

# JAPAN-KOREA: TOO CLOSE TO BE CLOSE?

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*Japan and Korea share a rich but complicated relationship. Much of what is today considered Japanese traditional culture, such as Buddhism, crafts and literature, has Korean roots or was transmitted to Japan from China via the Korean Peninsula. Japan's influence over Korea has at times also been monumental. The two countries have much in common, resembling the way Nordic nations have related to one another over the centuries; however, unlike in the Nordic case, history still weighs heavily on the present. With a Korean President known for his earlier anti-Japanese statements and a Japanese Prime Minister known for repeatedly challenging historic responsibility for Japan's treatment of Korea, few would be surprised if bilateral relations were to take a downturn. Instead, both leaders have shown statesmanship and emphasized the necessity of "future-oriented" relations. Hopefully, the need to build a common defense of democratic values against the bullying tactics of great powers will bring the two countries closer together in a positive way.*

## Early contacts

According to the Japanese chronicle *Nihon Shoki* (720), the king of the Korean state of Paekche presented an image of Buddha in gold and copper to the Japanese ruler in the 13th year of the reign of Emperor Kinmei (A.D. 552), together with Buddhist scriptures. Some advisers at the Japanese court were of the opinion that Japan should not accept the gift, saying, "Those who

have ruled our Empire have always made it their care to worship in spring, summer, autumn and winter the 180 Gods of Heaven and Earth and the Gods of the Land and of Grain (...) If at this time we were to worship in their stead foreign deities it may be feared that we should incur the wrath of our National Gods."<sup>1</sup>

In spite of this warning, the emperor accepted the gift

and entrusted the statue to one of his retainers, who built a temple for it. Unfortunately, not long after the country suffered from an epidemic outbreak, which was blamed on the statue. It was thrown into a canal and the temple where it had been sitting was set on fire.

A few decades later Paekche again sent Buddhist scriptures to Japan, this time together with a monk, a nun, a reciter of mantras, a maker of Buddhist images and a temple architect. Now the reception was different. During the reign of Emperor Sujun (587-592), Buddhist practices were not only allowed but also given official support. After yet another quarter of a century, in 623, an official inspection found that Japan had 46 Buddhist temples and over a thousand monks and nuns.<sup>2</sup> Without the Korean initiative, Buddhism and its many different sects would probably not have had the profound influence on Japanese, history, culture and identity that it had.

Fundamental changes to the social structures of Japan caused by arrivals from the Korean Peninsula had, of course, happened long before the arrival of Buddhism. Rice cultivation, metallurgy, horses, weaponry, were all introduced to the Japanese islands from and/or via Korea. Large waves of migrants came during the Yayoi period, around 300/200 B.C.–250/300 A.D. Some of them clashed with indigenous tribes, in the *Nihon Shoki* referred to as *tsuchigumo*, “earth spiders”, but the Yayoi migrations were mostly peaceful.

Violent changes to the societies on the Japanese islands came instead during the Tomb period (*kofun jidai*, 250/300–500/550), when large tombs were constructed for deceased local rulers and a centralized Japanese state was formed. Some scholars argue that the social changes of the Tomb period were brought about by an invading, violence-prone horse-riding people from the Korean Peninsula.<sup>3</sup> Others instead point to the close contacts that existed in various forms between the Japanese islands and the Korean Peninsula that western Japan and southern Korea during Yayoi and part of the Tomb period should be looked upon as a *thalassocracy*, a state formation whose power and influence come from

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its control over the sea, surrounding islands and coastal areas.<sup>4</sup>

According to the *Kojiki*<sup>5</sup> and *Nihon Shoki*, Japan’s first legendary emperor Jimmu was a direct descendant of the sun goddess Amaterasu and set foot on Japanese soil (Kyūshū) in 660 B.C. He advanced with his forces to the east and subjugated those resisting his advance. Logically, he did not originate from heaven, but instead arrived in Japan from the Korean Peninsula. The chronicles were compiled in the eighth century, after a centralized Japanese state had been formed, and it is not inconceivable that the authors used the Chinese sexagenary cycles and counted backwards before agreeing that the emperor began to take control of the Japanese islands some twelve hundred years before a centralized Japanese state was firmly established.

Different Korean states have over the years related differently to Japan. While Paekche (Baekje) was in close contacts with Japan it succumbed to a coalition of forces from its neighboring state Silla and China (Tang) in 660. The northern state Koguryo was also defeated, in 668, leading to a wave of refugees to Japan, including artisans and highly educated people. Unified Silla was replaced in 935 by the Goryeo dynasty, which lasted until 1392, when the Joseon dynasty took over.

## Attacks on Japan

In 1274 and 1281, Mongol forces made failed attempts to conquer Japan after having successfully established the Yuan dynasty in China 1271. Goryeo was forced to become a vassal state to Yuan and thousands of Korean troops accompanied the Mongols as they landed in northwestern Kyūshū. The invaders forces suffered immense losses, especially in 1281. The Japanese defense benefited significantly from major typhoons, known as *kamikaze* or “divine wind(s),” a term that was subsequently adopted to describe the actions of Japanese pilots during the Second World War.

## Diplomatic relations and attacks by Japan

In 1402, after the Yuan dynasty had been replaced by the Ming dynasty in 1368, Joseon Korea and Japan established formal diplomatic relations, leading to a

bilateral treaty in 1443, which established a framework for their relationship, not least for trade. Especially important for the regulated flow of goods was the island of Tsushima located between Japan and Korea. During the years that followed the two countries exchanged envoys on a regular basis.<sup>6</sup>

However, in 1592 the Japanese ruler Toyotomi Hideyoshi, having united a fractured Japan after a very destructive civil war, ordered an invasion of Korea, thinking he could also take control of Ming China and become the ruler of East Asia,. The 150,000-strong Japanese troops moved quickly across the peninsula, reaching as far as the Tumen River, but were halted by Chinese reinforcements. Another invasion attempt in 1597, with 140,000 troops, also failed, and after the death of Hideyoshi the following year the troops withdrew. Shortly thereafter Japan went into self-isolation during the Tokugawa (Edo) period, which lasted from 1603 until 1868. A small but regulated trade with Korea was conducted through Tsushima and small Japanese outpost, the *waegwan*, near Busan.

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## Japan opens up

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## Japan annexes Korea

The Chinese government was of a different opinion and the rivalry concerning the influence over Korea was a contributing factor to the Sino-Japanese war of 1894-1895, which ended with the Shimonoseki treaty, which not only ceded Taiwan to Japan, but also was the starting point of Japan taking full control over Korea. After defeating Russia in the Russo-Japanese War in 1905, Japan turned Korea into a protectorate and removed its diplomatic rights. Five years later, in 1910, Japan formally annexed Korea.

The Japanese rule over Korea was extremely harsh. The Japanese language was the mandated language for education, government and public use. Newspapers and publications in Korean were prohibited. The policy of forced assimilation aimed at destroying the Korean identity and Koreans were forced to adopt Japanese names. It was essentially a dictatorship under the Japanese Governor-General.

## Japan capitulates

Bitterness directed towards the Japanese was widespread among the Korean population when the war ended in 1945. The Japanese government was accused of having orchestrated schemes of forced labor and prostitution (*ianfu*, ‘comfort women’).

Korea was effectively divided into two halves after Soviet and American troops took control of each half of the peninsula, meeting at the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel. Two Korean states were officially proclaimed in 1948, ROK (Republic of Korea) on August 15, and the DPRK (Democratic People’s Republic of Korea), the latter on September 9. In June 1950, the Korean War began, ending three years later in an armistice.

## Normalization between Japan and ROK

In 1965, Japan and the Republic of Korea (ROK) signed the Treaty of Basic Relations, which not only established formal diplomatic ties, but also provided the ROK with

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economic aid for post-war recovery and a settlement for claims of compensation for earlier abuses. The aid had a huge impact and was a contributing factor to South Korea’s impressive economic growth. However, since it was signed by a Korean president, Park Chung-hee, who had served as an officer in the Japanese Imperial Army during the war (under the name of Takagi Masao), the treaty was criticized as being too soft on Japan.<sup>8</sup> The issue of “comfort women” and forced labor in Japanese mines took on a life of its own.

## The comfort women

After repeated discussions and claims, the issue of the comfort women was addressed in a special agreement, announced in a joint press conference by the foreign ministers on December 28, 2015. Japan’s foreign minister at the time, Kishida Fumio, stated: *The issue*

*of comfort women, with an involvement of the Japanese military authorities at that time, was a grave affront to the honor and dignity of large numbers of women, and the Government of Japan is painfully aware of responsibilities from this perspective. As Prime Minister of Japan, Prime Minister Abe expresses anew 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.*

A special fund was to be set up by a “one-time contribution” of 1 billion yen by the Japanese government in order to heal the psychological wounds of all comfort women. Through this measure, the issue was said to be “resolved finally and irreversibly” and the two governments agreed to “refrain from criticizing each other regarding this issue.”<sup>9</sup> Meanwhile, the South Korean foreign minister Yun Byung-se in a separate statement confirmed what Kishida said.

In spite of this, a statue of a comfort woman was installed in front of the Japanese Embassy in Seoul in 2011. In 2016, another was placed on the sidewalk facing the Consulate-General of Japan in Busan. The statues were seen as another way of arguing that the 2015 agreement was not valid. In May 2017 the new Moon Jae-in administration effectively nullified the deal, stating it did not adequately address the victims’ wishes.

In January 2018, the ROK’s new foreign minister, Kang Kyung-wha, announced that the ROK government would not ask for a renegotiation of the issue, but that the 2015 agreement “fails to properly reflect the wishes of the victims”, and thus “does not constitute a true resolution of the issue.”<sup>10</sup> Later that year the ROK government announced that it would arrange a reserve budget to “appropriate the full amount” of the 1 billion yen contributed by the Government of Japan and put it in a “Gender Equality Fund.”<sup>11</sup> This decision was later followed by several civic lawsuits against the Government of Japan and the issue continued to be contentious.

## The forced labor issue

In 2018, the South Korean Supreme Court handed down a landmark decision affirming that individuals subjected to forced labor during Japan’s rule (1910-1945) could sue Japanese companies like Nippon Steel and Mitsubishi Heavy Industries for compensation, rejecting Japanese claims that the issue was already settled by the 1965 treaty. The verdicts said that company assets could be seized by the court and sold to compensate the victims. However, former President Roh Moo-hyun (2003-2008) had formed a committee to review the issue, concluding that the 1965 treaty had in fact settled the matter.<sup>12</sup>

Japan responded to the Supreme Court’s decision by removing South Korea from its “whitelist” for preferential trading in July 2019, arguing that South Korea did not comply with export controls and regulations to prevent the resale of strategic goods, and that it had ignored the Japanese government’s request to hold export control talks. President Moon issued a statement saying that Korea “would never lose to Japan again”, while the Korean public reacted with boycotts of Japanese products. The ROK government also removed Japan from its own whitelist and announced that it would withdraw from the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA).<sup>13</sup>

In November 2024 Japan held a memorial service for wartime laborers at the Sado island mines in Niigata Prefecture, where thousands of Koreans had been forced to work under very harsh conditions. The issue gained special attention after Japan’s successful listing of some of the mines as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, first a silver mine in 2007, and later, in 2024, a gold mine. Korean representatives were invited, but announced their non-attendance at the last moment, probably because a Japanese parliamentary vice-minister for foreign affairs, who had just visited the controversial Yasukuni shrine a few months before the event, was supposed to attend the service.<sup>14</sup>

## Takeshima / Dokdo issue

Japan and South Korea have different views on the small islets called Takeshima by Japan and Dokdo by South Korea, situated approximately 215 kilometers from mainland Korea and 250 kilometers from Japan proper. South Korea claims them as Korean territory based on records that date back to the sixth century and a 1900 Korean Empire ordinance officially incorporating them into modern Ulleung County. Japanese claims come from seventeenth century records, as well as a “terra nullius” incorporation in 1905.

Today, South Korea classifies the islets as part of Ulleung County, North Gyeongsang Province, while Japan classifies them as part of Okinoshima, in Oki District, Shimane Prefecture. On February 22, 2005, Shimane Prefecture, declared that the day should be annually celebrated as “Takeshima Day” in commemoration of the Japanese incorporation of 1905. This tends to inflame the controversy on a yearly basis, but South

Korea is presently in control of the islets, and there are few indications that the status quo will change or that the issue will come to dominate over other urgent matters on the bilateral agenda. North Korea supports the South Korean position.

## Presidents Yoon Suk-yeol and Lee Jae-myung

When South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol assumed office in May 2022 he did so on a policy that included mending ties with Japan. He retracted several earlier Korean positions, statements and decisions and vowed to cooperate with Japan in meeting common regional and global challenges. Yoon seemingly agreed with the Japanese and American governments that a firm trilateral relationship was the best foundation for a credible defense against common regional threats. A historic trilateral summit was held in August 2023 at Camp David reaffirming this view.

When President Yoon declared martial law on December 3, he stunned most ROK citizens as well as the international community. However, within only a few hours 190 out of the 300 members of the National Assembly voted unanimously to annul the declaration. The coup attempt failed, Yoon ended up in jail and his nemesis, the leader of the Democratic Party, Lee Jae-myung, was elected the new president on June 3, 2025. Many in Japan believed that the bilateral relations would again turn sour, the reason being that Lee had a record of being very critical of Japan. Japanese media had even called him an “anti-Japanese monster.” But Lee surprised many by becoming the first South Korean leader since 1965 to make Japan his first destination for a foreign visit, albeit on his way to Washington D.C. This was a move that was widely welcomed in Tokyo. Before his visit Lee had also in an interview with the Japanese daily *Yomiuri Shimbun* stressed that past agreements on the comfort women and forced labor would not be rescinded.<sup>15</sup>

In a joint press conference with Prime Minister Ishiba Shigeru, Lee and Ishiba outlined five key areas for

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cooperation: enhancing exchanges and strategic communication between leaders; increasing cooperation on future industries; expanding people-to-people exchanges; cooperating on peace and security on the Korean Peninsula and North Korea; and deepening regional and international cooperation. Their statement avoided a few contentious issues, including historical disputes, but it was the first of its kind in almost twenty years.<sup>16</sup>

## Prime Minister Takaichi Sanae

Taking responsibility for repeated election losses, Ishiba announced his resignation on September 7, 2025. A new party leader, and probable prime minister, was elected on October 4. The winner was Takaichi Sanae, who managed to present a new coalition and thereby become the first female prime minister of Japan on October 21. Takaichi had made herself known as a hawkish politician and it did not take many days before her thinking was tested by a question in Parliament about the consequences for Japan of a possible Chinese attack or blockade against Taiwan. She replied that “If naval ships are used in order to use force, that would be a case that can only be considered a survival-threatening situation.”<sup>17</sup>

Takaichi’s statement was in line with Japan’s 2015 security law which stated that Japan could engage in “collective self-defense” if an ally (the U.S.) was attacked. In 2021, after leaving office, former premier Abe Shinzō had also declared that “a Taiwan emergency is a Japanese emergency.”<sup>18</sup> One reason being that the Japanese island chain stretches to a point very close to Japan. The closest inhabited Japanese island, Yonaguni, is only 111 km from Taiwan, and it is difficult to see a situation where a Chinese blockade, for instance, would not have serious consequences for Japan as well. Any American military response would also need to use American bases in Japan. However, the Chinese government’s reaction was explosive, recommending Chinese citizens to avoid visiting Japan, and trying to damage Japan’s economy by imposing an embargo on Japanese fish products.

How, then, would a Korean “anti-Japanese monster”, and a far-right Japanese hawk relate to each other when they met for the first time? Takaichi had, after all, earlier taken a critical view on whether Japan should offer reflection and apologies for Japan’s forcible annexation of Korea. She had also challenged earlier statements from the Japanese government acknowledging the forced mobilization of comfort women by the Japanese military (the Kōno statement of 1993) and expressing remorse and apology for its aggression and colonial role (the Murayama statement of 1995).<sup>19</sup>

An indication of how the governments of Japan and ROK would relate to each other came when Takaichi visited South Korea in connection with the APEC summit on October 30. President Lee expressed his opinion that amid “the rapidly changing global landscape and trade environment, neighboring South Korea and Japan must strengthen their future-oriented cooperation now more than ever.”<sup>20</sup>

On her part, Takaichi stated: “This year marks the 60th anniversary of the normalization of diplomatic relations between Japan and South Korea. I am convinced it will be beneficial for us to develop our relationship in a future-oriented and stable manner based on the foundation that has been built.”<sup>21</sup>

## Conclusion

Japan and Korea have a historical relationship filled with the whole spectrum of mutual friendship and animosity. Cultural, political and military influences from the Korean Peninsula ultimately laid the foundation for the creation of an independent island nation called Japan. Without early migration and missions from the Korean Peninsula, Japan as we know it would not exist. Earlier Japanese aggression is also responsible for the present situation of two Koreas, with very different ideologies, dividing the peninsula.

However, Japan and the Republic of Korea have proven themselves to be democracies with a common worldview. Without a future-oriented relationship, in

which they work together to tackle common challenges, their positions in the world community will be weaker. Their relationship is not unlike that which exists between European countries. Without mutual support and cooperation, larger nations will be tempted to increase their bullying tactics.

Perhaps Denmark and Sweden can serve as good examples. If they were to let earlier historical injustices determine how they relate to each other, they would never stop arguing. Today, they recognize that awful things have happened, but also that there should be no room for awful things to happen again. Instead, they realize that cooperation, both bilaterally and within suitable frameworks such as the EU, the Nordic Council and NATO, makes the defense of common values easier.

Being nations close to each other will almost by definition create tensions, but one should never let proximity stand in the way of closeness.

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