

60 Years of Normalization of ROK-Japan Diplomatic Relations: Achievements and Challenges



Jaichul Heo

Research Fellow, Head of Japan and East Asia Team

1. Achievements and Current Status over 60 Years of Normalization of Diplomatic Relations

This year, 2025, marks the 60th anniversary of the normalization of diplomatic relations between the Republic of Korea (ROK) and Japan. The ROK and Japan normalized their diplomatic relations by signing the Treaty on Basic Relations between ROK and Japan in June 1965. During the Cold War, the United States sought to establish a liberal bloc within East Asia, centered on Japan, to counter the communist bloc, toward which it pursued the normalization of ROK-Japan relations. Following its loss in World War II, Japan needed to resolve postwar issues through normalization of diplomatic relations with the ROK, while the ROK was in dire need of foreign capital necessary for its economic growth. Against this background, ROK-Japan diplomatic relations were normalized in 1965.

Since the normalization of diplomatic relations in 1965, the ROK and Japan have maintained close relations in various fields such as politics, economy, civil society, and culture while sharing the values of liberalism and market economy. Around 2000, the ROK abolished import restrictions on Japanese

* The opinions, findings, conclusions, and recommendations expressed in this article are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of KIEP.

popular culture, which expanded opportunities for cultural exchange between the two countries. As of December 2023, Japan is the ROK's fourth-largest trading partner and the ROK is Japan's fifth-largest trading partner, maintaining close economic relations. In terms of personal exchanges, as of 2023, there are approximately 410,000 residents of Korean nationality and 24,000 residents of Korean lineage (Chōsen-seki) in Japan, with an additional approximately 58,000 Koreans staying long-term in Japan. Among foreign tourists visiting the ROK in the first half of 2024, Japanese ranked second after Chinese, and among foreign tourists visiting Japan during the same period, the ROK ranked first. In the political realm, since the Yoon Suk Yeol government proposed a "third-party reimbursement" plan to solve the issue of compensation for forced labor in March 2023, bilateral relations at the government level have rapidly eased and trilateral cooperation between the ROK, US, and Japan has also solidified.

However, remaining social conflicts between the ROK and Japan over historical issues such as the comfort women issue, forced labor during the Japanese colonial period, and visits to the Yasukuni Shrine by Japanese officials have not yet been resolved, and continue to have negative impact on exchanges and cooperation in other areas.

2. Changes in Circumstances surrounding ROK-Japan Relations

Recently, there are considerable changes occurring in the environment surrounding the relationship between the two countries.

First, as the strategic competition between the United States and China intensifies, we have entered a so-called era of US-China strategic competition, which is having a significant impact on the entire international order. The ROK and Japan have close relations with both the United States and China, and are being significantly affected.

In addition, as the climate crisis is recognized as a serious threat to the survival of mankind, efforts are being made in the international community to suppress the rise in global-average temperature, starting with the Framework Convention on Climate Change (FCCC) in 1992, the Kyoto Protocol in 1997, and the 2015 Paris Agreement. In particular, efforts to promote a green transformation (GX) that can realize carbon neutrality have become essential for each country.

In addition, with the rapid development of science and technology, also known as the 4th Industrial Revolution, almost all areas of society are transitioning from the existing analog system to a digital system, with the success of this digital transformation (DX) directly related to the sustainability of national development. In addition, the importance of the East Asian region, where the ROK and Japan are located, is increasing. As of 2022, East Asia is growing into the

most important region in the international community, accounting for 23.4% of the world's GDP, 20% of the world's population, and 18.7% of global trade. Accordingly, how well basic values such as freedom, democracy, human rights, and equality and the market economic system are guaranteed and operated in this region has become a very important issue not only at the regional level but also at the global level.

3. Direction of Development of ROK-Japan Relations

Within this changing environment, the ROK and Japan are celebrating the 60th anniversary of normalization of their diplomatic relations. So, in what direction should the ROK and Japan develop their relationship in the future?

Four cooperation directions appear necessary, these being the principles of two-track, long-term perspective, youth generation-centered, and a citizen-feeling.

The ROK and Japan are already actively engaging in exchanges and cooperation in various fields, including politics, economy, civic society, and human exchanges. However, friction surrounding historical issues is acting as a risk and uncertainty in all of these areas of exchange and cooperation. In this situation, it is essential to address historical issues with due consideration while ensuring they do not become obstacles across all other areas. In other words, a two-track strategy is needed where on one side historical issues can be discussed more calmly and continuously at the level of academia and civil society, but apart from this, in other fields exchanges and cooperation continue.

Next, it is necessary to pursue development of the relationship between the two countries from a long-term perspective rather than short-term achievements. Above all, it is necessary to cultivate an attitude of developing the relationship between the two countries step by step, even if this proves a bit slow. The governments of both the ROK and Japan should not push forward policies to realize short-term diplomatic achievements of their respective regimes, but rather should push forward policies based on sufficient communication with the public. Cultivating such an approach could make for slow progress in various policies and efforts for the development of the relationship between the two countries, but this approach would ensure they are promoted more stably and continuously.

Developing ROK-Japan relations centered on the youth generation is also an important direction. In order to build a future-oriented ROK-Japan relationship, an environment must be created in which the youth generation, the masters of the future, can proactively suggest ideas for the development of ROK-Japan relations and play a central role. The older generations are

more likely to be passive in building a future-oriented relationship because they are relatively more influenced by vested interests and past memories. In contrast, the youth generation will be able to build a more future-oriented relationship from a medium to long-term perspective.

Finally, it will be important to proceed in directions of cooperation which the public can concur with and appreciate. No matter how effective the three aforementioned directions for developing relations prove to be, the relationship between the two countries can be shaken at any time according to political circumstances if they lack public support. By ensuring that the public can appreciate the benefits of developing relations between the two countries, we must secure solid public support for the development of relations between the two countries.

4. Specific Areas of Cooperation and Tasks

Based on the evolving environment and directions of cooperation, in what specific areas should the ROK and Japan cooperate in the future?

First, in the political and diplomatic spheres, the ROK and Japan should strengthen cooperation in protecting the open free trade order, preventing the intensification of the US-China strategic competition, establishing a small-scale cooperation system, and jointly responding to economic security concerns. Recently, protectionist trends have been expanding worldwide, and the intensification of the US-China strategic competition is having a negative impact on the ROK and Japan. Both the ROK and Japan, which have benefited from the free trade system, should make joint diplomatic efforts to maintain the free trade order and prevent the intensification of the US-China strategic competition. At the same time, the ROK and Japan may be able to seek cooperation within the framework of a small-scale cooperation system in addition to their bilateral relationship, toward which Japan's cooperation on the ROK's accession to the CPTPP would be a good example. In addition, as economic security issues are becoming increasingly important, it is necessary to strengthen cooperation at the political level between the two countries so that they can actively cooperate to stabilize the supply chains of critical minerals, energy, food, etc., jointly respond to economic coercion, and improve the export control system.

In the economic sector, the two countries must actively seek cooperation in the areas of green transformation (GX), digital transformation (DX), local economic revitalization, and startup fostering. Green transformation is a response to global climate change and has the potential to be a new economic growth engine for the future. In particular, there are concerns that the US leadership in responding to global climate change will weaken in the second term of Trump, so

the ROK and Japan need to strengthen cooperation and demonstrate global leadership in this area. In addition, with regard to digital transformation, the ROK already has considerable technological prowess and talent in the IT field, and Japan has great market potential in this field, so the possibility of cooperation between the two countries is expected to be high. And, since both ROK and Japan have a population and social infrastructure concentrated in the metropolitan area and big cities, they share the common task of revitalizing their local economies, meaning they should share their experiences and ideas in this area and solve problems together.

In the social sector, we should strengthen cooperation in areas such as responding to a low birth rate and aging society, active human exchanges among the younger generation, healthcare, and disaster management. In particular, both the ROK and Japan are facing serious social problems due to a low birth rate and aging population, so there are many areas where cooperation is possible. In addition, since exchanges among the younger generation are an important issue directly related to the future of ROK-Japan relations, we should establish various systems to activate this.

Finally, in the science and technology sector, we should strengthen cooperation in technology development and standards setting in clean energy such as hydrogen and offshore wind power, as well as artificial intelligence (AI), bio projects. To this end, it would be possible to promote the establishment of joint research institutes, operate talent exchange programs in the science and technology sector, and establish funds in which the government and private sector invest together. **KIEP**