

Japan–Republic of Korea Relations and Two-Level Games

Exploring Historical Issues of Conflict and Their Impact on the Ability for the Governments of South Korea and Japan to Fortify Bilateral Relations

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Abstract

Bilateral relations between the Republic of Korea and Japan reached an alarming state of degradation between the years of 2015 and 2019. The two countries faced escalating disagreements that impacted economic, military, and cultural ties. By examining the state of several standing issues of conflict during this time and the language used by the national leaders of both countries to describe actions of each other in speeches to domestic audiences during this period, this article argues that bilateral relations degraded due to the poor management of two-level games by the political leaders of the governments of South Korea and Japan.

Robert Putnam's political theory on two-level games builds on the concept that governments work to satisfy politics at both domestic and international levels.¹ Political leaders face the difficulty of reconciling their interests—and those on whose behalf they are negotiating—and the international consequences of their fixed investments in domestic politics.² Putnam points out that as both nations exercise sovereignty several variables complicate the successful execution of domestic policy and bilateral relations. The rationality of a player in one level of policy could be interpreted as impolitic on another, or a decision maker could upset the entire operation if they are unsatisfied with the progress of policy for the level in which they are involved. Other potential pitfalls include the forming of unexpected coalitions facilitated by strategic moves executed at one table and potential consequences on international bargaining positions caused by the institutional arrangements that strengthen decision makers at home.³ He ultimately argues that when central decision makers engage to maximize satisfaction of domestic pressures and ignore the development of foreign consequences, bilateral relations suffer.

After reviewing 167 speeches and briefings delivered by President Moon Jae-in and Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, several cases came to light supporting the argument that bilateral relations between South Korea and Japan suffered due to Abe's and Moon's engagement in their respective two-level games. Annually recurring occasions for speeches of both political leaders were particularly critical in revealing a pattern of behavior and the evolution of South Korea–Japan relations between the years of 2014–2019. The year 2014 is included to incorporate interactions prior to the establishment of the Comfort Women Agreement in 2015. The analysis will consist of introducing highlights and patterns in speeches made by the heads of state and developments surrounding several difficult issues impeding bilateral relations and presenting them through the two-level frame. As these speeches were directed toward a domestic audience, it strengthens the point that the speeches were designed to motivate a nationalist sentiment and appease domestic stakeholders at the cost of bilateral cooperation.

The issues that will be highlighted are the topics of forced labor, comfort women, and the Japan Self-Defense Force. These difficult issues are all founded in the early to mid-twentieth century, stemming from the period of 1910–1945 when Imperial Japan colonized the Korean Peninsula. The issues can largely be grouped into two categories. Forced labor and comfort women are difficult topics because the issues are concerned with acknowledging the treatment of the colonized, and the Japan Self-Defense Force is a difficult topic because it concerns Japan reconciling with its past imperial militarism. The Annual Policy Speech to the National Diet, Japan's bicameral legislature, was particularly indicative of the evolution of current affairs from Prime Minister Abe. For South Korea, speeches made by President Moon on occasions including Memorial Day and Liberation Day maintained a consistent tone regarding Japan by which to measure deviation of attitude over time.

President Moon Jae-in

President Moon was elected in 2017, following his predecessor being impeached and later convicted on corruption charges.⁴ President Moon's time in office can be categorized into two phases, with his initial time in office focused on reform and his later time refocused on bilateral cooperation. Moon ran for office on several platforms including economic growth, national political reform, and renegotiating the 2015 Japan–South Korea Comfort Women Agreement. In 2018, he also dedicated a national holiday to the memory of comfort women, which further reneged the terms of the 2015 agreement. His initial time in office was largely focused on appeasing his domestic audience and came at the cost of neglecting bilateral cooperation with Japan. President Moon's efforts to clarify

that his statements made to domestic audiences at the time were not intended to spark diplomatic dispute further illuminate this divide in intent versus impact.⁵

Looking at speeches made by President Moon to domestic audiences in reference to relations with Japan, his speeches made on Liberation Day and Memorial Day were most consistent and pertinent in their references, and the specific examples that follow will outline the theme of neglecting bilateral cooperation. In 2017, President Moon noted that “Resolving historical issues should be based on compensation and the restoration of honor to the victims,” and that obstacles to relations with Japan were founded in the Government of Japan’s (GOJ) “inconsistent acknowledgement of its history.”⁶ In 2018, President Moon formally rejected the terms of the 2015 agreement and expressed hope that the GOJ would “genuinely reconcile with its neighbors” through “sincere self-reflection and reconciliation.”⁷ That same year, he also expressed intent to “develop Korea–Japan relations in a forward-looking manner.”⁸ Finally in 2019, President Moon iterated that the Republic of Korea (ROK) and Japan must “firmly join hands while reflecting on history” to become “genuine friends.”⁹

There are three main takeaways from this period of President Moon’s incumbency. First, in the eyes of the South Korean public, historical issues with Japan remain unresolved. Second, the criteria for the establishment of a bilateral alliance are founded on Japan’s acknowledgment of history, self-reflection, and restoration of honor to the victims of World War II (WWII). Third, even if a genuine friendship between the two countries is not possible based on the aforementioned criteria, it is possible to establish positive relations with a future-oriented perspective.

Looking to speeches referencing relations with Japan made in the second half of Moon’s term, there is a notable shift in tone. In 2020, on the occasion of the 75th Liberation Day, he vocalized his interest to “work with Japan to protect universal values of humanity, the principles of international law and democracy based on the separation of powers.”¹⁰ He also believed that joint efforts by both governments to respect individual human rights would “become a bridge for friendship and future cooperation between the people.” In 2021, regarding issues based in history, President Moon implored to “resolve [the issues] through actions and practices that are consistent with universal values and the standards of the international community,” further determining that the GOJ and Government of South Korea (GOSK) will “[set] an example of the cooperation expected between neighbors.”¹¹

A clear shift can be construed in the second half of Moon’s term in office. Regarding relations with Japan, language emphasizing exploring joint solutions and recognizing standing agreements returned. Moon continued to vouch for both countries to work together to explore diplomatic solutions that will satisfy the victims of WWII. Further, there was a shift in the framework used to describe the foundation

of bilateral relations with Japan. The language used was much broader, speaking to universal values as well as involving the international community as a mediator for difficult issues, while focusing on maintaining messaging of building future cooperation between the two countries. President Moon appealed to the GOJ based on the standards and expectations of the international community and customary law as well as appealing to the people of South Korea, pleading to allow the GOSK to work to resolve difficult issues in accordance with the standards of the international community. The situational context for this plea concerned developments surrounding the topics of forced labor and comfort women and will be explained later.

Prime Minister Shinzo Abe

Prime Minister Shinzo Abe took office in 2012 and resigned in 2020 due to health concerns, making him the longest serving prime minister of Japan. He was known for his nationalist and right-wing political ideology. Prime Minister Abe had worked to move Japan out of the postwar era, calling for Japan to assume a more active role in regional defense and security. This was a contentious topic in the region as there is a popular fear that Japan will return to an imperialist state if given the opportunity to do so. Because of Abe's nationalist and conservative ideological beliefs, his pursuit of these efforts continued regardless of regional support and opinion. By not offering any concessions to allay these fears, he also neglected bilateral cooperation with South Korea.

The speeches Prime Minister Abe made to the National Diet in reference to relations with South Korea were most consistent and revealing of the state of bilateral relations. In 2014 and 2015, the ROK was identified as the "most important neighboring country," and it was stated that the GOJ would "continually engage in dialogue" to improve relations.¹² However, 2015 also marked the 70th anniversary of the end of WWII, where notably Prime Minister Abe stated that "history is harsh" and that "what is done cannot be undone."¹³ This speech was largely received as insincere across the region because although he used remorseful language, there was no apology made.¹⁴ Abe stuck with his refusal to apologize even through the announcement of the agreement on comfort women came in late December 2015. Instead, the Japanese foreign minister spoke on his behalf, relaying "his most sincere apologies and remorse to all the women who underwent immeasurable and painful experiences and suffered incurable physical and psychological wounds as comfort women."¹⁵

The references made to the ROK during this time were generic but neutral. The fact that Abe referred to South Korea as the most important neighboring country seems like an obvious choice as the ROK is the only neighboring country with democratic principles. From his speech on the 70th anniversary of the end of

WWII, it is clear to see that Prime Minister Abe was not interested in entertaining any additional self-reflection on engagements of Imperial Japan. In short, during this time, Tokyo was pursuing cooperative relations for the sake of furthering the desire to establish peace in the region.

In 2016, Prime Minister Abe introduced the concept of shared “strategic interests” with the ROK and emphasized the importance of “building cooperative relations” for the sake of establishing “peace and prosperity in East Asia.”¹⁶ This statement tied the importance of cooperative relations with South Korea to the ultimate state of peace in the neighboring region. A North Korean nuclear threat was reintroduced through nuclear weapons testing that took place in January 2016 and reestablished the importance to both Japan and South Korea of handling this shared threat in the interest of regional security. In 2017, Abe again noted ROK as the “most important neighbor” to Japan and expressed his interest to “deepen a cooperative relationship” with a “future-oriented” perspective. Abe also mentioned mutual trust for the first time, which could be interpreted to reflect growth and positive progress made between the two governments.¹⁷ In 2017, the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) engaged in the launching of ballistic missiles and other activities, which sidelined further exploration of historical issues between Japan and South Korea.

Abe’s speech in 2018 relayed intent to deepen cooperative relations with a future-oriented perspective built on trust but notably omitted the ROK’s importance as a neighboring country or shared strategic interests.¹⁸ This proved to be a significant year for DPRK–ROK relations with the joint Panmunjom Declaration for Peace, Prosperity, and Unification of the Korean Peninsula and relation building between North and South Korea. On the other hand, Japan and South Korea clashed over a South Korean Supreme Court decision and a military radar spat that took place in December. Furthermore, in 2019, references to South Korea were omitted entirely. The evidence is clear that Abe had downgraded the importance of South Korea–Japan relations through the evolution of his annual policy speech to the nation. It was also a reflection of domestic attitudes surrounding developments of difficult issues between Japan and ROK at the time. The development of bilateral relations seems to have been abandoned in 2019 due to the greater interest in appeasing domestic concerns.

Considering the ongoing issues of ROK Supreme Court decisions ruling the issuance of compensation for forced labor and the unresolved military radar dispute from December of 2018, which will be detailed below in Issue I and Issue III respectively, there is no shortage of opportunities for mutual cooperation to work through conflict. However, Prime Minister Abe attempted to utilize the opportunity of strife and seize the political opportunity to appeal to domestic constituents

to further his own interests. For example, the approval rating for Abe's cabinet rose six points following the radar spat, and a public opinion poll taken by the *Nihon Keizai Shinbun* reflected a desire from the Japanese public for the government to assume a "strong response" to the issue.¹⁹ Conflict with South Korea ultimately provided Abe an opportunity to further his "life's work" of revising the Japanese constitution by motivating the public for change and action. He further clarified this direction in the conclusion of his 2019 policy speech, in which he urged the Diet to "draw a clear path for the future" by engaging in conversation with the Commissions on the Constitution to determine the "ideals" for the nation that serve as a "guidepost towards a new era."²⁰

In 2020, the language referencing relations with South Korea returned, again identifying the ROK as the "most important neighbor which shares fundamental values and strategic interest" with hopes to "uphold promises" made between the two countries and build "future-oriented Japan-ROK relations."²¹ The language more closely mirrored that of President Moon's speech in 2020, and the efforts toward bilateral relations appeared to be restored and unified. Both countries once again deliberately emphasized a balance of building trust and a future-oriented relationship.

Issue I: Forced Labor

Forced labor refers to involuntary labor performed by Korean citizens in Japanese companies and industry on behalf of the Japanese Imperial Army leading up to and during WWII. The two countries ostensibly resolved the issue in 1965, when both governments came together and ratified the 1965 Agreement on the Settlement of Problems Concerning Property and Claims and on Economic Cooperation Between Japan and the Republic of Korea. This agreement, however, has not stopped South Korean victims from pursuing civil suits seeking redress or the South Korean courts from upholding these victims' rights to seek reparations, and subsequently, numerous cases have been filed and ruled in favor of the South Korean plaintiffs over the years.

In 2015, victims filed a civil suit against the Nippon Steel and Sumimoto Metal Corporation for wartime labor compensation, and the courts ruled in favor of the South Korean citizens named in the suit. In 2018, the South Korean Supreme Court upheld this lower-level court ruling and further, in 2019, approved the seizure of assets of the Nippon Steel and Sumimoto Metal Corporation. In response to these developments, the GOJ toughened export control regulation on chemicals important to the ROK manufacturing industry. The GOSK then countered by threatening to withdraw from the General Security of Military Information Agreement, which was enacted in 2016 and allows for the sharing of intel-

ligence among Japan, ROK, and the United States regarding DPRK activities.²² The GOJ refuted the ruling as a violation of the 1965 Agreement. The South Korea Supreme Court has asserted that the 1965 treaty did not terminate individuals' rights to claim damages. Notably, the two countries also did not meet during the 2019 G-20 Summit in Osaka because of tensions and disagreement surrounding the proceedings of the Nippon Steel forced labor suit.²³

The foreign minister of Japan underlined that the decision overthrew the legal foundation of cooperative relations that Japan and the South Korea had developed since the normalization of diplomatic relations.²⁴ The foreign ministry of South Korea accused Tokyo of politicizing the issue, warning that “excessive political emphasis” and statements made by policy makers do not help in the future-oriented relationship between the two countries.²⁵ These statements capture the fundamental differences in foundational needs for Japan–ROK relation building in each country.

These civil suits convolute the successful execution of relation building because the nature of the suit is contentious, bleeding into other sectors of business and escalating to international consequences. In August 2021, a seizure of assets was ordered against Mitsubishi Heavy Industries for a separate ongoing suit.²⁶ Ultimately in November 2021, these suits were dismissed following a public statement by President Moon recognizing the 1965 treaty as the ultimate authority for wartime compensation matters. However, it is likely that cases of this nature will continue to be filed as long as victims are alive.

Looking toward public interest and domestic attitudes toward the issue, in 2019 provincial and city governments in Gyeonggi-Do and Seoul announced proposals to require the use of stickers on school products that were made by Japanese companies that had benefited from forced South Korean labor during WWII. The intent behind the plans were to discourage the purchasing of goods and services from “war crime companies” and encouraged cutting ties with such corporations.²⁷ Ultimately these proposals were not actualized.

The forced labor issue illuminates numerous examples of domestic politics and interests directly impacting bilateral relation building. As a democratic nation, the head of state cannot control citizens' legal actions; however, Seoul must walk a fine line between supporting the narrative of victims' rights and pursuing future-oriented relation building with Japan. In this regard, 2019 was a low point for the issue, with political consequences attributed to the issue including missed G-20 summit meetings and a threat to withdraw from critical intelligence agreements.

Issue II: Comfort Women

Comfort women are those who were forced to serve as sexual slaves for the Japanese Imperial Army at military controlled “comfort stations” set up across

Japanese-occupied territories. According to historical research collected by the Special Rapporteur of the UN Commission on Human Rights, as many as 200,000 women were involved in this trade.²⁸ These women were recruited under the pretense of employment opportunities supporting the war economy and were coerced and abducted through the use of violence to themselves and their families.²⁹ The conditions of the comfort stations were austere, and the women were subject to forced prostitution under conditions that were habitually traumatic. These women were also subject to horrible violence if they resisted their situation, and the proximity of the comfort stations to the frontline of battle meant increased exposure to the general threat of death.³⁰

In 2015, a formal agreement was drafted as a “final and irreversible” settlement between South Korea and Japan.³¹ The GOSK promised to no longer criticize Japan on the issue of comfort women with the agreement that the GOJ would express responsibility and apologize to the victims of WWII and provide financial care for the now elderly victims.³² At the demand of the Japanese government, the settlement referred to the Korean victims as “victims of comfort stations of the Japanese military” instead of “sexual slaves,” despite the conditions under which the women were forced into their positions.³³ Following the settlement, the Japanese government made efforts to commence financial reparations, but the efforts were poorly received by the South Korean public, which was more interested in receiving official reparations instead of financial reparations. This, combined with a turnover in South Korean leadership, escalated public criticism of the deal. President Moon ran on the campaign platform to renegotiate the 2015 Agreement and appointed a government panel that in December of 2017 found that the settlement ultimately failed to encompass victims’ rights and demands.³⁴ In March 2018, President Moon described the Japanese Imperial Army’s use of comfort women as a “crime against humanity,” which warranted a response from the chief cabinet secretary of Japan that the remark was “extremely regrettable.”³⁵

In August 2018, Taiwan and South Korea engaged in protests on behalf of the memory of comfort women. Following this, a new monument was unveiled in Seoul, and a national holiday was established to commemorate the “Memorial Day for Japanese Forces’ Comfort Women Victims.” President Moon noted that the commemoration was initiated to restore honor and dignity to the women victims through the preservation of records and sharing their memory, while also sharing his hope that these actions would not spark further conflict with Japan.³⁶

This is obviously a difficult issue due to the nature of the offenses and because the GOJ and Japanese people view efforts to honor the victims by sharing their memory as inflammatory. This view is due to the Japanese government’s position that historical accounts surrounding comfort women are inaccurate and largely

exaggerated. Tokyo denies that the women were forcibly recruited and rejects the categorization of “sexual slaves” for the women.³⁷

The comfort women statues are also an interesting sticking point for the issue, as the monuments themselves are an effort to preserve the legacy of the comfort women, but the circumstances surrounding their implementation could be considered provocative. The first statue was erected in 2011 and placed directly outside of the Japanese embassy in Seoul. Statues continue to pop up every few years in numerous cities around the world, and always incite a negative reaction from the Japanese government. In 2017, the city of San Francisco, California, erected a statue commemorating comfort women, which prompted the city of Osaka to end its 60-year sister city relationship with San Francisco in protest over the statue.³⁸ Most recently a comfort woman statue was erected in the city of Pyeongchang, consisting of a young girl wearing a traditional hanbok and a male figure with a striking resemblance to Prime Minister Abe kneeling in a position of sincere apology.³⁹

Like the forced labor issue, there has also been a trend of South Korean comfort women victims filing civil suits against the Japanese government. In a shocking move, the Seoul Court ruled in 2021 that the GOJ must pay reparations to comfort women, and this news elicited a reaction of bewilderment from President Moon.⁴⁰ The reaction was no doubt informed by Moon’s concerns regarding the potential proceedings and the probable escalating bilateral consequences if the suit continues. Also of note is that the Japanese Minister for Foreign Affairs who oversaw the Comfort Women Agreement during its negotiations and ratification was none other than Fumio Kishida, who, was elected prime minister of Japan in October 2021.

The elections of both Prime Minister Kishida and President Moon, based on their involvement and stances regarding the comfort women topic, reflect domestic public opinions and attitudes on the issue. This public opinion hinders the political flexibility for either country on this topic, and as the civil suits and statues illustrate, this domestically driven political inflexibility has the great potential to negatively impact bilateral relation building. UN-driven research and investigation on comfort women reflects the international system’s stance on the matter, which the GOSK could use to further drive a wedge between the two countries and hinder bilateral relations. As of August 2021, there are 14 women recognized by the GOSK as former comfort women who are still alive.⁴¹ Comfort women will undoubtedly continue to be a difficult topic between Japan and South Korea, especially while the victims are still living.

Issue III: Japan Self-Defense Force

Following the end of WWII, the United States drafted the Constitution of Japan and included Article 9, a clause outlawing war as a means to settle international

disputes and banning the existence of Japanese armed forces with war-making potential. Because of this, the Japan Self-Defense Force (JSDF) is technically an extension of the national police force and exists in a legal gray area. The topic of Article 9 is difficult. Not only are regional neighbors, including South Korea, concerned with the potential militarization of Japan but the Japanese public is also divided on the issue of abandoning the pacifist principles of the postwar era.⁴²

Prime Minister Abe had stressed the desire to evolve Japan's role in regional security and made progress in reinterpreting Article 9 of the Japanese Constitution to actualize this vision. Throughout his tenure, Abe vocalized a goal for Japan to pursue a proactive contribution to the peace and stability across the Indo-Pacific region.⁴³ This approach was prompted as a direct response to the evolving threat environment for Japan, including the rise of China and a desire to redistribute burdens shared by the US–Japan Alliance.⁴⁴ For the Abe administration, the main objective of a reinterpretation was to produce a military capable of addressing independent and Alliance-based threats and making positive contributions to regional security and stability.⁴⁵

Efforts to relax constraints on the Japanese defense policy first commenced in the 1980s, and proponents have categorized such endeavors as a process to normalize Japan's role as a security actor.⁴⁶ Traditionally, Japan has maintained a defense-oriented policy through interpreting the right of self-defense according to its constitution. In 2015, legislation was relaxed to permit Japanese forces participating in UN peacekeeping operations to carry weapons to protect and rescue civilians as well as permit the JSDF to participate in internationally coordinated operations.⁴⁷ The legislation also introduced the concept of aiding an ally under attack from a third party, enabling the JSDF to have the ability to utilize force when an attack against an allied nation threatens the survival of Japan.⁴⁸

In 2018, Prime Minister Abe began a campaign intended to amend Article 9, calling for the addition of an explicit reference to the JSDF to establish a formal legal status for the individuals serving.⁴⁹ In March 2018, the Liberal Democratic Party of Japan presented seven draft constitutional proposals to Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in accordance with his plan to amend Article 9. Although a team of policy makers came together as a constitutional reform task force, even they were unable to unanimously agree on a proper way ahead for the future status and role of the JSDF. Internal struggles and disagreement have translated to uncertain public opinion. According to public polls, distrust of the reform stem from a lack of transparency regarding intent and motivation for the change.⁵⁰ Other fears are attached to the abandonment of the foundational intent of postwar pacifism that will occur if new language is introduced to the Constitution and Article 9.⁵¹ The JSDF is globally one of the top-10 well-funded and well-equipped military forces in the world,

yet it lacks a definite status of legality in its national constitution.⁵² The United States maintains a productive partnership with the JSDF and will benefit from increased utility of the joint forces. The future of JSDF involvement in regional conflict and US-allied threat response rely on the fate of these proposals.

Looking to the state of relations between Japan and South Korea, there was a significant incident between a South Korean naval vessel and an unarmed Japanese Maritime Self-Defense Force patrol aircraft in late 2018. Japan accused the South Korean warship of locking fire-control radar on the Japanese aircraft.⁵³ South Korea refuted this claim, asserting the humanitarian nature of their original mission to aid in the rescue of a North Korean ship out of international waters and claiming the Japanese aircraft had flown at a low altitude that could be interpreted as threatening toward the warship.⁵⁴ Both sides have released video recordings from the incident to support their claims and refute the other. Japanese and South Korean delegates met in Singapore in January 2019 with intentions to resolve the dispute; however, negotiators abandoned the talks after the defense ministers were unable to reach a mutually satisfactory conclusion.⁵⁵

Again, we see that 2018–2019 was a low point in bilateral relations, stemming from domestic political efforts to reshape military efforts in Japan. By making decisions to appease the domestic public without considering or caring for international opinions, there is a definite consequence to bilateral relations. The GOJ does not necessarily owe the GOSK an explanation for the proposed alterations to Japan's national defense strategy, but the historical context means considerations should be made for the regional reaction to their efforts. However, despite this conflict, the relationship has since improved, and the South Korean defense minister identified Japan as a crucial security partner in 2021.⁵⁶

Analysis

As the speeches and controversies reflect, the political leaders of South Korea and Japan engage in a delicate two-level game. Examining the state of standing conflicts and the language used by the national leaders of both countries to describe actions of each other in speeches to domestic audiences over the past several years, it is clear that bilateral relations are degrading due to poor management of two-level games by the political leaders of the South Korea and Japan. Abe and Moon faced the challenge of reconciling their interests and the interests of the general public with the international consequences of their commitments in domestic politics. The annual speeches presented a pattern of behavior that both leaders are neglecting to manage the foreign consequences that develop as a result of their domestic investments, and, therefore, the second level of bilateral relations suffer. Variables such as the political ideology to which they subscribe and cam-

campaign promises to domestic constituents presented as roadblocks for misinterpretation on the level of bilateral cooperation. At other times, statements made to unify the public at a domestic level had consequences of being received in an inflammatory manner and impacted bargaining positions that depended on mutual trust, going so far as to encourage the neglect of opportunities for joint discussions.

As Prime Minister Abe oriented Japanese policy toward a more active role in the region, he was charged with convincing his public to move away from the mind-set of a postwar era. His policy efforts reflected a desire to instill pride by moving away from the cycle of revisiting and repenting for an imperialist past. Abe's positions on topics of comfort women and forced labor, and efforts to revise Article 9 of the constitution, all present endeavors aimed at leaving narratives of the past in the past. As Prime Minister Abe executed these intentions on the domestic level, the international nature of these topics resulted in international consequences.

On the other hand, President Moon sought ultimate and fulfilling closure for the victims and leaned heavily on the memory of Japanese colonialism. His presidential campaign included promises to renegotiate the terms of a bilateral agreement that took substantial mutual collaboration and buy-in before it was announced in the first place. His speeches repeated the sentiments of celebrating the independence movement and those who fought for it, while emphasizing the need to eradicate remaining sentiments of a pro-Japanese imperialist past. Moon's positions on comfort women and forced labor all reflect a desire to bring closure to victims of WWII. As President Moon worked toward his goals for the nation, the international consequences stemming from his interests negatively impacted bilateral relations with Japan.

Conclusion

Historic memory is always fragmented and inherently inflammatory, as each country has a different story they would like to tell, and the people have different memories they wish to preserve as a part of their national cultural identity. Particularly when it comes to issues of conflict founded in history, appeasing domestic audiences in one level comes at the expense of fortifying bilateral relations on the second level. The years 2018 and 2019 were the lowest point in contemporary Japan–ROK relations, and the situation climaxed due to the mismanagement of two-level games by President Moon and Prime Minister Abe. As both governments were working to alleviate domestic pressures at the cost of bilateral cooperation; with the ROK pursuing satisfactory solutions for victims of WWII outside of standing agreements with the GOJ, and Japan working to evolve into a more active regional role while neglecting earnest efforts at bilateral cooperation. Beginning in

2020 and on, however, there appears to have been a shift for the better, and the pursuit of fortifying relations seems to be a much more deliberate and unified effort.

There are several significant events to also consider. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on both nations has definitely played a role through delayed judicial proceedings and the prevention of large-scale gatherings and protests. The pandemic response occupied significant time and resources of both governments, which allowed for developments around the difficult issues to cool for a period as well. Finally, both countries have elected new heads of state. In Japan, Prime Minister Kishida was elected to office in October 2021. In the ROK, President Yoon Suk-yeol was elected in April 2022. Both parties are interested in resolving difficult issues in a way that does not generate diplomatic friction; however, we are yet to see the execution of these intentions. At the end of the day, the state of Japan–ROK relations depends on the leaders of both countries understanding the importance of appropriately managing two-level games through minding developments on historical issues and fostering future-oriented cooperation. 🌟

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