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AWAITING A BREAKTHROUGH? PM KISHIDA AND SOUTH KOREA'S PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATES

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The year 2021 ended with no breakthroughs in Japan-Korea relations. Bilateral ties remain stalled over South Korea's 2018 Supreme Court ruling on forced labor during Japan's occupation of the Korean Peninsula and Japan's export restrictions placed in 2019 on key materials used for South Korea's electronics industry. The inauguration of Kishida Fumio as Japan's new prime minister in September did not lead to a new momentum for addressing these bilateral issues, as both Tokyo and Seoul adhered to their positions. Prime Minister Kishida, while acknowledging that Japan's relationship with South Korea should not be left as is, largely reiterated Tokyo's official stance from the Abe and Suga governments that Seoul should first take steps on the forced labor issue. South Korean President Moon Jae-in sent a letter congratulating Kishida on his inauguration, signaling willingness to talk about bilateral challenges. Developments in the final months of 2021 are a reminder that there is no easy solution to these issues in sight.

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Looking at the year ahead, a window of opportunity for a possible breakthrough may arrive immediately after South Korea's presidential election in early March 2022 as experts like Sohn Yul and Nishino Junya [have pointed out](#). The three leading presidential candidates—Lee Jae-myung of the incumbent Democratic Party, Yoon Seok-yeol of the main opposition People Power Party, and Ahn Cheol-soo of the minor opposition People's Party—have proposed that South Korea mend ties with Japan and they all referred to the [1998 Kim-Obuchi joint declaration](#) as a point to which the two countries should return.

Whoever becomes South Korea's next president, working with Japan on the forced labor issue will be the key to whether there are positive changes in bilateral relations. In September, the Daejeon District Court ordered the sale of Mitsubishi Heavy Industries' assets (the patents and trademarks) in South Korea to compensate forced laborers. This marked the first time that a South Korean court ordered the liquidation of Japanese companies' assets over the issue. Japan strongly protested the order. Foreign Minister Motegi Toshimitsu said that the decision was "truly regrettable" and a "clear violation of international law." The South Korean Foreign Ministry refuted his remark as "not based on fact." Following this September decision, in December, the Daegu District Court ordered the sale of confiscated assets of Nippon Steel Corp to compensate forced laborers.

PM Kishida and Japan's Policy Toward the Two Koreas

Kishida's inauguration as Japan's leader did not give rise to a promise between leaders of the two countries to meet as soon as possible, which is typical when relations are going well. South Korean President Moon Jae-in's October letter to Kishida [stated](#) that he "looks forward to seeing the two countries communicate and cooperate to share the basic values of democracy and a market economy, setting an example of cooperation as neighboring countries that are closest geographically and culturally." During their first phone conversation, which took place after his conversations with the United States, Australia, Britain, India, China, and Russia, Kishida [reiterated](#) that South Korea should take appropriate action while noting that bilateral relations are in an "extremely difficult situation." Moon suggested that the two sides

accelerate consultations and communications in search for a diplomatic solution.



Figure 1 Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida speaks during a news conference at the prime minister's official residence on Oct. 14, 2021. Photo: Eugene Hoshiko/Pool via Reuters

The two leaders discussed North Korea during this phone call, but unsurprisingly, their emphasis differed. Kishida, since the campaign, had said that he would be willing to meet with the North Korean leader without preconditions. Moon said that he "highly appreciate[s] Prime Minister Kishida's willingness to meet with Chairman Kim [Jong Un] directly without conditions." Kishida asked for South Korea's support on the issue of North Korea's abduction of Japanese citizens in the 1970s and 1980s. While Moon's goal is to gain international support for his efforts to declare an end of the Korean War as a way to create a new momentum with North Korea, Kishida has his eyes on resolving the abduction issue.

At a deeper level, the Moon and Kishida governments' approaches to North Korea reflect different policy priorities. Kishida's North Korea policy is a continuation of Japan's position on Pyongyang for over a decade, which has sought to use pressure and sanctions over dialogue to comprehensively resolve the abduction and nuclear and missile issues. Former Prime Ministers Abe Shinzo and Suga Yoshihide's willingness to meet Kim Jong Un without condition should be understood in the context that the Japanese government would "consider all possible measures including a summit with Kim," a position that Kishida [advocates](#). In South Korea, for the progressive Moon government, support for the Japanese leader's summit meeting with Kim rests on a strong desire for a breakthrough in North Korea's engagement with the outside world and in inter-Korean

reconciliation. Moon's primary methods are to use dialogue with North Korea while seeking to find ways to engage with Pyongyang economically and culturally.

Since Kishida was Japan's longest-serving foreign minister in the postwar era (2012–2017), it is perhaps unsurprising that his foreign policy would continue trends of the Abe government. Importantly, while serving as foreign minister Kishida played a key role in reaching a 2015 bilateral agreement with South Korea on the so-called "comfort women" (wartime victims of sexual slavery) issue. In December, he [urged](#) the South Korean government to uphold the agreement and said, "at least the promise between states must be kept, or any discussion from now on will be meaningless." More broadly, Japan under his leadership is expected to continue policies promoting defense capability enhancement and stronger ties with the United States while keeping an eye on China's growing military power and economic influences in the region. In this picture, South Korea and Japan currently do not share a lot of overlap in terms of their respective policies toward dealing with shifting power balances in the region and the US-China strategic rivalry. But they may be able to develop partnerships in the area of economic security, especially trilaterally with the United States, while buttressed by Japan and South Korea's membership in the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) and possibly the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement on Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP).

It is important to remember that Kishida described himself as a "dovish liberal," when comparing himself with Abe, who he called "hawkish." In his 2017 TV *Asahi* interview, he [said](#) that his beliefs and philosophies are different from those of Abe. The appointment of Hayashi Yoshimasa, viewed as pro-China and from the same Kochikai faction, as a foreign minister may signal that Kishida's leadership may create more room for diplomacy with South Korea. Kishida has been the head of this faction since 2012.

North Korea, Dokdo/Takeshima, and Seoul-Tokyo-Washington Relations

The Biden administration continues to strengthen trilateral cooperation with Seoul and Tokyo, part of its broader strategy to improve coordination with allies after years of neglect by

the previous administration. But any progress made over the past few months of close coordination and calibrated messaging was at risk because of a diplomatic faux pas in mid-November over the South Korean police chief's visit to the Dokdo/Takeshima islets and Japan's protests. What was meant to be a public show of improving trilateral cooperation became instead a public reminder that deep distrust between Seoul and Tokyo is a hindrance to tighter tripartite cooperation with Washington.

At the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly in September, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, South Korean Foreign Minister Chung Eui-yong, and Japanese Foreign Minister Motegi Toshimitsu [met to](#) continue coordination on North Korea, regional situations, and global challenges such as supply chains and climate change (see [Japanese](#) and [Korean](#) readouts). This was their first meeting since the G7 in London in May. A day after, the [South Korean](#) and [Japanese](#) foreign ministers met separately but failed to make any progress, with both sides reiterating their respective positions on forced labor, comfort women, and export controls.

The nuclear envoys continued their efforts toward the goal of complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, with meetings in Tokyo in [mid-September](#) and Washington in [late October](#). Both meetings came in the wake of North Korean provocations. The Sept. 14 meeting came a day after North Korea [tested](#) a new long-range cruise missile. According to the South Korean Foreign Ministry, the US and South Korea [had](#) "extensive consultations" on efforts to engage North Korea, including on joint humanitarian cooperation. The three sides reaffirmed their commitment to denuclearization. US Special Representative for North Korea Sung Kim also publicly [urged](#) North Korea to "respond positively to our multiple offers to meet without preconditions" and reiterated that the US "has no hostile intent towards the DPRK." This [echoed](#) remarks he made in Seoul in August.

When the nuclear envoys met again on Oct. 19 in Washington, Sung Kim repeated the US offer to restart talks. His comments were [reaffirmed](#) the same night by US Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman, who revealed that the US had reached out directly to Pyongyang. According to a high-ranking South Korean official, the US and South Korea [completed](#) working-level discussions on humanitarian aid for North Korea and discussed "creative ways" to bring the North

back to dialogue. The official explained confidence-building measures such as President Moon's end of war declaration and humanitarian projects are important to their efforts. According to *Kyodo News*, Funakoshi Takehiro, director-general of the Japanese Foreign Ministry's Asian and Oceanian Affairs Bureau, [responded](#) by saying that it is "premature" to discuss the South Korean proposal given North Korea's provocative behavior of test-firing missiles. Just hours after talks concluded in Washington, North Korea responded by [testing](#) a new type of SLBM, its first SLBM test in two years, which violated multiple UN Security Council resolutions.

On the same day, the intelligence chiefs of the US, South Korea, and Japan met in Seoul to discuss the North Korean situation and global supply chain issues. This was their first trilateral meeting since Tokyo in May, and the first meeting for Japan's Cabinet Intelligence Director Takizawa Hiroaki under Kishida. According to South Korea's National Intelligence Service (NIS), NIS Director Park Jie-won, US Director of National Intelligence Avril Haines, and Takizawa "[agreed](#) to further strengthen their information cooperation" during their meeting.

Despite North Korea's continued provocations and a lack of response to the offer of dialogue, Sung Kim still made the trip to Seoul a week later for his scheduled meeting with his South Korean counterpart, Special Representative for Korean Peninsula Peace and Security Affairs Noh Kyu-duk. While in Seoul, he [repeated](#) the US offer for restarting dialogue, and called on North Korea to cease provocations.

An awkward moment for the US hosts happened after a trilateral meeting between US Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman, South Korean Vice Foreign Minister Choi Jong-kun, and Japanese Vice Foreign Minister Mori Takeo in Washington. For context, the South Korean Police Chief Kim Chang-yong [made](#) an undisclosed visit [earlier in the week](#) to the Dokdo/Takeshima islets. According to a source from South Korean police, the visit was [intended](#) to offer encouragement to police officers on duty as there has been a change from Dokdo Coast Guard to general police officers. The visit, while not unprecedented—the last such visit by a South Korean police chief happened in 2009—was publicized by mistake by the media and prompted a strong response by the Japanese government.



Figure 2 US Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman gives a news conference alone in Washington after talks with her counterparts from Japan and South Korea. Photo: Kyodo via The Japan Times

According to Korean press reports, Vice Foreign Minister Mori's visit was almost [canceled](#) as a result. At the end of the trilateral meeting, they were supposed to host a joint press conference to discuss the results—which they did during their last meeting in Tokyo in July. But because of the islet visit, the Japanese and the South Koreans pulled out at the last minute, leaving Sherman to host the press conference alone, where she acknowledged that "there are some bilateral differences" between South Korea and Japan that "are continuing to be resolved." Mori reportedly informed the host prior to the meeting that the Japanese side would not take part. Hours later, a spokesperson at the Japanese embassy in Washington [explained](#) Japan had "lodged a strong protest" over the islet visit, and therefore a joint press conference was inappropriate under these circumstances. During a separate press conference with South Korean reporters that afternoon, Vice Foreign Minister Choi, when asked, [answered](#) that the Japanese side had said that they were not participating in the joint press conference because of the Dokdo/Takeshima visit. Choi admitted that "the issues between Korea and Japan are unlikely to be resolved all at once," but they will continue to meet as "regularly and frequently as possible" towards "more specific forms of functional cooperation."

South Korea's Next President and Relations with Japan

The presidential race in South Korea entered the final stage in the final months of the year, with both parties selecting the front-runners to be their official candidate for next March's election. The incumbent Democratic Party [selected](#)

Gyeonggi Gov. Lee Jae-myung as candidate with 50.29% of the vote. The opposition People Power Party [chose](#) former Prosecutor General Yoon Seok-yeol with 47.85% of the vote. Now that the stage is set for the presidential election next March, what do we know of the leading candidates' views on relations with Japan? Below is what we can glean so far from the candidates' various speeches and interviews, as well as remarks from their foreign policy advisors.

Lee Jae-myung, [distancing](#) himself from an earlier characterization of having a hawkish stance toward Japan, sought to emphasize his willingness to take a future-oriented approach to relations with Japan, embracing the spirit of the 1998 Kim-Obuchi joint declaration. On his official campaign page, his foreign policy on Japan is [remaining](#) “committed to repairing the tenuous relationship between Korea and Japan.” His overall foreign policy is underpinned by “pragmatic diplomacy” and “national interest first.” He has [promised](#) to be firm on historical and territorial issues. Yoon Suk-yeol has also [vowed](#) to improve relations with Japan as soon as he takes office, saying that while “the issues between the two countries are not easy ... they are not impossible to solve.” While [speaking](#) in a forum with Lee in November, Yoon blamed the current state of relations on the Moon government, stating that they “did not prioritize the national interest and used diplomacy for domestic politics.” Yoon has promised he will reaffirm the [1998 Kim-Obuchi joint declaration](#), bring forth a Kim-Obuchi 2.0 era, and seek a “comprehensive solution” for contentious historical, economic, and security issues between the two countries. Ahn Cheol-soo of the minor opposition People's Party has similarly embraced this joint declaration.

What about their views on contentious issues between the two countries? On Dokdo/Takeshima, Lee responded to the South Korean police chief's visit to the islet by doubling down and [saying](#) that “Dokdo is definitely under effective control of South Korea,” and criticizing Japan for “meddling in another country's policy.” Yoon has not publicly responded to this visit, but expectations are that he will maintain that Dokdo is undisputed South Korean territory.



Figure 3 Candidates running in the upcoming presidential election pose for a photo at a forum in Seoul on Nov. 25, 2021. Pictured from left to right are Ahn Cheol-soo of the People's Party, Yoon Suk-yeol of the People Power Party, Lee Jae-myung of the Democratic Party of Korea and Sim Sang-jeung of the Justice Party. Photo: Korea Times

On forced labor, Lee [believes](#) that Japan should offer a sincere apology, and that he accepts the Supreme Court's decision on the seizure of Japanese companies' assets because of the separation of powers in Korea. He has also [called on](#) Japan to carry out the compensation quickly and respect the court's decision. For Yoon, the forced labor issue is part of the “comprehensive solution” he has discussed. On the comfort women issue, Lee has demanded that Japan apologize to the victims, a stance shared by Yoon.

On trilateral cooperation, Lee [believes](#) that while a “truly permanent relationship of interchange and coexistence based on a complete resolution of territorial and historical issues” will be ideal, he cautioned that Japan's “vague attitude on territorial issues and imperialist aggressions” will make “a trilateral military alliance among South Korea, the US and Japan ... very dangerous.” One of his close aides, Wi Sung-lac [took](#) a more conciliatory tone during an interview with Japanese press in December, where he stressed the usefulness of trilateral cooperation, including the Korea-Japan military-intelligence sharing agreement known as GSOMIA. Yoon has [emphasized](#) the importance of trilateral security cooperation for peace and security in the region.

Economic Relations and Public Opinions

How have the export controls Japan put in place in 2019 affected the South Korean economy? According to data from the Federation of Korean Industries, imports of hydrogen fluoride, photoresists, and fluorinated polyimide—three materials used for computer chips and displays but restricted for export by Japan to Korea—did not record a significant drop. Export of those

materials only declined 1% from \$729.5 million between the second half of 2017 and the first half of 2019 (before the export controls) to \$724.6 million between the second half of 2019 and the first half of 2021 (after the export controls). However, *JoongAng Ilbo* [reported](#) that overall bilateral trade fell 9.8% between the second half of 2017 and the first half of 2019, compared with the second half of 2019 and the first half of 2021. During this same period, Japan's direct investment in South Korea dropped from \$2.2 billion to \$1.6 billion (about a 30% decrease), while South Korea's investment in Japan went up by 25% largely due to SK Hynix's investment in Toshiba's memory business in late 2017.

South Korean National Assembly ratified the RCEP in Dec. and it will take effect on Feb. 1, 2022. This will bring South Korea and Japan together in a free trade agreement. With the pact, the share of goods traded tariff-free between South Korea and Japan will [go](#) from 19% to 92%. In Dec., South Korea announced that it plans to apply for the CPTPP. Japan's response did not appear very welcoming, emphasizing the high requirements "in terms of market access, e-commerce, intellectual property rights, government procurement, and so on." Japanese Chief Cabinet Secretary Matsuno Hirokazu [said](#), "as for South Korea's membership in the partnership, we have never discussed with it, and we are not planning to do so, either." To join the CPTPP, current member countries—Australia, Brunei, Canada, Chile, Japan, Malaysia, Mexico, New Zealand, Peru, Singapore, and Vietnam—have to approve South Korea's application.

Public polls [conducted](#) by Genron NPO in September 2021 revealed that the public perceptions of bilateral and regional relations have improved but remain largely negative. 63.2% of South Korean respondents said they have a "poor" impression of Japan, which is down from 71.6% last year. 48.8% of Japanese respondents said that their impression of South Korea is "poor," which is slightly higher than the 46.3% last year. Interestingly, only 4.6% of Japanese respondents said that the presidential election and a new South Korean president will have a positive impact on bilateral relations. Genron polls found that about 46.6% of Japanese respondents believe Japan-South Korea relations are important, which is a significant drop from 74% in 2013. As for the reason why the bilateral relationship is not important, the most popular response (67%) was "the current government cannot be trusted to negotiate in good faith, as it

has overturned previous intergovernmental agreements regarding historical awareness." The second most popular response (44.8%) was that "the current South Korean government is actively provoking Japan."

Looking Ahead

With just three months left on the campaign trail, we expect to learn more of the South Korean presidential candidates' views on Korea-Japan relations. Considering that the progressive Democratic Party and the conservative People Power Party tend to show clear differences in their overall approach toward North Korea, and this is an area in which Japan is interested in cooperating with South Korea, the next South Korean president in March will likely have an impact on bilateral relations. It also remains to be seen how the two leaders will work to resolve the "comfort women" and forced labor issues, which have remained obstacles in the relationship. On their campaign trail, the two leading South Korean presidential candidates have promised to improve the historic low relationship with Japan, and a willingness to hold a bilateral leader summit may signal a thaw. Regardless of the outcome of the March presidential election, it is certain that many difficult to disentangle issues await the new leader in Tokyo and the next leader in Seoul.

CHRONOLOGY OF JAPAN-KOREA RELATIONS

SEPTEMBER—DECEMBER 2021

Sept. 2, 2021: South Korea Ministry of National Defense [publishes](#) 2022–2026 Midterm Defense Plan.

Sept. 2, 2021: Seoul Central District Court [orders](#) Japan to disclose all assets in South Korea by March 21, 2022 in connection with asset seizure ruling for “comfort women” compensation.

Sept. 6, 2021: International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) mission [arrives](#) in Japan to help with preparations for release of treated water from Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant.

Sept. 8, 2021: Seoul Central District Court [issues](#) ruling in lawsuit stating that Nippon Steel is not required to pay compensation to children of a World War II-era forced laborer.

Sept. 8, 2021: In a statement issued on its website, the International Olympic Committee [announces](#) suspension of North Korea Olympic Committee until the end of 2022 due to non-participation in the Tokyo Olympic Games.

Sept. 10, 2021: South Korea Ministry of Foreign Affairs comments on publication of Japanese textbooks and [states](#), “It is very regrettable that the Japanese government decided to dilute the extent of the coercion faced by comfort women and forced laborers in April, that textbook publishers applied for changes or the deletion of related expressions, and that the ministry recently approved the publication of the textbooks.”

Sept. 13, 2021: North Korea’s *Korean Central News Agency* (KCNA) [reports](#) launch of missiles on Sept. 11 and Sept. 12.

Sept. 14, 2021: US Special Envoy for North Korea Sung Kim [meets](#) South Korean counterpart Noh Kyu-duk and Japanese counterpart Funakoshi Takehiro in Tokyo.

Sept. 15, 2021: According to South Korea Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS), North Korea [fires](#) two ballistic missiles. Three hours later, South Korea Agency for Defense Development conducts successful launch of domestic submarine-launched ballistic missile (SLBM) in the presence of President Moon Jae-in at Anheung Test Center.

Sept. 21, 2021: During speech at the UN General Assembly, President Moon [says](#), “I once again urge the community of nations to mobilize its strengths for the end-of-war declaration on the Korean Peninsula and propose that the three parties—the two Koreas and the US—or the four parties —the two Koreas, the US and China — come together and declare that the war on the Korean Peninsula is over.”

Sept. 22, 2021: South Korea Foreign Minister Chung Eui-yong [meets](#) Japanese counterpart Motegi Toshimitsu and US Secretary of State Antony Blinken during visit to the UN General Assembly.

Sept. 23, 2021: Japanese FM Motegi [meets](#) South Korea counterpart Chung during the UN General Assembly.

Sept. 24, 2021: KCNA [releases](#) statement from Kim Yo-Jong regarding end-of-war declaration, stating North Korea’s “willingness to keep our close contacts with the south again and have constructive discussion with it about the restoration and development of the bilateral relations if it is careful about its future language and not hostile toward us.”

Sept. 27, 2021: During meeting in Vienna, IAEA Board of Governors [elects](#) South Korea as IAEA chair.

Sept. 27, 2021: South Korea Daejeon District Court [orders](#) sale of patents and copyrights of Mitsubishi Heavy Industries for compensation of two wartime forced laborers.

Sept. 28, 2021: During a press conference, Japanese FM Motegi [says](#) ruling ordering sale of Mitsubishi Heavy Industries assets is “a clear violation of international law.”

Sept. 29, 2021: Kishida Fumio [is elected](#) leader of Japans Liberal Democratic Party, becoming the new prime minister of Japan.

Oct. 4, 2021: Blue House presidential spokesperson Park Kyung-mee reports that in a letter congratulating Prime Minister Kishida on his win, President Moon [says](#) he “looks forward to seeing the two countries communicate and cooperate to share the basic values of democracy and a market economy, setting an example of cooperation as neighboring countries that are closest geographically and culturally.”

Oct. 4, 2021: During a press conference, Prime Minister Kishida [indicates](#) willingness to meet with North Korean leader Kim Jong-un “without preconditions.”

Oct. 5, 2021: Federation of Korean Industries (FKI) [reports](#) that increased restrictions on sale of photoresists, hydrogen fluoride, and fluorinated polyimide sales from Japan to Korea had minimal impact on imports, however, overall trade between Japan and Korea has decreased.

Oct. 8, 2021: In remarks aired by Japanese broadcasting company NHK, Prime Minister Kishida [comments](#) on his first phone conversation with Chinese President Xi Jinping and says “Xi and I agreed to work together on various shared issues, including North Korea.”

Oct. 10, 2021: South Korean Democratic Party [chooses](#) former governor of Gyeonggi Province Lee Jae-myung as its candidate for 2022 presidential election.

Oct. 15, 2021: Blue House presidential spokesperson Park states that during their first phone call, President Moon and Prime Minister Kishida [discussed](#) diplomatic solutions to forced labor, “comfort women,” and denuclearization of North Korea. Speaking to reporters, Kishida [says](#), “Relations between Japan and South Korea continue to be in severe conditions.”

Oct. 17, 2021: During a tour of the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant, Kishida [tells](#) reporters, “I felt strongly that the water issue is a crucial one that should not be pushed back.”

Oct. 18, 2021: US Director of National Intelligence Avril Haines [meets](#) with South Korean counterpart Park Jie-won and Japanese counterpart Takizawa Hiroaki in Seoul.

Oct. 19, 2021: South Korea Special Representative for Korean Peace and Security Affairs Noh Kyu-duk [meets](#) US counterpart Sung Kim and Japanese counterpart Funakoshi Takehiro in Washington, DC.

Oct. 21, 2021: Fishing boat [capsizes](#) after an accident near Dokdo/Takeshima islands.

Oct. 25, 2021: South Korea Forest Service [registers](#) six plants native to the Takeshima/Dokdo islands on Dokdo Day. Korea Forest Service Director Choi Young-tae states, “By registering the endemic plant species of the Dokdo islets and Ulleung Island under an international organization on Dokdo Day, we hope to display strong sovereignty over Dokdo.”

Oct. 27, 2021: Japanese Prime Minister Kishida, South Korean President Moon, and Chinese Premier Li Keqiang [attend](#) the 24th ASEAN Plus Three summit.

Nov. 2, 2021: “Comfort woman” survivor Lee Yong-soo [advocates](#) for pursuit of comfort women issue resolution through UN Committee Against Torture during discussion with South Korea’s Democratic Party Chairman Song Yuong-gil at the National Assembly.

Nov. 6, 2021: A monument for Koreans who died during World War II atomic bombing [is erected](#) at the Nagasaki Atomic Bomb Museum. Japan notes that Koreans were mobilized as soldiers and laborers against their will. During unveiling ceremony, South Korean Ambassador Kang Chang-il says, “Today’s small step will go down in history as a model of joint efforts by South Korea and Japan and serve as a big step to contribute to founding the bastion of global peace.”

Nov. 11, 2021: US Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Daniel Kritenbrink [meets](#) South Korea Deputy Foreign Minister for Political Affairs Yeo Seung-bae to discuss supply chain issues at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Seoul.

Nov. 15, 2021: Six officials from the IAEA [arrive](#) in Japan to discuss plan for release of Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant treated water with Japanese officials.

Nov. 16, 2021: During a visit to Washington, South Korean First Vice Foreign Minister Choi Jong-kun [meets](#) with US counterpart, Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman.

Nov. 16, 2021: Commissioner-General of South Korea National Policy Agency Kim Chang-yong [visits](#) Dokdo/Takeshima island.

Nov. 17, 2021: During a press conference, Japan Chief Cabinet Secretary Matsuno Hirokazu [remarks](#) on visit to Takeshima/Dokdo island by South Korea police chief and says, “We cannot accept this at all and regard it as extremely unfortunate, considering that they are clearly an inherent part of Japan’s territory in view of historical facts and international laws.”

Nov. 19, 2021: South Korea Minister of Trade Yeo Han-koo [discusses](#) supply chain resilience and Korean steel exports to the US during meeting with US Trade Representative Katherine Tai in Seoul.

Nov. 19, 2021: During an interview in Tokyo, Prime Minister Kishida [says](#), “International agreements and promises must be fulfilled. I hope South Korea will take a positive approach.”

Nov. 25, 2021: During talks at the Seoul Foreign Correspondent’s Club, South Korea Democratic Party presidential candidate Lee Jae-myung [says](#), “Japan has been provocative, claiming the territorial rights of Dokdo, and has not apologized for historical issues.”

Dec. 2, 2021: During a press conference following the 53rd annual Security Consultative meeting in Seoul, South Korea Defense Minister Suh Wook and US counterpart Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin [announce](#) update to joint strategic planning guidance for wartime operations.

Dec. 6, 2021: Japan’s Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry [announces](#) that IAEA will delay plans to visit Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant until 2022 due to the omicron variant.

Dec. 7, 2021: Around 100 Japanese politicians, vice ministers, and political aides [visit](#) Yasukuni Shrine. South Korea Ministry for Foreign Affairs issues statement expressing “deep regret and concern for the visit to Yasukuni Shrine, which beautifies the colonial invasion and war of aggression.”

Dec. 11, 2021: In talks with South Korea Foreign Minister Chung, Japanese Foreign Minister Hayashi Yoshimasa [requests](#) “appropriate response” from South Korea for forced labor and “comfort women” issues during informal dinner at G7 gathering in Liverpool, England.

Dec. 13, 2021: South Korea Minister of Finance Nam Hong-ki [announces](#) South Korea’s intent to pursue membership in the CPTPP.

Dec. 17, 2021: US Undersecretary for Economic Growth, Energy, and the Environment Jose Fernandez [meets](#) South Korean Second Vice Foreign Minister Choi Jong-moon at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Seoul.

Dec. 26, 2021: *Yomiuri Shimbun* [reports](#) 203 cases of Japanese fishery products sold in South Korea without identification of place of origin.

Dec. 28 2021: During a *Kyodo News* interview, Prime Minister Kishida discusses 2015 bilateral “comfort women” agreement and [says](#), “At least the promise between states must be kept, or any discussion from now on will be meaningless.”

Dec. 29, 2021: *Yonhap* [reports](#) South Korea conducted military drills near Dokdo/Takeshima a week earlier. In a phone call with a South Korean ministry official, Japan Ministry of Foreign Affairs Director-General of Asian and Oceanian Affairs Bureau Funakoshi Takehiro comments on the drills and [says](#), “As Takeshima is clearly Japan’s inherent territory in light of historical facts and under international law, we cannot accept it.”

Chronology prepared by Patrice Francis, MA Student, American University’s School of International Service.

