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JAPAN-KOREA RELATIONS

THE RETURN OF SHUTTLE DIPLOMACY

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In March 2023, Japan and South Korea had a long-awaited breakthrough in their bilateral relations, which many viewed as being at the lowest point since the 1965 normalization. On March 16, South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol and Japanese Prime Minister Kishida Fumio held a summit in Tokyo and agreed to resume “shuttle diplomacy,” a crucial mechanism of bilateral cooperation that had been halted for about a decade. Behind the positive developments was President Yoon’s political decision on the issue of compensating wartime forced laborers. The two leaders took steps to bring ties back to the level that existed prior to actions in 2018 and 2019, which precipitated the downward spiral in their relationship. Japan decided to lift the export controls it placed on its neighbor following the South Korean Supreme Court ruling on forced labor in 2018. South Korea withdrew its complaint with the World Trade Organization on Japan’s export controls. Less than a week after the summit, Seoul officially fully restored the information sharing agreement (GSOMIA) that it had with Tokyo. They also resumed high-level bilateral foreign and security dialogues to discuss ways to navigate the changing international environment together as partners.

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The big question now is whether this trend of restoring and expanding bilateral cooperation would continue throughout and beyond the Yoon presidency. In South Korea, critics argue that his handling of the forced labor issue is not a lasting solution to historical issues with Japan. The breakthrough was not a product of any major change in South Korean public sentiment toward Japan's past wrongdoings. Nor was it a product of changes in the Japanese position on outstanding bilateral historical and territorial issues. Both the Japanese and South Korean governments, however, feel the urgent need to cooperate for their own national security, and for economic reasons. Whether the advances in the first four months of 2023 will be short-lived or the start of a new partnership and reconciliation will likely depend on how much understanding they both show in seeing things from the other's perspective and how willing they will be in accommodating the other's political needs.



Figure 1 South Korea President Yoon Suk Yeol and Japan Prime Minister Kishida Fumio hold a joint press conference on March 16, 2023 in Tokyo, Japan. Photo: Kiyoshi Ota/Pool/Bloomberg/Anadolu Agency/Getty Images

President Yoon's Forced Labor Decision

On March 6, South Korea officially announced a plan by which a government foundation under the South Korean Ministry of Interior and Safety will compensate the victims of forced labor, using voluntary donations from South Korean companies. The victims and other civic groups in South Korea have requested that Japanese companies Nippon Steel Corporation and Mitsubishi Heavy Industries pay compensation and make sincere apologies. South Korean Foreign Minister Park Jin [explained](#) the government decision in the context of the importance of improving relations with Japan

“for the national interest” and to “end the vicious circle” for the South Korean people.

The South Korean government [had hoped](#) that Japanese companies, including Nippon Steel Corporation and Mitsubishi Heavy Industries would voluntarily donate funds to this South Korean government foundation. For example, in his interview with South Korean broadcaster SBS in January, Foreign Minister Park [said](#) that it would be “desirable for Japanese companies to take measures of responding voluntarily and sincerely with a sense of historical consciousness.” However, according to South Korean daily [Chosun Ilbo](#), the Japanese government made an internal decision that these companies should not be involved, and that the Japan Business Federation (Keidanren) may donate funds but not to the government foundation. Japan has long maintained that all compensation was settled by the 1965 treaty that normalized diplomatic relations between Seoul and Tokyo and that it must be South Korea that offers a solution to the issue of forced labor.

In any society, the question of compensating victims of past wrongdoings is not a simple matter. This is especially the case in the context of interstate relations, because it concerns not just the availability of funds but historical memories and interpretations as to who caused harm and what justice means for victims in legal processes across borders. In other words, compensation issues fuse the notion of what ought to be done with relations between countries involved, often making salient the distinction of “us vs them.” In this regard, the significance of President Yoon's decision and the South Korea's public responses to the forced labor issue can be understood at a much deeper level from the perspective of South Korean national identity and Japan's place in it. How do South Koreans regard the Japanese and how do they view themselves in relations to Japan—particularly considering South Korea's own aspirations as a global actor?

President Yoon's perspectives on Japan's role in envisioning South Korea's future is worth noting. His March First Independence Movement address and interviews with major Japanese dailies reveal how he sets himself apart from other leaders in South Korea by focusing on what South Korea and Japan have in common -- democratic values such as freedom and the rule of law. In his mind, these democratic values are what make South Korea an important global

actor—or a “[global pivotal state](#)” in his parlance—and a participant in the liberal international order. His desire to work with Japan in large part stems from the fact that Japan shares these values with South Korea. In his speech, Yoon [stated](#) that the March First Independence Movement in 1919 was “a movement to build a free, democratic nation...” and continued:

Fellow Koreans,

Now, a century after the March First Independence Movement, Japan has transformed from a militaristic aggressor of the past into a partner that shares the same universal values with us. Today Korea and Japan cooperate on issues of security and economy. We also work together to cope with global challenges.

During his visit to Japan in mid-March, Yoon [gave](#) a special lecture before some 170 students at Keio University and encouraged future generations of the two countries to communicate actively for the future. Yoon [characterized](#) Japan-Korea relations as sharing similar cultures and sentiments, highlighting the significance that both countries are liberal democracies that uphold common values such as freedom, human rights, and the rule of law.



Figure 2 South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol gives a special lecture at Keio University in Tokyo, Japan on March 17, 2023. Photo: Yonhap

Yoon’s [interview](#) with the major conservative Japanese daily *Yomiuri Shimbun* just before the summit with Prime Minister Kishida explained his thinking that “when countries share universal values and have similar [political] systems, it is possible to trust and to predict how the other will likely to behave.” When asked about Japan’s national security documents that included the use of counterstrike capabilities—

the capability for Japan to strike into an opponent’s territory—Yoon showed his understanding of Japan’s measures given North Korean missile capabilities that can pass over the Japanese archipelago (“日本の措置を十分理解している”). Earlier in January, during a joint policy briefing from the foreign and defense ministries, President Yoon had said he does not take issue with Japan increasing its defense budget because of the North Korean missile threat.

Whether and to what extent Yoon’s approach will be sustained hinges on South Korean public opinion. Whereas the Yoon administration’s announcement was hailed in Japan and the United States, his actions toward Japan received mixed responses, at best, back home, presenting a challenging task for him and South Korean society. According to a [Gallup Korea poll](#), 59% of South Koreans said that they opposed the plan for not requiring Japan’s official apology and compensation. About 35% of respondents supported the plan in consideration of South Korea’s national interests and relations with Japan. The same polling suggests that while 31% felt that South Korea’s relations with Japan should be mended as soon as possible even if that meant Seoul’s concessions, a higher percentage of people—64%—answered that there is no need to hurry as long as Japan does not show a change in its attitude toward history issues. Also, 85% of South Koreans [thought](#) that the Japanese government has not repented for its wartime atrocities, suggesting that the deal itself is not a product of national consensus nor a result of national dialogue.

Main opposition Democratic Party leader Lee Jae-myung [called](#) the government plan “the biggest humiliation and stain in diplomatic history.” A week after the government’s announcement, the Democratic Party unilaterally [passed](#) a resolution in the National Assembly that urged the Yoon administration to withdraw its compensation plan. Civic groups supporting the forced labor victims, a coalition of 611 civic and labor organizations, immediately opposed the compensation plan for not involving direct contributions from responsible Japanese firms. A 94-year-old surviving forced labor victim said she will not accept any compensation from the foundation because it is through a third-party and was not an apology. South Korean intellectuals expressed strong concerns about Yoon’s take on history, with some criticizing prospects of

strengthening military cooperation with Japan. For example, on the day that President Yoon departed for the United States for a state visit, 248 Sungkyunkwan University professors and researchers [signed](#) a declaration that criticized the Yoon administration's foreign and security policy. They expressed concern that a South Korea-US-Japan military pact will “turn South Korea into an outpost of a US proxy war.”



Figure 3 Yang Geum-deok, a forced labor victim, and activists condemn government's plan to compensate victims of Japan's wartime forced labor on March 6, 2023 in Gwangju, South Korea. Photo: Yonhap

There are 15 plaintiffs from the 2018 Supreme Court ruling. Victims who publicly announced that they would accept the payment showed their understanding toward the South Korean government's position on the importance of South Korea's relations with Japan. According to [Mr. Chung—the son of a forced labor victim—](#) after waging a legal battle (with his father) for some 30 years in Japan and South Korea, the South Korean government plan signified a meaningful end to those years of efforts. His interview with South Korean daily *Chosun Ilbo* shed light on an episode of those Japanese who supported Korean victims. He said, “when we were doing a trial in Japan, we received much help from Japanese attorneys and civil society activists. They always knelt in front of my father and repeated that they ‘apologized for the past wrong doings’.”

In contrast to the reception in South Korea for President Yoon's plan -- seen either as too rushed or conceding too much—Japan readily welcomed Seoul's announcement. Prime Minister Kishida [said](#) it is a “return to a healthy relationship” between the two countries. According to a survey by the Japanese daily [Asahi Shimbun](#), 55% of Japanese respondents viewed South Korea's proposal positively, while 28%

said that they disapproved. About 65% of those who approved of the Kishida administration and 49% among those who disapproved supported Seoul's plan. Furthermore, the survey showed that a majority of Japanese respondents who were in their 60s and 70s—67%—viewed the plan positively.

The Kishida-Yoon summit—Shuttle Diplomacy, GSOMIA, and Economic Security

Marking the first bilateral presidential trip to Japan in 12 years, President Yoon visited Tokyo on March 16 and 17 for a summit with Prime Minister Kishida. The last such visit was in 2011 by then President Lee Myung-bak. Several important deliverables emerged from the summit: 1) the resumption of shuttle diplomacy (reciprocal visits by the leaders of the two countries); 2) the creation of a forum to facilitate cooperation on economic security; and 3) the full restoration of the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA).

On history, Prime Minister Kishida [stated](#) at the joint press conference that “Japan confirms that it upholds in its entirety the position of the previous cabinets on history.” This includes the 1998 Joint Declaration between President Kim Dae Jung and Prime Minister Obuchi Keizo, which [states](#) that “it was important that both countries squarely face the past and develop relations based on mutual understanding and trust...Prime Minister Obuchi regarded in a spirit of humility the fact of history that Japan caused, during a certain period in the past, tremendous damage and suffering to the people of the Republic of Korea through its colonial rule, and expressed his deep remorse and heartfelt apology for this fact.”

Sharing the view that “there is an urgent need to strengthen Japan-South Korea relations and that they will work to further develop ties,” Kishida and Yoon agreed to resume shuttle diplomacy, and restart other dormant and new dialogues. This included plans to resume the Japan-ROK Security Dialogue and the Japan-ROK Vice-Ministerial Strategic Dialogue. They also created a new bilateral economic security dialogue to discuss cooperation in supply chains and key technologies.

Bilateral diplomacy blossomed immediately after the summit. South Korean Unification Minister Kwon Young-se [made](#) a four-day trip

to Japan in late March, the first in 18 years. In April, the 2+2 meeting of foreign and defense ministry officials was [held](#) in Seoul for the first time in five years. In mid-April, they [agreed](#) to have finance ministers meet in May on the sidelines of the ADB annual meeting in Songdo, South Korea, which would be the first meeting in seven years.

Another important result of the summit was the [agreement](#) to “completely normalize” GSOMIA. Former President Moon Jae-in decided to terminate this military intelligence-sharing agreement between the two in 2019 (in response to Japan’s export controls). While that decision was eventually put on hold, intelligence sharing has been limited. With its resumption, the two neighbors can again share critical information on missile tests by North Korea, which has already conducted [12 such tests](#) during the reporting period. Even before the breakthroughs of March 2023, the one area where the two neighbors cooperated consistently since the start of the Yoon administration has been their joint responses to North Korea’s provocations. North Korea’s growing nuclear and missile capabilities unite the two governments and will likely continue to do so.

Beyond these national security-related matters, part of the larger process to heal the relationship is resolving symbolic but important disputes to show trust and reciprocity. The two sides chose one issue that was either an outcome or catalyst—depending on which side you are on—for the cold relations in the past four years: controversial export controls that Japan placed on South Korea in 2019, which in Seoul’s view was retaliation for the Supreme Court ruling in 2018 against Japanese companies.

On the same day the forced labor compensation plan was unveiled, South Korea [announced](#) its intention to withdraw its complaint to the World Trade Organization (WTO)—tabled in 2019—against Japan’s export controls on fluorinated polyimide, hydrogen fluoride, and resists—three key precursor materials for semiconductors and displays. When Yoon and Kishida [met](#) on March 16, Japan announced it was lifting export controls on those items. Korea [responded](#) the same day by officially withdrawing its WTO complaint and calling it the “first step” in establishing trust. Procedures to do so were [completed](#) a week later on March 23, and Seoul began domestic procedures to put Japan back on its “white list” of trusted trade

partners. Less than a month later, South Korea officially [reinstated](#) Japan to its “white list,” restoring the ability of South Korean companies to fast-track export of strategic items to Japan. In recognition of improving trust, Japan reciprocated and [began](#) on April 28 domestic procedures to put South Korea back on its own “white list.”

In addition to mending ties, the two leaders also agreed to further bilateral cooperation. This includes the creation of a new body to promote bilateral dialogue economic security to enhance the stability of supply chains for components. During his trip to Japan, President Yoon brought up new areas and industries for bilateral cooperation. In his meeting with the Korea-Japan business community, Yoon said there was “tremendous potential” in “new industries of the future such as digital transformation, semiconductors, batteries and electric vehicles.” After he returned to Seoul, he asked each ministry to come up with plans to expand cooperation with Japanese counterparts.

On March 18, the South Korean Ministry of Science and ICT [announced](#) possible plans to expand cooperation with Japan in AI, “5G and 6G wireless networks, space satellites and quantum technologies”, and to resume working-level talks on radio wave issues and upgrade it to the ministerial level. On March 24, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Economy and Finance Choo Kyungho [said](#) restored bilateral relations will provide “significant positive spillover” to the South Korean economy. On April 11, President and CEO of the Korea Trade-Investment Promotion Agency (KOTRA) Yu Jeung-yeol [spoke](#) about opportunities to expand business cooperation with Japan, including in “digital transformation, carbon neutrality and components” and potentially working together in third countries.

The business communities in both countries have been big supporters of the rapprochement. Some 63.6% of South Korean trade firms [surveyed](#) by KITA in late March said the summit will have positive impacts on business. During a roundtable with President Yoon in Tokyo, Chairman of South Korea’s Federation of Industries Kim Byong-joon said the two sides will expand economic exchanges in areas such as economic security and digital and green energy. The Chairman of Japan’s Keidanren Tokura Masakazu called it “a golden

opportunity” for a “forward-looking relationship.”

Both sides [played](#) their part by creating separate “future partnership” funds worth \$1.5 million each to promote youth exchanges and joint research between the two countries. Shortly after the summit, the six major South Korean business lobbies [released](#) a joint statement calling Yoon’s visit a “‘turning point’ in bilateral relations.” In April, Korea Chamber of Commerce and Industry (KCCI) and the Japan Chamber of Commerce and Industry (JCCI) [resumed](#) working-level meetings for the first time in six years and [announced](#) the resumption of their high-level annual conference in Busan on June 9. The South Korean Ministry of Trade, Industry and Energy [said](#) about 400 companies from both countries will participate in about five meetings in the first half of 2023 to expand economic and industrial exchanges.

After the summit, Kishida’s Cabinet approval rating [went up](#) from 35% in February to 40%. Some 63% of Japanese respondents thought that the summit with Yoon went well, while 21% disagreed. Importantly, even among those who disapprove of the Kishida Cabinet, 56% evaluated the summit positively, while 78% of those who supported the Kishida Cabinet did so. *Yomiuri Shimbun*, a major conservative daily in Japan, [commented](#) that it was “Yoon’s political decision that led to a breakthrough in bilateral relations,” advocating that the summit “should serve as turning point to deepen broad exchanges.”

Trilateral Cooperation at a New Height

The US has been unequivocal in reaffirming that a strong trilateral relationship is “key” and “central” to a shared vision of a free and open Indo-Pacific. This was evident by the US [responses](#) to the March 6 announcement and the Yoon-Kishida March 16 summit. When the South Korean government announced the compensation plan, the US wholeheartedly endorsed Seoul’s initiative. President Joe Biden [praised](#) the announcement as marking “a groundbreaking new chapter of cooperation and partnership” between its two allies. Similar endorsements came quickly from the US diplomatic establishment, including from [Secretary Blinken](#), [Deputy Secretary Sherman](#), and [Ambassador Goldberg](#).

Since the start of the Biden administration, Washington has worked constantly behind the scenes to create an environment for improving relations between Seoul and Tokyo, and to help reach some sort of reconciliation between its two closest allies in the Indo-Pacific. The US has done this by organizing and facilitating a series of trilateral meetings in the past year. The three partners have been in lockstep in maintaining diplomatic coordination and strengthening defense cooperation in the past months. They [held](#) the first session of the newly created trilateral economic security dialogue—an initiative from the Phnom Penh statement in November 2022—in Honolulu on Feb. 28. These efforts undoubtedly provided a major boost for the Yoon-Kishida summit.

Since the start of 2023, North Korea has remained committed to continuing its aggressive campaign of missile testing, and it has already quickly [matched](#) the pace of 2022, which we know was a record-breaking year of provocations. So far this year, North Korea has unveiled new capabilities to threaten South Korea and Japan, including tactical nuclear warheads, unmanned underwater attack drones, and strategic cruise missiles. By the end of April, North Korea conducted 12 missile tests—matching 2022—and launched more missiles than ever before in the same time period.

South Korea and Japan participated together with the US in [anti-submarine warfare exercises](#) and [anti-submarine and search-and-rescue exercise](#), which included the first search-and-rescue drills among the three nations in seven years. They also [continued](#) to respond to North Korean missile tests with trilateral missile defense exercises, working together to improve procedures to deter, track, and intercept potential missiles.

In mid-April, the three [hosted](#) the 13th Defense Trilateral Talks (DTT)—a director-general level defense meeting—for the first time in three years in Washington. The biggest takeaways from that meeting were the discussion to “regularize” missile defense and anti-submarine exercises to deter against the North Korean threat and plans to also resume trilateral exercises like maritime interdiction and anti-piracy exercises.

Still Unresolved Issues

The progress of the past few months has crossed one pressing issue off the long list of issues—for now. But there remain quite a few unresolved bilateral concerns that the two administrations must navigate in the foreseeable future. These include the Fukushima seafood and wastewater discharge plan, Dokdo/Takeshima, history textbooks, Sado Mine, and more.

Fukushima wastewater

Up first is an issue close to the Korean public's mind and appetite: seafood from the Fukushima region—which has been banned since 2013 for fears of radiation—and Japan's plan to soon discharge potentially unsafe wastewater—more than 1 million tons—from the disabled Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant into the Pacific Ocean. The wastewater discharge, expected to begin this spring or summer barring further delays, will likely continue to test the resolves of the two governments and their public.

The wastewater issue caused quite a stir in the aftermath of the Yoon-Kishida summit, as some Japanese media [reported](#) that Yoon told Japanese lawmakers he vowed to seek and improve Korean's public understanding over the discharge plan. Interestingly, this reporting was not [disavowed](#) by South Korean Foreign Minister Park Jin, who went on record to say that two other issues allegedly discussed—Dokdo/Takeshima and comfort women—were not talked about. The Yoon government at the end of March [declared](#) that there are no plans to lift the ban on Fukushima seafood. That didn't stop the pressure. In April, lawmakers from the opposition Democratic Party (DP)'s task force on this issue [visited](#) the Japanese embassy in Seoul to ask the Japanese government to suspend the discharge plan. They [followed](#) this meeting with a three-day study trip to Japan to look into the discharge plan and situation in the Fukushima area. Another DP lawmaker [proposed](#) a bill to recognize the potential damage from the plan as a “fishing industry disaster” to preemptively help fishermen.

Meanwhile, data from the Korea Customs Service on April 18 [showed](#) that South Korea's import of Japanese seafood increased by almost 21% in the first quarter of 2023, following a strong 2022 where imports hit a 12-year high. A

day after those numbers were released, the Ministry of Oceans and Fisheries, together with the South Korean Coast Guard, [announced](#) a two-month inspection into the marking of origin for imported seafood products over safety concerns.



Figure 4 Opposition party members talking to reporters about Japan's plan to release radioactive water from Fukushima nuclear power plant at Japanese Embassy on April 5, 2023 in Seoul, Republic of Korea. Photo: Yonhap

Textbooks, Disputed Islets and Sado Mine

The Japanese government's decision on March 28 to [approve](#) new textbooks with questionable language on sensitive historical issues again raised protests. One example was changing Korean men being conscripted to fight for the Japanese during World War II to “having participated,” and the second was adding the word “illegal” to describe South Korea's claims to the disputed Dokdo/Takeshima islets. The South Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs [expressed](#) strong regrets, saying that “the Korean government urges the Japanese government to sincerely inherit the spirit of apology and reflection of its past.”

Two weeks later, the Japanese foreign ministry [continued](#) using the phrase “illegal occupation” in its 2023 Diplomatic Bluebook. In an attempt to bolster Korea's claim to the islets, opposition leader Lee Jae-myung [introduced](#) a bill on March 21 to revise the Act on Sustainable Use of Dokdo to designate “Dokdo Day” (Oct. 25) as a legally recognized anniversary and require the Minister of Oceans and Fisheries to add plans about the use of islets in regular reports.

The Sado mine issue came up in late January, when Japan [resubmitted](#) its bid to list the controversial gold and silver mine on Sado

Island, which is linked to South Korean wartime forced labor, to the UNESCO World Heritage list. Japan's application in 2022 was deemed incomplete by the agency. If the bid is forwarded this time for recommendation, formal decision on its inclusion is expected in summer 2023. In late February, the South Korean National Assembly [adopted](#) a resolution urging Japan to withdraw its bid.

Looking Ahead

The big question now is whether this trend of restoring and expanding bilateral cooperation would continue throughout and beyond the Yoon presidency.

CHRONOLOGY OF JAPAN-KOREA RELATIONS

JANUARY—APRIL 2023

Jan. 1, 2023: US, South Korean, and Japanese nuclear envoys Sung Kim, Kim Gunn, and Funakoshi Takehiro [discuss](#) North Korea's call for strengthening self-defense capabilities and recent provocations.

Jan. 1, 2023: Japanese newspaper *Yomiuri Shimbun* [reports](#) that South Korea and Japan are considering sharing radar information in real time on North Korean missile launches by connecting their systems via the US Indo-Pacific Command.

Jan. 11, 2023: In the South Korean foreign ministry's report to President Yoon Suk Yeol on major policy tasks for 2023, First Vice Foreign Minister Cho Hyun-dong [says](#) Korea will continue to mend ties with Japan through "reasonable solutions" to pending issues, and also hope to resume shuttle diplomacy.

Jan. 11, 2023: In a joint policy briefing from the foreign and defense ministries, President Yoon [says](#) he does not take issue with Japan increasing its defense budget because of the North Korean missile threat.

Jan. 11, 2023: US Secretary of State Antony Blinken [reiterates](#) that the US is working to deepen trilateral cooperation with South Korea and Japan to deter against North Korean provocations.

Jan. 12, 2023: South Korean foreign ministry [holds](#) a public hearing at the National Assembly on the wartime forced labor issue and confirms a plan to compensate victims through a public foundation fund instead of through funds from Japanese companies. The announcement was strongly protested by victims and supporting civic groups.

Jan. 12, 2023: About 30 lawmakers from the opposition Democratic Party and the Justice Party [hold](#) a press conference with a civic group to denounce the South Korean government's compensation proposal for victims of wartime forced labor.

Jan. 13, 2023: South Korea's LG Energy Solution Ltd. and Japan's Honda Motor Co. joint US electric-vehicle battery venture, the L-H Battery Co. Inc. officially [starts](#) with plans for a facility in Jeffersonville, Ohio with an annual production capacity of 40 gigawatt hours.

Jan. 13, 2023: South Korean Foreign Minister Park Jin and Japanese Foreign Minister Hayashi Yoshimasa [speak](#) on the phone and agree to continue close discussion on the wartime forced labor issue, a day after South Korea proposes a new compensation plan.

Jan. 15, 2023: Chairperson of South Korea's Nuclear Safety and Security Commission Yoo Guk-hee [says](#) the safety review process for Japan's planned release of contaminated water from the Fukushima Daiichi power plant has not been completed.

Jan. 16, 2023: South Korean Foreign Ministry's Director-General for Asia and Pacific Affairs Seo Min-jung [meets](#) Japanese counterpart Funakoshi Takehiro in Tokyo for discussions on the wartime forced labor issue, including on South Korea's compensation plan proposal.

Jan. 17, 2023: Both South Korean President Yoon and Japanese Prime Minister Kishida Fumio [express](#) the desire to continue improving bilateral relations, with Yoon reiterating that the two are "the closest and most important neighbors."

Jan. 20, 2023: South Korean Second Vice Foreign Minister Lee Do-hoon [calls](#) in an official from the Japanese embassy in Seoul to lodge a formal protest over Japan's move the day before to resubmit a recommendation letter to list the Sado Island gold mine as a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

Jan. 24, 2023: South Korean Foreign Ministry's Director-General for Asia and Pacific Affairs Seo Min-jung [calls](#) in an official from the Japanese embassy in Seoul to lodge a protest over

Japanese Foreign Minister Hayashi Yoshimasa's speech in the Diet on Dokdo/Takeshima.

Jan. 26, 2023: South Korean foreign minister [says](#) in an interview with SBS that it is "desirable for Japanese companies" to voluntarily participate in the proposed compensation plan for the wartime forced labor issue.

Jan. 28, 2023: Japanese newspaper *Sankei Shimbun* [reports](#) that Japan is considering lifting export controls to South Korea as they continue to work on a resolution to the wartime forced labor issue. Kyodo News also [reports](#) that Japan has plans to uphold previous apology to Korea.

Jan. 30, 2023: South Korean Foreign Ministry's Director-General for Asia and Pacific Affairs Seo Min-jung [meets](#) again with Japanese counterpart Funakoshi Takehiro, this time in Seoul, to continue discussions on the wartime forced labor issue. Government sources say Japan is planning to uphold previous statements by Japanese prime ministers expressing "deep remorse" and "heartfelt apology" as part of a "sincere response" requested by South Korean officials.

Jan. 31, 2023: South Korean Special Representative for Korean Peninsula peace and security affairs Kim Gunn [meets](#) Japanese counterpart Funakoshi Takehiro in Seoul to discuss bilateral and trilateral (with the US) measures to deal with the North Korean threat.

Feb. 6, 2023: South Korean Prime Minister Han Duck-soo [tells](#) National Assembly that South Korea's relations with Japan "should move toward the future" in response to a question on how the wartime forced labor issue should be resolved.

Feb. 13, 2023: South Korean First Vice Foreign Minister Cho Hyun-dong [says](#) South Korea and Japan are narrowing differences on the wartime forced labor issue and hopes to resolve it soon.

Feb. 13, 2023: US Deputy of State Wendy Sherman [hosts](#) a trilateral minister meeting in Washington, DC with Korean and Japanese counterparts Cho Hyun-dong and Mori Takeo. Their joint statement reaffirms their commitment to the trilateral relationship and underscores that this is vital "not only to the security and prosperity of the Indo-Pacific

region but also to their shared global interests." They also vow to continue the success of their trilateral exercises on ballistic missile defense and anti-submarine warfare.

Feb. 13, 2023: South Korean First Vice Foreign Minister Cho Hyun-dong and Japanese Vice Foreign Minister Mori Takeo [hold](#) bilateral talks in Washington to find "common ground" on the wartime forced labor issue.

Feb. 16, 2023: US, South Korea, Japan, and Taiwan [hold](#) first meeting of the "Chip4" or "Fab 4" initiative to build a resilient semiconductor supply chain, involving senior government officials. They also [discuss](#) building an early warning system.

Feb. 18, 2023: US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, South Korean Foreign Minister Park Jin, and Japanese Foreign Minister Hayashi [hold](#) a trilateral meeting on the sidelines of the Munich Security Conference. They condemned North Korea's latest launch of an ICBM and committed to strengthening defense cooperation and joint deterrence.

Feb. 19, 2023: South Korean FM Park Jin and Japanese FM Hayashi [meet](#) in a 35-minute bilateral meeting on the sidelines of the Munich Security Conference to discuss "major points in dispute" in the wartime forced labor issue. The Korean side asked Japan to make a "make a political decision for a sincere response."

Feb. 22, 2023: US, South Korea, and Japan [carry](#) out joint maritime drills in the sea between Korea and Japan in response to North Korea's recent ICBM and SRBM tests. The trilateral exercises lasted about five hours and involved *Aegis* ships from each side and included exercises on information sharing and response procedures.

Feb. 22, 2023: Commander of the US Seventh Fleet Vice Adm. Karl Thomas, Commander of the ROK Fleet Vice Adm. Kim Myung-soo and Commander of Japan's Self-Defense Fleet Vice Adm. Saito Akira [meet](#) in the US Seventh Fleet base in Yokosuka, Japan to discuss cooperation against the North Korean threat.

Feb. 22, 2023: Japan [sends](#) Nakano Hideyuki, vice minister in the Cabinet Office to attend an annual ceremony for Dokdo/Takeshima. South Korean Foreign Ministry's Director-General for

Asia and Pacific Affairs Seo Min-jung lodged a protest with the Japanese Embassy in Tokyo.

Feb. 27, 2023: South Korean National Assembly [adopts](#) a resolution urging Japan to withdraw its bid to list the Sado gold mine as a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

Feb. 28, 2023: US, South Korea, and Japan [hold](#) first meeting of the newly established trilateral economic security dialogue in Honolulu, Hawaii.

Feb. 28, 2023: South Korean FM Park Jin [meets](#) families of victims of wartime forced labor to discuss South Korea-Japan negotiations on a resolution, and to listen to their opinions on the South Korea government proposal.

March 1, 2023: In his first speech addressing the March First Independence Movement Day, President Yoon [calls](#) Japan a “partner” to work together to face global challenges.

March 1, 2023: In a rally marking the March First Independence Movement, leader of the opposition Democratic Party Lee Jae-myung [says](#) the Yoon government is humiliating forced labor victims with their compensation plan. Other members of the opposition party also [criticized](#) President Yoon’s speech.

March 1, 2023: US Department of State spokesperson Ned Price [says](#) the US supports President Yoon’s vision for a “more cooperative, future oriented relationship with Japan.”

March 3, 2023: South Korea and Japan [create](#) a new channel of bilateral communication to negotiate a resolution of the wartime forced labor issue. The new channel is between South Korea’s National Security Office and Japan’s National Security Secretariat. This new channel is one of a few in addition to the foreign ministry.

March 6, 2023: South Korean FM Park Jin formally [announces](#) the Yoon government’s compensation plan for the 15 forced labor victims. It will use a public foundation called the Foundation for Victims of Forced Mobilization to compensate victims, which will be funded with “voluntary” donations from the private sector.

March 6, 2023: President Yoon [says](#) the decision to have compensation without the direct involvement of Japanese businesses was “aimed

at “moving toward a future-oriented relationship between South Korea and Japan.”

March 6, 2023: Prime Minister Kishida praises the compensation plan and says it will help restore “healthy ties” with South Korea, an “important partner.” He also says Japan will stand by its past apology to South Korea, referencing the Murayama Statement in 1995.

March 6, 2023: South Korean opposition leader Lee Jae-myung [calls](#) the Yoon government’s forced labor compensation plan “the biggest humiliation and stain in diplomatic history.”

March 6, 2023: Civic groups supporting forced labor victims, a coalition of 611 civic and labor organizations, [oppose](#) the compensation plan for not having direct contributions from responsible Japanese firms. A 94-year-old surviving forced labor victim said she will not accept any compensation from the foundation because it is from a third-party and also not an apology.

March 6, 2023: South Korea [drops](#) its complaint with the World Trade Organization (WTO) on Japan’s export controls of three important semiconductor precursor materials, hydrogen fluoride, fluorinated polyamide and photoresist.

March 6, 2023: Japan [announces](#) it will start discussions with South Korea on lifting export controls.

March 7, 2023: President Yoon [reiterates](#) that his government’s compensation plan for the forced labor victims was made without the direct involvement of Japanese companies in consideration of “future-oriented cooperation between South Korea and Japan” while “respecting the victims’ positions.”

March 7, 2023: Floor leader of the South Korean opposition party Park Hong-keun [asks](#) Yoon to apologize for his compensation plan, calling it an act of “serious humiliation for victims and all our people.”

March 7, 2023: Civic groups supporting forced labor victims [criticizes](#) the compensation plan in front of the National Assembly, saying “March 6 of 2023 will be recorded as the worst day in South Korean history and the second National Humiliation Day.”

March 9, 2023: South Korean Prime Minister Han Duck-soo [defends](#) the government's compensation plan for forced labor victims, saying the proposal is "result of repeated considerations to promote future-oriented Korea-Japan relations while swiftly healing the pain that victims of forced labor have suffered for a long time."

March 9, 2023: New leader of the ruling People Power Party in South Korea, Rep. Kim Gi-hyeon, say Korea-Japan relationship "should be rewritten for the future generation."

March 10, 2023: A Gallup Korea poll [shows](#) that 59% of Koreans do not approve of the Yoon government's compensation plan because it does not involve an apology or compensation from Japanese firms.

March 11, 2023: South Korean opposition leader Lee Jae-myung again [criticizes](#) the compensation plan at a rally, and says there is a chance that Japanese Self-Defense Forces may enter the Korean Peninsula under a joint trilateral military drill.

March 13, 2023: President Yoon [instructs](#) each ministry to find new cooperation projects to build a "future-oriented" relationship with Japan.

March 13, 2023: South Korea's opposition Democratic Party unilaterally [passes](#) a resolution in the National Assembly urging the Yoon government to withdraw its compensation plan for wartime forced labor victims.

March 15, 2023: POSCO Holdings Inc., South Korea's leading steelmaker [announces](#) it has donated \$3.1 million to the Foundation for Victims of Forced Mobilization to compensate forced labor victims.

March 15, 2023: South Korea and Japan [participate](#) in *Sea Dragon 23*, a US-led multinational anti-submarine warfare exercises off Guam, a few days after North Korea conducted its first test firing of strategic cruise missiles from a submarine.

March 16, 2023: North Korea test-[fires](#) an ICBM hours before the Yoon-Kishida summit in Tokyo.

March 16, 2023: President Yoon [arrives](#) in Tokyo for his two-day trip to meet Prime Minister Kishida, the first bilateral visit by a South Korean leader in 12 years. During their summit, they [agree](#) to "completely normalize" GSOMIA, a military intelligence sharing agreement. They [met](#) later for dinner and drinks at Rengatei, a famous Japanese restaurant known as the birthplace of *omurice*.

March 16, 2023: South Korean and Japanese business groups, the Federation of Korean Industries (FKI) and the Japan Business Federation (Keidanren) [announce](#) plans to create a separate fund to support cooperation projects, including youth exchange programs and joint research, as of the proposed resolution to the forced labor issue.

March 16, 2023: Japan announces decision to [lift](#) export controls on three precursor materials, fluorine polyimide, photoresist and hydrogen fluoride to South Korea. In return, South Korea [announces](#) withdrawal of its complaint with the WTO on Japan's export controls.

March 16, 2023: Two forced labor victims [file](#) a lawsuit in Seoul Central District Court against a South Korean affiliate of Mitsubishi Heavy Industries in order to collect compensation.

March 17, 2023: President Yoon [meets](#) members of the Japan-Korea Parliamentarians' Union and the Japan-Korea Cooperation Committee, including former Prime Ministers Aso Taro and Suga Yoshihide. He also meets leaders of the opposition Constitutional Democratic Party and Komeito, the junior coalition partner of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party.

March 17, 2023: President Yoon meets business leaders from South Korean and Japanese business groups, the Federation of Korean Industries (FKI) and the Japan Business Federation (Keidanren).

March 17, 2023: South Korean opposition leader Lee Jae-myung [criticizes](#) the Yoon-Kishida summit and calls it the "most humiliating and dreadful moment in the history of our diplomacy."

March 18, 2023: South Korean opposition leader Lee Jae-myung and about 3,000 people [demonstrate](#) in front of Seoul City Hall against Yoon's recent summit with Kishida.

March 20, 2023: Japan's *Kyodo News* [reports](#) that Prime Minister Kishida has invited President Yoon to the G-7 summit in Hiroshima in May.

March 21, 2023: South Korea and Japan fully [restore](#) the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA), which has been put on hold since 2019.

March 22, 2023: Speaker of South Korea's National Assembly and member of the opposition Democratic Party Kim Jin-pyo [says](#) President Yoon made a "big decision" with the forced labor issue, and also urged Japan to make a concession and an apology from Prime Minister Kishida.

March 22, 2023: South Korean Unification Minister Kwon Young-se [begins](#) a four-day trip to Japan, the first in 18 years, and meets top Japanese officials to discuss North Korea and the abductee issue.

March 23, 2023: South Korean PM Han Duck-soo [says](#) a "new horizon" has opened in the bilateral relations between Korea and Japan as a result of the Yoon-Kishida summit on March 16.

March 23, 2023: South Korea [completes](#) procedures to withdraw its WTO complaint on export controls against Japan and begin domestic procedures to reinstate Japan to its "white list" of trusted trade partner.

March 24, 2023: South Korean Finance Minister Choo Kyung-ho says restoring Korea-Japan bilateral relations will "give a significant positive spillover" to the South Korean economy.

March 28, 2023: Japan's Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology [approves](#) 149 textbooks, with some using language that waters down language on wartime conscription of South Koreans and on Dokdo/Takeshima.

March 30, 2023: South Korea's Office of the President [announces](#) that Korea will not resume imports of seafood from the Fukushima region.

March 30, 2023: South Korea and Japan [hold](#) a trade meeting of over 100 government officials in Seoul to discuss improving bilateral business and trade cooperation.

April 3, 2023: South Korea, Japan, and the US [begin](#) a two-day trilateral anti-submarine and search-and-rescue exercise involving the USS Nimitz aircraft carrier.

April 5, 2023: Daejeon District Court [seizes](#) four additional Korean-based patent rights of Mitsubishi Heavy Industries at the request of a few forced labor victim. This is part of the seizure and debt collection process for the compensation suit that was upheld by an appeals court and pending at the Supreme Court.

April 7, 2023: US Special Representative for the DPRK Sung Kim, South Korea's Special Representative for Korean Peninsula Peace and Security Affairs Kim Gunn, and Japan's Director-General of the Asian and Oceanian Affairs Bureau Takehiro Funakoshi [meet](#) trilaterally in Seoul to discuss recent North Korean missile tests and human rights situation.

April 7, 2023: Japan's Director-General of the Asian and Oceanian Affairs Bureau Takehiro Funakoshi also [meets](#) with Korean counterpart Seo Min-jung in Seoul to discuss follow-up measures to the Yoon government's compensation plan for the forced labor issue.

April 10, 2023: Four lawmakers from the South Korean opposition party [finish](#) their three-day trip to Japan to look into the wastewater discharge plan from the Fukushima nuclear power plant.

April 10, 2023: Korea Chamber of Commerce and Industry (KCCI) and Japan Chamber of Commerce and Industry (JCCI) [hold](#) working-level meeting in Seoul, the first time in six years.

April 11, 2023: South Korean Foreign Ministry [lodges](#) a protest with the Japanese embassy in Seoul for the inclusion of Dokdo/Takeshima in the 2023 Diplomatic Bluebook.

April 11, 2023: President and CEO of Korea Trade-Investment Promotion Agency (KOTRA) Yu Jeoung-yeol [speaks](#) about opportunities to expand business cooperation with Japan, including in "digital transformation, carbon neutrality and components" and working together in third countries.

April 13, 2023: US Special Representative for the DPRK Sung Kim, South Korea's Special Representative for Korean Peninsula Peace and

Security Affairs Kim Gunn, and Japan's Director-General of the Asian and Oceanian Affairs Bureau Takehiro Funakoshi [hold](#) phone calls to discuss North Korea's latest missile tests.

April 13, 2023: According to the South Korean Foreign Ministry, 10 of the 15 bereaved families of the forced labor victims have [agreed](#) to receive compensation from the Foundation for Victims of Forced Mobilization.

April 15, 2023: US, South Korea, and Japan [hold](#) the 13th Defense Trilateral Talks, a director-general level talk in Washington, D.C. to discuss the North Korean threat and ways to deepen trilateral security cooperation.

April 15, 2023: South Korea and Japan [agree](#) to boost tourism during South Korean Minister of Culture, Sports and Tourism Park Bo-gyoon's visit to Tokyo.

April 17, 2023: South Korea and Japan [hold](#) a 2+2 meeting of director-general level foreign ministry and defense ministry officials in Seoul to discuss the North Korean threat and trilateral security cooperation.

April 19, 2023: South Korea's Ministry of Oceans and Fisheries [announce](#) a two-month inspection with the Coast Guard into the marking of origin for imported seafood products over safety concerns.

April 21, 2023: South Korean foreign ministry [expresses](#) "deep disappointment and regret" after Prime Minister Kishida sent a ritual offering of a "masakaki" tree stand to Yasukuni Shrine.

April 24, 2023: South Korea [reinstates](#) Japan back to its "white list" of trusted trading partners, allowing South Korean companies to fast-track export of strategic items to Japan.

April 28, 2023: Japan [begins](#) domestic procedures to relist South Korea back to its "white list" of trusted trading partners.

April 29, 2023: Japanese newspaper *Yomiuri Shimbun* [reports](#) that Prime Minister Kishida will likely visit Seoul either May 7 or 8 for another summit with South Korean President Yoon.