

MP-IDSA *Issue Brief*

History and Geopolitics in South Korea-Japan Relations: The Sado Mine Issue

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S*ummary*

Historical issues have a deep impact on the relationship between South Korea and Japan. However, the recent cooperation between Seoul and Tokyo with regards to the colonial history (1910–1945) reflects the improvement in the bilateral relations between these two 'middle power' countries. It also signifies the geopolitical shift in the East Asian region.

Introduction

South Korea–Japan relations have been deeply troubled by the ‘history problem’.¹ The colonisation of the Korean Peninsula by imperial Japan (1910–1945) still evokes strong resentment among the Korean people. It is argued that the Japanese colonial administration in the Korean Peninsula not only exploited the Korean people, but also tried to completely erase their national identity, history and culture. From the South Korean perspective, tens of thousands of Korean men were used as ‘forced labour’ in industries and mines, and a large number of Korean women were sexually exploited as ‘comfort women’ by the Japanese colonial regime. The interpretation of the colonial history in the school textbooks in Japan, and the visits to the Yasukuni shrine by the Japanese leaders to worship their dead army men, including ‘Class-A war criminals’ who died in the World War II, are also controversial in South Korea.²

The instrumental use of historical issues in domestic politics and foreign affairs is also quite common in both South Korea and Japan. In case of South Korea, political leaders often use historical memories and victimisation by the Japanese colonial regime to generate strong nationalistic feelings. But South Koreans largely remain silent on the role of the Korean ‘collaborators’ in assisting the Japanese colonial administration and the contribution of Japan in modernising the Korean Peninsula.³ On the other hand, Tokyo also carefully hides the brutalities committed on the colonised people during the building of its so-called ‘Greater East Asia Co-prosperity Sphere’.

However, the recent conciliatory approach adopted by South Korea towards Japan with regards to the colonial history reflects the improvement in the bilateral relations between these two neighbouring countries. The cooperation between South Korea and Japan on the issue of enlisting of historical Sado gold and silver mine of Japan as the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) World Heritage Site in July 2024 is a remarkable development. From the South Korean account, hundreds of Korean workers were forcibly recruited by the Japanese colonial regime to work in dangerous circumstances at the Sado mine. While Japan acknowledged the mistreatment of the Korean mineworkers employed in the Sado mine during the colonial period, South Korean government also supported the designation of this mine as the World Heritage Site.⁴

¹ Chris Deacon, “[\(Re\)producing the ‘History Problem’: Memory, Identity and the Japan-South Korea Trade Dispute](#)”, *The Pacific Review*, Vol. 35, No. 5, 2022, pp. 789–820.

² Ji Young Kim, “[Escaping the Vicious Cycle: Symbolic Politics and History Disputes between South Korea and Japan](#)”, *Asian Perspective*, Vol. 38, No. 1, January–March 2014, pp. 31–60.

³ Atul Kohli, “[Where Do High Growth Political Economies Come From? The Japanese Lineage of Korea’s ‘Developmental State’](#)”, *World Development*, Vol. 22, No. 9, 1994, pp. 1269–1293.

⁴ Lim Jeong-Won and Seo Ji-Eun, “[Japanese Mines Registered With Unesco After Seoul, Tokyo Agree On History Descriptions](#)”, *Korea JoongAng Daily*, 28 July 2024.

South Korea–Japan Cooperation on Sado Mine Issue

Japan had repeatedly tried to enlist Sado mine historical site related to the Japanese history of Edo period (1603–1867) as the UNESCO World Heritage Site since 2022. Japan highlighted the historical importance of this mine which is located in the Niigata Prefecture, but did not mention about the situation of the Korean workers who were recruited in the gold and silver mining activities in Sado mine when Korean Peninsula was a Japanese colony. Following this, the South Korean government lodged a strong protest against the Japanese efforts for the enlistment of Sado mine in UNESCO.⁵

This issue became even more serious when the National Assembly of South Korea passed a resolution demanding the withdrawal of the application for Sado mine’s enlistment in UNESCO by Japan.⁶ Later, the South Korean government stated that it may support the inclusion of Sado mine in World Heritage list if the issue of exploitation of the Korean workers in the mining activities by the Japanese colonial administrators is also considered by the World Heritage Committee, which was scheduled to meet in New Delhi, India during 21–31 July 2024.⁷

In this regard, Japan made a compromise with South Korea and accepted to acknowledge the harsh working conditions in the Sado mine for the Korean workers during the colonial period. But Japan refrained from using the term ‘forced labour’ for the Korean mineworkers.⁸ Tokyo even refused to release the list of Korean workers employed at the Sado mine.⁹ As a gesture of conciliation, the Japanese government accepted to hold an annual ceremony at the Sado mine in the memory of the Korean workers who worked there in harsh circumstances. In response, South Korea decided to support the Japanese bid to get Sado mine enlisted as the UNESCO World Heritage Site.

However, there are also apprehensions in South Korea over the seriousness of Japan regarding its acceptance of the mistreatment of Korean workers in Sado mine during the colonial period.¹⁰ The speaker of the National Assembly of South Korea has even asked the government for the release of all documents related to the Sado mine’s World Heritage Site listing.¹¹ But despite strong criticism from the

⁵ Ji Da-gyum, [“S. Korea Summons Japan Envoy Over Re-Pushing for Sado Mine as UNESCO Heritage”](#), *The Korea Herald*, 20 January 2023.

⁶ Yonhap, [“National Assembly Adopts Resolution Urging Japan to Withdraw Unesco Bid For Sado Mine”](#), *Korea JoongAng Daily*, 28 February 2023.

⁷ Lim Jeong-Won, [“Korea Could Allow Unesco Listing of Japanese Gold Mines if Conditions Met”](#), *Korea JoongAng Daily*, 7 June 2024.

⁸ Yonhap, [“Japan Rejected S. Korea’s Call to Include Term ‘Forced’ in Sado Mine Exhibits”](#), *The Korea Herald*, 6 August 2024.

⁹ Lee Hyo-jin, [“Japan Refuses to Provide List of Korean Forced Laborers at Sado Mines”](#), *The Korea Times*, 8 August 2024.

¹⁰ Yonhap, [“Japan’s Mine Associated with Wartime Forced Labor Listed as UNESCO World Heritage”](#), *The Korea Times*, 27 July 2024.

¹¹ Kwak Yeon-soo, [“Assembly Speaker Calls for Disclosure of Negotiation Process Surrounding UNESCO Listing of Sado Mines”](#), *The Korea Times*, 6 August 2024.

opposition Democratic Party in South Korea, the government’s approach towards Japan on this aspect of colonial history is noteworthy.¹²

South Korean Domestic Politics and Historical Issues

The issues of colonial history have flared up in South Korea–Japan relations from time to time. The relations between South Korea and Japan plummeted to a new low during the administrations of Park Geun-hye (2013–2017) and Moon Jae-in (2017–2022). During the tenure of Park Geun-hye, Japan ‘temporarily’ recalled its ambassador and consulate general from South Korea as a protest over the installation of a ‘comfort woman’ statue in Busan.¹³ Similarly, under the Moon Jae-in administration, Japan put restrictions on the export of essential chemicals needed in semiconductor industries, supposedly due to the verdict passed by the South Korean Supreme Court favouring compensation by the Japanese companies for the Korean ‘forced labour’ victims.¹⁴

Remarkably, the South Korean government under Park and Moon showed more closeness towards China and ignored Japan. Some scholars have claimed that the foreign policy behaviour of South Korea towards China and Japan had been contrary to Seoul’s claims of being a ‘middle power’ country.¹⁵ In fact, it is even argued that South Korea had been more anxious about Japan’s possible remilitarisation than China’s rise as a military power.¹⁶ Nonetheless, since President Yoon Suk Yeol came to power in 2022, there have been some noticeable changes in South Korea’s relations with Japan. Evidently, the historical issues are no longer a determining factor in the bilateral relations and contentious issue like that of Korean ‘forced labour’ of the colonial period, or the UNESCO’s recognition to Japanese Sado mine, were resolved amicably.

However, critics argue that South Korean government has unreasonably compromised with Japan on the Sado mine issue.¹⁷ President Yoon Suk Yeol’s apparently ‘pro-Japanese’ policies have come under criticism. There have also been allegations that Yoon administration has appointed a number of persons from the ‘New Right’ ideological background having pro-Japanese sentiments in various

¹² Yonhap, “[DPK Criticizes Yoon Gov’t as Japan’s Sado Gold Mine Gains UNESCO Status](#)”, *The Korea Times*, 29 July 2024.

¹³ Choe Sang-Hun and Motoko Rich, “[Japan Recalls Ambassador to South Korea to Protest ‘Comfort Woman’ Statue](#)”, *The New York Times*, 6 January 2017.

¹⁴ Josh Doyle, “[Decades of Distrust: South Koreans Angry at Japan’s Export Curbs](#)”, *Al Jazeera*, 22 July 2019.

¹⁵ Leif-Eric Easley and Kyuri Park, “[South Korea’s Mismatched Diplomacy in Asia: Middle Power Identity, Interests, and Foreign Policy](#)”, *International Politics*, Vol. 55, No. 2, 2018, pp. 242–263.

¹⁶ David C. Kang, [China Rising: Peace, Power, and Order in East Asia](#), Columbia University Press, New York, 2007, p. 104.

¹⁷ Wang Son-taek, “[\[Wang Son-Taek\] Obscured Truth in the Sado Mine Complex](#)”, *The Korea Herald*, 1 August 2024.

institutions of national importance in South Korea.¹⁸ The appointment of ‘pro-Japan’ director of the Independence Hall in South Korea, Kim Hyung-seok in August 2024 stirred significant controversy due to his views about Japan’s colonial rule in the Korean Peninsula and its impact on the modernisation of the country.¹⁹ As a result, the main opposition party, the Democratic Party of Korea, called for the removal of Kim from his post.

History and Geopolitics in East Asia

Historical issues have played a significant role in the geopolitics of the East Asian region. The relations between China, Japan and the two Koreas have been deeply influenced by the events of the past. In 2004, a huge controversy erupted between China and South Korea over the ownership of ancient Goguryeo kingdom (37BC–668AD). Similarly, Japan’s imperial past and brutalities committed by the Japanese military on the Chinese and Korean people have triggered massive resentment in contemporary China and the two Korean states. North Koreans also harbour deep hatred towards the United States due to America’s role in the division of the Korean Peninsula, and massive destruction of North Korea by the American military during the devastating Korean War (1950–1953).

However, the new development with regards to the colonial history in South Korea–Japan relations is happening in the milieu of shifting geopolitics in the East Asian region, particularly China’s rising assertiveness, military cooperation between Russia and North Korea, the efforts of the United States to strengthen its strategic alliance with its allies and partners in the ‘Indo-Pacific’, and the Japanese efforts for a ‘Free and Open Indo-Pacific’. On the other hand, South Korea’s relations with North Korea have deteriorated in the recent years and in 2024 Pyongyang even designated its southern neighbour as an “enemy and separate country”. The recent cooperation between Seoul and Tokyo on historical issues is largely due to the convergence of strategic interests, and similarities in the security and economic challenges they both are currently facing.²⁰

Therefore, the recent success in the enlisting of the historical Sado mine as the UNESCO World Heritage Site also signifies the changing geopolitical situation in the region. As a result, the relations between South Korea and Japan have strengthened in the recent years. The efforts of the United States have also been vital in building security cooperation between these two East Asian countries.²¹ For

¹⁸ Kim Song-yi, [“New Right Figures Undermine Fabric of Korea’s ‘History of Liberation’”](#), *The Kyunghyang Shinmun*, 9 August 2024.

¹⁹ Jung Min-kyung, [“New Chief of Independence Hall of Korea Accused of Being ‘Pro-Japan’”](#), *The Korea Herald*, 9 August 2024.

²⁰ Ji Da-gyum, [“Can South Korea, Japan Move Beyond Historical Disputes?”](#), *The Korea Herald*, 14 August 2024.

²¹ Yonhap, [“Top Biden Officials Tout Improved Seoul-Tokyo Ties, Cooperation against NK Threats as Key Policy Feats”](#), *The Korea Times*, 6 August 2024.

the first time, the United States, Japan and South Korea have come together to initiate a multi-domain trilateral military exercise called ‘Freedom Edge’ and have also jointly established a ‘Trilateral Security Cooperation Framework’ in 2024.²²

The rising military engagement between North Korea and Russia and the signing of a ‘Comprehensive Strategic Partnership’ treaty between Pyongyang and Moscow in June 2024 have been an issue of concern to Washington, Tokyo and Seoul. This new treaty between North Korea and Russia has the provision for mutual military assistance ‘without delay’ if either of the two countries is invaded.²³ The United States has also been deeply apprehensive over the possibilities of Russia’s transfer of sophisticated weapons to North Korea.²⁴ Therefore, the United States, Japan and South Korea have been cooperating for deepening their security partnership.

Conclusion

The issues of history have been crucial in shaping international relations in the East Asian region. For decades, South Korea–Japan relations remained strained over the colonial history. The tenure of the two previous administrations in South Korea saw deterioration in the bilateral ties between Seoul and Tokyo, largely due to the contentious aspects of the Japanese colonial regime in the Korean Peninsula. In this regard, the issues related to the ‘comfort women’ and ‘forced labour’ during the colonial period generated lot of controversies in South Korea and Japan.

However, South Korea–Japan relations have witnessed a positive change in the recent years and the two countries have shown conciliatory approach on the contentious issues of the colonial period. The warming up of the relationship between South Korea and Japan is evident from the fact that the outgoing Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida even made a farewell visit to Seoul in September 2024 to boost bilateral ties. The new Japanese Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba has also expressed his desire to continue improving relationship between Tokyo and Seoul.²⁵

This shift also signals the changing geopolitical situation in the East Asian region. The emerging ‘new Cold War’ in the region has made it imperative for Seoul and Tokyo to overcome their differences and strengthen their security partnership. The issue of the enlistment of the Sado mine as the UNESCO World Heritage Site provides useful lessons for further cooperation and conciliation over the contentious aspects of the colonial history and territorial disputes in South Korea–Japan relations.

²² Anna J. Park, “[S. Korea, US and Japan Sign Trilateral Security Cooperation Framework](#)”, *The Korea Times*, 28 July 2024.

²³ “[DPRK-Russia Treaty on Comprehensive Strategic Partnership](#)”, *KCNA*, 20 June 2024.

²⁴ Justin McCurry and Andrew Roth, “[US ‘Incredibly Concerned’ Over Putin’s Threat to Supply Weapons to North Korea After Asia Tour](#)”, *The Guardian*, 21 June 2024.

²⁵ Sarah Kim, “[Yoon, Ishiba Pledge to Continue Improving Ties in First Bilateral Summit](#)”, *Korea JoongAng Daily*, 10 October 2024.

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