

PACIFIC FORUM

COMPARATIVE

C O N N E C T I O N S

A TRIANNUAL E-JOURNAL OF BILATERAL
RELATIONS IN THE INDO-PACIFIC

JAPAN-KOREA RELATIONS

A NEW LEADER IN JAPAN AND UNCERTAIN FUTURE SCENARIOS

JI-YOUNG LEE, AMERICAN UNIVERSITY

The inauguration of Suga Yoshihide as Japan's prime minister in September 2020 did not lead to a breakthrough in the stalled Japan-South Korea relationship. However, it provided an opportunity for South Korea to signal that President Moon Jae-in would be interested in a summit meeting with Suga. In the final months of 2020, it became apparent that both governments in Seoul and Tokyo felt the need to improve bilateral ties, but had not yet found a way to make that happen.

This article is extracted from *Comparative Connections: A Triannual E-Journal of Bilateral Relations in the Indo-Pacific*, Vol. 21, No. 3, January 2020. Preferred citation: Ji-Young Lee and Mintaro Oba, "Japan-Korea Relations: A New Leader in Japan and Uncertain Future Scenarios," *Comparative Connections*, Vol. 21, No. 3, pp 131-140.

South Korea reached out to Japan, perhaps with eyes on the planned Tokyo Olympics in 2021, to use the occasion as a platform for a diplomatic breakthrough between North Korea and the international community, with Japan on board. While welcoming Seoul's gesture of goodwill, the Suga administration adhered to the position that South Korea should first take a step toward a solution for forced labor compensation issues. Suga's decision not to attend a Beijing-Seoul-Tokyo trilateral meeting scheduled for December, which South Korea was to host, came in the context that Japan's new prime minister could not visit Seoul without assurance that Japanese companies' assets would not be liquidated. This decision seemed to confirm the speculation of those who believe that Suga's Korea policies would not differ much from those of his predecessor, Abe Shinzo. But amid the growing uncertainties of domestic political challenges and the COVID-19 crisis, it remains to be seen how things will evolve in 2021, especially given the Biden administration's emphasis on a trilateral partnership with Tokyo and Seoul, and North Korea's possible participation in the Tokyo Olympics—assuming the event takes place.

A Glass Half Empty or Half Full? Seoul-Tokyo Diplomatic Activities

In the conduct of foreign relations, leadership changes and summit meetings that ensue can create new opportunities to “reset” difficult relations. Prior to the Park Geun-hye and Abe Shinzo administrations, Japan-South Korea relations repeated this pattern during much of the 2000s. The inauguration of a new leader in either country tended to bring Seoul and Tokyo together to promise a future-oriented relationship, only for territorial and historical flareups to lead them to express regret and lodge diplomatic protests against the other. Stalled periods of “cold politics” typically followed, with high-profile meetings and bilateral negotiations cancelled or suspended. In current circumstances, the change in political leadership will not resolve outstanding bilateral problems, but could provide momentum for fresh engagement and dialogue amid exchanges of goodwill, which could culminate in a first summit.

The inauguration of Suga as Japan's new prime minister in September led to a “glass half empty or half full” situation; that is, while the Moon and Suga administrations sent signals to each

other that they were interested in improving bilateral ties, in the final months of 2020 they stopped short of any tangible steps toward the resolution of forced labor compensation and export restrictions issues. At the start of January 2021, there is no clear indication of when their first summit will be held. Optimists would consider how, compared to former Prime Minister Abe, Japan's pragmatic new prime minister might try to cooperate with South Korea, especially as both Seoul and Tokyo have incentives to avoid the further deterioration of relations and work closely for the success of the Tokyo Olympics. The incoming Biden administration's likely emphasis on better relations between two of its key Asian allies is another consideration. Pessimists point to Suga's decision not to attend a trilateral China-Japan-South Korea summit Seoul was to host in December over the forced labor compensation issue as an early sign that bilateral relations will likely remain frosty, and not very different from those under Abe.

From the day that the Japanese Diet elected Suga as prime minister, there were signs suggesting the glass is half full. Moon reached out to Suga with [a letter](#) that stated he was “ready to sit down for a summit anytime with his counterpart in Japan, Korea's closest friend culturally and geographically, and a neighbor that shares fundamental values and strategic interests.” The US State Department welcomed Seoul's move. Suga conveyed his appreciation and his hope that the two countries would develop forward-looking relations as “important neighbors.” About a week later, a telephone conversation between Suga and Moon marked the first time that the leaders of the two countries had spoken since December 2019. During [their call](#), Moon expressed his desire to move relations forward and find a solution to forced labor compensation issues. Suga said bilateral relations could not remain in their current state, urging South Korea to take appropriate action. They agreed to cooperate on COVID-19 responses, such as easing entry restrictions on essential travelers, like businessmen, between the two countries.



Figure 1 South Korean President Moon Jae-in and Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga spoke by phone on September 24, 2020, marking the first direct talks between leaders of the two countries since December 2019. Photo: Reuters/Masayuki Terazawa via Nikkei Asia

After Moon and Suga showed their willingness to seek ways of mending relations, reciprocal diplomatic activities followed. On Oct. 18, South Korea's ruling Democratic Party chairman and potential presidential candidate Lee Nak-yeon met Japan's former chief Cabinet secretary and the current head of the Japan-Korea Parliamentary Group Kawamura Takeo. On Oct. 29, Takizaki Shigeki, Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs' director-general of the Asian and Oceanic Affairs Bureau, visited Seoul on a three-day visit and met his counterpart Kim Jung-han, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' director-general for Asian and Pacific affairs. On the forced labor compensation issue, the South Korea government [urged](#) the Japanese government to show a more sincere attitude toward resolution of the problem, while Japan [urged](#) South Korea to offer a resolution that was "acceptable to the Japanese side." Japan reiterated that a liquidation of Japanese companies' assets could "lead to an extremely grave situation and must be avoided at all costs." South Korea requested that Tokyo ease its restrictions on the exports of key industrial materials.

Seoul's eagerness to mend relations was further evidenced by a visit to Tokyo by Park Ji-won, South Korea's director of the National Intelligence Service, during which he met with Suga for about a half an hour on Nov. 10. Park also met Nikai Toshihiro, the Liberal Democratic Party secretary general, Shigeru Kitamura, head of the National Security Secretariat of Japan, and Takizawa Hiroaki, director of Japan's Cabinet Intelligence. A bipartisan group of South Korean lawmakers of the Korea-Japan Parliamentarians' Union then made a three-day visit to Japan, and met Suga on Nov. 13, together with their Japanese

counterparts, the Japan-Korea Parliamentarians' Union. On the following day, Moon [draw media attention](#) in South Korea and Japan when he singled out and welcomed Suga during greetings at the virtual East Asia Summit.

Suga's Policies and the Likely Future of Bilateral Ties

Japan's approach to South Korea was more reserved. While it is too early to tell if Suga's Korea policies will remain more or less the same as Abe's, sentiment within Japan did not seem optimistic about the possibility that South Korea would change course on thorny bilateral issues. According to [Kyodo News](#) in late September 2020, the Suga administration clarified its position that a summit meeting with South Korea was tied to the forced labor compensation issue, and that it would be "impossible" for Suga to visit Seoul without "proper measures" from the Moon administration toward its resolution. In response, South Korea's Blue House [commented](#) that "There is not much room for a solution if Japan puts forward such a condition." Later that month, during his first address to the Diet as prime minister, Suga [stated](#) that the Japanese government would "strongly urge an appropriate response [from South Korea] in line with Japan's consistent position." In November, during a meeting with Kim Jin-pyo and other South Korean officials, Suga was reported to have asked for the same message to be relayed to Moon—that South Korea should first take action to resolve the issue. A Seoul-Tokyo-Beijing trilateral meeting that South Korea had hoped to host in December might have brought about a summit between Suga and Moon, but did not happen.

When Suga became leader of Japan, experts and observers in South Korea were divided over the prospects for Tokyo's bilateral ties with South Korea. Suga's decision not to visit Seoul for the Beijing-Seoul-Tokyo trilateral meeting led South Korea's [JoongAng Ilbo](#) to report that "Suga adopts Abe's hardline toward South Korea." Another South Korea daily, [Hanryoreh](#), described Suga's responses to Moon's message calling for improved relations as "noncommittal" and reported that Suga's impression of South Korea was shaped by the Moon administration's reversal of the 2015 agreement designed to resolve the issue of the Korean "comfort women."

There are at least three considerations that might explain South Korea's diplomatic efforts in the final months of 2020 and the desire to repair relations with Japan. First, South Korea needs to ease Japan's export restrictions on three key industrial materials—photoresists, hydrogen fluoride, and fluorinated polyimide—which are critical for South Korea's technological industries. Second, Seoul's successful management of its alliance with the United States is at least indirectly related to its working relationship with Tokyo. Allies have expectations toward their alliance partners. The Biden administration will likely expect South Korea to tighten the Seoul-Tokyo-Washington trilateral relationship, by managing its bilateral ties with Tokyo. Third, in light of Moon's experience with the 2018 Pyeongchang Winter Olympics, it appears that South Korean policymakers consider the Tokyo Olympics in the context of aiding their North Korea policy, by leveraging the Olympics as a venue where the international community, including Japan, could bring North Korea into dialogue and possible negotiations. Rep. Kim Jin-pyo of the ruling Democratic Party, leader of the South Korean delegation of the Korea-Japan Parliamentarians' Union, [said](#) that he "looks forward to the Tokyo Olympics next year [2021] to be a major occasion to improve inter-Korean and South Korea-Japan relations, and relations in Northeast Asia. We plan to actively support the Tokyo Olympics becoming an Olympics of peace." When asked by Constitutional Democratic Party lawmaker Haku Shinkun at the House of Councillors Committee on the Budget in Japan, Suga [said](#) the Tokyo Olympics would be "a very good opportunity" for leaders to come together to have talks on North Korean nuclear issues. Haku is [reported](#) to have proposed that Japan take the initiative and invite Moon and other leaders to the Olympics, using the occasion as an opportunity to resume talks on the North Korean nuclear issue.

Given the [stated](#) position of Suga that his mission is to "inherit and facilitate policies promoted by Prime Minister Abe," it is not far-fetched to expect that without major concessions from the Moon administration, Tokyo-Seoul relations would continue to experience "[cold economics, cold politics](#)," if not a downward spiral. On the question of forced labor compensation, the Japanese government's position appears to be firmly set: there will be no improvement of relations with Seoul unless South Korea provides measures

that stop the liquidation of Japanese companies' assets. The Abe administration warned of countermeasures if that were to take place.

Symbolic Politics—'Comfort Women' Statue in Berlin and the Yasukuni Shrine

A statue of a girl symbolizing Korean victims of wartime sexual slavery—the so-called "comfort women" statue, also known as the "Statue of Peace"—in Berlin became the source of a diplomatic spat involving Germany as well as Japan and South Korea. In September, the statue was installed near the Japanese Embassy in Berlin by Korea Verband, a civic group of South Koreans based in Berlin, after receiving permission from the Mitte district office to display it for one year. Berlin is not the first global city outside South Korea where the statue has been erected. David Chapman in "Visualizing Korea: The Politics of the Statue of Peace," in *Asian Studies Review* (2020) [writes](#) about the statue describing it as a form of "visual politics":

The statue is a girl dressed in traditional hanbok sitting next to an empty chair that is symbolically provided for deceased victims. However, the chair is often used by members of the public to sit, reflect and participate in protest. The girl has a bird on her shoulder that symbolizes the link between the victims who are still alive and those who have passed away ... The location and positioning of the statue are often highly strategic. Its location across from the Japanese Embassy is especially impactful: it presents itself to the Japanese government as a perpetual reminder of the colonial past and its link to the present.



Figure 2 A statue commemorating comfort women remained erected in central Berlin following Japanese officials' requests for its removal. Photo: AP Photo/Markus Schreiber

Foreign Minister Motegi Toshimitsu asked German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas to remove the statue. South Korea responded by [saying](#) that it was “not desirable for (governments) to get diplomatically involved.” The Mitte district office reversed its decision and ordered Korea Verband to remove the statue. Korea Verband filed a petition to suspend the order. While Korea Verband activists and South Korean expatriates marched to the Mitte district office in Berlin, a civic group based in South Korea’s port city Busan—the Busan Women’s Action to Resolve the Japanese Military “Comfort Women” Issue—held demonstrations, protesting Japan’s request to remove the statue in Berlin. On Dec. 1, 24 of 29 members of the Mitte district council passed a resolution to maintain the statue at least until September 2021, with the possibility of finding a solution for its permanent exhibition. Kato Katsunobu, Japan’s chief Cabinet secretary, vowed that the Japanese government would press for immediate removal of the statue. The issue could emerge again as an obstacle for Japan–South Korea relations in 2021.

Meanwhile, news of South Korean “comfort women” activist-turned lawmaker Yoon Mi-hyang’s indictment received Japanese and international media attention. Yoon was the head of Korean Council for Justice and Remembrance for the Issues of Military Sexual Slavery by Japan, a civic group that has led a protest demanding Japan’s apologies for “comfort women” victims every Wednesday near the Japanese Embassy in Seoul. Under the Moon administration, Yoon made a political career as the ruling Democratic Party’s proportional representative out of her reputation as a longtime activist who worked

for “comfort women” victims. In September, the Seoul Western District Prosecutor’s Office indicted her on charges of embezzlement of and fraud regarding funds intended to help the victims. The ruling Democratic Party suspended her party membership. In May, one of the “comfort women” victims, a 91-year-old survivor Lee Yong-soo publicly announced that Yoon had exploited her and other victims for decades, which led to the prosecutors’ investigation.

Abe [said](#) that he visited the Yasukuni Shrine in September to report his resignation as prime minister, to which South Korea’s Foreign Ministry expressed its “deep concern.” South Koreans tend to interpret Japanese leaders’ stance on the Yasukuni Shrine as a litmus test of their take on history issues, and then views visits as important signals on the state of bilateral relations. In October, in commemoration of the autumn harvest festival, Suga sent offerings to Yasukuni Shrine, following the position that Abe took during his tenure as prime minister.

Japan’s North Korea Policy under Suga

What will be Japan’s North Korea policy under Suga’s leadership? On multiple occasions, Suga said that he is willing to meet with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un. It is likely that Suga will inherit the Abe administration’s policy to solve the issue of abduction of Japanese citizens by North Korea. In October, Suga and Abe attended a memorial that honored Yokota Shigeru, whose daughter Megumi was abducted by North Korea at age 13 and never returned to Japan. The late Yokota campaigned for the return of his daughter and other abductees. Suga [said](#), “It is heartbreaking to imagine the pain of the family members who passed, after working so hard to rescue their dearest children and yet not achieving a reunion in the end.” Suga was the minister of the abduction issue when he was chief Cabinet secretary under Abe.

In 2021, one of the key questions for Japan’s relations with North Korea as well as with South Korea will be whether Japan decides to invite Kim Jong Un to the Tokyo Olympics and whether Kim would accept the invitation. Past summit meetings between Japan and North Korea all took place in Pyongyang in 2002 and 2004.

Ties that Bind

Both Japan and South Korea become members of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), along with China, Australia, New Zealand, and the 10 members of ASEAN. This is the first time that Seoul and Tokyo are parties to the same free trade agreement; their negotiations for a bilateral FTA have long been suspended. Under the agreement, Japan will get rid of tariffs on 49% of farm products imported from South Korea, 56% of those from China, and 61% from ASEAN, Australia, and New Zealand. Under the agreement, South Korea's automobile and auto component manufacturers [are expected](#) to experience stronger competition from Japanese and Chinese counterparts, but its steel and automobile products will likely benefit from the deal. Maekyung's *Pulse* [reported](#) that South Korea and Japan will remove tariffs on 83% export items from each other.

The two governments had allowed travel to resume between their two countries for short and long-term business travel before Japan halted the entry of foreign nationals as the COVID-19 situation worsened in December 2020.



Figure 3 Japanese businesspersons speak during an annual meeting with their South Korean counterparts via video at a Tokyo hotel on November 27, 2020. Photo: Yonhap

On Nov. 27, business leaders of South Korea and Japan held a virtual conference, Japan-Korea Cooperation that Opens the Future: The New Era of SDGs (Sustainable Development Goals) 2020. Welcoming Seoul and Tokyo's membership in the RCEP, they called for better relations between the two countries, including by increasing the level of exchanges in people, economies and cultures, and promised cooperation toward a successful Olympics and Paralympics in 2021.

Looking Ahead

Japan and South Korea face an uncertain future in 2021. Two factors—the inauguration of the Biden administration in the United States and its likely diplomatic initiatives, and the Tokyo Olympics, if held as planned—may provide the Moon and Suga government much-needed opportunities for reconciliation. But the forced labor compensation and “comfort women” issues remain major obstacles to conciliatory positions, due in large part to each government's need to consider domestic political constituencies. Other issues like the worsening of the COVID-19 spread and the struggling approval ratings of the two national leaders can also complicate efforts to focus on any improvement in bilateral relations.

CHRONOLOGY OF JAPAN-KOREA RELATIONS

SEPTEMBER – DECEMBER 2020

Sept. 4, 2020: Osaka International Peace Center [allows](#) families of Korean victims of wartime air raids to request listing of relatives by ethnic Korean names instead of Japanese names.

Sept. 5, 2020: Center for Strategic and International Studies [reports](#) that satellite imagery of North Korean shipyard indicates preparation for tests of medium-range submarine-launched ballistic missiles.

Sept. 7, 2020: South Korean Foreign Ministry official [tells](#) reporters “We are making efforts to send out the message that it is crucial to bring back North Korea to dialogue” ahead of South Korean Foreign Minister Kang Kyung-wha’s participation in virtual meetings with the ASEAN Regional Forum, the East Asia Summit, and ASEAN Plus Three.

Sept. 9, 2020: During the 10th East Asia Summit, ROK FM Kang [seeks](#) support from the international community for peace between the two Koreas, explaining that the government of South Korea is “making efforts to improve the livelihood of North Korean people and improve South-North relations through inter-Korean cooperation.”

Sept. 11, 2020: South Korea and the United States [create](#) the “Alliance Dialogue,” a new channel for dialogue between their high-level diplomats. After talks with US Deputy Secretary of State Stephen Biegun, South Korean First Vice Foreign Minister Choi Jong-kun tells reporters in Washington that “We agreed that Korea and the United States should continue cooperation and communication based on ironclad trust.”

Sept. 14, 2020: Seoul Western District Prosecutor’s Office [indicts](#) South Korean Democratic Party Representative Yoon Mi-hyang for misappropriating funds intended to help comfort women victims. Two days later, the Democratic Party [suspends](#) her party membership.

Sept. 16, 2020: Japan’s Diet [elects](#) Suga Yoshihide as prime minister. South Korean President Moon Jae-in [sends](#) a congratulatory letter to Suga.

Sept. 19, 2020: Former Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzo [visits](#) Yasukuni Shrine. ROK Foreign Ministry spokesman Kim In-chul reacts by expressing “deep concern and regret.”

Sept. 21, 2020: Blue House spokesman Kang Min-seok [reports](#) that Suga “expressed thanks for President Moon’s congratulatory letter and stressed that the two countries are important neighbors” in a letter sent to the South Korean president.

Sept. 22, 2020: Moon delivers [speech](#) by video at the 75th UN General Assembly stating, “I hope that the UN and the international community provide support so that we can advance into an era of reconciliation and prosperity through the end-of-war declaration.”

Sept. 23, 2020: South Korea’s Ministry of Defense [issues](#) statement saying that missing South Korean official may be in North Korea. It is later revealed that the North Korean side shot the official and burned his body.

Sept. 24, 2020: Suga and Moon [hold](#) their first phone call. After the call, Suga briefs Japanese reporters stating, “I told President Moon that we must not leave bilateral relations in the current serious state, such as the feud over the forced labor issue.” According to ROK presidential spokesman Kang Min-seok, “President Moon said the two countries should step up efforts based on a new attitude to resolve pending bilateral issues, including the forced labor issue.”

Sept. 25, 2020: North Korean leader Kim Jong Un [apologizes](#) for death of missing South Korean official saying he is “very sorry” about the unexpected and unfortunate situation.

Sept. 28, 2020: After a meeting at the US Department of State with South Korean nuclear envoy Lee Do-hoon, Deputy Secretary Biegun [tells](#) reporters “The United States and the Republic of Korea remain fully committed to diplomacy as a way to reach an enduring peace on the Korean Peninsula, to achieve denuclearization, to bring about a brighter future for all of the Korean people, and to bring about normalcy in the United States’ relationship with the DPRK.”

Oct. 1, 2020: Japanese Foreign Minister Motegi Toshimitsu [requests](#) removal of Berlin comfort woman statue during a call with German counterpart Heiko Maas and says the statue “goes against the position of the Japanese government.”

Oct. 6, 2020: South Korea and Japan [agree](#) to ease restrictions and exempt businesspeople from each country from a 14-day mandatory quarantine if they obtain documentation showing they have no health issues within 72 hours of travel.

Oct. 8, 2020: During a press briefing, South Korean spokesman Kim In-chul [comments](#) on Japan’s request to remove a comfort women statue near the Japanese embassy in Berlin and states that “the government stepping in to force its removal does not help resolve the problem at all. It also goes against the spirit of the sense of responsibility and self-reflection and apology that Japan has revealed itself.”

Oct. 12, 2020: At a press conference, Japan’s Chief Cabinet Secretary Kato Katsunobu [says](#) “in order to respond to threats that are diversifying and complex, we will firmly work to strengthen our comprehensive missile deterrence capability.”

Oct. 12, 2020: Moon [holds](#) a special strategy session with top aides to discuss supporting the campaign of Yoo Myung-hee to be director general of the World Trade Organization.

Oct. 13, 2020: *Kyodo News* [reports](#) that a Japanese government source states that Suga will not attend a trilateral summit between South Korea, China, and Japan without resolution to the South Korean Supreme Court decision to liquidate assets of Japanese companies Nippon Steel and Mitsubishi Heavy Industries.

Oct. 13, 2020: In a press release, Mitte District Mayor Stephan von Dassel [promises](#) to review Berlin comfort women statue issue from South Korean and Japanese perspectives along with the district perspective prior to a decision regarding whether the statue will be removed.

Oct. 17, 2020: Suga [sends](#) offering to Yasukuni Shrine to commemorate the Japanese autumn festival.

Oct. 18, 2020: ROK Democratic Party Chairman Lee Nak-yon [meets](#) head of Japan-Korea parliamentary group Takeo Kawamura at the National Assembly in Seoul to discuss bilateral relations.

Oct. 20, 2020: During a press conference at the National Assembly, Jeju Governor Won Hee-ryong [says](#) “if the Japanese government pushes ahead with releasing contaminated water from Fukushima into the ocean, Jeju Island will take the lead in filing lawsuits in both the South Korean and Japanese courts and at international tribunals. Jeju Island and the Republic of Korea will not tolerate a single drop of contaminated water from Fukushima.”

Oct. 26, 2020: In an address to the Japanese Diet, Suga [refers](#) to South Korea as “a very important neighboring country,” and says that the Japanese government will “strongly urge an appropriate response in line with Japan’s consistent position” on the forced labor issue.

Oct. 28, 2020: The group Busan Women’s Action to Resolve the Japanese Military “Comfort Women” Issue [holds](#) a demonstration in front of Japanese Consulate in Busan to protest Japanese government request to remove comfort women statue in Berlin.

Oct. 29, 2020: Japan’s Director General of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Asian and Oceanian Affairs Bureau Shigeki Takizaki [attends](#) in-person meetings with South Korean counterpart Kim Jung-han and South Korean nuclear envoy Lee Do-hoon in Seoul.

Nov. 5, 2020: During a meeting with the House of Councilors Budget Committee, Suga responds to question regarding six-party talks during the Tokyo Summer Olympics and [says](#) “in diplomatic terms, it will be a very important opportunity.”

Nov. 6, 2020: South Korean Director of the Blue House National Security Office Suh Hoon meets Japanese counterpart Shigeru Kitamura and US counterpart Robert O’Brien by video. Blue House spokesman Kang Min-seok [says](#) “they shared their assessments on the latest affairs concerning the Korean Peninsula and discussed ways to engage North Korea to resume talks.”

Nov. 8, 2020: South Korean Director of the National Intelligence Service (NIS) Park Jie-won [meets](#) with Liberal Democratic Party Secretary General Nikai Toshihiro and other senior officials in Tokyo to talk about compensation of forced labor victims and export restrictions.

Nov. 9, 2020: Environmental civic groups [campaign](#) against Japanese seafood near the Japanese embassy in Seoul due to Japan’s plan to discharge radioactive water into the ocean.

Nov. 10, 2020: Park [tells](#) reporters in Tokyo “I conveyed to Prime Minister Suga President Moon Jae-in’s earnest greetings and intent to normalize Korea-Japan relations, and we had good discussions on the North Korea issue.”

Nov. 12, 2020: ROK representative and head of Korea-Japan Parliamentarian’s Union Kim Jin-pyo and a seven-member delegation meet Japanese counterparts in Tokyo. At Narita International Airport, Representative Kim [tells](#) reporters “It is time for the leaders of the countries to meet to discuss the pending issues between Korea and Japan and make a political decision.”

Nov. 12, 2020: US President-elect Joe Biden [talks](#) with Suga and has first phone call with Moon.

Nov. 14, 2020: During a virtual summit for leaders of ASEAN nations, plus China, South Korea, and Japan, President Moon [begins](#) keynote speech by saying, “Honorable chair, excellences. In particular, it’s a pleasure to meet you, Prime Minister Suga of Japan.”

Nov. 16, 2020: International Hydrographic Organization Assembly [adopts a proposal](#) to label all seas with unique numerical codes instead of names.

Nov. 17, 2020: ROK Representative Kim Jin-pyo says he [was told](#) in a meeting with a high-ranking Japanese official in Tokyo a week earlier that “if Chairman Kim has intentions to attend, a formal invitation could be made” to invite Kim Jong-un to the Tokyo Summer Olympics.

Nov. 17, 2020: UN [passes](#) a resolution accusing the North Korean regime of human rights violations by consensus during meeting at UN headquarters. South Korea [declines](#) to sponsor the resolution.

Nov. 20, 2020: During a press conference at the Japanese Embassy in Seoul, an embassy official discusses the discharge radioactive water and [tells](#) reporters that Tokyo “will come up with ways to adequately control and monitor the discharge and discuss them with neighboring countries.”

Nov. 23, 2020: President Moon Jae-in [nominates](#) Kang Chang-il as new ambassador to Japan.

Nov. 27, 2020: Leadership from South Korean and Japanese businesses [discuss](#) Japan-South Korea relations during the 52nd Korea-Japan Business Conference. During his keynote address, chairman of the Korea Peace Foundation Hong Seok-hyun says “we need to begin the process of historical reconciliation starting now, with the target of 2025.”

Dec. 1, 2020: Berlin’s Mitte District council [adopts](#) resolution to permanently install the “comfort woman” statue. During a press briefing, Chief Cabinet Secretary Kato [expresses](#) deep regret over Mitte Council’s decision to permanently install the “comfort woman” statue in Berlin.

Dec. 7, 2020: South Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs official [tells](#) reporters that South Korea “has the right to request information to determine whether Japan’s plans [to discharge radioactive water] are safe.”

Dec. 8, 2020: South Korea [declines](#) Japanese government's request to resume flights between Haneda in Tokyo and Gimpo in Seoul due to potential complications with quarantine efforts.

Dec. 22, 2020: Governor's Association of Korea [issues](#) a statement requesting that the Japanese government "immediately halt discussions to release the radioactive water from Fukushima."

Dec. 29, 2020: Court in the South Korean city Daejeon [completes](#) process of serving notice to Mitsubishi Heavy Industries regarding asset seizure for compensation of forced labor victims.