



**Japan-Korea Relations:  
When No News Is Good News**

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The summer months were less tumultuous than usual for Seoul and Tokyo. Aside from the main political issue surrounding the implementation of the “comfort women” deal that was struck back in December 2015, there were many visible instances of cooperation across a range of sectors. To some extent, Seoul was preoccupied with the fallout from its decision to host the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system while Japan was focused on its House of Councillors election in July (particularly as it was the first election after lowering the voting age from 20 to 18). It was business as usual with North Korea for Japan, with efforts to denounce Pyongyang’s ballistic missile tests and continued stalemate over the investigation into the abduction of Japanese citizens since the North’s decision to suspend the probe in February 2016.

**Multiple cooperative nodes**

There were numerous initiatives – both one-off and recurring – that brought officials and the public from Japan and South Korea together. At the inter-governmental level, Japan’s Minister of Defense Nakatani Gen and South Korean counterpart Han Min-koo met in Singapore ahead of the Shangri-La Dialogue in early June. There were also three notable meetings in July: a vice-ministerial meeting in Honolulu ahead of the US-Japan-South Korea trilateral meeting, talks between South Korea’s new Ambassador to Japan Lee Joon-gyu and Japanese Foreign Minister Kishida Fumio, and a discussion involving Kishida and South Korean counterpart Yun Byung-se in Laos. On the legislative side, South Korean National Assembly Speaker Chung Ui-hwa visited Tokyo to reinforce inter-parliamentary diplomacy. Additionally, there was a joint coast guard conference on maritime security in Incheon, marking the first such conference since 2012, which was held in Tokyo.

There was also a wide range of other organizational interactions between the two countries. In the cultural sphere, the 37<sup>th</sup> Japan-South Korea Buddhist Cultural Exchange Conference was held in Tokyo, the National Museum of Korea and Tokyo National Museum held a joint special exhibition on “Pensive Bodhisattvas: National Treasures of Korea and Japan” (the first time these Japanese treasures were shipped overseas), and South Korea’s National Research Institute of Maritime Cultural Heritage announced its plans to construct the ships (in life-size) used by the Joseon Tongsinsa – diplomatic delegations during the Joseon Dynasty to Japan. The project is scheduled to be completed in 2018. In the field of education, the UNESCO Japan-South Korea

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Teachers' Dialogue was held in mid-July. The dialogue is organized by the Korean National Commission for UNESCO (KNCU), the Asia-Pacific Cultural Centre for UNESCO, and the United Nations University (UNU), and aims to invite a delegation of Japanese teachers to Korea for exchanges with their Korean counterparts. Commercially, Jeju Airlines announced its new Incheon-Sapporo route, giving the airline the most destinations in Japan (nine total) within the Low Cost Carrier (LCC) category. Unfortunately, bilateral talks toward the end of June on fisheries collapsed after the two sides failed to come to an agreement regarding fishing quotas and the acceptable number of fishing vessels in each other's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ).

Surprisingly, roughly two weeks before the appointment of the new head of the Korea-Japan Parliamentarians' Union, *Yonhap News* reported that the organization had been receiving funds from the National Assembly Secretariat (NAS) under an inadequate legal basis. Citing the figures released by the NAS, the Korea-Japan Parliamentarians' Union had received roughly 11 billion won from 1997 to 2015. In order to comply with existing regulations, the entity must gain permission from the NAS for legal status and receive an evaluation of its activities after three years. The news did not make many headlines though and was quickly buried under all the coverage over the implementation of the "comfort women" deal, which may have been a blessing (by preventing any negative repercussions to general inter-parliamentary diplomacy).

### **Easier said than done**

Now that a few months have passed since the December deal between Tokyo and Seoul on the issue of "comfort women," it is time to make a preliminary assessment. First, there are surveys about general public sentiment. On July 20, the East Asia Institute (EAI) and Genron NPO released the results of their joint opinion poll on overall Japan-Korea bilateral relations (in [Japanese](#) & in [Korean](#)). A key takeaway was that there was discernable momentum toward change, with more positive responses than in previous iterations of the survey.

It is true that there have been more visible instances of cooperation. Still, the predictable asymmetry in perceptions was clear. On one particular question that asked for challenges that the bilateral relationship would need to tackle to move forward, Japanese respondents answered "perception of history and education" (46.5 percent), followed by "Dokdo/Takeshima" (39 percent), with the "comfort women issue" (29.6 percent) coming in at fourth. In contrast, Korean respondents thought "Dokdo/Takeshima" (81.1 percent) was the most important, then "comfort women" (75.7 percent), followed by "perception of history and education" (74.9 percent). Specifically regarding the December deal on the "comfort women," more Japanese viewed it to be mostly positive (48 percent) than not (21 percent), while more Koreans still saw the agreement as mostly negative (38 percent) than otherwise (28 percent). In the Korean version, there was an additional question to gauge what the public thought about the deal's impact on resolving the "comfort women" issue – a majority 74 percent said the issue is yet to be resolved, with 58 percent stating that the deal would most likely not be helpful for bilateral relations.

So far, the bilateral agreement seems to highlight how getting to a decision is almost always followed by an even heftier task of implementation (claiming mission accomplished is not the same as actual victory). The sentiment of this uphill battle was captured in the grueling eight hours of discussion in Seoul on Aug. 9 between Japan's Director General of the Asian and

Oceanian Affairs Bureau Kanasugi Kenji and South Korea's Director General of the Northeast Asian Affairs Bureau Chung Byung-won. It would be incomplete however, to think that the main fault line here lies across state borders. In this case, there is an undeniably important domestic component – a divide in South Korea about whether it needs uncompromising direction and leadership or judicious consultation/consensus and *internal* reconciliation. On July 28, the Foundation for Reconciliation and Healing, which Japan vowed to support with ¥1 billion (roughly \$9.6 million), held its inauguration ceremony and first meeting of the board of directors at its secretariat in Seoul amidst protests, including a physical attack using hot pepper spray on several members including the foundation's director, Kim Tae-hyeon.

Even as Foreign Minister Yun Byung-se tried to convince the public that cuts in the Korean government budget for the multilateral effort toward inscription of records about “comfort women” on the UNESCO Memory of the World Register (see detailed nomination form [here](#)) was unrelated to its deal with Japan (the government's formal [position](#) has been that this project is being pursued by the private sector), there was more interest in the headlines ([Korean; English](#)) that noted plans of a 31 percent decrease in next year's budget allocated to the issue of “comfort women.” On July 14, members of the Minjoo Party of Korea and the Korean Council for the Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan held an exhibition titled “Truth and Justice Cannot Fail.” As a clear slap in the face to the Park administration, the exhibition was not only held in the lobby of the National Assembly Members' Office Building in the compound of the National Assembly, but also motivated by the desire to nullify the existing accord on the “comfort women.”

Japan was also experiencing comparatively mild yet visible signs of internal discord over the deal. Since reaching the agreement in December, Tokyo has continued to demand the removal of the bronze statue of the girl erected in front of the Japanese Embassy in Seoul, while the Korean government has argued that its removal is separate from the agreement. In late July, *the Mainichi reported* that the Japanese government was inclined to transfer its funds to the Foundation for Reconciliation and Healing regardless of what happened with the statue in light of North Korea's nuclear test in January and continued provocations in ballistic missile tests. By Aug. 12, there were [reports](#) that the “diplomats had won out over the politicians” in Japan, as the Japanese government had agreed to transfer the funds despite inaction by Seoul to remove the statue. This move places the ball squarely in Seoul's court and also puts much of the onus of any potential stalemate on further implementation of the accord on the Korean government.

Speaking of statues, there was a demonstration/performance on Aug. 13 under the theme of the “living comfort women” in Berlin, Germany, where women representing each of the 15 nations that had been victims of sexual enslavement by Japan during World War II sat like a statue in protest of the Japan-Korea agreement (photos [here](#)). The implication seemed to be that the issue of the “comfort women” must be internationalized in order to have genuine meaning; to some extent, this has already been accomplished, particularly in the geographic space of the US. For instance, in August, the US Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit upheld the decision to dismiss a lawsuit against the city of Glendale, California for its installation of a “comfort women” memorial statue in its central park in 2013 (case [#14-56440](#)). The main contention was whether the installation “concerns an area of traditional state responsibility and does not intrude on the federal government's foreign affairs power.” Basically, the court came to the conclusion that

Glendale's monument to advocate against the "violations of human rights" is well within the traditional responsibilities of state and local governments (and the basic function of "communicating its views and values to its citizenry") and that such "expressive displays or events" (c.f. remedies or regulations) do not suggest that Glendale is necessarily inserting itself into foreign affairs. Like it or not, there is also domestic disjuncture here though, as at the federal level, the State Department has been quite clear about its preference to see its allies just get along rather than digging deeper into a hole that is historical memory or "justice" (see [here](#) and [here](#)).

So one person's "[humiliating diplomacy](#)" (Korean Council for the Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery in Japan) has become another's "[courageous statecraft](#)" (US State Department). Perhaps it is inevitable to have domestic discord – particularly within the institutional setting of a functioning democracy –and consensus is an unobtainable illusion. Even at the June 20, 2016 signing ceremony and settlement between Mitsubishi Materials Corp. and the Chinese victims of the company's use of forced labor during World War II, there was mixed reaction by the victims of the accord (see video clip [here](#)). Nevertheless, the governments seem desperate to get this deal working, having accepted the risks of the political consequences of the deal completely unraveling to any benefits in attempts at signification revision or even its nullification.

Along that sentiment, South Korean President Park Geun-hye's speech on Aug. 15, 2016 was indeed, restrained. The *Asahi Shimbun* noted immediately after the speech in its [article](#) that "Park made no mention of the 'comfort women' issue in the speech, the first such omission in the four speeches she has given at the National Liberation Day ceremony." Overall, it was true that Park's speech contained more aspirations of a forward-looking bilateral relationship than there was wrestling with past indemnities or grudges, but it was not the first time that there was such an omission. In fact, the only time there was any direct mention of "comfort women" in the context of Japan was in 2015, when she called on the Japanese government to "rightly and quickly resolve the issue regarding the victims of sexual enslavement by the Japanese Imperial Army." In 2014, the South Korean president referred to her urging the leadership in Japan to correct its view of history, especially her demands for "a forward-looking policy that would be acceptable to those remaining 'comfort women' victims." In 2013, Park emphasized the need for the Japanese elites to show leadership that would heal the wounds of history, particularly for "responsible and sincere measures that would heal the wounds of those survivors whose pain are rooted in history." To be specific then, there was no explicit connection between Japan and "comfort women"; just some generalities wrapped up in the larger context of history.

### **The Japan piece to THAAD**

There was, however, a significant portion of Park's 2016 speech that was directed at North Korea. There was a special reference to THAAD, and how the decision to host the system was a necessary step in self-defense to protect the livelihoods of South Korean citizens from the North's provocations. From Japan's perspective, Seoul's decision regarding THAAD has been an interesting development, though not without its complications.

For one, the official position of the Japanese government is that while it is mulling over the possibility of introducing THAAD on its own soil, there are no concrete plans to do so at this time; Defense Minister Nakatani Gen has said something to that effect at several press briefings

earlier this year ([here](#) and [here](#)). According to Nakatani, the government has been “conducting studies since FY2014, and have continued to carry out various reviews diligently.” At the same time, there are [voices](#) within Japan that views the THAAD option to be too expensive, suggesting that it may be better off investing in cruise missiles. Plus, Tokyo is well aware of the geopolitical repercussions (i.e., backlash from China) of the decision to host THAAD – something that it clearly pointed out in its 2016 defense white paper [section on South Korea](#).

But more directly to the point of the Japan-South Korea bilateral relationship, Seoul’s decision to host THAAD has caused some confusion over the implications for intelligence sharing. During a [daily press briefing](#) on Aug. 4 by the South Korean Ministry of National Defense (MND) spokesperson, the press was told that in the event that Japan was to request intelligence from THAAD sensors, “this would be deemed possible within the context of the US-Japan-South Korea trilateral intelligence-sharing agreement (of 2014).” The statement seemed to contradict remarks made by Defense Minister Han Min-goo, who had denied the possibilities of bilateral intelligence sharing under the THAAD framework – something that the *Sankei Shimbun* was quick to pick up. The paper [reported](#) that there was confusion about the MND spokesperson’s remarks, especially in light of what US officials were saying – that THAAD is purely for Korea’s self-defense and not part of the larger missile defense system, thus, denying the point about intelligence sharing between South Korea and Japan.

Actually, the sense of general confusion has always existed, even before Seoul’s decision to host THAAD. During the same Korean MND press briefing on Aug. 4, reporters questioned the quality of intelligence in general by noting that the South Korean government only realized much later that Pyongyang had test-fired two ballistic missiles (not one) just the day before. They also highlighted the discrepancy of the missile launch site, which the US cited as being near Hwangju (in North Hwanghae Province) and South Korea as being near Eunyul (in South Hwanghae Province). The two locations are roughly 100km apart, so this discrepancy may not be a huge deal. On the other hand, if dealing with North Korea’s provocations are truly that high on the agenda for countries such as Japan, South Korea, and the US, it is problematic that there are such uncertainties about the things that they care about most. Then again, when it comes to North Korea, not many really know what is going on and those that say they do are often proven wrong. This was not lost on Japan, which was also dealing with a restless regime in Pyongyang during the summer months.

### **Keep calm and test on**

(Un)fortunately for North Korea, the media has been busy with its coverage of a different, yet just as colorful character in politics – the Republican US presidential nominee, Donald Trump (prompting *the Guardian* to post an [article](#) titled “Who Said it: Donald Trump or North Korea?” which challenges readers to distinguish official statements by the DPRK from remarks made by Donald Trump.) Pyongyang did not disappoint, making headlines through multiple ballistic missile tests: one on May 31, two on June 22, three on July 19, two on Aug. 3, and one on Aug. 24. Its efforts earned a specific paragraph in the [communiqué](#) of the NATO Summit in Warsaw on July 8-9, which called on Pyongyang to “immediately cease and abandon all its existing nuclear and ballistic missile activities in a complete, verifiable, and irreversible manner and re-engage in international talks.” *The Mainichi* ran a [story](#) quoting Japanese government officials as

claiming that Pyongyang's provocations "entered a new phase" with the warhead from one of the missile launches on Aug. 3 landing in Japan's EEZ for the first time.

There was similar sentiment expressed in Japan's annual Defense [White Paper](#), which was released on Aug. 2. At the [press conference](#) by (now former) Defense Minister Nakatani on the day of the rollout, he had noted the increase in content on North Korea in the white paper from 14 to 18 pages, and stated that "In particular, the white paper for the first time characterizes the progress in North Korea's nuclear and ballistic missile development as a grave and imminent threat to the security not only of Japan but also of the region surrounding the country and the international community." On Aug. 3, Prime Minister Abe Shinzo appointed [Inada Tomomi](#) as Japan's new defense minister, news that received a bitter reception in South Korea as the lawmaker had often been referenced for her participation in controversial Yasukuni Shrine visits. In a direct (yet strange) choice of words and juxtaposition, [the Korea Herald](#) claimed that "Inada, a mother of two children, has a history of irritating Asian neighbours such as China and South Korea," citing the 2011 incident when she along with two other Japanese lawmakers were denied entry into South Korea after their attempt to visit Ulleung Island, which Seoul considers as part of its sovereign territory.

Determined to keep pressure on the North, the Japanese government enmeshed its efforts at the multilateral level. There were 13 participants from Japan at the Northeast Asia Cooperation Dialogue (NEACD) in Beijing, including Kanasugi Kenji, the director general of the Northeast Asian Affairs Bureau at the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs (for complete list of participants, see [here](#)). The forum is organized annually by the Institute on Global Conflict and Cooperation (IGCC) of the University of California, San Diego; unlike the event in 2014 and 2015, North Korea was represented at this year's meeting by Choe Son Hui, deputy director for North American affairs at North Korea's Foreign Ministry. The US, Japan, and South Korea also conducted joint ballistic missile defense exercises (*Pacific Dragon*) in Hawaii in late June, while the 25<sup>th</sup> *Rim of the Pacific (RIMPAC)* exercise kicked off on June 30, involving 26 nations including Japan and South Korea. On Aug. 4, the nuclear envoys of Japan and South Korea, Kanasugi Kenji and Kim Hong-kyun, held talks via phone regarding bilateral collaboration in the wake of North Korea's missile tests the day before. There was also [news](#) in late July of Japan's plans to upgrade its *Patriot PAC-3* missile defense system given the need to better respond to North Korea's ballistic missiles, especially as Tokyo prepares to host the 2020 Olympic Games.

Finally, there was little progress on Pyongyang's investigation into the abduction of Japanese citizens, since the North announced that it would halt its inquiry earlier this year. There was, however, [news](#) that a Japanese man found to have been kidnapped by North Korea (and missing at age 32) had been found in Japan in early June (though it was unclear what the man had been up to for 20 or so years).

## **Fall 2016**

Autumn 2016 appears set to proceed smoothly, although that is never a sure thing in Northeast Asia. There are no meetings or events of particular note that are scheduled, and Korea and Japan relations might remain steady. There is always the possibility of a North Korean provocation that could stir things up, or that a new historical or maritime dispute will flare up between Japan and Korea – but neither is guaranteed to happen. Rather, all eyes will be on the US presidential

election, the possible changes to US policies that might affect the region, and preparations for a leadership transition in the US.

## **Chronology of Japan-Korea Relations** **May – August 2016**

**May 14-17, 2016:** South Korea's Parliamentary Speaker Chung Ui-hwa visits Japan for inter-parliamentary dialogue.

**May 16, 2016:** *The Guardian* posts an [article](#) quizzing readers about which statement belongs to which leader: Donald Trump or Kim Jong Un.

**May 24, 2016:** A joint exhibition titled “Pensive Bodhisattvas: National Treasures of Korea and Japan” kicks off in Seoul. The exhibition is co-hosted by the National Museum of Korea and Tokyo National Museum.

**May 31, 2016:** North Korea launches a missile off the eastern city of Wonsan, but is deemed to be unsuccessful.

**June 1, 2016:** Japan's Mitsubishi Materials Corp. concludes a settlement agreement with former Chinese laborers that were forced to work for the company during World War II.

**June 4, 2016:** Japan's Defense Minister Nakatani Gen and South Korean counterpart Han Min-koo meet in Singapore ahead of the Shangri-La Dialogue (Asia Security Summit).

**June 6, 2016:** The *New York Times* publishes an [article](#) tracing the plight of elderly Japanese women living in a nursing home called “Nazarewon” in South Korea. Many of the women stayed with their Korean husbands during Japanese colonial rule.

**June 15-18, 2016:** The 37<sup>th</sup> Japan-South Korea Buddhist Cultural Exchange Conference is held in Tokyo. The event is attended by roughly 250 participants.

**June 16, 2016:** A missing Japanese man that authorities had deemed to be abducted by North Korea is found in Japan in Fukui Prefecture.

**June 18, 2016:** The US, Japan, and South Korea conduct joint ballistic missile defense exercises (*Pacific Dragon*) off the coast of the Pacific Missile Range Facility (PMRF) in Kauai, Hawaii.

**June 21-23, 2016:** Northeast Asia Cooperation Dialogue (NEACD) is held in Beijing.

**June 27-28, 2016:** China, Japan, and South Korea hold their tenth round of talks on the trilateral free trade deal in Seoul.

**June 29, 2016:** Bilateral fishing negotiations in Tokyo between Japan and South Korea collapse after a failure to agree on fishing quotas.

**July 1, 2016:** South Korea's President, Park Geun-hye, appoints Lee Joon-gyu, as Seoul's new ambassador to Tokyo.

**July 8-9, 2016:** The 2016 Warsaw Summit of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) is held in Poland. The communiqué contains a section urging Pyongyang to stop its provocations surrounding its existing nuclear and ballistic missile activities.

**July 12, 2016:** *Yonhap News* reports that the Korea-Japan Parliamentarians' Union has been receiving funds from the National Assembly Secretariat (NAS) under inadequate legal basis.

**July 12-18, 2016:** The UNESCO Japan-South Korea Teachers' Dialogue is held. The dialogue is organized by the Korean National Commission for UNESCO (KNCU), the Asia-Pacific Cultural Centre for UNESCO, and the United Nations University (UNU).

**July 13, 2016:** Japanese Vice Foreign Minister Sugiyama Shinsuke meets South Korean First Vice Foreign Minister Lim Sung-nam, in Honolulu ahead of trilateral meeting with the US.

**July 14, 2016:** Members of the Minjoo Party of Korea and the Korean Council for the Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan hold an exhibition titled "Truth and Justice Cannot Fail" in the lobby of the National Assembly Members' Office Building in Seoul.

**July 14, 2016:** South Korea's new Ambassador to Japan Lee Joon-gyu and Foreign Minister Kishida Fumio meet at Japan's Foreign Ministry.

**July 19, 2016:** North Korea fires three ballistic missiles off its eastern coast.

**July 20, 2016:** Genron NPO in Japan and East Asia Institute (EAI) in South Korea, release the results of their joint survey on Japan-Korea relations.

**July 21, 2016:** Japanese and South Korean joint coast guard conference on maritime security is held in Incheon, marking the first such conference since one held in 2012 in Tokyo.

**July 25, 2016:** Foreign Minister Kishida meets South Korean counterpart Yun Byung-se in Laos.

**July 25, 2016:** Former Chairman of the Minjoo Party of Korea Moon Jae-in visits Dokdo.

**July 27, 2016:** South Korea's National Research Institute of Maritime Cultural Heritage announces plans to construct the ships (in life-size) that the Joseon Tongsinsa used during the Joseon Dynasty for its goodwill missions to Japan.

**July 27, 2016:** Korea-Japan Parliamentarians' Union appoints its new head of the organization – Seo Chung-won, a member of the ruling Saenuri Party.

**July 28, 2016:** Foundation for Reconciliation and Healing holds its inauguration ceremony and first meeting of the board of directors at its secretariat in Seoul amidst protests.

**Aug. 2, 2016:** Japan's annual Defense White Paper is published and identifies North Korea as a key threat to Japan's national security.

**Aug. 3, 2016:** North Korea test-fires two ballistic missiles into the waters near Japan, sparking protest from Tokyo.

**Aug. 3, 2016:** Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzo appoints Inada Tomomi as defense minister.

**Aug. 4, 2016:** Kim Hong-kyun, South Korea's special representative for Korean Peninsula peace and security affairs, and Japan's Director General of the Asian and Oceanian Affairs Bureau Kanasugi Kenji hold talks over the phone to discuss North Korea's recent provocations.

**Aug. 4, 2016:** During a daily press briefing by the South Korean Ministry of National Defense (MND), spokesperson Moon Sang-kyun hints at the possibilities of South Korea sharing radar intelligence with Japan as provided by the scheduled deployment of the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system in South Korea.

**Aug. 9, 2016:** Director General of the Asian and Oceanian Affairs Bureau Kanasugi meets South Korea counterpart Chung Byung-won in Seoul to discuss "comfort women" accord of Dec. 2015.

**Aug. 12, 2016:** Foreign Minister Yun Byung-se holds a telephone conversation with Foreign Minister Kishida to exchange views on the implementation of the "comfort women" agreement.

**Aug. 13, 2016:** Demonstration/performance to protest the December agreement between Seoul and Tokyo on "comfort women" is held in Berlin, Germany.

**Aug. 15, 2016:** Prime Minister Abe sends a ritual donation to Yasukuni Shrine in lieu of a visit. Japan's newly-appointed Defense Minister Inada Tomomi travels to Djibouti on her first overseas trip in her post amidst earlier speculations that she would visit the shrine.

**Aug. 15 2016:** Group of South Korean lawmakers led by Saenuri Party Representative Na Kyung-won visits Dokdo.

**Aug. 24, 2016:** North Korea test fires a submarine-based ballistic missile from its eastern coast.

**Aug. 24, 2016:** Eighth trilateral China-Japan-South Korea Foreign Ministers Meeting is held in Tokyo. The three countries agree to cooperate in urging North Korea to refrain from further provocations, especially in response to its latest ballistic missile test.

**Aug. 24, 2016:** Japanese Prime Minister Abe's Cabinet approves the disbursement of ¥1 billion (\$9.6 million) to the Foundation for Reconciliation and Healing.

**Aug. 27, 2016:** Seventh trilateral China-Japan-South Korea Finance Ministers Meeting is held in Seoul.