



THE PENINSULA

Hopeful First Steps in Korea-Japan Relations Under Lee Jae Myung

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Attendees at a reception last week by the South Korean Embassy at Tokyo's New Otani Hotel, held to celebrate the sixtieth anniversary of the normalization of diplomatic relations between South Korea and Japan, were pleasantly surprised when Japanese Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba showed up to deliver a warm address. He was followed by former prime ministers Fumio Kishida and Yoshihide Suga and accompanied by a host of Japanese dignitaries.

The celebratory mood reflected the view in Japan following the meeting between newly elected South Korean President Lee Jae Myung and Prime Minister Ishiba at the Group of Seven (G7) Summit. The meeting was marked by not only cordiality but a clear mutual desire to tighten cooperation. Unspoken, but implicit, was the shared interest that both leaders have in countering the growing chaos in global affairs, from trade wars to actual wars, and their growing sense that the South Korea-Japan partnership is an effective response to the advent of Donald Trump's America-First regime.

"We have an inseparable relationship, like neighbors who share the same garden," Lee said. "Even if we have small differences of opinion, I hope we can develop a relationship in which we cooperate and help each other in various areas."

While the two governments continue to voice support for trilateral cooperation with the United States, it was evident that the real emphasis of their meeting was on bilateral links.

"With difficulties intensifying in terms of the international trade environment and international relations, South Korea and Japan can be of great help to one another when they cooperate in many areas in a relationship that is both close and complementary," Lee

Contrary to some expectations, President Lee went out of his way to dispel the idea that he is bound to a hostile view toward Japan. He emphasized building a stable and respectful relationship as the two countries near the sixtieth anniversary of the normalization of diplomatic relations on June 22.

Lee has by no means abandoned a critical view of Japan's colonial rule over the Korean Peninsula and the ongoing problems of apology and compensation for abuses, including sexual slavery and forced labor.

"We cannot dwell on the past," Lee said in an interview with Time Magazine before the presidential election. "But Japan continues to deny its history and does not sincerely apologize, which hurts us Koreans."

But Lee also called for separating those issues from the need for cooperation, particularly in dealing with common issues such as trade wars and challenges from China, Russia, and even North Korea.

This "two-track" approach is reminiscent of the progressive Roh Moo-hyun administration from 2003 to 2008. President Roh proclaimed a commitment to a pragmatic handling of ties with Japan while retaining a critical view of Japan's past.

Former Korean Ambassador to Japan Shin Kak-soo hinted he was cautiously optimistic about the new South Korean president's initial approach.

"For the time being, it is true that the Lee Jae Myung government has shifted gear in handling the thorny bilateral ties with Tokyo drastically, given his past record of words and deeds that had been strongly anti-Japanese," he told this writer in an email. "I hope that he and his administration will keep this path for a long time."

The View in Japan

This mirrors the view in Japan, where cautious optimism is widely shared, particularly in official circles.

"Lee has made an amiable debut in Japanese eyes that contradicts prior expectations," a veteran Japanese journalist for the liberal *Asahi Shimbun*, with deep experience in foreign affairs, told this writer. As he recounted, officials in the prime minister's office told Japanese journalists that they were pleasantly surprised by Lee's behavior during his first meeting with Ishiba, including the wide smile that Lee flashed in official photos.

"They took it a sign that the Korean general sentiment to Japan has improved so much as to let Lee feel safe performing diplomatically in public with a Japanese leader," the *Asahi* journalist said. "There is a little bit of wishful assessment probably, but I sense that Lee's slogan 'pragmatic diplomacy' started well."

According to this analysis, what happened in Canada was assisted by Trump and his rather abrupt and rude departure from the summit. "In that sense, as a short-term effect, Trump's arrogance resulted in bringing about a favorable mood between South Korea and Japan," the Japanese diplomatic correspondent told this author.

Along with the Trump effect, there is evidence of a growing convergence of public opinion in both countries, particularly due to the perception of shared external threat from China, North Korea, and Russia. A recent joint poll by Japan's Asahi Shimbun and South Korea's Dong A Ilbo support for strengthening defense cooperation in both countries. Compared to a similar poll conducted at the time of the fiftieth anniversary, there was a clear upswing in positive views of each other, reflecting growing cultural, economic, and other ties, a product in part of the massive flow of tourists between the two countries and the impact of the popular Korean wave in Japan.

Still, South Korean and Japanese citizens remain far apart on certain issues. In the joint poll, respondents were asked about historical issues arising out of Japan's colonization of the Korean Peninsula from 1910 to 1945. In Japan, opinions were evenly split: 46 percent of respondents said the issues had been "resolved," while the same percentage of respondents said they had "not been resolved."

In contrast, only 17 percent of Koreans said the issues had been "resolved," still up from 2 percent a decade ago, while 80 percent said they had "not been resolved," a slight drop from 95 percent in the previous poll.

The Roh Precedent

The Roh presidency offers grounds for caution about the future course of the relationship. Roh began his term with similar goals of separating history from future relations, while simultaneously insisting that Japan confront its past. But within a year, a series of issues sent the relationship spiraling into deep discord, including conflicts over the competing territorial claims, Japanese textbook revisions, and the Japanese prime minister's continued visits to the controversial Yasukuni Shrine.

Lee Jong-seok, who served as Roh's national security advisor and has returned as head of the National Intelligence Service (NIS) under President Lee, recounted this spiral in his memoir.

"Throughout its tenure, the administration could not find a point of diplomatic balance with Japan over the history issue. Each time history became a topic, ROK-Japanese relations lurched...We are still living in a time when all our citizens are victims of the Japanese empire," Lee wrote. "There was no room for future-oriented ROK policy toward Japan as long as Japan constantly tried to legitimize its history of aggression."

That danger could easily resurface, argues Ambassador Shin, who remains an active player in I.5-track diplomacy between the two countries.

"We should not forget that there lurk many diverse landmines ahead in our sensitive bilateral ties," Shin told this writer. "President Lee should not repeat President Roh's mistake that he vowed not to raise history issues at his inauguration, but made an about-face abruptly in his mid-term."

Japanese Prime Minister Ishiba also has work to do to avoid this outcome. This includes gestures and steps to reassure South Koreans that he is also ready to face the past—from using the upcoming anniversaries, such as the eightieth anniversary of the end of World War II, and strongly restate Japan's apologies to urging Japanese companies to contribute to the South Korean fund to compensate wartime forced laborers.

For that, Ishiba must deal with his own domestic political challenges—a right-wing faction of the conservative Liberal Democratic Party that opposes such moves and a weak minority government facing a crucial test in elections for the upper house of the National Diet in July.

“Ishiba has signaled an interest in a more constructive relationship with South Korea in the past — based on a more forthright reckoning with Imperial Japan’s conduct on the Korean peninsula — but the LDP’s right wing still makes it difficult to be overly solicitous of South Korea without facing domestic resistance,” observes Tobias Harris, founder of the political risk firm Japan Foresight.

“While a victory in the upper house elections will not make this resistance disappear, it may give him more space to express his own views, in remarks on the anniversary of the end of the war for example. In general, other things being equal, if Ishiba can hold power instead of a more right-wing alternative, it’s positive for the bilateral relationship.”

Looking to the Future

Ultimately, external events may shape whether relations deepen or fray. From North Korean belligerence to Trumpist isolationism and chaos, developments beyond South Korea and Japan are likely to continue driving the two neighbors closer together, whether they like it or not.

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Photo from the Japanese Prime Minister’s Office.

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