essential to bring out Japan's shift in policy orientations and its active support for inter-Korean affairs, considering Japan's status as a US ally. The necessity of policy coordination encompassing Japan, South Korea, and the US in dealing with North Korea is an undeniable reality. In other words, this is the exact reason why progressive groups should adopt a more proactive approach in leveraging the ROK-US-Japan cooperation system.

As such, the actual trajectory of South Korea's policy toward Japan is determined by the dynamic interplay between structure and agents. However, a problem arises from the trend of polarization in external strategies. This political polarization engenders unnecessary domestic conflicts and presents obstacles to

implementing stable policies toward Japan. Progressives criticize conservatives by employing a rhetorical framework that labels conservatives' foreign policy stances as "pro-Japanese" and "confrontational and conflictual." Conversely, conservatives denounce progressives' foreign policy stances using rhetoric such as "anti-Japanese" and "pro-Chinese" or "pro-North Korean." Moreover, the prevailing political polarization in South Korea faces a challenging environment in achieving a balance approach to its policy toward Japan, given the potential for regime change at any given time.

Ultimately, the pervasive polarization in South Korean politics inevitably has a negative impact on Korea-Japan relations, particularly in the era of US-China strategic competition. To some extent, the intense confrontation between conservatives and progressives within South Korea can be interpreted as a political process to establish a point of equilibrium similar to the Yoshida Doctrine pursued by Japan during the Cold War era. Through multiple trials and errors, progressives are likely to adopt a more realistic perspective on the strategic significance of Korea-Japan relations. Similarly, conservatives are expected to realize the paramount importance of values such as peace and justice.

In this regard, President Kim Dae-jung's diplomatic and security strategy presents a potential point of consensus. He recognized the pivotal role of Japan in the peace process on the Korean Peninsula and encouraged dialogue between Japan and North Korea. He commended Japan for its pursuit of the path toward becoming a peace-loving nation and expressed gratitude for its economic cooperation with South Korea, while also encouraging statements of regret and apology from the Japanese government for the colonial occupation of Korea. President Kim aimed to address both the North Korean issue (peaceful coexistence between the two Koreas) and the Japanese issue (historical reconciliation) simultaneously. Additionally, President Kim Dae-jung actively worked toward establishing peace on the Korean Peninsula based on a fortified deterrence capability. He pursued both bilateral security cooperation between South Korea and Japan and trilateral cooperation among Japan, South Korea, and the US to strengthen South Korea's deterrence capacity, recognizing that necessary diplomatic efforts should not be considered as "taboo." Building upon a foundation of robust deterrence capability, the Kim administration promoted the "Sunshine Policy" and sought to achieve peace on the Korean Peninsula through multilateral cooperation. President Kim Dae-jung's diplomatic and security strategy exemplifies a path of mediation as he endeavored to integrate the perspectives of both progressives and conservatives. This was particularly crucial given the divergence in diplomatic and security strategies between the two groups regarding issues pertaining to North Korea and Japan, as well as differences in priorities

concerning the strengthening of deterrence capacity and the establishment of peace on the Korean Peninsula.

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