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Public Opinion Surveys and Diplomatic Dynamics in Korea-Japan Relations

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Last year, President Yoon Suk Yeol and Prime Minister Kishida Fumio made significant efforts to develop a strong working relationship to advance the bilateral relationship. In a recent interview with public broadcaster KBS, President Yoon said his Japanese counterpart is an honest leader. In recent months, surveys looking at both the Korean and Japanese publics have found that views of the other side have trended positively, following the political rehabilitation of the relationship. But this positive trajectory is not promised to continue. History issues continue to float in the background, and the democratic process is poised to weigh on policymakers. As always, steady political leadership will be needed to maintain the upward progress in Korea-Japan relations this year.

On the Japanese side of the ledger, feelings towards Korea have turned quite positive. Last month, the Japanese Cabinet Office released the results of a public opinion survey looking at attitudes toward nearby countries and world powers. A total of 52.8 percent of respondents said they “feel an affinity” with Korea, which is up from 45.9 percent in the last survey. There was a minute decrease in the number of respondents who definitely felt affinity with Korea, with 10.7 percent of respondents this year compared to 11.0 percent last year. But there was also an increase in the number of respondents who said they rather felt affinity with Korea, with 42.1 percent of respondents this year, compared to 34.9 percent last year. When broken down by gender, almost 60 percent of women said they held warm feelings toward Korea, compared to 47.1 percent of men. While 23.9 percent of

young adults aged 18 to 29 said they definitely had positive feelings when it came to Korea, this answer was given by a total of 54.3 percent of respondents aged 70 and above. Finally, the survey found that a total of 73.1 percent of respondents viewed the future development of Korea- Japan relations to be essential. This was up about five points from the previous year.

The Korean side of the ledger has also recovered. This month, the Japan Press Research Institute released the results of their survey that included questions on foreign countries' views of Japan. The organization reported that 44 percent of Korean respondents said they held a positive view of Japan. This four-point increase continues a positive trend from the year President Yoon was elected, with 39.9 percent of respondents saying they had a positive view of Japan in 2022. That was an increase of 8.7 percent from the previous year's 31.2 percent. Like Japan, younger Koreans were more likely to hold a positive view of Japan, with such views being held to close to 60 percent of respondents in their teens and twenties. But unlike their Japanese counterparts, 49.6 percent of men held positive views of Japan, compared to 38.3 percent of women.

One important implication of the two surveys concerns young people. Close to two-thirds of young people under thirty years of age in both Korea and Japan have a sense of positive feelings towards the other side. This is most notable on the Korean side, where interest in Japan and Japanese products is booming. Korean consumers launched the "No Japan" campaign in 2019 after Japan struck Korea from its whitelist of trusted trade partners. But five years later, the Korea JoongAng Daily observes that the pendulum has shifted to a "Yes Japan" side. The paper said in a February article that sales of Japanese beer have recovered, audiences flocked to see the Japanese animated film "Slam Dunk," and seven million Korean tourists traveled to Japan, making up the largest group of foreigners. President Yoon has made significant efforts to resolve contemporary problems stemming from the legacy of the Japanese occupation of the Korean Peninsula. But experts also point out that young people in general take a different approach towards Japan than their elders. "Although they dive deep into historical events...they consider establishing their taste and experiencing new culture more precious," Dr. Koo Jeong-woo told the Korea JoongAng Daily. "They are not allowing those historical events to get in their way."

The gender of respondents is another interesting implication. On the one hand, the Korea Wave is probably the cause for the strong interest in Korea by Japanese women. Japanese consumers broadly have interest in Korean products ranging from food to music, but older women have been a notable demographic ever since Winter Sonata was first broadcast in Japan in 2004. It seems like the Korea Wave is still surging in this area.

On the other hand, Korean women have strongly negative views of Japan. This is likely due to the legacy of the comfort women system, by which Imperial Japan sexually enslaved women during World War II. Japan has made attempts to address this particular atrocity, culminating in the 2015 comfort women agreement. Despite withering under the progressive Moon Jae-in government, his successor's administration has tried to make progress in overcoming this hurdle. But this remains a difficult subject for Japan, with Foreign Minister Kamikawa Yoko strongly protesting in November after the Seoul High Court awarded compensation to former comfort women. Even if this history is decades in the past, the comfort women issue remains influential in shaping Korean views of Japan.

As noted previously, there are significant domestic political pressures in both Seoul and Tokyo in the short term. When Koreans go to the polls in April to elect their representatives to the National Assembly, President Yoon won't be on the ballot, but his party members will be. A recent survey by Realmeter published in February found that the president's conservative party has a 39.1 percent approval rating, compared to the Democratic Party's 40.2 percent. The president himself has a comparatively healthy 39.5 percent approval rating. A source told the Yonhap News Agency that President Yoon wanted to devote more attention to domestic issues ahead of the election, which is one reason why he canceled his previously scheduled trip to Europe. No visits to Japan or meetings with Japanese officials have been announced. But a presidential spokesperson denied public reports that discussions were under way for Prime Minister Kishida to visit Seoul. The Japanese leader himself faces a precarious position, with several surveys showing strong public disapproval, reflecting his management of the campaign finance scandal engulfing the ruling Liberal Democratic Party. Given these domestic political issues, it remains to be seen how either President Yoon or Prime Minister Kishida will handle their foreign policies.

With a year of positive development in the Korea-Japan bilateral relationship, it is tempting to remain optimistic for its continued progress. The recent surveys by the Japanese Cabinet Office and JPRI show that there are constituents that hold positive feelings towards the other side. Particularly the younger generation, given their temporal distance from the Japanese occupation, may be able to handle contentious historical issues in a better way than their predecessors. But in the upcoming months, leaders in both Seoul and Tokyo have domestic concerns that will require most of their attention. Hopefully they will be able to maintain their upward momentum this year.

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Return to the Peninsula