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JAPAN-KOREA RELATIONS

BACK TO NORMAL BUSINESS

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Korea-Japan relations returned to normal over the summer months as Pyongyang-Tokyo relations remained at a standstill and Seoul-Tokyo relations followed the [dual track approach](#). For both Pyongyang and Seoul, the primary demand is for Japan to offer an acceptable apology and compensation for Japan's actions during its colonial rule of the Korean Peninsula. Pyongyang demanded atonement for Japan "war crimes" as the basic condition for the resumption of dialogue between the two countries. Seoul [urged](#) Japan to sincerely apologize to Korean women forced into wartime sexual slavery, saying that the issue cannot be resolved diplomatically. Other sources of contention for North Korea-Japan relations are Japan's support for UN sanctions against the DPRK and Pyongyang's unwillingness to account for past abductions of Japanese citizens. In the case of South Korea-Japan relations, the disputes over [Dokdo/Takeshima](#) and biased [history textbooks](#) lingered, although both sides made efforts to strengthen economic, security, and cultural ties despite those issues.

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Standstill: Pyongyang–Tokyo relations

At the end of April, there was increasing optimism that North Korea and Japan might pursue diplomatic normalization in the final months of 2018. At the historic North–South Korea summit on April 27, North Korean leader Kim Jong Un expressed his willingness to hold [talks](#) with Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzo, and Abe expressed interest in holding a summit with Kim. However, the atmosphere of reconciliation between Pyongyang and Tokyo lasted less than a month as the two countries failed to narrow their positions on sanctions and pressure.

Although recognizing North Korea's recent expression of its commitment to denuclearization in outward statements as "significant progress," Japan retained the position that the international community should "firmly [maintain](#) economic sanctions and continue to apply maximum pressure on North Korea" until Pyongyang takes concrete actions with regard to denuclearization. On May 8, calling Japan's continued support for sanctions and pressure against its regime as "throwing cold water over easing tensions on the Korean Peninsula," the *Rodong Sinmun*, North Korea's official newspaper, [denounced](#) Japan for "seeking to profit from the worsening security situations on the peninsula." On May 9, *Korea Central News Agency (KCNA)* leveled [criticism](#) at Japan's first joint exercise with the British Navy off Honshu for simulating a sea blockade against North Korea while "peace-loving North Korea" was making proactive and positive efforts for its expected summit with the United States. Given the tension, despite the Japanese government's continued push for [high-level](#) talks between the two countries on the sidelines of the ASEAN Regional Forum in August, North Korea provided only a lukewarm response.

Continued disagreement over North Korea's abduction of Japanese citizens in the 1970s and 1980s further strained bilateral relations. Japan noted that Tokyo is considering Prime Minister Abe's visit to Pyongyang for a summit with Kim as an option, but with a minimum condition of including Japan in the reinvestigation of the [abduction](#) of Japanese by North Korean agents. Optimism about the possible diplomatic thaw was short lived, however. During the June 12 Trump–Kim summit, Kim made no reference to the abduction issue, indicating there had been

no changes to North Korea's official position that the abduction issue had been [settled](#).



Figure 1 Parents of Megumi Yokota shows pictures of their daughter who was abducted to North Korean in 1977. The pictures were brought back by Japanese delegates from North Korea after a fact-finding mission in November 2004. Photo: AFP

While Tokyo sets the abduction issue as a minimum condition for the resumption of dialogue, Pyongyang appears to expect a Japanese apology and compensation for war crimes during its colonial rule of the Korean Peninsula from 1910–45 as its minimum. On Aug. 23, urging Japan to realize that it can never move into the future with its "[crime-woven past](#)" unaddressed, a spokesman for the North's Korea Asia-Pacific Peace Committee issued a statement saying that "[w]hat is all the more intolerable is that the Abe group is adding new crimes to the piles of the hideous past crimes, far from atoning for them. While keeping mum about the hideous crime that took the lives of millions of the Koreans, they are hyping the issue of a few abductees."

Dual-track approach: Seoul–Tokyo relations

In our April article, we anticipated that the [North Korea factor](#) would continue to influence Seoul–Tokyo relations greatly in the summer months, especially if the North were to take concrete actions toward denuclearization based on the inter-Korea agreement. However, as the North Korea issue progressed slowly, the ups-and-downs of Seoul–Tokyo relations were largely shaped by a [dual-track approach](#). Historical issues, especially, the issue of Japan's [wartime forced labor](#) and [sexual enslavement](#) of Koreans and sovereignty claims to [Dokdo/Takeshima](#) remained sources of discord in bilateral relations. For instance on July 24, aptly reflecting the Moon administration's decision to overturn the 2015 comfort women agreement between the two countries, Seoul

approved a budget to [replace](#) a ¥1 billion yen (\$9 million) fund the Japanese government paid to settle the diplomatic row over Japan's wartime sexual enslavement of Korean women. Despite these tensions, Seoul and Tokyo strove to strengthen economic, security, and cultural ties.



Figure 2 On the 73rd anniversary of Korea's liberation from Japan's colonial rule (Aug. 15, 2018), about 700 South Korean citizens join a weekly rally in Seoul against Japan's wartime sex slavery. Photo: Yonhap

South Korea and Japan promoted economic cooperation through both bilateral and trilateral channels. In May, on the sidelines of the ASEAN Plus Three finance ministers and central bank governors meeting in Manila, Bank of Korea (BOK) Gov. Lee Ju-yeol expressed South Korea's desire for reviving a currency swap deal with Japan, which had been suspended over a diplomatic row last year. Tokyo had broken off negotiations citing Seoul's decision to let a "comfort women" statue be installed near the Japanese consulate in Busan. Also, in May, finance chiefs of the governments in Seoul, Beijing and Tokyo produced a trilateral joint statement warning against growing [protectionism](#) trends, and Prime Minister Abe and President Moon agreed to cooperate on promoting a [trilateral free trade pact](#) for mutual economic growth.

In an effort to address Japan's fear of being "[sidelined](#)" in the discussion of denuclearizing North Korea and enhancing peace and stability in the region, President Moon vowed to help Japan [improve](#) ties with North Korea, and Foreign Minister Kang Kyung-hwa confirmed Seoul's commitment to close policy coordination with Tokyo and Washington for complete, verifiable, irreversible dismantlement ([CVID](#)) of the North's nuclear program. The Japanese government stressed the importance of closer cooperation with South Korea and the US over the North's denuclearization at a United Nations-sponsored Conference on Disarmament on June 26. However, Japan's

involvement in the denuclearization talks remained [limited](#) due to North Korea's strong expression of discontent about Japan's intervention in the issue, noting that Tokyo is not a signatory to the Panmunjom Declaration between the two Koreas nor the North's summit agreement with the US.



Figure 3 The US-North Korea summit on June 12, 2018 in Singapore. Photo: Yonhap

Turning to culture, South Korea and Japan relations were, as usual, complex. People-to-people exchanges expanded, but negative feelings dominated public sentiment toward the other country. Data released by the Korea Tourism Organization (KTO) indicated that the number of [tourist](#) visits between the two countries was much [higher](#) than in 2017. However, a June 2018 [poll](#) by the Asan Institute for Policy Studies, a Seoul-based think tank, showed the level of South Korean's favorable feelings toward Japan to be 3.55 on a scale of 0 to 10, lower than sentiment toward the US (5.97), North Korea (4.71), and even China (4.16). Also, a joint survey conducted by the South Korean private think tank East Asia Institute and Japanese think tank Genron NPO, between May and June, showed that for the first time since 2013, the ratio of Japanese having friendly feelings toward South Korea (22.9 percent) [dropped](#) lower than that of South Koreans toward Japan (28 percent). As part of efforts to address unfavorable public sentiment between the two countries, Seoul and Tokyo bolstered cultural exchanges. For instance, on Aug. 24, the Busan municipal government re-enacted an historic parade of Korea's cultural missions to Japanese southwestern port city of [Shimonoseki](#). On Aug. 29, the culture ministers from South Korea, Japan, and China held their three-day annual meeting in Harbin to discuss ways to expand trilateral cultural exchanges and vowed to cooperate on developing the common brand of the [East Asian Culture City](#).

The months ahead

Unless the two Koreas and Japan can find a mutually satisfactory way to get beyond past grievances, Japan's relations with the North will remain at a standstill and will be shaped by the dual-track approach with the South. Initially, President Moon vowed to help Japan improve its ties with North Korea, but now that Pyongyang has demanded Tokyo's atonement and compensation for past war crimes as basic conditions for the resumption of dialogue, Moon will have to rethink his strategy. As a [middle power](#), South Korea's ideal strategy is to leverage networks and play the [mediator](#) role, but often that strategy is obstructed by Korea's nationalist anti-Japan identity. Is it possible to form a united Korean front on the history issue to demand a sincere apology and compensation from Japan? Or, will Seoul's commitment to close policy coordination with Tokyo and Washington for complete, verifiable, irreversible dismantlement of the North's nuclear program create discord between the two Koreas? It is hard to predict the trajectories of Pyongyang-Tokyo and Seoul-Tokyo relations, but we can be sure that the trajectories are closely intertwined.

CHRONOLOGY OF JAPAN-KOREA RELATIONS

MAY – AUGUST 2018

May 1, 2018: South Korean police and activists [clash](#) over installation of a statue symbolizing forced labor victims under Japan’s colonial rule near Japanese consulate in Busan.

May 2, 2018: South Korean Vice Foreign Minister Cho Hyun prods Japan to stick to its pledge to [atone](#) for wartime forced labor.

May 4, 2018: Finance chiefs of South Korea, Japan, and China release a joint statement warning against growing [protectionism](#) and stressing the importance of promoting an open and rule-based trade framework after their meeting in Manila.

May 6, 2018: Bank of Korea’s chief says South Korea will push to resume talks with Japan for [currency swap](#) deal, which broke off in January 2017 due to the comfort women issue.

May 8, 2018: President Moon Jae-in vows to help Japan [improve](#) its ties with North Korea and urges Tokyo and Pyongyang to start a dialogue for diplomatic normalization.

May 9, 2018: South Korea, Japan, and China hold the seventh [trilateral](#) summit. The leaders vow [joint](#) efforts to denuclearize North Korea and agree to cooperate on promoting a [trilateral free trade pact](#) for mutual economic growth.

May 9, 2018: President Moon and Prime Minister Abe Shinzo meet on the sidelines of the South Korea, Japan, and China trilateral summit and express hope for [improved](#) ties between the two countries. South Korean minister of trade, industry and energy and Japanese counterpart discuss ways to expand [cooperation](#) in energy and autonomous cars.

May 11, 2018: Prime Minister Abe says that he could [talk](#) with Kim Jong Un if it leads to resolution of abductions of Japanese citizens by North Korea.

May 15, 2018: South Korean government [denounces](#) Japanese government’s claim to Dokdo/Takeshima and the “[East Sea](#)” name denial in its annual Diplomatic Bluebook.

May 16, 2018: Office of Prime Minister Lee Nak-
yon [denies](#) *Yomiuri* report that Lee said that the Six-Party Talks “should discuss economic aid to the communist nation if Pyongyang agrees to denuclearization.”

May 17, 2018: Minister of Gender Equality and Family Chung Hyun-back says Seoul plans to open a [research institute](#) in August to commemorate comfort women.

May 30, 2018: Top [military](#) officials of South Korea, Japan, and the US hold talks over joint efforts to ensure regional peace and stability in Hawaii. Japan [pushes](#) for high-level talks with North Korea in August, according to *Kyodo News*.

May 31, 2018: Statue symbolizing Korean forced laborers under Japan’s colonial rule is [removed](#) from a pedestrian road near the Japanese Consulate in Busan amid a strong clash between police and activists.

June 5, 2018: Prime Minister Lee says the [removal](#) of a statue symbolizing forced labor under Japan’s colonial rule, from a site near the Japanese Consulate in Busan, took place because activists did not get permission for the installation.

June 9, 2018: Hideki Yano, secretary general of the Society Connecting the Colonization History Museum to Japan, a Japanese [civic](#) group, visits Seoul to deliver the group’s donation of \$93,000 to the Seoul-based Center for Historical Truth and Justice. Yano urges Tokyo to [compensate](#) colonial-era victims in North Korea.

June 12, 2018: US Secretary State Mike Pompeo talks by [phone](#) with South Korean Foreign Minister Kang and Japanese Foreign Minister Kono on the outcome of the US-North Korea summit in Singapore.

June 13–14, 2018: Foreign Minister Kono visits South Korea and meets ROK counterpart Kang and US counterpart Pompeo. They [share](#) the view that it is important to convert the outcomes of the US-DPRK summit into “concrete actions by North Korea” and confirm their [commitment](#) to future policy [coordination](#).

June 14, 2018: Japanese media [reports](#) that North Korean leader Kim Jong Un gave a positive response to a summit with Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo and that Japan is considering an Abe visit to Pyongyang.

June 18, 2018: Joint survey by South Korea’s East Asia Institute and Japan’s Genron NPO shows South Koreans are more [optimistic](#) than Japanese about North Korea’s denuclearization. On Seoul-Tokyo relations, for the first time since 2013, the ratio of Japanese having friendly feelings toward South Korea was lower than that of South Koreans toward them.

June 18, 2018: South Korean Ministry of National Defense dismisses Japan’s call for halt to “[Dokdo defense drill](#).”

June 27, 2018: North Korea warns Japan [not to intervene](#) in the Korean denuclearization issue, saying that Tokyo is not a signatory to the Panmunjom Declaration between the two Koreas nor the North’s summit agreement with the US.

June 28, 2018: Japan’s Ambassador to South Korea Nagamine Yusumasa participates in Jeju forum and urges North Korea to implement complete, verifiable, irreversible dismantlement (CVID) of its nuclear program and address the abduction issue. He also conveys Japan’s desire for a bilateral summit with North Korea.

July 5, 2018: A June 2018 [poll](#) by Asan Institute for Policy Studies is released that shows South Korea’s favorable feelings toward Japan stood at 3.55 on a scale of 0 to 10.

July 8, 2018: Foreign Ministers Kang and Kono hold [bilateral](#) meeting in Tokyo. They also meet Secretary of State [Pompeo](#) in Tokyo to discuss Pompeo’s first visit to North Korea. They [reaffirm](#) their shared goal of complete, verifiable, irreversible denuclearization of North Korea.

July 17, 2018: South Korea’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs calls in Maruyama Kohei, minister at the Japanese Embassy in Seoul, to deliver a formal protest message on Japanese government’s [amendment](#) to the teacher’s guide for use at high school that projects Japan’s territorial claim on Dokdo/Takeshima.

July 19, 2018: South Korean civic group, the Korean Council for Reconciliation and Cooperation (KCRC), signs agreement with North Korea “to work together in bringing home from Japan the remains of those [victims](#) of forced labor” during its three-day visit to the North.

July 20, 2018: South Korean government provides Japan with \$1 million in [flood](#) aid.

July 22, 2018: Civic groups from South and North Korea form a committee to bring the [remains](#) of Koreans forced to do hard labor in Japan during the 1910–45 colonial era. The two sides agree to seek support from the international community, including Japan.

July 24, 2018: South Korean government approves a budget to [replace](#) a ¥1 billion (\$9 million) fund the Japanese government paid to settle the diplomatic row over Japan’s wartime sexual enslavement of Korean women.

July 25, 2018: The number of Japanese tourists to South Korea [surges](#) 40.2 percent comparing to last year, according to the Korea Tourism Organization.

July 27, 2018: Cyber experts from South Korea, Japan, and the US hold trilateral meeting in Washington and agree to continue cooperation on issues affecting [cybersecurity](#).

July 30, 2018: South Korean civic group says that it will push for the return of 35 sets of [remains](#) of forced labor victims from Japan in August.

Aug. 2, 2018: South Korea and Japan foreign ministers meet on sidelines of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF).

Aug. 3, 2018: Japan ranks as the top choice for young South Koreans wanting to [travel](#) on short notice. According to *Yonhap*, in the first five months of 2018, 3.41 million Koreans visited Japan, outpacing 3.3 million Chinese visitors.

Aug. 5, 2018: South Korean heads of three major parties seek to visit Japan in September and meet with ruling and opposition lawmakers, and government officials in Tokyo as part of their [bipartisan](#) effort to foster a lasting peace on the peninsula.

Aug. 9, 2018: South Korea [launches](#) a research center to compile and commission research on the history of the Imperial Japanese Army's wartime sexual enslavement of Korean women, according to the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family.

Aug. 14, 2018: At a ceremony marking the designation of a new national day for [comfort women](#), President Moon says that “the issue of comfort women for the Japanese military can truly be resolved when the victims’ dignity and honor are restored and their broken hearts are healed.” He adds that “I hope this issue will not lead to a diplomatic dispute between South Korea and Japan. I do not even believe it is an issue that can be resolved through a diplomatic solution.”

Aug. 15, 2018: South Korean government expresses deep regret over Japanese Prime Minister Abe's sending of a ritual offering to [Yasukuni](#) war shrine.

Aug. 16, 2018: South Korea and Japan fail to renew [fisheries](#) agreement over differences on fishing quotas, but fishermen from the two countries continue talks over operations in a joint fishing zone.

Aug. 23, 2018: North Korea [stresses](#) the need for Japan's apology and compensation before resuming dialogue.

Aug. 24, 2018: As a part of South Korea–Japan [cultural](#) exchange effort, the Busan municipal government re-enacts historic parade of Korea's cultural missions to Japan's southwestern port city of Shimonoseki.

Aug. 28, 2018: Japanese government renews its claim to [Dokdo/Takeshima](#) in 2018 Defense White Paper for the 14th consecutive year.

Aug. 29, 2018: Culture ministers from South Korea, Japan, and China meet for three-day annual meeting in Harbin to discuss ways to expand trilateral cultural exchanges and cooperation. The officials vow for cooperation on developing the common brand of the [East Asian Culture City](#).

