

		Press Release		EAI East Asia Institute
Date & Time of Release	After 2021.09.28. (Tues) 15:00 (Embargo)		Date & Time of Distribution	2021.09.27.(Mon)
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The East Asia Institute (EAI) and Genron NPO announce the main results of the 9th Joint Korea-Japan Public Opinion Survey.

◆ The 9th Joint Korea-Japan Public Opinion Survey

South Korea's global think tank, East Asia Institute (EAI, President Yul Sohn), and Japan's Genron NPO, conducted the “Joint Korea-Japan Public Opinion Survey” on the people of Korea and Japan in August and September 2021 and are announcing the survey results at 3 p.m. on Tuesday, September 28th through a press conference inviting Korean journalists and foreign correspondents in and outside of Korea. The Joint Korea-Japan Public Opinion Survey has been conducted annually since 2013, marking its ninth anniversary this year. The purpose of this survey is to continuously identify changes in the understanding and perception of the people of both countries to resolve the differences in perceptions between the people of both countries and promote mutual understanding. The materials used in this press conference can be found in (1) this summary and (2) key data tables.

The detailed results of this survey will be discussed at the 9th Korea-Japan Future Dialogue, which will be jointly held by the East Asia Institute and Genron NPO on October 2nd through an online seminar between Korea and Japan. Through the 9th Korea-Japan Future Dialogue, experts and intellectuals from both countries will gather in one place to discuss in-depth ways to narrow the currently widening gap in public perception between the two countries and improve Korea-Japan relations.

◆ Summary of the Key Results of the 9th Joint Korea-Japan Public Opinion Survey

1. Favorability toward the other country, Escaped the worst

- Korea's favorability toward Japan rebounded by 8.5%, escaping the worst observed last year.
- Japan's favorability toward Korea maintained a rebound trend observed last year.
- The rebound in favorability comes from fatigue from the long-term deadlock in relations and the need for mutual cooperation in security and economic issues for both countries.
- In both countries, the youth generation (especially those in their 20s) led the rebound in favorability while those in their 60s or older led the rebound in hostility.

Reasons for the rebound in favorability

Korea's positive perception for Japan rose from 12.3% in 2020 to 20.5% in 2021 while negative perception decreased from 71.6% in 2020 to 63.2%. This is an improvement from the results of the 2020 survey, which reflects the trade conflict between the two countries and controversy over GSOMIA in 2019. Korea's favorability toward Japan has been on the rise since 2015, but plunged to (15.7% → 21.3% → 26.8% → 28.3% → 31.7%) 12.3% in 2020. Negative perceptions toward Japan showed a downward trend from 72.5% in 2015 to 49.9% in 2019, but negative perceptions toward Japan soared to 71.6% in 2020.

On the other hand, Japan's negative perception toward Korea decreased slightly compared to the previous year, while positive perception rose. From 2016 to 2019, Japan's favorability toward Korea continued to decline, but its favorability rebounded to 5.9% in 2020 (29.1% → 26.9% → 22.9% → 20%), and it remained at this level this year.

In both countries, generational variation in favorability has been clearly defined. While the leading force of favorability was the younger generation, sentiments of hostility were prevalent among those in their 60s and older.

2. Public opinion on the Korean side, in favor of improving Korea-Japan relations and cooperation, has gained force.

- In Korea, the willingness to improve Korea-Japan relations and strengthen cooperation has sharply rebounded, escaping the worst observed last year.
- Prospect on resolving historical problems have increased if a future-oriented cooperative relationship were to be established (24.5% in 2020 → 38.1% in 2021)
- Japan acknowledges the need to improve relations, but maintains a cold stance on cooperation.

Korea strongly expressed that improvements need to be made on exacerbating Korea-Japan relations, in which relations between the two countries continue to deteriorate due to trade conflicts and the controversy over GSOMIA in 2019. 45.8% of the respondents expressed their opinion that Korea and Japan should overcome the conflict through a future-oriented approach, and (28.8%) expressed that the two countries should at least avoid political confrontation. An overwhelming majority of 74.6% viewed that the countries should escape from the current status of confrontation. In the case of Japan, 54.8% of the respondents, more than half, support this.

Figure 2 shows that responses to the option that “Creating future-oriented cooperative relationships (security, economy, health, climate change, etc.) between the two countries will gradually solve historical problems” on the issue of historical conflict, the main source exacerbating Korea-Japan relations, has increased by 14% from 24.5% from last year to 38.1% this year. That for the option of “Historical problems will not be resolved regardless of cooperation between the two countries” decreased from 43.6% to 21.7%. From these two points, we can see that trends on the Korean side have changed.

3. The central force that drives the other country's favorability is consumers of popular culture

- 81.2% of the people who consume Korean pop culture (*Hallyu*: Korean Wave) in Japan are in favor of Korea.
- In the case of Korea, 67% of the respondents who consume Japanese pop culture are in favor of Japan.
- There is a high level of loyalty to the Korean Wave in Japan.
“64.6% responded that consumption of the Korean Wave will remain the same even if Korea-Japan relations worsen.”
- The youth generation (MZ) led the consumption of popular culture.
In Japan, the proportion of women is more than 10% higher than that of men.

Whether or not the other country consumes popular culture was found to be a major factor driving favorability toward the other country. In the case of Korea, 18% of the respondents responded that they consume Japanese pop culture, of whom approximately 67% responded that they were in favor of Japan (10.4% responded that they had a favorable impression of Japan; 56.6% responded that they had a somewhat favorable impression of Japan)/

On the other hand, 34.5% of Korean respondents enjoy Japanese pop culture, of whom an overwhelming majority of 81.2% (25.8% responded that they had a favorable impression of Korea; 55.4% responded that they have a somewhat favorable impression of Korea) of the respondents showed favor for Korea.

49.5% of Koreans responded that they would “Hesitate to consume Japanese pop culture if the relationship worsens,” showing that they cannot separate worsening Korea-Japan relations and their consumption of Japanese popular culture. On the other hand, more than half of the Japanese respondents (64.6%) expressed their belief that even if Korea-Japan relations worsen, their enjoyment of Korean cultural contents will not change, showing a high level of loyalty toward the Korean Wave. The main group of consumers of popular culture in both countries is in their 20s and 30s, and in Japan, the proportion of women is 10% higher than that of men.

4. “Korea wants security and economic cooperation with Japan” – Is the China factor in the works?

- Korea-U.S. military security cooperation forms a V-Shape; support for Quad membership; also an increased demand for economic cooperation.
- Decreased awareness of military threats toward Japan (44% → 38.6%) vs. A surge in the awareness of military threats to China (44.3% → 61.8%)
- Korea's public opinion toward China is at its worst (with 10.7% favorability, half the level of favorability toward Japan).
- There is a correlation between increasing awareness of threats and dislike against China and support for Korea-U.S.-Japan cooperation and Korea-Japan cooperation.

The opinion that Korea, the U.S., and Japan should strengthen their trilateral military security cooperation in Korea increased from 53.6% in 2020 to 64.2% in 2021. Responses to the option of “Neither” decreased from 35.4% to 27.5%. On the other hand, to the opinion on strengthening military security cooperation between South Korea, the U.S., and Japan, responses to the option of “Neither” increased from 50.6% in 2020 to 52% in 2021 by a little. The argument on strengthening military security cooperation between South Korea and Japan also decreased from 38.9% in 2020 to 36% in 2021.

In particular, the change in the perception among Koreans is contrary to the results of the previous year's survey, in which support for the opinion that military security cooperation between South Korea, the U.S., and Japan should be strengthened decreased, showing a V-Shape. This shows that Koreans' perception of Japan has returned to that similar to results prior to the 2019 survey. The demand for economic cooperation between Korea and Japan also increased again (41.6% → 34.3% → 43.2%).

The change in Koreans' perception that they want security and economic cooperation with Japan may have been affected by worsening public opinion toward China. As shown in Figure 12, public opinion toward China in 2021 was the worst with levels of favorability toward China at 10.7%, half the level of favorability toward Japan. Over the past three years, a growing percentage of respondents answered that “China does not respect Korea (43.8%)” as the cause of public disapproval, while the percentage of respondents who answered “due to China's coercive actions such as THAAD retaliation (65.2%)” has steadily decreased. However, it is worth noting that Korea recognizes China as a threat, given that Korea's perception of China's military threat surged from 44.3% to 61.8% (Figure 15), and that half the respondents responded that Korea should participate in the Quad, joining Japan, the U.S., Australia, and India (51.1%). As China has been recognized as a threat, the issue of human rights suppression in China was also mentioned as a potential area for cooperation between Korea and Japan. In the case of Korea, more than half answered that it should respond strongly to the issue of human rights suppression in China (61%).

5. Expectations that the next administration will solve Korea-Japan relations are low

- Expectations for Korea's next administration/president – 48.3% in Korea, 46.1% in Japan respond that “it will not improve.”
- Expectations for Japan's next administration/president – 52.3% in Korea, 59.7% in Japan respond that “it will not improve.”
- Low expectations for the Korea-Japan summit – 40.7% in Korea, 38.2% in Japan respond that “There is no need to hold it as soon as possible.”

Both Korea and Japan had low expectations for the improvement of Korea-Japan relationships in the next administration. In the case of Korea, 48.3% of the respondents said that Korea-Japan relations will not improve during the next administration, and 52.3% of the respondents responded the same in Japan. Expectations for the summit were low and 40.7% respondents in Korea and 38.2% respondents in Japan, respectively, responded that “There is no need to hold it as soon as possible.” Overall, while recognizing the need for cooperation between Korea and Japan, the results show that expectations for actual cooperation are low. ■