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THE PENINSULA

How Korea Is Viewed From Japan

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In the early weeks after President Yoon Suk Yeol's attempted imposition of martial law and his subsequent impeachment by the National Assembly, the response in Japan among foreign policy specialists and in the mass media was uniformly supportive, even admiring, of the resilience of Korea's democratic institutions. "Yoon's action was undemocratic and inexcusable," a senior correspondent with wide experience covering international affairs at the liberal daily *Asahi Shimbun* told this writer, speaking on background. "That view was widely shared in Japan right after the day of his martial law declaration and its revocation by the parliament."

But with the arrest of President Yoon and the perception of deepening division within Korea, Japanese observers have become increasingly apprehensive, with growing worries about an absence of order. Those concerns can be perceived in the careful, though still supportive, words of senior officials and in the editorials of major Japanese dailies.

"We are watching the internal situation [in South Korea] with great interest," Foreign Minister Iwaya Takeshi told the conservative monthly *Gekkan Nippon*. "But I want to believe in the resilience of Korea's democracy." Iwaya echoed widespread concerns about a breakdown in the progress made in bilateral Korea-Japan relations as a result of the political shifts in Seoul. "This is the year of the anniversary of normalization of relations between Japan and Korea," Iwaya said. "Japan-Korea relations have gone through various

phases and there have been periods of cooling down. However, Japan-Korea relations have improved greatly during the Kishida administration. We will continue to make efforts to maintain this momentum.”

The conservative dailies in Japan have expressed increasing unease over the political polarization in Korea, noting the rise of support for the conservatives and expressing worries that North Korea may take advantage of these divisions. “The public may also have a growing a sense of disgust toward the opposition, which has exacerbated the turmoil,” wrote *Yomiuri Shimbun*, Japan’s largest paper, in a January 16 editorial. “North Korea has stepped up its provocations already this year, such as by launching ballistic missiles twice. It is time for both the ruling and opposition parties to try to resolve the situation through calm discussions in accordance with judicial procedures.”

“Ruling and opposition parties cannot afford to remain fixated on their political strife and neglect external vigilance,” advised the right-wing daily *Sankei Shimbun* on January 20. “Doing so only invites neighboring autocratic nations to take advantage of the situation. Those nations include North Korea, which is strengthening its nuclear capabilities.”

Even the liberal *Asahi Shimbun* worried about the consequences of the political divide within Korea on both security and economic issues. “In this leaderless situation, both ruling and opposition parties are challenged to set aside their perennial partisan politics and narrow party interests to stabilize politics through dialogue,” it wrote in a January 16 editorial.

Japanese news coverage of Korea has markedly dropped since mid-January. As the Korean battles moved into the courts and the legal system, accompanied by street protests, Japanese interest noticeably waned. “The volume of news reports declined as the situation became prolonged with domestic legal procedures,” explained the veteran *Asahi Shimbun* journalist. He noted that the perception of a descent into political partisanship fed that fading interest. “The Japanese public voices praising the Korean people as faithful defenders of democracy waned as the conservative party’s approval ratings took a V-shaped turn, even beating the progressives lately,” the writer explained. “It looked like those developments unfolded not as a defense of democracy but as a political game driven by ideological and social divisions.”

Another factor in Japan’s shift of focus is not surprisingly the return to power of Donald Trump, and the attention of the Japanese government has been swamped by the need to cope with the constant flow of events in Washington and by preparations for Prime Minister Ishiba Shigeru’s visit to the White House. The Japanese government, however, continues to express confidence in Korea and stress the importance of the Korea-Japan relationship and the trilateral cooperation with the United States forged during the Joe Biden administration. To some degree, such sentiments are fed by the fear of North Korea’s resurgence as a result of its security alliance with Russia. “North Korean soldiers have been deployed to the Ukrainian front and there are concerns that the repercussions will extend to Asia,” Foreign Minister Iwaya recently told the monthly *Bungei Shunju*.

Prime Minister Ishiba’s visit to Washington was mostly focused on avoiding serious conflict with the Trump administration on economic issues, from trade to investment. But the Japanese government is clearly absorbed by the need to keep the United States engaged in East Asia. The possibility of a renewed effort by Trump to hold talks with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un to reach a limited deal that de facto accepts their status as a nuclear-

weapon state worries Japanese policymakers. The joint statement issued by the two governments after the February 7 meeting reflected Japanese views and concerns and was remarkably consistent with those issued during the previous US administration. President Trump made no mention of the statement, but Prime Minister Ishiba and others placed great emphasis on it—likely because it was largely drafted by the Japanese Foreign Ministry, according to a senior Japanese official.

On Korea, the statement read: “The two leaders expressed their serious concerns over and the need to address the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea’s (DPRK’s) nuclear and missile programs and reaffirmed their resolute commitment to the complete denuclearization of the DPRK. Both countries underscored the need to deter and counter the DPRK’s malicious cyber activities and the DPRK’s increasing military cooperation with Russia. In addition, both countries affirmed the importance of the Japan-U.S.-ROK trilateral partnership in responding to the DPRK and upholding regional peace and prosperity. Japan reiterated its determination to achieve an immediate resolution of the abductions issue, which the United States supported.”

For now, this concurrence of views exists, at least on paper. But events in Korea itself are likely to once again grab Japanese attention.

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