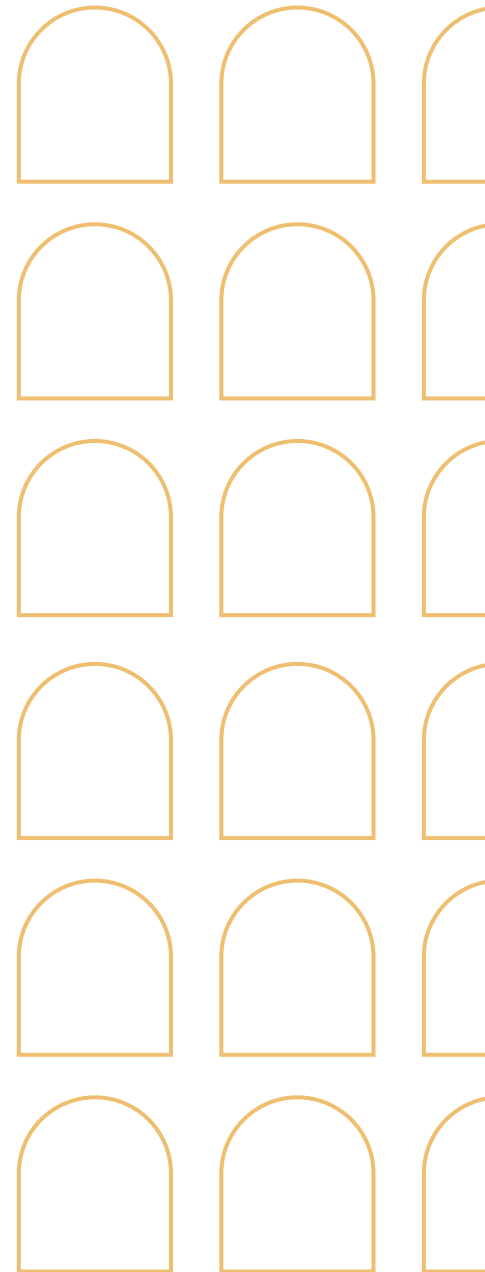


POLICY BRIEF

Continuity or change? Navigating ROK-Japan relations in the post-election era

Managing ROK-Japan relations: between security and history

Relations between the Republic of Korea (ROK) and Japan undoubtedly constitute one of the key variables in the development of East Asian international relations and one of the more complex and politically sensitive bilateral relationships in the region. There are several factors that influence interactions between Seoul and Tokyo, ranging from a difficult and controversial historical legacy to common security challenges, a close economic connection and strong domestic political dynamics. In recent years, these dynamics have affected relations both negatively and positively, oscillating between cooperation and confrontation. Changes in the political leadership in both countries and transformations in the regional and global situation have directly affected management of the relationship and mutual perceptions of it.



Issue 2026/06

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TOSHIBA

Toshiba International Foundation

This policy brief analyses the most recent developments in ROK-Japan relations by focusing on the dynamics of change and continuity, in particular in relation to the domestic dimension of the relationship in South Korea and the interaction between the bilateral relationship and a broader trilateral framework that includes the United States.

While Korea-Japan relations are relevant in the domestic politics of both, there is also a sort of cognitive dissonance in how the historical dimension of the relationship is understood and evaluated in the two countries and how it still influences the current political debate. For the currently dominant conservative mainstream of Japanese politics, controversies related to the colonisation period, which took place in the first half of the 20th century, were settled with the normalisation agreement of 1965, while for a significant portion of South Korea's politicians and public opinion they still remain an open wound for which Japan has never properly atoned. This dissonance means that the issue of bilateral relations has assumed a much more central and significant, but at the same time controversial, value in the political debate in South Korea rather than in Japan.

As this brief explains, relations with Japan have become deeply embedded in South Korean domestic politics, in which they are often used as a tool of political contestation between conservative and progressive forces, reflecting different approaches to history, security and foreign policy strategy.

The election of progressive President Lee Jae-myung in South Korea, with a more critical stance toward Tokyo particularly regarding the controversial historical legacy, led to mounting expectations of a substantive policy shift, compared to the rapprochement under his conservative predecessor. In addition to this, a second key element analysed is the role of the United States and the framing of the bilateral relationship within the trilateral context. The brief assesses how changes in the leadership and priorities in Washington, particularly following the return of Donald Trump to the White House, have affected cooperation among the three countries and influenced ROK-Japan relations.

Despite these changes, the post-election phase has been mainly characterised by continuity. In practice, political change in Seoul did not fundamentally alter the approach to relations with Japan, even though the current administration bases its approach on a pragmatic understanding of its foreign policy priorities rather than value-based diplomacy. At the same time, there is evidence to suggest that ultra-conservative leaders such as Takaichi Sanae have taken a pragmatic approach, notwithstanding their personal anti-Korean nationalistic feelings. Concurrently, the uncertainty introduced by the election of Donald Trump regarding the role of the United States in the region and within the trilateral framework could negatively affect the relationship, but it is also opening new possibilities of reinforcing cooperation between Seoul and Tokyo. Whether this balance can be sustained will shape the trajectory of ROK-Japan relations in the coming years, with implications not only for bilateral ties but also for stability in Northeast Asia more broadly.

The domestic dimension of South Korea-Japan relations

Over the course of the years the domestic political dimension of the relationship between Tokyo and Seoul has also become significant, in particular for South Korea. According to the different perceptions of the issue between the two countries presented above, relations with Japan have assumed a broader relevance for both Korean policymakers and the population at large. This goes beyond strategic-security and economic-trade considerations and includes an identity-emotional dimension that results directly from the controversial historical past and the legacy that still influences the relationship today.¹

This dynamic has rendered interactions deeply embedded in internal political debates, leading to a strong politicisation of South Korea's relations with Japan. This process started to be particularly relevant after the democratisation of 1987, when foreign policy entered the realm of domestic political contestation. The two main foreign policy traditions – conservative and progressive – developed different approaches to the main foreign policy issues, and more specifically relations with North Korea, the

1 Kim, Ji-Young. 2014. "Escaping the Vicious Cycle: Symbolic Politics and History Disputes Between South Korea and Japan." *Asian Perspective* 38 (1): 31-60; Glosserman, Brad and Scott A. Snyder. 2015. *The Japan-South Korea Identity Clash: East Asian Security and the United States*. New York: Columbia University Press.

alliance with the United States and relations with Japan. On the one hand, conservatives favoured a strong relationship with Washington, a hard-line approach to Pyongyang and a more conciliatory position regarding Tokyo, in line with the political legacy of the regime of Park Chung-hee, who pursued normalisation of relations with Japan in 1965, and also with requests from the US, which traditionally supported positive relations between South Korea and Japan. On the other hand, progressives focused on improving dialogue and cooperation with North Korea, a more autonomous approach in the alliance with the United States and in the region, and a more sceptical stance on Japan, as a consequence of the historical controversies that still represented a persistent source of tension between the two countries. Under these circumstances, the political affiliation of the Korean government and the political alternation in power in the country, with conservatives and progressives having different approaches to dealing with this neighbour, became one of the key factors that shaped the relationship.

This dynamic was exemplified by significant changes in ROK-Japan relations that took place with the election of the progressive Moon Jae-in in 2017, which led to a deterioration of the bilateral relationship, which had notably improved in the later part of Park Geun-hye's presidency (2013-2017), particularly thanks to the 2015 'comfort women' agreement. The crisis that erupted in 2019, following South Korean Supreme Court rulings on forced labour during the colonial period, marked a turning point, demonstrating once again that historical issues deemed unresolved by part of the political spectrum and public opinion could affect political-diplomatic relations. In the following years, disputes related to forced labour, the 'comfort women' issue, history textbooks and sovereignty of the Dokdo/Takeshima islets continued to resurface, which reinforced their role as structural points of contention.² While tension started to reduce during the following years of the Moon presidency, thanks mainly to the influence of and pressure from the Biden administration starting from 2021, a general

sentiment of distrust remained between the two countries, especially concerning issues related to the controversial historical legacy and its consequences, such as in the case of the Japanese government retaliation to the 2019 Supreme Court ruling with punitive export controls of high-end tech and components.

The election of the conservative Yoon Suk-yeol in March 2022 also led to a significant change in the management of relations between South Korea and Japan, in line with the above-mentioned differences between the two main political traditions. During the electoral campaign, Yoon actively reached out to Tokyo, calling for improvement of bilateral relations.³ This positive stance was later realised after his inauguration, first with several brief meetings with Japan's Prime Minister Kishida Fumio in 2022 at international gatherings, and then with Yoon's trip to Tokyo in March 2023, the first bilateral visit of a South Korean president in twelve years. The meeting marked a turning point in relations between the two countries and reinforced the shared vision of both leaders that strengthening mutual cooperation had become a strategic part of their foreign policy. Most of the controversial issues that had emerged during the previous Moon administration were addressed. The summit also led to resumption of 'shuttle diplomacy' between the two countries. Kishida returned the visit two months later on 7 May, the first visit by a Japanese Prime Minister to Korea since 2018. The meeting confirmed the steps taken in the March summit and was further evidence of rapid improvement of relations between the two countries.⁴ The new positive course of relations continued to bear fruit on the diplomatic front with several more meetings between Yoon and Kishida in 2023 and 2024, multiple diplomatic events at the ministerial and operational levels, including reciprocal visits between defence and foreign ministers to strengthen political dialogue and enhance operational coordination, and a series of lower level meetings on a number of different issues ranging from security to the economy, trade, science and technology. The departure of Kishida, following his decision not to run for leader of the

2 Kim, Ji-Young, Wenxin Li and Seunghye Lee. 2021. "Making Sense of Japan's Export Restrictions against South Korea: Domestic Symbolism, Empowered Premiership, and Anti-Korean Sentiment." *Asian Survey* 61 (4): 683-710.

3 Yoon, Suk-yeol. 2022. "South Korea Needs to Step Up: The Country's Next President on His Foreign Policy Vision." *Foreign Affairs*. 8 February. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/south-korea/south-korea-needs-step-yoon-suk-yeol>.

4 Lee, Ji-Young and Andy Lim. 2023. "Japan-Korea Relations: The Return of Shuttle Diplomacy." *Comparative Connections* 25 (1): 147-160.

ruling Liberal Democratic Party, also ending his term as Prime Minister, which led to the election of Ishiba Shigeru in 2024, did not have a significant impact on relations with Korea, which remained very positive also with the new Japanese government.

Yoon Suk-yeol's bold decision to change course in terms of relations with Japan bore positive results for the relationship and in terms of alignment with the US, which for a long time had advocated rapprochement between its two main Asian allies. Moreover, these efforts to mend ties with Tokyo were in line with the Yoon administration's overall strategy to enhance the country's international role and image as a responsible global player that supported democracy and the international liberal order. At the same time, however, this strategic realignment was mostly based on presidential decisions, while on the domestic front the situation was more complicated with strong criticism from the South Korean opposition, civil society actors and a significant portion of public opinion. The issues related to historical controversies, to which other controversial issues were added, including discharge into the sea of Fukushima treated wastewater in summer 2023, remained politically sensitive due to their strong resonance in Korean public opinion.

While Yoon Suk-yeol deliberately chose to keep a low profile on these sensitive issues in order to preserve the momentum for rapprochement, their re-emergence indicated that a sustainable reconciliation process could not avoid addressing them more comprehensively. The experience of the 2015 'comfort women' agreement, the legitimacy of which was strongly contested domestically, further demonstrated the importance of building broad domestic consensus.

The domestic vulnerability of the rapprochement became particularly evident in 2024. A resounding defeat of Yoon's conservative party in the National Assembly elections revealed widespread dissatisfaction with government policies.⁵ In this context, Yoon's repositioning regarding Japan raised

strong criticism in South Korea, especially from the political opposition led by the Democratic Party and its leader Lee Jae-myung, in particular, who called this move "the biggest humiliation" in the country's diplomatic history, from civil society organisations supporting the forced labour victims and from large sectors of public opinion, as opinion polls reported on the matter.⁶ The progressive political front actively pursued a strategy of politicisation of ROK-Japan relations, according to the domestic political divide previously mentioned, in order to use it to build internal opposition to the conservatives and to reinforce public consensus towards themselves.

The crisis triggered by Yoon Suk-yeol's declaration of martial law on 3 December 2024 further undermined the stability of Korea's foreign policy direction. Although not directly linked to Japan, the crisis exposed how strongly the rapprochement had depended on decisions by the president and on his political capital, as shown by the inclusion of a reference to Yoon's policy on Japan in the first impeachment motion filed on 4 December.⁷ In this scenario, after the Constitutional Court confirmed the impeachment in April 2025, the following presidential election on 3 June 2025 led to him being replaced by the progressive candidate Lee Jae-myung, which meant a significant reorientation of Seoul's policy towards Japan, with potentially destabilising effects on the fragile process of rapprochement.

The 2025 presidential election in South Korea and its significance for ROK-Japan relations

The election of Lee Jae-myung as South Korean president, which was widely expected after the political crisis triggered by Yoon Suk-yeol's declaration of martial law, was considered by many observers to be a probable turning point in Korea-Japan relations. This assumption was based on the previous very critical position that Lee had adopted regarding Yoon Suk-yeol's new

5 Lee, Jong-eun. 2024. "South Korean President Yoon faces foreign policy challenges after the National Assembly election". *The Conversation*. 19 April. <https://theconversation.com/south-korean-president-yoon-faces-foreign-policy-challenges-after-the-national-assembly-election-227650>.

6 Lee, Ji-Young and Andy Lim. 2023. "Japan-Korea Relations: The Return of Shuttle Diplomacy." *Comparative Connections* 25 (1): 147-160.

7 Sneider, Daniel. 2024. "Yoon coup a gift to foes at home, bad for solidarity with Japan, US." *Asia Times*. 8 December. <https://asiatimes.com/2024/12/yoons-coup-a-gift-to-foes-at-home-bad-for-solidarity-with-japan-us/>.

policy on Tokyo and also on the traditional view of the progressive party regarding the matter. Under Yoon's administration, as leader of the opposition Lee Jae-myung had very clearly expressed strong disapproval of the president's new Japan policy. However, immediately after becoming the Democratic Party candidate and the strongest contender in the electoral competition, he started to tone down his rhetoric and become more moderate,⁸ demonstrating that his previous harsh Japan-bashing positions were mostly used for instrumental purposes of consensus-building. In fact, a closer look suggests that this more moderate stance was already present during Lee Jae-myung's previous presidential campaign in 2022, when he presented a "pragmatic" foreign policy platform in which he criticised Japan's economic retaliation against the 2019 Supreme Court sentence but also focused on promoting economic, social and diplomatic cooperation.⁹

The moderate turn that took place during the 2025 campaign, and was maintained even more after the inauguration of the new administration in June of the same year, was in line with this pragmatic approach to foreign policy that is guiding Lee's presidency. He maintained a friendly relationship with the Japanese government, choosing Tokyo as his first visit abroad, holding a summit with then Prime Minister Ishiba Shigeru and issuing a joint statement that included a commitment to firmly maintain shuttle diplomacy. Lee also reaffirmed the idea of pursuing a "dual track" policy, separating controversial historical issues from security and economic cooperation. Unlike the approach of his predecessors, the policy of the newly elected president was not value-based diplomacy but rather a pragmatic approach that considered Japan a key actor in the region and a crucial partner for Seoul's security and economic growth. At the practical level, relations remained largely unchanged and continued on a positive note, defying the mostly pessimistic predictions of many observers. This favourable situation remained in place also with the new leadership in Tokyo, after Ishiba was replaced by Takaichi Sanae, who is considered more hawkish and conservative

compared to her predecessor. Similarly to what happened in South Korea with Lee Jae-myung, although on the other side of the political spectrum, also in Japan the new Prime Minister moderated her previous positions on issues that could be sensitive and damaging to relations with Seoul – such as visits to the Yasukuni shrine and controversial comments on the 'comfort women' issue – after taking office.¹⁰ This pattern was confirmed by the friendly and constructive atmosphere that characterised the first meetings of the two leaders on the sidelines of the APEC Summit in Gyeongju and the G-20 Summit in South Africa.

The continuation of the rapprochement seems to be more supported by pragmatic calculations based on mutual interests than a shared understanding of the problems and controversies that have damaged the bilateral relationship for many years. In addition, present conditions seem to favour a continuation of the current situation. On the South Korea domestic front, which has been one of the main sources of tension over the years, Lee Jae-myung has more than four years of his presidency left, he is still benefiting from a very high approval rating, his party commands a large majority in the National Assembly and legislative elections are not scheduled until 2028. These circumstances make it very unlikely for the current president or the progressive party to resort to exploiting anti-Japanese sentiment for domestic electoral purposes. At the international level, the role and behaviour of the current US administration could also reinforce the need for Seoul and Tokyo to avoid undermining their relationship and reinforce their cooperation in maintaining regional order.

The 'Trump card' and the importance of the trilateral framework

In order to fully understand the recent evolution of Korea-Japan relations, it is crucial to consider the role of the trilateral dimension, which involves the United States. As treaty allies of Washington, both Seoul and Tokyo are cornerstones of American strategy in East Asia, both from a historical

8 Chae, Yun-hwan. 2025. "DP's Lee vows 'pragmatic' diplomacy, to solidify 3-way cooperation with US, Japan". *Yonhap News Agency*. 26 May. <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20250526002151315>.

9 Lee, Jae-myung. 2022. "A Practical Vision for South Korea: How Seoul Can Lead in Asia and Spur Growth at Home" *Foreign Affairs*. 23 February. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/east-asia/2022-02-23/practical-vision-south-korea>.

10 Deacon, Chris. 2025. "Can Japan-South Korea Relations Continue to Thaw Under Lee and Takaichi?" *The Diplomat*. 24 October. <https://thediplomat.com/2025/10/can-japan-south-korea-relations-continue-to-thaw-under-lee-and-takaichi/>.

perspective and in the current situation. Therefore, promoting stable relations between them has long been a key aim of the United States in the region. This has become even more relevant in a context marked by rising tension between the US and China. Nevertheless, despite American efforts, continuing bilateral tension between Korea and Japan have repeatedly undermined consolidation of trilateral cooperation, in particular because of the existing political and historical controversies. In 2019 an escalation of disputes related to the forced labour issue, for example, not only deteriorated bilateral relations but also affected the security dimension, leading South Korea to announce its withdrawal from the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA). Against this backdrop, US diplomatic efforts played a crucial role in containing the crisis. While encouraging cooperation among its allies has been a constant feature of US regional policy, the level of attention and commitment devoted to this task has varied from administration to administration, with the first Trump presidency showing comparatively limited interest in these efforts. Conversely, the election of President Biden in 2020 marked a renewed emphasis on reinforcing coordination and cooperation among allies as a central pillar of the overall American strategy to counterbalance the influence of China. Despite tension between Seoul and Tokyo, for example, the trilateral format became the primary channel for engagement during the presidency of Moon Jae-in, with a series of meetings between national security officials and foreign ministers in 2021.

The conservative victory in South Korea in 2022 was welcomed by the Biden administration as an opportunity to revitalise bilateral and trilateral cooperation. The rapprochement between Korea and Japan also paved the way for significant progress in trilateral cooperation. A summit held at Camp David in August 2023, which saw participation by the leaders of the three countries, represented a milestone in this process. The summit was specifically designed to formalise security cooperation among the three countries. This was outlined in the final Statement of Principles and a Joint Statement, in which for the first time Japan and South Korea

explicitly acknowledged the interconnected nature of their security interests.¹¹ In the following months, trilateral cooperation continued to deepen with regular diplomatic exchanges and military exercises reinforcing the institutional foundations created at Camp David. This process reached a further stage in late 2024, with establishment of a Trilateral Secretariat, in Seoul, aimed at enhancing coordination and policy alignment.¹² The decision to institutionalise cooperation was probably also influenced by the growing uncertainty caused by Donald Trump's electoral victory in November 2024, with the limited interest of his previous administration in multilateral cooperation, his transactional view of foreign relations and his general unpredictability in terms of foreign and security policy.

While the first year of Trump's second mandate was not too disruptive of the trilateral relationship with Seoul and Tokyo – unlike several other international issues – still a certain degree of uncertainty was introduced compared to the previous administration. Both South Korea and Japan had to face new and similar challenges, such as that related to tariffs imposed by the United States on imported products. The unilateral nature of this decision, which was aimed at allies and rivals alike, and the strictly bilateral logic of the successive trade negotiations weakened trust in the US commitment to trilateral cooperation and support for its allies. Moreover, the Trump administration foreign policy strategy seems more oriented to prioritising the Western hemisphere and deals with other major powers, such as China, with a Beijing-focused approach to East Asia. The responses of South Korea and Japan have differed on this issue, with Tokyo largely aligning itself with Washington's containment-oriented approach, including support for stronger language regarding China and the Taiwan issue, and Seoul adopting a more cautious position characterised by reluctance to endorse a confrontational posture. However, these developments could create spaces to improve cooperation between the two countries to protect their interests and support the existing regional order. If under Biden American influence played a stabilising role, discouraging escalation of political disputes and encouraging

11 The White House. 2023. "Remarks by President Biden, President Yoon Suk Yeol of the Republic of Korea, and Prime Minister Kishida Fumio of Japan in Joint Press Conference." 18 August. <https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2023/08/18/remarks-by-president-biden-president-yoon-suk-yeol-of-the-republic-of-korea-and-prime-minister-kishida-fumio-of-japan-in-joint-press-conference-camp-david-md/>.

12 Kim, Seung-yeon. 2024. "S. Korea, U.S., Japan launch secretariat for trilateral cooperation." *Yonhap News Agency*. 20 November. <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20241120009800315>.

collaboration, today the US has largely withdrawn from its mediating role in the trilateral relationship, leaving the responsibility to South Korea and Japan to autonomously promote their cooperation.

constraints continue to favour stability. In this international context, mutual recognition is emerging that Japan and South Korea are each other's most reliable and predictable partners.

'New leaders' in 'old bottles'? Between continuity and change

The analysis presented above suggests that recent leadership changes in South Korea and Japan have not produced a fundamental break in relations between the two countries despite predictions in this sense after the Korean presidential elections in June 2025, but instead a continuation of the existing approach based on positive interactions in spite of significant domestic and external transformations. The arrival of 'new leaders' in both Seoul and Tokyo over the course of the year – Lee Jae-myung and Takaichi Sanae – initially raised prospects of policy reorientation, given their political backgrounds and previous positions. However, developments following their arrival indicate a strong degree of continuity.

In South Korea, despite the progressive orientation of Lee Jae-myung and his earlier criticism of the conservative approach to Japan, the new administration has largely maintained the core elements of the rapprochement initiated under Yoon Suk-yeol, following a pragmatic line in conducting foreign policy. Similarly, in Japan Takaichi's leadership has not translated into a more conflictual stance toward Seoul, as her potentially sensitive positions have been moderated after taking office. In both cases, strategic considerations, regional security and economic concerns have limited the scope for renewed confrontation.

The broader trilateral framework that includes the United States has also played an important role in shaping this dynamic, despite the radical change between the Biden and the second Trump administrations. While uncertainty surrounding US commitment to the allies has reduced its stabilising role, it has also increased the responsibility put on Seoul and Tokyo to manage their relationship more autonomously.

This situation and a combination of domestic and external factors have reinforced a pattern in which ROK-Japan cooperation is sustained by pragmatic calculations. Continuity has prevailed over change, not because the underlying historical and political tensions have been resolved but because existing

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**Co-funded by
the European Union**

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Published by
European University Institute (EUI)
Via dei Roccettini 9, I-50014
San Domenico di Fiesole (FI)
Italy

doi:10.2870/7657315
ISBN:978-92-9466-775-5
ISSN:2467-4540
QM-01-26-015-EN-N