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JAPAN-KOREA RELATIONS

THAWS AND TREMORS

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If relations between Japan and South Korea were defined by “[cold economics, cold politics](#)” through the summer of 2019 (as we described it in the September issue of *Comparative Connections*), South Korea-Japan ties at the end of 2019 had begun a tentative thaw. Tensions between the two countries have fallen in the waning months of 2019 from their peak in the summer, when Japan imposed export restrictions on South Korea and Seoul Korea indicated its intent to withdraw from the General Security of Military Information Sharing Agreement (GSOMIA). Following a comparatively quiet but tense period in September and October, both countries took de-escalatory steps starting in November—most notably South Korea’s conditional decision not to withdraw from GSOMIA after all—that improved the atmosphere and created space for diplomacy.

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Importantly, this progress came in a different strategic context from previous months, raising the possibility that both countries were influenced by a desire to maintain bilateral stability and predictability amid other challenges. Notably, the Trump administration's demand that the two allies [pay more](#) for US troops in South Korea and Japan introduced new destabilizing tremors for Seoul and Tokyo. In the meanwhile, amid stalled US-North Korea denuclearization talks, Pyongyang gave both Tokyo and Seoul the cold shoulder, while the whole region was bracing for North Korea's "Christmas gift" of missile threats.

The future remains uncertain. The steps that Japan and South Korea took at the end of 2019 did not resolve key substantive disagreements that had raised tensions in the first place. Japan-South Korea relations in the year 2020 will not be smooth sailing, as long as neither side budes in the ongoing dispute over the Korean forced labor compensation rulings.

Tremors in the Region—Cost-Sharing and North Korea

The regional environment surrounding Japan and South Korea—and the major constraints they faced—changed in the last months of 2019, especially from the perspective of their alliance management vis-à-vis the United States. For the most part, these shifts represented sources of greater uncertainty and heightened instability for both countries.

The first shift was the increasing volatility of both countries' military cost-sharing discussions with the United States, which have the potential to shake the foundations of the US alliance system in East Asia. South Korea is in the midst of negotiations with the US, and Japan will have to negotiate with Washington on an agreement expiring in 2021. As Secretary of Defense Mark Esper visited in Seoul in November, media reports suggested US negotiators were seeking almost \$5 billion per year more in Korean contributions. Esper [declared](#) that South Korea "is a wealthy country and could and should pay more to help offset the cost of defense." Around the same time, reports also circulated indicating Washington was requesting around five times more per year from Japan for the cost of US forces in Japan. The uncertainty was heightened by a continuing high-profile focus on the issue from US President Donald Trump, who [publicly claimed](#)

that the United States had been "the sucker country for years and years" and told a rally audience that he had asked Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzo, "how did you get away with it for so long?"

Judging from South Korea's approach to the 2018 renegotiations of the Korea-US Free Trade Agreement (KORUS FTA), the Moon Jae-in administration's desire for resuming momentum in dialogue between the United States and North Korea will likely incentivize South Korea to actively seek a viable solution for Trump's cost-sharing demands. However, if the mood of the US-North Korea dialogue becomes one that has no prospect of mending, the cost-sharing issue will put real strain on the US-ROK alliance.

While both countries were dealing with similar uncertainties in their alliance relationships with the United States, they also faced an increasingly challenging situation with North Korea. In September, Abe reiterated [his interest](#) in meeting with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un without preconditions. Abe's conciliatory gestures to Pyongyang included a visit by a Japanese [physicians group](#) to Pyongyang with a possibility of future medical aid, and a 60-person [Japanese delegation](#) led by Kanemaru Shingo, the second son of Kanemaru Shin, the late political heavyweight who endeavored to normalize Japan's diplomatic relations with North Korea in the 1990s. Kanemaru met with Song Il-ho, North Korean ambassador for negotiations to normalize relations with Tokyo, who said that Japan-North Korea relations had gotten worse.



Figure 1 A Japanese physicians lobby visits North Korea with a possibility of future medical aid. Photo: Kyodo

As North Korea imposed the end-of-year deadline for the US to make concessions on sanctions, its rhetoric grew more hostile. According to Kyodo News, Tokyo's concern

about North Korean missile threat was heightened by Japan's [failure to track](#) the trajectory of some of Pyongyang's new short-range missiles. That Japan-South Korea relations were experiencing tensions and disunity over GSOMIA at those moments did not help, either; North Korea appeared ready to heighten tensions itself, complicating an already difficult and unstable regional picture.

It is impossible to say whether these tremors shaped Korean and Japanese calculations about their bilateral relationship. But the fact that the thaw in Korea-Japan relations at the end of 2019 occurred in a regional environment more uncertain than the one in which bilateral tensions arose earlier in the year may be noteworthy for future analyses. That is, a sense of continued unpredictability and vulnerability vis-à-vis North Korea and the United States may make them act more prudently toward each other.

A Quiet Thaw

Although the furor over South Korea's August announcement that it would withdraw from GSOMIA had started to die down by September, the atmosphere between the two countries remained tense throughout the fall. In a Sept. 20 meeting of the Japanese and South Korean Foreign Ministry directors general for the Asian region, the Korean side [called](#) Japan's export restrictions "inappropriate" and "retaliatory." Quiet, pragmatic interactions between South Korea and Japan continued; South Korea's First Vice Foreign Minister Lee Tae-ho attended the Korea-Japan Festival in Seoul on Sept. 1 and met with a delegation from the Japan-Korea Cultural Foundation Sept. 17, and the Korean and Japanese special representatives for North Korea met bilaterally and trilaterally with US Special Representative Steven Biegun Sept. 24. The annual UN General Assembly consumed the later part of September, with Korean Foreign Minister Kang Kyung-hwa and Japanese Foreign Minister Motegi Toshimitsu meeting on the sidelines to reaffirm their countries' existing stances.

Through mid-November, diplomatic interactions between the two countries continued quietly. On Nov. 4, Japanese Prime Minister Abe and South Korean President Moon met briefly on the margins of the East Asia Summit. On Nov. 6, Korean Foreign Minister Kang's met with US Assistant Secretary of State

for East Asian and Pacific Affairs David Stilwell and Under Secretary of State for Economic Growth, Energy, and the Environment Keith Krach, and "explained the efforts of the [Republic of Korea] government to draw reasonable solutions through dialogue" in Seoul's relations with Tokyo, according to a Korean Foreign Ministry [press statement](#). Another meeting of the Korean and Japanese directors general unfolded Nov. 15, with little indication of progress but a professed commitment to continued dialogue.

Fall 2019, then, marked the first steps toward a quiet thaw; tensions persisted between Japan and South Korea, but both countries largely kept tensions more controlled in their public expression than in the summer and contained within diplomatic channels.

South Korea Stays In GSOMIA

In late November, the early fall's thaw would become bigger and more durable due to South Korea's decision to remain in GSOMIA.

Two separate streams of diplomacy in this period may have been influential in this decision and the subsequent warming of bilateral relations: first, US diplomatic efforts with South Korea and Japan following the August GSOMIA withdrawal announcement; and second, preparation for the China-Japan-Korea trilateral summit in December that both created an opportunity for Abe and Moon to meet bilaterally and increased the pressure for Japan and South Korea to make progress so that the three countries would be able to present positive optics of unity at the summit.

The United States engaged at high levels to press South Korea to stay in GSOMIA. Secretary of Defense Esper, visiting Seoul Nov. 15 as part of a dialogue with his Korean counterpart, [told reporters](#) that "the only ones who benefit from the expiration of GSOMIA and continued friction between Seoul and Tokyo are Pyongyang and Beijing." In a [background briefing](#) for press the same day, a senior State Department official indicated that he had stressed to Japanese counterparts that "recent [Democratic People's Republic of Korea, or North Korean] missile launches have highlighted the critical value of the ROK-Japan security cooperation and information sharing" and that "when tensions arise between Japan and ROK, the only winners are Pyongyang, Moscow, and Beijing." To

Korean counterparts, the official “stressed the importance of the GSOMIA to our collective security and urged ROK not to terminate this important information-sharing agreement” and that while the United States “will not mediate between our two key allies, I made clear that we will remain engaged and continue to urge the ROK and Japan to de-escalate tensions and find creative solutions to their differences.”

Whereas Washington views the GSOMIA between Seoul and Tokyo from the perspective of its Asia strategy—as a step toward tighter tripartite Seoul-Tokyo-Washington security cooperation—Seoul remains indecisive about taking such a step, approaching the issue through the lens of South Korea’s relations with Japan. Korean officials doubled down publicly. On Nov. 15, South Korean Minister of National Defense Jeong Kyeong-doo [stated](#) Seoul would withdraw from GSOMIA unless Japan abandoned its export restrictions on South Korea. “Our decision to terminate GSOMIA was inevitable,” a Moon spokesperson said.

On Nov. 21, the day before the deadline to extend GSOMIA, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo called Kang in a conversation which, according to the Korean statement, included an exchange of views on GSOMIA. Hours before the deadline the next day, South Korea announced it would “conditionally” suspend withdrawal from GSOMIA. The two countries also agreed to regular senior-level talks on Japan’s export restrictions and South Korea suspended its complaint against Japan in the World Trade Organization. Abe called the GSOMIA extension a “[strategic decision](#),” while a US Department of State [spokesperson](#) said the decision “sends a positive message that like-minded allies can work through bilateral disputes.”

Still, both countries quickly demonstrated that the substance of their positions had not changed and that the GSOMIA decision was not a resolution of the underlying issues. South Korean officials [emphasized](#) that GSOMIA could still “be terminated at any time.” “The current biggest and most fundamental issues is that concerning former laborers from the Korean Peninsula,” Motegi said, underscoring [the point](#) by saying that “We’d like to keep demanding that South Korea eliminate the situation that violates international law as soon as possible.” Public disagreements also persisted in the immediate aftermath of the GSOMIA decision, with the two countries butting heads over the

timing and content of statements characterizing their agreement.

The Big Thaw

In late November and early December, the atmosphere between Japan and South Korea started to improve more significantly. Meeting on the margins of the G-20 foreign ministers meeting in Nagoya Nov. 23, the countries’ foreign ministers [agreed](#) on a bilateral summit between Moon and Abe on the occasion of the China-Korea-Japan trilateral summit planned for late December. Preparations for that trilateral summit continued apace, with senior officials from the three countries meeting on Dec. 13. The foreign ministers had a brief “[pull-aside](#)” meeting on the sidelines of the ASEM (Asia-Europe Meeting) Foreign Ministers’ Meeting in which foreign ministers Kang and Motegi “welcomed the export control policy dialogue” between the two countries and agreed to “continue to make coordinated efforts” toward a summit with Prime Minister Abe and President Moon. The first of the high-level meetings on Japan’s export restrictions began Dec. 16 in Tokyo, and on Dec. 20 Japan granted a permit allowing for the export of a key chemical to South Korea over the next three years—a move that fell short of South Korea’s demand for full lifting of export restrictions but appeared to represent a first positive gesture as the dialogue moved forward.



Figure 2 President Moon Jae-in and Prime Minister Shinzo Abe meet on the sidelines of the 8th Korea-Japan-China Summit in Chengdu. Photo: Ministry of Foreign Affairs Republic of Korea

These steps created the space for the trilateral summit in Chengdu, China Dec. 24 and a bilateral summit between Abe and Moon, which helped signal the shift to a more positive atmosphere. The foreign ministers also met on that occasion. Although the two sides continued to assert their existing positions and put the

onus on the other to resolve the major issues in contention, both emphasized the importance of dialogue and maintained a largely constructive tone.

Economic Ties That Bind

Although Japan-South Korea relations went downhill in 2019, to a point where the two countries used economic interdependence as political leverage against the other, it is arguable that the thaw of the last months of the year was made possible by the degree to which their economies are intertwined.

South Korean tech companies such as Samsung Electronics rely on Japan's exports of three key restricted industrial materials—photoresists, hydrogen fluoride, and fluorinated polyimide. With Japan's removal of South Korea from its white list, Japan's approval for Korean exports of important materials in 1,735 categories could take 15 days, as opposed to 5 days previously. South Korea, in return, removed Japan from its list of preferential trade partners, while taking the dispute to the World Trade Organization (WTO).

According to *The Japan Times*, South Korean consumers' boycotts of Japanese goods have significantly reduced Japanese companies' sales. For example, exports of Japanese beer to South Korea [fell to zero](#) in October, compared to last October's \$7.3 million, making South Korea the Japanese beer industry's biggest overseas market in 2018. In November, Japan's automotive exports fell 88.5% to 1.56 billion yen, while the number of [Korean tourists](#) to Japan experienced a 65% drop to 205,000 compared to last November.

Businesses from the two countries called for the improvement of relations. About 300 representatives from Japan and South Korea—including Samsung, Sumitomo, Posco, Toyota, and Korean Air—held their annual conference in Seoul, calling for the restoration of diplomatic and economic relations. Sasaki Mikio, the Japan-Korea Economic Association Chair, [argued](#) that Korean consumers' informal boycott of Japanese products hurt not just Japanese but Korean companies and their employees. Kim Yoon, the Korea-Japan Economic Association chairman, said, "businesses does not look into the past but to the future, and reality over ideology."

An Uncertain Road Ahead

As South Korea and Japan started the new year, then, a relationship that had reached one of its lowest points ever in 2019 had begun to de-escalate tensions and recommit to diplomacy. The momentum for change came from the two countries' agreement to extend GSOMIA and start talks on easing exports, nudged along by US diplomacy and the need to create the right atmosphere for the December trilateral summit. The external tremors of North Korea and alliance cost-sharing negotiations provided added incentives for stability in Japan-Korea relations.

These factors were powerful enough to yield a thaw, but much remains uncertain. The GSOMIA extension provided a temporary and conditional fig leaf for the much more intractable issues of Japan's export restrictions and South Korea's forced labor compensation claims against Japan. Even as both sides sought to de-escalate tensions, they remained committed to diametrically opposed positions, with no clear path to resolution. While the coming months may provide incentives to keep the Korea-Japan relationship stable and opportunities for positive interaction, a return to major tensions remained a possibility.

For now, though, the thaw in Japan-Korea relations persists—opening up enough space for longstanding practical cooperation and progress between the two countries in areas like North Korea, economics, and culture.

CHRONOLOGY OF JAPAN-KOREA RELATIONS

SEPTEMBER – DECEMBER 2019

Sept. 1, 2019: South Korean Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs Lee Tae-ho attends Korea-Japan Festival.

Sept. 11, 2019: In a cabinet reshuffle, Prime Minister Abe Shinzo replaces key personnel dealing with the abduction issue.

Sept. 16, 2019: Abe says that he remains committed to meeting with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un.

Sept. 17, 2019: South Korea's Ministry of Trade, Industry and Energy announced that Japan would no longer remain on its list of preferential trade partners. Vice Foreign Minister Lee meets with Japan-Korea Cultural Foundation.

Sept. 19, 2019: North Korea's ambassador for negotiations to normalize relations with Japan Song Il-ho tells a visiting delegation led by Kanemaru Shingo that Japan-North Korea relations had worsened.

Sept. 20, 2019: South Korea's Director-General for Asian and Pacific Affairs of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Jung-han Kim and Japan's Director-General of the Asian and Oceanian Affairs Bureau of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Takizaki Shigeki meet in Tokyo and discuss issues including forced labor.

Sept. 24, 2019: Takizaki, South Korea's Special Representative for Korean Peninsula Peace and Security Affairs Lee Do-hoon, and US Special Representative for North Korea Stephen Biegun hold a trilateral consultation on the North Korean nuclear issue.

Sept. 26, 2019: Japan's Minister for Foreign Affairs Motegi Toshimitsu and South Korea's Minister of Foreign Affairs Kang Kyung-wha hold a bilateral meeting.

Sept. 29, 2019: A group of Japanese physicians arrives in North Korea to investigate North Korea's need for medical aid.

Sept. 27, 2019: Japan's annual defense white paper released. South Korea protests Japan's claim on Dokdo/Takeshima in the paper.

Oct. 3, 2019: North Korea says it successfully test-fired a new submarine-launched ballistic missile the day before.

Oct. 7, 2019: Japan protests to North Korea over a North Korean fishing boat's collision with a Japanese patrol vessel.

Oct. 9, 2019: Japan's Air Self-Defense Force conducts a deployment drill for its PAC-3.

Oct. 27, 2019: Former North Korean nuclear negotiator criticizes Washington for using "delaying tactics."

Oct. 31, 2019: North Korea launches two projectiles into the East Sea/Sea of Japan.

Nov. 4, 2019: South Korean President Moon Jae-in and Prime Minister Abe meet briefly at ASEAN meeting in Bangkok.

Nov. 7, 2019: North Korea calls Abe an "idiot" and "villain" for his remarks on North Korea's firing of missiles.

Nov. 15, 2019: Japan's Director-General of the Asian and Oceanian Affairs Bureau of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Takizaki and his South Korean counterpart Kim meet and discuss bilateral issues, including the South Korean Supreme Court ruling on forced labor.

Nov. 15, 2019: US Secretary of Defense Mark Esper visits Seoul to urged South Korea to remain in GSOMIA.

Nov. 21, 2019: South Korea's Foreign Minister Kang and US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo hold a telephone conversation and discuss the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMNIA) and other issues.

Nov. 22, 2019: Hours before the deadline, South Korea announces it will remain in GSOMIA conditionally.

Nov. 23, 2019: Kang and Motegi meet on the sidelines of the G20 Foreign Ministers' meeting in Japan.

Dec. 13, 2019: Trilateral senior officials of Japan, South Korea, and China meet.

Dec. 14, 2019: North Korea announce that it conducted "another crucial test" at Sohae long-range rocket site.

Dec. 16, 2019: Seoul and Tokyo hold talks in search for a breakthrough in the export restrictions.

Dec. 18, 2019: The US and South Korea fail to reach a deal on how to share costs for the US military presence in South Korea.

