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Why Kishida and Yoon moved to improve frosty bilateral ties



South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol toasts with Prime Minister Fumio Kishida during their talks at Rengatei, a pop established restaurant specializing in Japanese-style Western dishes, in Tokyo's Ginza district on Thursday. | CABINE OFFICE

Thursday's summit [between Prime Minister Fumio Kishida and South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol](https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2023/03/16/national/kishida-yoon-summit-bilateral-thaw/) (<https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2023/03/16/national/kishida-yoon-summit-bilateral-thaw/>) underlined the thawing bilateral ties, with the two leaders agreeing to resume “shuttle diplomacy,” dining at Yoon’s favorite *omurice* restaurant in Tokyo’s glitzy Ginza district and drinking beer and Korean *soju* with their ties off.

But beyond the good food and drinks, what really prompted the two leaders to improve frosty bilateral ties was a deteriorating security environment due to North Korea’s repeated missile launches and the need for the two countries to cooperate over economic security to ensure a stable semiconductor supply chain.

“In response to North Korea, which is further advancing its nuclear and missile activities ... we confirmed the importance of strengthening the deterrence and response capabilities of the Japan-U.S, and South Korea-U.S. alliances and vigorously promoting security cooperation among the three countries,” Kishida said during a joint news conference.

On Thursday morning ahead of the talks, North Korea launched one of its powerful long-range missiles into waters just 250 kilometers west of Hokkaido. Later in the day, the two leaders announced the resumption of key security talks halted five years ago.

They also agreed to establish a new body to deepen cooperation on economic security between senior government officials.

“I hope that, starting with dialogue on Japan-Korea economic security at a National Security Council level, various consultative bodies will communicate with each other in the future,” Yoon said.

Ahead of the summit, Japan’s trade ministry announced it would lift strict measures it has imposed since 2019 on the export of high-tech materials for making smartphone displays and chips. The move followed Seoul’s announcement that it would formally terminate its World Trade Organization dispute against Japan.

Washington, which wanted to solidify better trilateral cooperation to deal with China, was also an important factor in Thursday’s summit, serving as the go-between for months to promote rapprochement between Tokyo and Seoul.

“The historic events of the last two weeks clearly show the two leaders boldly chose the path of partnership, and they are to be commended for the choice,” [U.S. Ambassador to Japan Rahm Emanuel](https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2022/12/12/national/rahm-emanuel-profile/) (<https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2022/12/12/national/rahm-emanuel-profile/>) said in a statement [posted on Twitter](https://twitter.com/USAmbJapan/status/1636538309714518017/photo/1). (<https://twitter.com/USAmbJapan/status/1636538309714518017/photo/1>)



(https://www.japantimes.co.jp/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/np_file_216381.jpeg)

Yoon and Kishida hold a joint news conference in Tokyo on Thursday. | POOL / VIA REUTERS

For the U.S., improved ties between Japan and South Korea and enhanced multilateral cooperation in the region was essential, said Christopher Hughes, a professor at Warwick University in the U.K. and an expert on Japanese politics.

“The (Joe) Biden administration has exercised influence to bring Japan and South Korea closer together, as its key allies in Northeast Asia, even taking the unusual step in its Indo-Pacific strategy of commenting on the need for the two to improve their ties, as well as trilateral cooperation with the U.S.,” Hughes said.

Despite the various circumstances that brought Kishida and Yoon together, hurdles remain, including on the issue of wartime laborers.

Relations between the neighbors plummeted to a fresh low in 2018 after the South Korean Supreme Court issued rulings ordering two Japanese firms to pay compensation to wartime forced laborers and their families.

Tokyo maintains that all issues related to compensation were settled under a 1965 bilateral agreement.

But earlier this month, South Korea unveiled a plan for the funds to be raised by “voluntary” private sector donations and paid to a South Korean foundation, which would then compensate the victims, in place of Japanese companies.

One key concern for Japan is the possibility that the government-affiliated Foundation for Victims of Forced Mobilization by Imperial Japan will seek reimbursement from Japanese companies over the payment in the future.

Under South Korean law, the foundation reserves the right to seek reimbursement, a move that would almost certainly bring everything back to square one — something both leaders are aware of.

“If the right to compensation is exercised, it will bring things back to what it was,” Yoon said. “I am not anticipating that.”

The right to reimbursement will expire in 10 years, and Yoon has four more years before the end of his single, five-year term as president.

Lee Jae-myung, leader of the main opposition Democratic Party (DP), on Friday criticized Yoon’s statement, hinting at potential headwinds for the bilateral relationship once Yoon leaves office.

“After five years of a president’s term, a different individual will be making a final decision for the nation’s policies,” Lee said, according to Kyodo News. “Who could say anything for certain?”

The DP’s strong stance against the agreement is backed by widespread opposition among the general public [with a majority of the population opposing last week’s resolution](https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20230310005500315) (<https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20230310005500315>), according to a survey from Gallup Korea.

Even among those in favor of the resolution in South Korea, Yoon is perceived as having made a considerable concession to Japan, risking domestic backlash.



(https://www.japantimes.co.jp/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/np_file_216382.jpeg)

North Korea's repeated missile launches and the need for Japan and South Korea to cooperate over economic security prompted a thaw in bilateral ties. | POOL / VIA REUTERS

Therefore, there are growing expectations both among policymakers and the general public that the ball is now in Japan's court.

"The Yoon administration seems to expect Tokyo to understand that it's expending considerable political capital on this," said Joel Atkinson, a professor specializing in Northeast Asian politics at Hankuk University of Foreign Studies in Seoul.

"I wouldn't be surprised if Yoon and the people around him feel like they are reaching the limit of what they can do, and now it's time for Tokyo to step up," he said.

But will Kishida do anything drastic that would satisfy South Korea and its people?

Asked about Japan's allegedly tepid response to Seoul's resolution, during Thursday's news conference, Kishida did not offer any additional details on Japan's next moves, only saying that the two countries will cooperate in a variety of fields.

On the issue of wartime history, Kishida simply maintained that Japan upholds the 1998 joint declaration between the two countries' leaders that saw Japan express "deep remorse" and a "heartfelt apology" for its 1910-45 colonial rule of the Korean Peninsula.

The effective suspension of the 2015 agreement on “comfort women,” a euphemism for those who suffered under Japan’s military brothel system before and during World War II, by former South Korean President Moon Jae-In has left deep scars in Tokyo and effectively hardened Japan’s stance toward its neighbor.

Indeed, conservatives in the ruling Liberal Democratic Party are cautious about making concessions to the South Korean side, maintaining that historical issues such as how to handle wartime labor compensation are something Seoul should solve on its own.

“Promises made in the past have been repeatedly broken, so it is important (to see) how the South Korean side will take action on what they are proposing now,” Hiroshige Seko, secretary-general of the LDP’s Upper House caucus, said Friday.

Still, in a further sign of rapprochement, former Prime Ministers Taro Aso and Yoshihide Suga met with Yoon on Friday to talk about the content of Thursday’s bilateral summit. Aso chairs a group of lawmakers and business leaders on bilateral ties while Suga is expected to become head of a parliamentary group on Japan-South Korea relations.

Hughes says Thursday’s summit is the beginning of a long-term process to get bilateral ties firmly back on track with various outstanding problems remaining — such as the issue of comfort women, a territorial dispute and Seoul’s ban on marine and farm products from Japan.

“The troubled past of Japan-South Korea relations has shown that even when national security interests coincide, this is still insufficient to compensate for the impact of wider bilateral diplomatic and domestic political tensions that can derail ties.”

Staff writer Jesse Johnson contributed to the report.



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