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JAPAN-KOREA RELATIONS

THE NORTH KOREA FACTOR

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In the first four months of 2018, Japan's relationship with South Korea was influenced more than ever by North Korea as a thaw in inter-Korean relations created a new dynamic for Japan-Korea relations. The shift began with Kim Jong Un's expressed hope for improvement in Seoul-Pyongyang relations and inter-Korean talks in his 2018 New Year's speech. The PyeongChang Winter Olympics created significant momentum and the inter-Korean summit in late April put an exclamation mark on the dramatic turnaround. While Moon Jae-in's administration welcomed the initiative from the North with guarded optimism and facilitated the improvement in relations as the gracious host for both the Olympics and the summit, the Abe administration kept a skeptical and indeed critical stance toward North Korea's "charm offensive." However, Japan was forced to move away from its hardline policy in the face of inter-Korean bonhomie and when the US recognized the shift as an opportunity to move toward diplomacy with North Korea.

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North Korea emerges as a factor in South Korea-Japan relations

North Korea only recently became a factor in South Korea-Japan ties. Prompted by a shared concern about Pyongyang's provocations and its nuclear program, the two countries had closely cooperated on military and security matters in recent years. In the [previous year](#), ups and downs in relations were largely driven by their disagreement over the 2015 comfort women deal. The decision by the Moon administration to revisit the 2015 accord, concluding that it did not fully reflect a "[victim-oriented approach](#)" – a widely accepted norm of the international community for human rights of wartime women – created a diplomatic spat with the Abe administration, which maintained the position that the accord "finally" and "irreversibly" resolved the comfort women issue. While squabbling continued over history – not only comfort women, but also the Dokdo/Takeshima islets – continued in early 2018, it was less salient because Pyongyang's engagement with Seoul increased the urgency for close Seoul-Tokyo coordination on the North Korea issue.

Peace Olympics: 2018 PyeongChang Winter Olympics



[Olympism](#) – promoting peace through sports – was strong in the first four months of 2018. The 2018 PyeongChang Winter Olympics, hosted by South Korea from Feb. 9-25, was fraught with political and diplomatic implications for all countries in the region. Until the end of last year, Japan's Prime Minister Abe Shinzo had made clear his intention to [decline](#) to attend the opening ceremony, citing his objections to Seoul's recent revisiting of the 2015 comfort women accord. However, the remarkable diplomatic progress with North Korea in early 2018 led to Japan's request for talks on Jan. 24 with South Korea to arrange Abe's [attendance](#) at the ceremony; South Korea officially [welcomed](#) Abe's offer. The reversal was so sudden that on

Feb. 9, the opening day of the Olympics, Abe and President Moon held their third bilateral summit and shared their views on history, security, and diplomatic issues. Three factors led to the change in Abe's position on the opening ceremony of PyeongChang Olympics: domestic politics, the 2020 Tokyo Summer Olympics, and North Korea.

The *Hankyoreh* attributed Abe's attendance at the Olympics to [domestic politics](#). Abe viewed PyeongChang as the ideal venue to push the Moon administration to implement the 2015 comfort women accord and for Abe to regain his approval rating and momentum for constitutional reform. Indeed, the comfort women issue was a major point of contention during the Feb. 9 meeting. Moon urged Japan to look squarely at history and expressed his hopes for "[true friendship](#)" between the two countries. Abe [demanded](#) that South Korea faithfully implement the 2015 deal and asked for the removal of the comfort woman statue in front of the Japanese Embassy in Seoul. Moon responded that "the reason we decided that the comfort women issue has not been resolved is because the former comfort women and the Korean public have not accepted the content of the agreement that was reached by the previous administration."

Other analysts argued that Abe's decision was partly driven by a concern about the [2020 Tokyo Summer Olympics](#). A South Korean government official told the press that the Japanese government was conscious that cooperation with South Korea would be essential for successfully hosting the upcoming Olympics in Tokyo. However, domestic politics and diplomatic pragmatism did not really explain Abe's last-minute embrace of the PyeongChang Winter Olympics given that Abe was planning in late 2017 to [decline](#) South Korea's invitation.

Then, what changed within the one month? The recent thaw in inter-Korean relations seems to be the best explanation. Reversing an earlier position of no participation, Kim Jong Un's willingness to send a North Korean delegation to the 2018 Winter Olympics changed everything. It was welcome news to the Moon administration, which wanted to make the PyeongChang Winter Olympics a "[Peace Olympics](#)" and had made persistent [efforts](#) to invite North Korea to the Games. South Korea immediately welcomed the North's decision. It also changed Japan's calculus even though the

Abe administration remained critical and cautious toward the North.

The divergence of South Korean and Japanese views on North Korea's new diplomatic gesture was evident at "a Foreign Minister's Meeting on Security and Stability on the Korean Peninsula" that took place in Vancouver, Canada Jan. 15-16. There, South Korean Foreign Minister Kang Kyung-wha expressed guarded optimism that the Olympics could be a watershed event that might lead to détente on the Korean Peninsula. She proposed resuming humanitarian assistance to the North. Japanese Foreign Minister Kono Taro warned that the world should not be naive or blinded by North Korea's "charm offensive," and voiced opposition to South Korea's humanitarian aid proposal. Kono remarked, "I am aware that some people argue that because North Korea is engaging in inter-Korean dialogue, we should reward them by lifting up sanctions or by providing some sort of assistance.... Frankly I think this view is just too naive. I believe that North Korea wants to buy some time to continue their nuclear missile program." The US and the UK agreed.

Abe's decision to participate in the Olympics was initially driven by Japan's desire to nudge Seoul to be more cautious about the North's charm offensive and maintain a strong united front on the denuclearization of North Korea. During their bilateral summit on Feb. 9, Abe expressed Tokyo's concerns about Pyeongyang's "smile diplomacy" and explicitly called on South Korea to resume its annual joint military drills with the United States, which Seoul and Washington earlier agreed to postpone until after the PyeongChang Olympics to encourage North Korea's participation in the Games. However, President Moon rejected Prime Minister Abe's call to resume the joint military drills outright, telling Abe that the issue is a matter of South Korea's sovereignty, saying, "I understand what Prime Minister Abe said is not to delay South Korea-U.S. military drills until there is progress in the denuclearization of North Korea. But the issue is about our sovereignty and intervention in our domestic affairs."

To show how complex this diplomacy was, a Japanese government insider noted that Washington strongly urged Tokyo to consider having Abe attend the Olympics, citing the need to "warn Moon in person against breaking with the maximum pressure strategy spearheaded by the U.S. and Japan."



Diplomatic spat and sync: the 2018 inter-Korean summit

After the Olympics, the single most dramatic event in Northeast Asia was the April 27 North-South summit. In the run-up to the summit, South Korea and Japan worked most closely on diplomatic approaches to North Korea, despite different views on its overture toward the South. Dispelling Japan's concern that the thaw in inter-Korean relations could rupture Seoul and Tokyo's united front on North Korean nuclear issues, the two countries exchanged views and information on North Korea to ensure close policy coordination. For instance, on March 15, senior diplomats and defense officials from Japan and South Korea held the first joint diplomacy-defense talks in three years to discuss details of planned bilateral summits between Moon and Kim and between Moon and Trump. On March 17, Foreign Ministers Kono and Kang met in Washington to discuss the security situation on the Korean Peninsula and details related to the upcoming inter-Korean summit. The two ministers agreed to strengthen coordination. On March 21, the US, South Korea, and Japan held the Defense Trilateral Talks (DTT) in Washington.

Efforts by Seoul and Tokyo to synchronize policies were criticized by North Korean media in March. The *Korean Central News Agency* (KCNA) accused Japan of trying to undermine the recent improvement in the North's ties with South Korea and the US and said that "Now is time to reject cooperation with foreign forces," because it "leads to confrontation and war." *Rodong Sinmun*, the newspaper of the North Korean Workers' Party, slammed South Korea's security consultation meeting with Japan in March by describing it as "foul meetings to plot confrontation which run counter to the current reconciliatory mood for inter-Korean relations and improving the security situation of the Korean Peninsula." However, despite the risk of

provoking the displeasure of Pyongyang and spoiling the mood on the Korean Peninsula, Seoul and Tokyo continued to work closely. On March 30, Foreign Ministers Kang and Kono had an “in-depth” [phone conversation](#) on preparations for the inter-Korean summit and the North Korea nuclear issue. Kang reaffirmed South Korea’s commitment to peacefully resolving the North’s nuclear program and promised to closely cooperate with relevant partners on that matter. Kono called for close cooperation to make the planned inter-Korean summit a success.

In April, policy coordination efforts between Tokyo and Seoul further intensified through shuttle diplomacy, which reassured Japan and allowed South Korea to earn Tokyo’s support for the summit. On April 10-11, Foreign Minister Kono [traveled to](#) South Korea for the first time since he took office in August 2017. On April 23, South Korea’s top nuclear negotiator Lee Do-hoon met Japanese counterpart Kanasugi Kenji in Seoul. At the meeting, the [envoys](#) emphasized the importance of consultation and cooperation between relevant countries for the successful inter-Korean summit and denuclearization of North Korea.

To show how sensitive all parties are, an issue that engendered a diplomatic spat between South Korea and Japan was South Korea’s decision to offer a [dessert](#) featuring an image of Dokdo/Takeshima – disputed islets between Japan and Korea – at the inter-Korean summit. After Cheong Wa Dae disclosed details of the menu for the summit dinner, Japan’s Foreign Ministry’s Director General of Asian and Oceanian Affairs Kanasugi expressed regret and called on the South Korean government to drop the food from the menu. Ignoring Tokyo’s protest, the dessert was served at the dinner on April 27. After all, if there is one thing that North and South Korea can agree on, it is that Dokdo is Korean.



After the inter-Korean summit, Prime Minister Abe [said](#) that he welcomed the inter-Korean summit talks to build peace and denuclearize the Korean Peninsula and “takes them as positive moves.” He also praised the South Korean government’s efforts that led to the summit. However, Abe also strongly urged North Korea “to take concrete action” following the agreement and said that he “will keep watching North Korea.” Two days after the inter-Korean summit, Moon and Abe talked by telephone to discuss the results. Moon told Abe that he had relayed Tokyo’s hopes to normalize ties with Pyongyang and offered to [broker](#) a dialogue between North Korea and Japan. Abe expressed his gratitude to Moon for relaying Tokyo’s interest in meeting with Kim and for addressing the [abduction](#) of Japanese nationals by the North at the inter-Korean summit.

The months ahead

The next few months will likely be the most consequential and potentially transformative in decades for Northeast Asia. Depending on the success of the US-North Korea summit, which will be held in Singapore on June 12, relations in the region could move dramatically for the better, or rapidly return to the threats and name-calling of the past year. Four months ago, it would have been almost inconceivable to think that North Korea would have a voluntary moratorium on missile testing, be talking about dismantling its nuclear weapons program (whatever that means in practical terms), be discussing an end to the Korean War, and be discussing diplomacy with the United States. Given the rapid increase in diplomacy in the region, all countries and all leaders are scrambling to adjust to new possibilities. The North Korea factor will continue to drive the course of Seoul and Tokyo’s relations in the summer months of 2018. The critical factor will

be whether North Korea takes concrete actions toward denuclearization based on the inter-Korea agreement. If it does in any meaningful way, it will profoundly affect both South Korea and Japan's policy coordination toward North Korea and toward each other. If a North Korea-Japan bilateral summit is scheduled for 2018 as Abe is attempting to do, Seoul-Tokyo relations will be largely shaped by their close coordination on that summit. These are truly fascinating times, and ones that are, in some ways, unprecedented in recent history.

CHRONOLOGY OF JAPAN-KOREA RELATIONS

JANUARY – APRIL 2018

Jan. 2, 2018: South Korean Foreign Minister Kang Kyung-wha cites strained bilateral relations with Japan over comfort women issues as one of the diplomatic challenges confronting South Korea in her New Year speech.

Jan. 4, 2018: South Korean President Moon Jae-in holds a lunch meeting with eight former wartime sex slaves of the Japanese military at Cheong Wa Dae as an apparent demonstration of his objection to 2015 comfort women agreement. It followed Moon's visit to Kim Bok-dong, a 90-year-old former sex slave at a local hospital.

Jan. 4, 2018: Lee Do-hoon, special representative for Korean Peninsula peace and security affairs, talks by telephone with Japanese counterpart Kanasugi Kenji to share assessments of the security situation of the Korean Peninsula.

Jan. 5, 2018: Yonhap reports that Foreign Minister Kang has begun efforts to listen to views of former wartime sex slaves of Japan since the Foreign Ministry task force concluded that the 2015 comfort women deal had procedural problems and did not fully reflect opinions of the victims and civic groups.

Jan. 8, 2018: South Korean Foreign Ministry Director General for Northeast Asian Affairs Kim Yong-kil meets Director General for Asian and Oceanian Affairs Kanasugi to discuss bilateral issues.

Jan. 8, 2018: Choi Jong-ku, chairman of the Financial Services Commission (FSC), says South Korea seeks deeper cooperation with Japan and China in regulating cryptocurrencies.

Jan. 9, 2018: Foreign Minister Kang says South Korea will not seek renegotiation of the 2015 comfort women deal with Japan, but demands Japan's fresh “voluntary and heart-felt apology” to victims. In response, Foreign Minister Kono Taro says, “ It's totally unacceptable that South Korea demands Japan carry out more measures, even though the 2015 Japan-South Korea agreement confirmed a final and irreversible resolution.”

Jan. 10, 2018: In a nationally televised press conference, President Moon calls for Japan's sincere apology to resolve wartime sexual slavery issue.

Jan. 15-16, 2018: Foreign Ministers Kang and Kono attend “a Foreign Minister’s Meeting on Security and Stability on the Korean Peninsula” in Vancouver, Canada, where foreign ministers of 20 countries express support for inter-Korean talks and the importance of diplomatic efforts to resolve the North Korea’s nuclear issue.

Jan. 21, 2018: South Korea’s Finance Ministry levies a 56.3 percent preliminary anti-dumping duty on coated paper from Japan to protect its local industry.

Jan. 22, 2018: At the 196th session of the Diet, Foreign Minister Kono reaffirms Japan’s commitment to closely cooperating with South Korea on North Korea issue and building a future-oriented relationship. He stresses that the Japan-ROK agreement on the comfort women issue is “final and irreversible.” and reaffirms Tokyo’s position that Takeshima is an inherent part of the territory of Japan.

Jan. 23, 2018: Ambassador Lee Su-hoon says South Korea needs to take a long-term approach in dealing with sexual slavery issue with Japan. South Korean Foreign Ministry spokesperson says Seoul has yet to determine the fate of a fund worth ¥1 billion paid by Japan under the 2015 comfort women deal and will also consult with Japan about how to handle the fund.

Jan. 24, 2018: Japanese Embassy in Seoul officially requests Prime Minister [Abe's](#) attendance at the opening ceremony of PyeongChang Winter Olympics. Cheong Wa Dae [welcomes](#) Abe's offer to visit South Korea.

Jan. 25, 2018: [Nikkei](#) reports that Abe's decision to attend the opening ceremony of the PyeongChang winter Olympics was prompted by the US.

Jan. 25, 2018: South Korea strongly protests Japan's establishment of an [exhibition](#) hall intended to promote its claims to Dokdo/Takeshima.

Jan. 29, 2018: South Korean Defense Minister Song Young-moo suggests that the navies of South Korea, Japan, the US, China, and Russia hold a joint forum on peace and [maritime](#) order in Northeast Asia.

Feb. 1, 2018: Ferrotec Korea Corp., the local subsidiary of Japanese semiconductor parts firm Ferrotex, is referred to South Korean prosecutors over industrial [spying](#) allegations.

Feb. 6, 2018: Chief Cabinet Secretary Suga Yoshihide says South Korea's use of flag showing Dokdo/Takeshima islets during PyeongChang Winter Olympics is "extremely regrettable" and urges Seoul to take "appropriate measures." South Korea's Foreign Ministry reaffirms it will not use a unification [flag](#) showing Dokdo/Takeshima during the Olympics.

Feb. 8, 2018: South Korea's [export](#) of agricultural products and food increase in January, aided by a jump in shipments to Japan. A cheering squad of [Chongryon](#), a pro-North Korea organization in Japan, arrives in South Korea for the PyeongChang Winter Olympics.

Feb. 9, 2018: Prime Minister Abe makes his first visit to South Korea since President Moon took office. The two meet in Pyeongchang.

Feb. 10, 2018: Cheong Wa Dae official says President Moon [rejected](#) Prime Minister Abe's call to resume South Korea-US military drills.

Feb. 12, 2018: [Lawmakers](#) from South Korea and Japan discuss North Korea's Olympics charm offensive as the key topic at the second annual forum.

Feb. 14, 2018: Japan's Education Ministry posts new [textbook](#) guidelines with its renewed claim to Takeshima on Tokyo's e-government website for public view. South Korea voices strong [protest](#) against the textbook guidelines.

Feb. 18, 2018: South Korean man is detained for threatening to [blow up](#) the Japanese Embassy in Seoul after an NBC commentator's favorable remark about Japan's colonial rule of Korean Peninsula.

Feb. 20, 2018: Seoul Central District Court orders South Korean government to pay 7 million won in [compensation](#) to Kato Tatsuya, a former Seoul bureau chief of the [Sankei Shimbun](#), acquitted of defaming ex-President Park Geun-hye in a news article regarding the Sewol Ferry sinking in 2014.

Feb. 22, 2018: Japan's Shimane Prefecture holds annual event to promote its claim to Takeshima, which was designated "[Takeshima Day](#)" in 2005. South Korean Foreign Ministry lodges an official protest with Tokyo.

Feb. 22, 2018: South Korea's trade ministry says that it will [appeal](#) the World Trade Organization (WTO) ruling on import restrictions on Japanese seafood after the 2011 Fukushima nuclear disaster to safeguard public health and safety.

Feb. 26, 2018: During her keynote speech to the [United Nations Human Rights Council](#) in Geneva, Foreign Minister Kang says efforts to resolve the issue of Japan's sexual enslavement of Korean women during World War II "lacked a victim-centered approach."

Feb. 28, 2018: Japan allows [import](#) of processed poultry from South Korea following six years of negotiations.

March 1, 2018: In a speech marking the anniversary of the March 1 Movement, President Moon strongly urges Japan to sincerely reflect on past wrongdoings and says that Japan has [no right](#) to claim that the sex slave issue is settled.

March 8, 2018: South Korean businesses in Japan forecast [increased](#) sales in 2018 due to Japan's economic recovery, according to Korean International Trade Association (KITA).

March 12, 2018: Suh Hoon, special envoy of President Moon, [visits](#) Japan to meet Prime Minister Abe and Foreign Minister Kono to explain the outcome of his two-day visit to North Korea, where he held talks and dinner with leader Kim Jong-un. During a meeting with Suh, Kono voices his “respect” for South Korea’s diplomatic efforts to bring North Korea back to negotiations and describes the situation as a “[moment right before the miracle.](#)”

March 15, 2018: Japan and South Korea hold a [joint meeting](#) of senior diplomats and defense officials, the so called “two-plus-two” meeting, to discuss policy cooperation for the first time in three years.

March 16, 2018: Prime Minister Abe and President Moon hold a phone conversation. Moon stresses that inter-Korean ties can move forward when [Pyongyang-Tokyo ties](#) improve.

March 17, 2018: Foreign Ministers Kono and Kang [meet](#) in Washington to discuss the latest security situation on the Korean Peninsula and details related to the inter-Korean summit. They agree to [strengthen](#) coordination on North Korea.

March 17, 2018: Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) accuses Japan of trying to [undermine](#) the recent improvement in North Korean relations with South Korea and the US.

March 19, 2018: Cheong Wa Dae tells reporters that the national security advisers of South Korea, Japan, and the US had an [unannounced meeting](#) in San Francisco to discuss ways for “complete denuclearization” of Korea.

March 21, 2018: US, South Korea, and Japan hold [Defense Trilateral Talks](#) (DTT) in Washington.

March 23, 2018: South Korea, Japan, and China hold trade talks in Seoul.

March 23, 2018: South Korea, Japan, and the US agree to maintain close cooperation against North Korea’s [illegal maritime activity](#), including illicit shipment, which is prohibited under UN Security Council resolutions.

March 26, 2018: Rodong Sinmun [slams](#) South Korea’s security consultation meeting with Japan in March by describing it as “foul meetings to plot confrontation which run counter to the current reconciliatory mood for inter-Korean relations and improving the security situation of the Korean Peninsula.”

March 30, 2018: Foreign Ministers Kang and Kono have a [phone](#) discussion on inter-Korean summit, North Korea nuclear issue, and bilateral relations. Seoul strongly [condemns](#) Tokyo’s endorsement of new textbook guideline with its sovereignty claim over Dokdo/Takeshima.

April 1, 2018: KCNA [criticizes](#) South Korea’s defense cooperation with Japan and the US saying that “Now is the time to reject cooperation with foreign forces,” because it “leads to confrontation and war.”

April 5, 2018: Yonhap reports that Japan and South Korea will decide the fate of their protracted negotiations for a [bilateral fisheries agreement](#) by the end of April.

April 9, 2018: Oh Tai-kyu, South Korea’s new consul general in Osaka, vows to narrow [differences in perceptions](#) among Koreans and Japanese over Japan’s wartime sexual slavery of Korean women. South Korea’s trade ministry says that it has filed an [appeal](#) against a ruling by the WTO on its import restrictions on Japanese seafood.

April 10-11, 2018: Foreign Minister Kono [visits](#) South Korea and [meets](#) President Moon and Foreign Minister Kang. Moon says “[close communication and cooperation](#) between South Korea and Japan are more important than ever.”

April 13, 2018: Coalition of South Korean civic groups vows to [erect a statue](#) for forced labor victims near Japanese consulate in Busan.

April 20, 2018: South Korea protests a group of 76 high-level Japanese officials’ visit to [Yasukuni Shrine](#). The group includes State Minister for Foreign Affairs Sato Masahisa and Okuno Shinsuke, state minister for internal affairs and communications.

April 21, 2018: South Korea voices deep concerns over Prime Minister Abe’s sending of [offering](#) to the Yasukuni Shrine.

April 23, 2018: Top nuclear envoys of South Korea and Japan meet in Seoul to discuss cooperation on North Korea and its nuclear issues.

April 24, 2018: In a telephone conversation with President Moon, Prime Minister Abe expresses hope to meet North Korean leader Kim Jong Un after inter-Korean summit.

April 25, 2018: Japan protests South Korea's plan to offer a dessert featuring "Dokdo" at the upcoming inter-Korean summit.

April 27, 2018: Prime Minister Abe welcomes inter-Korean summit agreements to build peace and denuclearize the Korean Peninsula, but also strongly urges North Korea "to take concrete action" following the agreement.

April 29, 2018: President Moon and Prime Minister Abe hold telephone talks to discuss the result of the inter-Korean summit.

