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JAPAN-KOREA RELATIONS

RUNNING ON RIVALRY: PRESIDENTIAL HOPEFULS CAPITALIZE ON DISPUTES

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With South Korean presidential election scheduled for May 9, the early months of 2017 witnessed not only avid campaigning by candidates, but also a deepening diplomatic conflict between Seoul and Tokyo. In particular, the installation of a “comfort woman” statue facing the Consulate General of Japan in Busan last December perturbed bilateral relations, calling into question the landmark “comfort women” agreement. While the anticipated installations of additional statues by provincial and civic actors risked escalating tensions further, the presidential candidates have made nominal efforts to quell the concerns of Japanese diplomats. As the Blue House prepares to greet its new occupant, prospects for a significant turnaround in bilateral relations remain uncertain.

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With South Korean presidential election scheduled for May 9, the early months of 2017 witnessed not only avid campaigning by candidates, but also a deepening diplomatic conflict between Seoul and Tokyo. In particular, the installation of a “comfort woman” statue facing the Consulate General of Japan in Busan last December perturbed bilateral relations, calling into question the landmark “comfort women” agreement. While the anticipated installations of additional statues by provincial and civic actors risked escalating tensions further, the presidential candidates have made nominal efforts to quell the concerns of Japanese diplomats. As the Blue House prepares to greet its new occupant, prospects for a significant turnaround in bilateral relations remain uncertain.



The “comfort woman” statue in Busan (Feb. 21, 2017)

New year, old problems

The first four months of 2017 provided little scope for Seoul and Tokyo to entertain a fresh start. Diplomatic ramifications of the year-end installation of a “comfort woman” statue facing the Japanese Consulate General in Busan as well as a visit by Japanese lawmakers to the Yasukuni Shrine largely sidelined the two countries’ notable achievement in concluding the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) in November 2016.

Within the first 10 days of the new year, there was growing momentum among South Korean civic and provincial actors to install additional “comfort women” statues in major cities around the country and even on the disputed Dokdo/Takeshima islets. Notably, on Jan. 5, the Gyeonggi Province Council [announced](#) plans to install a “comfort woman” statue on one of the islets and another statue on the provincial council grounds by the end of this year. The

endeavor was projected to cost 70 million won (\$59,400), according to a [report](#) by *The Korea Times*.

In Japan, Chief Cabinet Secretary Suga Yoshihide [indicated](#) in his regular press briefings on Jan. 5 and 6 that installation of the statue was “extremely regrettable,” and that it was also in clear violation of the dignity of consular institutions as stipulated in the Vienna Convention on Consular Relations. In addition, Suga indirectly [signaled](#) Japan’s broader disappointment regarding South Korea’s inaction on installation of the Busan statue, given that the Japanese government understood the statue’s installation ran counter to the “comfort women” agreement concluded in December 2015, which was supposed to provide a “final and irreversible” resolution to the longstanding dispute. In particular, Seoul’s move to let the local government decide whether and when to remove the statue appeared insufficient to Tokyo.

As an interim response, the Japanese government introduced four key measures. First, the Japan’s consular staff in Busan was to halt participation in any event organized by the city of Busan. Second, Japanese Ambassador to South Korea Nagamine Yasumasa and Busan’s Consul General Morimoto Yasuhiro were to be recalled to Tokyo. Third, consultations and talks to renew the bilateral currency swap arrangement that had been maintained since 2001 but expired in February 2015 were to be suspended. Fourth, high-level economic dialogue between the two countries was to be postponed.

However, although Suga stated at the Jan. 6 press briefing that the Japanese government would urge South Korea to implement the terms of the “comfort women” agreement and remove the statue, ambiguity ensued when Suga was pressed by reporters on whether these measures would be in place until the statue is removed, and whether the measures might have a negative impact on relations between Tokyo and Seoul. As observers would learn, the measures failed to achieve their objective – removal of the statue. In particular, the recall of the Japanese ambassador and consul general – which was rendered official on Jan. 9 – was reversed on April 5 without having achieved any observable progress toward removal of the statue.

On the eve of the two Japanese envoys' return to Seoul, *Asahi Shimbun* was prompted to question the purpose and effectiveness of the recall in its [editorial](#). It argued that the recall had incurred deep costs for Japan, as the absence of key envoys in South Korea meant that the government could not “make effective efforts to build ties with top campaign officials for the leading presidential candidates,” a view that was purportedly endorsed by sources close to Japan’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The editorial also criticized the diplomatic recall as a “rash, short-sighted move” that delayed the Japanese government’s collection of much-needed information in preparation for dialogue with the incoming South Korean administration. Another key message of the editorial was to urge South Korean presidential candidates to “convince the public of the long-term importance of improving the bilateral relationship” and to refrain from “[using] anti-Japanese rhetoric to garner votes.” As usual, however, conditions on the ground were rather different.

Presidential hopefuls call for more hawkish measures

Election campaigns often foment hawkishness among candidates. In the run-up to South Korean presidential election, Japan emerged as a key target of hawkish statements advanced by the major-party candidates. For instance, regarding the “comfort women” agreement, the five main candidates – Ahn Cheol-soo (People’s Party), Hong Jun-pyo (Liberty Korea Party), Moon Jae-in (Democratic Party), Sim Sang-jung (Justice Party), and Yoo Seong-min (Bareun Party) – all said they would alter some, if not most, of the terms of the agreement. The two frontrunners – Moon Jae-in and Ahn Cheol-soo – more specifically indicated their intention to renegotiate the agreement.

A *Nikkei Asian Review* [article](#) characterized Moon Jae-in as a left-leaning liberal candidate who would “even meet with North Korean ruler [Kim Jong-un] before visiting the U.S.,” but “reserves his hawkish side for Japan.” On the “comfort women” agreement, Moon was understood to want Japan to issue an official apology and take further legal responsibility. In his [interview](#) with *The Korea Herald*, Moon explicitly indicated that “both the agreement and the negotiation process were wrong,” and that the agreement “must be renegotiated [in accordance with] the will of the majority of the public.”

Such hawkishness from the presidential candidate of the main opposition party was not surprising, however. As explored in a [previous](#) issue of *Comparative Connections*, murky circumstances involving former President Park Geun-hye’s confidante Choi Soon-sil undermined the credibility of the South Korean foreign policymaking process in the eyes of the opposition elite and the public more generally. This seemed to be the case not only for the “comfort women” issue, but also for the Dokdo/Takeshima dispute, and the conclusion of the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA).

A *Yomiuri Shimbun* article [characterized](#) the other frontrunner, Ahn Cheol-soo, as a candidate with “little connection with Japan” beyond having worked as a visiting researcher at Kyushu University’s School of Medicine for two months in 1990. The article highlighted his lack of contact with Japanese politicians, except for two meetings with Okada Katsuya, the former leader of the Democratic Party of Japan, in December 2013 and February 2017. In an [interview](#) with *The Korea Herald*, Ahn opined that the “comfort women” agreement should be “reconsidered.” Like Moon, Ahn affirmed that the Japanese government should admit its “liability” and provide a “sincere apology.” Unlike Moon, however, Ahn has adopted a somewhat more reconciliatory stance toward Japan beyond the “comfort women” agreement. As [reported](#) by the *Nikkei Asian Review*, Ahn endorsed a more forward-looking vision that dovetails with an outline proposed by former South Korean President Kim Dae-jung and former Japanese Prime Minister Obuchi Keizo in 1998. With the backdrop of the so-called “Fourth Industrial Revolution,” Ahn expressed interest directing bilateral cooperation toward dealing with trade imbalances, forming a joint response to US trade barriers, bolstering economic cooperation in relation to North Korea, and developing better industrial policies. Ahn has also been the first presidential candidate to affirm in explicit terms that he would “immediately start drawing up plans for working with Japan after taking office.”

Turbulent business as usual

As the presidential candidates engaged in heated exchanges, diplomats from both countries had the tough job of mitigating frictions that emanated from the installation of the “comfort woman” statue in Busan and the resurgence of

tensions regarding the disputed Dokdo/Takeshima islets. As mentioned, the Japanese government proposed a series of measures as an interim response to what it deemed a “regrettable” installation of the “comfort woman” statue in Busan. However, mitigation of the issue was rendered more complex as it became apparent that the issue would be embroiled in a series of tit-for-tat measures that cut across multiple policy areas, making prospects for settlement more uncertain.

The tit-for-tat began in January with the Gyeonggi Province Council’s [announcement](#) that it would install a “comfort woman” statue on one of the Dokdo/Takeshima islets and another statue on the provincial council grounds. Tokyo followed with its [complaint](#) against the Pyeongchang Olympics Committee for having referred to the disputed islets as “Dokdo” instead of “Takeshima” on the official website of the Games. The next day, Foreign Minister Kishida Fumio [evoked](#) claims of Japanese sovereignty over the islets during his New Year’s foreign policy address at the National Diet of Japan. Five days later, the Korean Sport and Olympic Committee [lodged](#) a complaint against the Japanese Olympic Committee and the organizers of the Sapporo Asian Winter Games for having assigned South Korean athletes to a hotel that provided books with “far-right tendencies” in its guest rooms.

North Korea’s launch of an intermediate-range ballistic missile on Feb. 12 provided a much-needed reason for Tokyo and Seoul to develop a more united front. On the sidelines of the G20 Foreign Ministers Meeting on Feb. 16-17 in Bonn, Germany, Japan, South Korea, and the United States [held](#) the first trilateral meeting since the inauguration of the Trump administration. They issued a joint statement condemning North Korea’s missile launch and its human rights abuses. This was followed by a bilateral [meeting](#) between Foreign Minister Kishida and South Korean Foreign Minister Yun Byung-se to discuss the “comfort woman” statue in Busan. Kishida reiterated the government’s deep concern regarding the installation, and called for its removal (though to no avail).

The celebration of “Takeshima Day” by Japan’s Shimane Prefecture on Feb. 22 irritated Seoul, leading to the release of a [statement](#) by the South Korean Foreign Ministry that called for

“an immediate halt to such moves.” Nonetheless, the end of February saw another high-level trilateral meeting among envoys from the three countries – Kanasugi Kenji, Kim Hong-kyun, and Joseph Yun – to discuss North Korea’s provocation and the assassination of the North Korean leader’s half-brother, Kim Jong Nam.

With North Korea’s launch of another round of missiles on March 6, there initially appeared to be hope for a unifying front between the two sides. Yet, beyond phone talks between the foreign ministers on the same day, opportunities to improve bilateral relations were minimal. Conversely, another round of tit-for-tat exchanges resulted from the Japanese government’s complaint over South Korea’s proposed plan to conduct drills near Dokdo, which was followed by the South Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs’ [condemnation](#) of Tokyo’s approval of high-school textbooks that portray Takeshima as Japanese territory. This was followed by another South Korean [condemnation](#) of Tokyo’s approval of courses of study for elementary and secondary schools that incorporate territorial claims over Dokdo/Takeshima.



Japanese ambassador to South Korea, Nagamine Yasumasa, returns to Seoul.

The reversal of the diplomatic recall provided a more promising start to April. On April 10, Ambassador Nagamine [met](#) South Korean Vice Foreign Minister Lim Sung-nam to discuss the “comfort women” issue and specifically the statue in Busan, even though material progress was not observed. Separately, the United States’ apparent resolve to launch a preemptive strike, and North Korea’s threats to reciprocate, led Tokyo and Seoul to form a united front in coordinating efforts to evacuate citizens should

military conflict take place. Notably, as *The Mainichi* [reported](#), the Japanese government has begun conducting studies on the evacuation of the 57,000 Japanese nationals who are short-term visitors or medium-to-long-term residents in South Korea, should either the United States or North Korea launch an attack.

The caveat, however, was that the Japanese ambassador failed to secure a meeting with Acting South Korean President Hwang Kyo-ahn. In fact, as *The Mainichi* [reported](#) on April 11, South Korea's defense and reunification ministers refused to approve a request by the Japanese government for such a meeting.

Subnational flashpoints

Beyond turbulence at the interstate level, the first months of 2017 featured a number of notable subnational flashpoints and, in certain cases, tentative resolutions. One such case relates to Sejong University professor Park Yu-ha, who published a polarizing book entitled *Comfort Women of the Empire* (2013). In it, she argued that certain comfort women had a "comrade-like relationship" with Japanese soldiers, and that not all of them were "sex slaves." Causing deep controversy, publication of this book led a group of former comfort women to file suit for defamation, which led the public prosecutor to request a three-year jail sentence for Park. On Jan. 25, the Seoul Eastern District Court [acquitted](#) Park, citing the argument that there remains "much room for debate on how the defendant is viewed."

Another notable subnational case pertains to the issue of wartime forced labor. Nachi-Fujikoshi Corp., a Japanese machinery maker headquartered in Toyama, was indicted for its forced recruitment of laborers during World War II. As *The Mainichi* [reported](#), a court order by the Seoul Central District Court on March 16 required Nachi-Fujikoshi Corp. to pay 100 million won (\$88,300) to Lee Chun Myon, a now-85-year-old South Korean woman, to compensate for hardships she experienced when working under hostile conditions at the firm's munitions factory in Japan. This case represents the latest in a series of court rulings in favor of plaintiffs. Japanese firms such as Mitsubishi Heavy Industries Ltd. and Nippon Steel & Sumitomo Metal Corp. were targeted in previous court cases.

A growing number of civic groups have been calling for the construction and installation of statues symbolizing WWII forced laborers. On April 28, a South Korean civic group [unveiled](#) plans to install such statues in front of the Japanese Embassy in Seoul and the Consulate General in Busan. This prompted a direct response from Japan's Chief Cabinet Secretary Suga, who warned that such moves would likely have an "undesirable" effect on bilateral relations, and urged the South Korean government to deal with the civic group's plans "appropriately." *Sankei Shimbun* [noted](#) (in Japanese) that if the installation did go ahead, it might result in another round of retaliatory measures to be implemented by the Japanese government, which could involve another recall of Ambassador Nagamine.

A higher note

One of the brighter spots in Japan-Korea relations emerged in the area of intercultural appreciation. *Yonhap* reported that the Japanese sci-fi anime *Kimi No Na Wa* ("Your Name") reached blockbuster status in South Korea. Within a month of its initial release, the film had become the most-viewed and highest-grossing Japanese animated film in recent history. Similarly, in an [interview](#) with *Dong-A Ilbo*, the First Lady of Japan Abe Akie highlighted her admiration for South Korean culture, and affirmed the importance of bilateral relations. In her words, "whatever may happen, South Korea would remain a very important country for Japan."

Prospects for the summer

As the presidential candidates run the final lap in the race for the Blue House, it is unclear whether campaign hawkishness will be replaced by a renewed sense of mission among leaders on both sides to rebuild bilateral relations from the troughs of early 2017. The most likely candidate to win the election, Moon Jae-in, subtly [extended](#) an olive branch to Tokyo by expressing his hope to meet Prime Minister Abe and Ambassador Nagamine by the end of 2017, if elected.



South Korea's presidential candidates at the latest TV debate (Ahn Young-joon/Reuters)

While the rapidly evolving security environment in Northeast Asia introduces greater uncertainty, and while a wide spectrum of policy issues ranging from GSOMIA to the “comfort women” agreement still requires proper resolution, come May 10, South Korea will at least again have its top executive. The summer months of 2017 should shed important light on the logic and trajectory of political developments between Seoul and Tokyo.

CHRONOLOGY OF JAPAN-KOREA RELATIONS

JANUARY – APRIL 2017

Jan. 5, 2017: Japan, South Korea, and the US [hold](#) the sixth vice foreign ministerial meeting in Washington DC. Japanese Vice Foreign Minister Sugiyama Shinsuke and South Korean First Vice Foreign Minister Lim Sung-nam meet bilaterally to discuss the US response to North Korea's provocations and the implementation of the "comfort women" agreement.

Jan. 5, 2017: Gyeonggi Province Council [announces](#) its plan to install a "comfort woman" statue on one of the Dokdo/Takeshima islets and another on the provincial council grounds by December this year. The Council expects to raise 70 million won (\$59,400) for this endeavor.

Jan. 6, 2017: Japan's Chief Cabinet Secretary Suga Yoshihide [indicates](#) during a regular press briefing that the installation of a "comfort woman" statue facing the Consulate General of Japan in Busan in December 2016 was in violation of the dignity of consular institutions as stipulated in the Vienna Convention on Consular Relations.

Jan. 9, 2017: Japanese Ambassador to South Korea Nagamine Yasumasa and Consul General to Busan Morimoto Yasuhiro are [recalled](#) to Tokyo in a move to signal the Japanese government's dissatisfaction with the installation of the "comfort woman" statue in Busan.

Jan. 19, 2017: The Japanese government [lodges](#) a complaint against the designation of "Takeshima" as "Dokdo" on the official website of the Pyeongchang Olympics.

Jan. 20, 2017: Japanese Foreign Minister Kishida Fumio [asserts](#) that "Takeshima is Japan's sovereign territory" in his New Year's foreign policy address at the National Diet of Japan.

Jan. 25, 2017: The Seoul Eastern District Court [acquits](#) Sejong University professor Park Yu-ha of defaming "comfort women." Park is the author of *Comfort Women of the Empire*.

Jan. 25, 2017: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan [issues](#) a statement calling for closer cooperation between Japan and South Korea, as well as trilateral partnership with the United States. The Ministry also urges South Korea to support a "steady implementation" of the "comfort women" agreement.

Jan. 25, 2017: Korean Sport and Olympic Committee [lodges](#) a formal complaint against the Japanese Olympic Committee and organizers of the Sapporo Asian Winter Games for assigning South Korean athletes to a hotel that provided books with "far-right tendencies" in its guest rooms.

Feb. 6, 2017: South Korean Foreign Minister Yun Byung-se [meets](#) a delegation from the Korean community in Japan. Head of the Korean Residents Union Oh Gong-tae states the delegation's concern over the "comfort woman" statue in Busan, and requests its relocation.

Feb. 12, 2017: North Korea [launches](#) an intermediate-range ballistic missile. Japanese Chief Cabinet Secretary Suga condemns the launch as a "clear provocation to Japan and the region," while South Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs issues a statement calling the launch an "explicit" violation of the relevant UN Security Council (UNSC) resolutions.

Feb. 12, 2017: Japan, South Korea, and the US jointly [call](#) for an emergency UNSC meeting to discuss North Korea's latest missile launch.

Feb. 13, 2017: Envoys from Japan, South Korea, and the US [hold](#) a video conference to discuss North Korea's latest provocation.

Feb. 14, 2017: South Korean government [summons](#) the Japanese embassy minister to lodge a complaint against Japan's Education Ministry for renewing claims to Dokdo/Takeshima in a draft version of its revised education guidelines for elementary and middle schools.

Feb. 16, 2017: First trilateral meeting among Japan, South Korea, and the US since the inauguration of the Trump administration is [held](#) on the sidelines of the G20 Foreign Ministers Meeting in Bonn. They issue a joint statement to condemn North Korea's launch of a ballistic missile and its human rights abuses.

Feb. 17, 2017: Foreign Minister Kishida Fumio [meets](#) Foreign Minister Yun Byung-se to discuss South Korean civic groups' installation of a "comfort woman" statue in Busan. Kishida expresses deep concern regarding the installation, and calls for its removal.

Feb. 22, 2017: Japan's Shimane prefecture [holds](#) the annual "Takeshima Day" to promote territorial claims over the disputed islets. The South Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs releases a [statement](#) that calls for "an immediate halt to such moves."

Feb. 27, 2017: Top envoys from Japan, South Korea, and the US [meet](#) in Washington DC to discuss North Korea's latest missile launch and Kim Jong Nam's assassination. They agree to work together in response to North Korea's provocations and the assassination.

Feb. 28, 2017: *Yonhap News Agency* [reports](#) that the US has informed Japan and South Korea about plans to review reinstatement of North Korea on the list of state sponsors of terrorism.

March 6, 2017: North Korea [launches](#) four ballistic missiles toward the East Sea (Sea of Japan). Three of them fall into Japan's exclusive economic zone, west of Akita Prefecture.

March 6, 2017: Foreign Minister Kishida and Foreign Minister Yun Byung-se [hold](#) phone talks regarding North Korea's ballistic missile launch earlier that morning. They agree to cooperate and curb North Korean provocations.

March 24, 2017: Japanese government [lodges](#) a complaint over South Korea's proposed plan to conduct military drills near Dokdo/Takeshima.

March 24, 2017: South Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs [condemns](#) Japanese government for approving high-school textbooks that portray Dokdo/Takeshima as Japanese territory. The Ministry demands "an immediate correction."

March 31, 2017: South Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs [condemns](#) Japanese government's approval of courses of study for elementary and secondary schools that incorporate territorial claims over Dokdo/Takeshima. The Ministry calls for an immediate withdrawal of such claims.

April 5, 2017: Ambassador to South Korea Nagamine Yasumasa and Consul General to Busan Morimoto Yasuhiro [return](#) to Seoul after having been recalled to Tokyo in January.

April 10, 2017: Ambassador Nagamine [meets](#) South Korean Vice Foreign Minister Lim Sung-nam to discuss the "comfort women" issue and the statue in Busan.

April 11, 2017: *The Mainichi* [reports](#) that South Korea's defense and unification ministries refused a request by the Japanese government for Ambassador Nagamine to meet Acting President Hwang Kyo-ahn.

April 14, 2017: First televised debate is [held](#) among South Korean presidential candidates.

April 21, 2017: Japanese government [announces](#) plans to conduct a study on the evacuation of Japanese nationals in South Korea in the event of a military conflict.

April 21, 2017: Around 95 Japanese lawmakers visit Yasukuni Shrine to mark the beginning of the annual Spring Festival. Prime Minister Abe dedicates a *masakaki* wooden offering, but does not visit in person. The visit and offering prompt South Korea's Ministry of Foreign Affairs to express "deep concern" in a [brief statement](#).

April 25, 2017: South Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs lodges a [complaint](#) against the Japanese government's "unjust sovereignty claims" over Dokdo/Takeshima in its 2017 diplomatic bluebook. The Ministry calls for an immediate withdrawal of such claims.

April 25, 2017: North Korea [conducts](#) a live-fire artillery drill in celebration of the 85th anniversary of the founding of its army.

April 25, 2017: Envoys from Japan, South Korea, and the US [hold](#) meet in Tokyo to discuss North Korea's recent provocations, and further collaboration among the three countries.

Apr. 28, 2017: A South Korean civic group [unveils](#) plans to install statues symbolizing World War II forced laborers in front of the Japanese Embassy in Seoul and the Consulate General in Busan. Japan's Chief Cabinet Secretary Suga Yoshihide reacts to the news by indicating that such moves will likely have an "undesirable" effect on bilateral relations.