



## Korea-Japan Relations in Crisis: People want a change

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Korea–Japan relations have been at an impasse which is unprecedented in their diplomatic relations. The announcement of export control by the then Prime Minister Abe on July 2019 has severely damaged Korea–Japan relations, which in turn led to a series of economic disputes including the exclusion of South Korea from the whitelist by the Japanese government and then boycott movements over Japanese products in South Korea, as well as security tension such as the announcement of a plan to terminate General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) by the South Korean government. Historical issues surrounding the South Korean court ruling over victims of forced labor that was made on October 2018, which are a major cause for these series of disputes, remain unresolved, straining bilateral relations between the two countries. While negotiations at the governmental level have been at a stalemate, the two countries are pitted against each other on many issues. If the South Korean court’s order to liquidate assets from Japanese companies comes into effect, the Japanese government is expected to take another retaliatory action, which would put Korea–Japan relations into danger of further deterioration.

This paper seeks to illustrate main points drawn from the results of the “8<sup>th</sup> South Korea–Japan Joint Public Opinion Poll” conducted jointly by the East Asia Institute (EAI), a private Korean think tank, and a Japanese NGO The Genron NPO on September 2020, as well as discussions made during the “8<sup>th</sup> Korea–Japan Future Dialogue” held on October 16–17, and to make suggestions for healthy Korea–Japan relations. Firstly, South Korean public opinions *vis-à-vis* Japan have plummeted. South Korean favorable perception towards Japan, which had seen a steady increase over the last five years, has dropped by 20% point, while unfavorability has increased by 22% point, with the young generation in their 20s and 30s leading the trend. Secondly, Japanese favorability towards South Korea showed improvement from its downward trend. It requires a due analysis on whether this change is temporary or can lead to a steady increase in the future. Thirdly, only around 30% of people in both countries expressed support to their own government’s policy towards the other country, which indicates that both South Korean and Japanese people exhibit a considerable level of dissatisfaction with the current situations and government policies concerned. Fourthly, both South Korean and Japanese public support for their government’s position on the South Korean court ruling over the forced labor issue have been changing. In this respect, it is noteworthy that the increasing number of people prefer a new approach to resolving the forced labor issue.

Lastly, if the governments of both countries are neglectful of the current situations without breaking the deadlock, both countries are likely to face another crisis. In this regard, the South Korean government should make a decision on the forced labor issue in a forward-looking manner by taking a careful look at changing public opinions. At the same time, the South Korean government needs to prepare for a comprehensive strategy to restore mutual trust between the two countries.

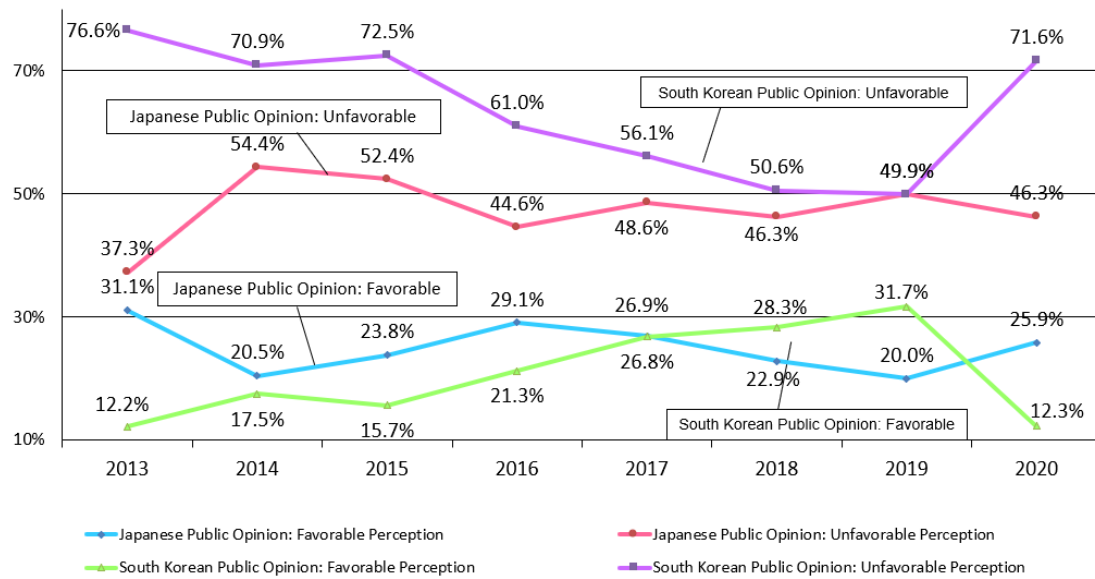
### 1. **South Korean Favorable Perception towards Japan plummeted, with the young generation leading the trend**

- South Korean favorable perception towards Japan plummeted by 19.4% point, while its unfavorable perception increased by 21.7% point
- There has been an upsurge in unfavorable perception towards Japan among the younger generation in their 20s and 30s, leading the increasing trend in unfavorability

The most notable change in this year's survey is a sharp decline in favorable perception towards Japan among South Korean respondents. South Koreans' unfavorable perception towards Japan has increased from 49.9% in 2019 to 71.6% in 2020. On the contrary, their favorable perception has plummeted from 31.7% in 2019 to 12.3% in 2020. Given that the trend of favorability towards Japan has been on the rise since 2015 (15.7%→21.3%→26.8%→28.3%→31.7%), this change is rather shocking. South Koreans' unfavorable perception toward Japan showed a declining trend from 72.5% in 2015 to 49.9% in 2019. In 2020, however, their unfavorable perception toward Japan has soared to 71.6%, which is similar to the figure in 2015.

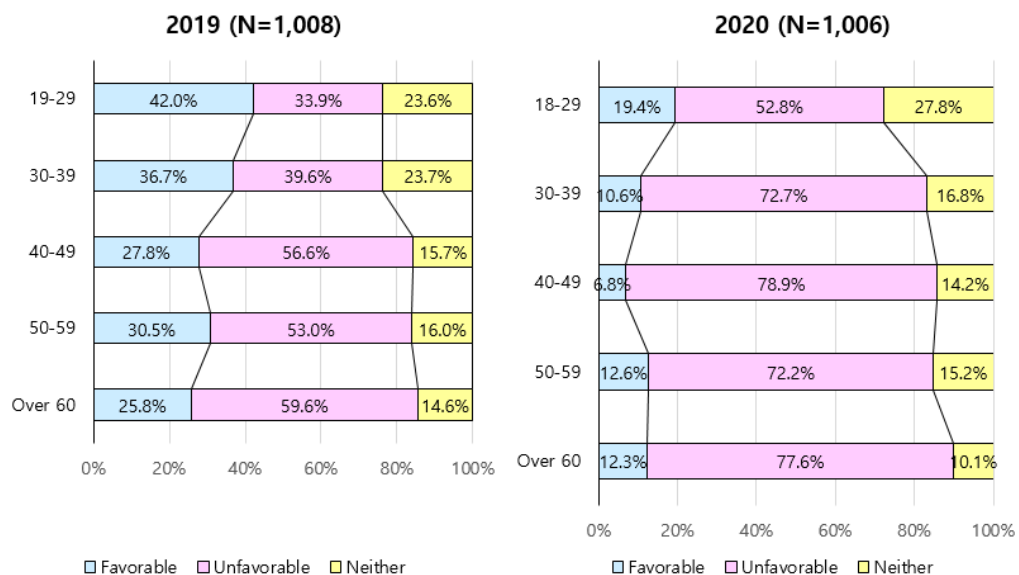
On the other hand, Japanese unfavorable perception towards South Korea has decreased slightly compared with the previous year, while their favorability has increased. From 2016 to 2019, Japanese favorable perception towards South Korea was on the decline (29.1%→26.9%→22.9%→20%). However, their favorable perception has shown improvement by marking 25.9% in 2020, which is a 5.9% point increase.

[Figure 1] South Korean and Japanese Perceptions towards Each Other (2013-2020)

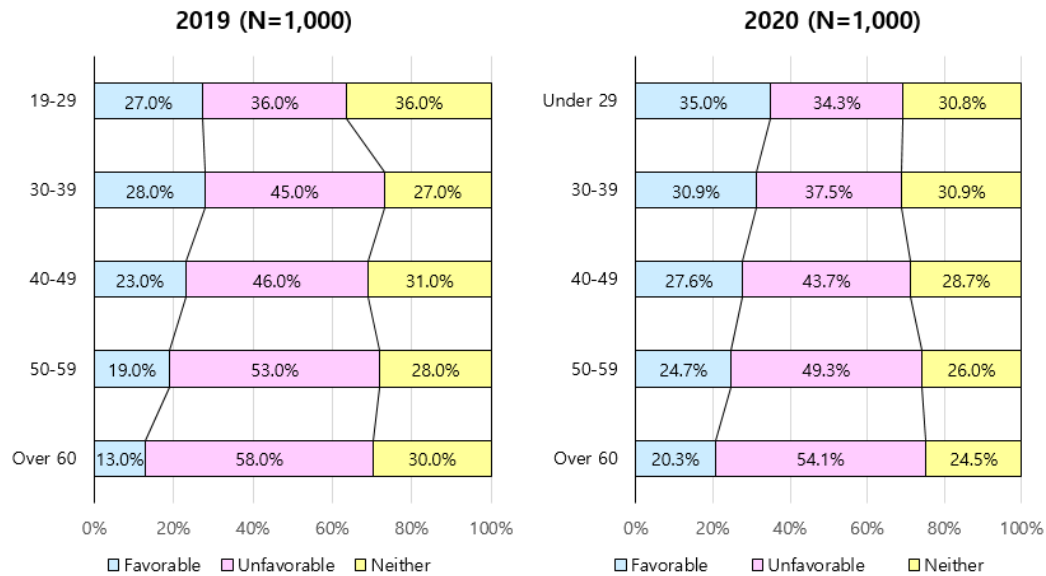


Considering the fact that changes in South Korean/Japanese favorability towards each other have been fluctuating within the 10% range since the comfort women agreement made in 2015, this drastic change of around 20% point is obviously an outlier. What changes have been made?

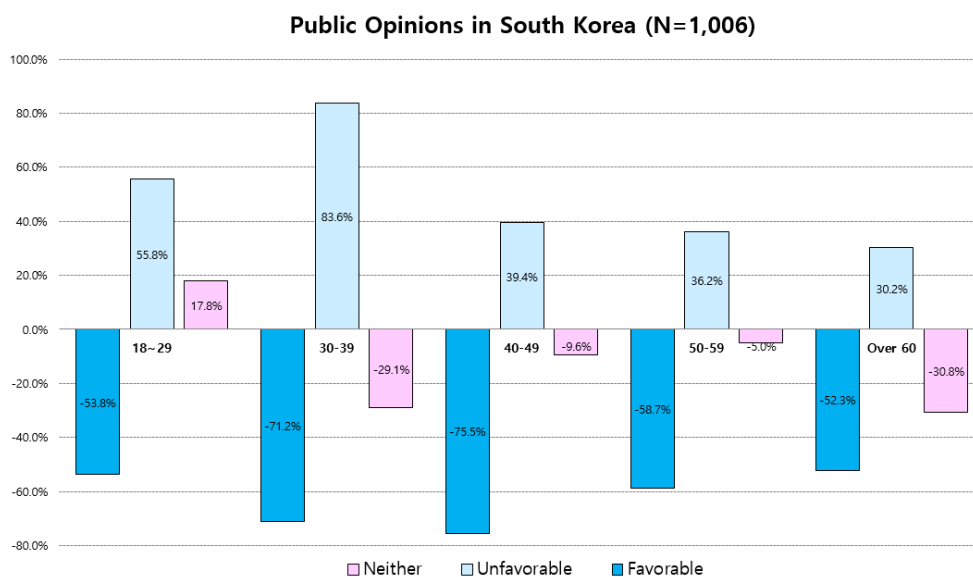
[Figure 2] South Koreans: Trend of the Preference over Japan by Age Group



[Figure 3] Japanese: Trend of the Preference over South Korea by Age Group



[Figure 4] South Koreans: Increase/Decrease of Preference over Japan by Age Group in 2020



As shown in the figure 2 and 3, the age groups that have been leading the favorable trend are those in their 20s and 30s. Considering that favorability among the younger generation in both countries have been higher than that of other age groups, the drop in favorability as well as the upsurge in unfavorability among South Korean youth in the 2020 survey result are a drastic change. As shown in the figure 4, unfavorable perception towards Japan among South Koreans in their 30s has skyrocketed by 83.6% point, while their favorable perception has dropped by 71.2% point compared to the previous year. Even among those in their 20s who have been considered an age group with the highest favorability towards Japan, unfavorable perception has increased by 55.8% point, while their favorability has decreased by 53.8%

point. Therefore, it can be argued that the most decisive factor that has led to the drop in favorability as well as the upsurge in unfavorability towards Japan is the changing mind of the younger generation in their 20s and 30s. Then what are the factors that have brought about a change in the mind of young people in South Korea?

The most decisive factor was the Japanese government's declaration of export control over three major components essential for the production of South Korean semi-conductors back in July 2019. The semi-conductor industry is considered a lifeline for South Korean economy. Therefore, the export control targeting this industry can be seen as an action meant to damage the foundation of South Korean economy, which is the very reason why the South Korean government had strongly condemned this action and labelled this as "economic invasion". Abe administration's argument was that they had put restrictions mainly for the sake of national security, claiming that there had been some problems with the South Korean management system for strategic materials. However, few South Korean had believed in this claim. Even if there had been actually some problems with the South Korean management system, most of South Koreans would have not agreed that the problems had been of utmost importance that could threaten Japan's national security and that it was the reason why the Japanese government took such an action aiming at the lifeline of South Korean economy. Consequently, this action was understood as a retaliation by the Japanese government over the South Korean court decision on the forced labor issue back in October 2018 and the subsequent response by the South Korean government, which was later revealed during the bilateral talks between the two governments.

The second factor was Japanese leadership's attitude and statements towards South Korea, which were clearly displayed throughout the course of the South Korean court decision and the announcement of export control. In the past, conflicts between the two countries had broken out in a manner in which South Korea had criticized Japan over historical issues and Japan had taken a defensive stance on those issues. However, under the Abe administration, it is notable that the Japanese government confronts South Korea by criticizing it over its history perspective. The then Prime Minister Abe Sinzo continuously blamed South Korea by stating that "South Korea is a county that does not keep its promise", "South Korea is a country where rule of law is not applied", and "South Korea is a country that cannot be trusted". Such statements have been repeated by other Japanese high-ranking officials such as the Chief Cabinet Secretary and the Foreign Minister. Even the then Foreign Minister Taro Kono stated that the South Korean court ruling was "a violence and a challenge to the international order". Although there had been some thorny remarks made by some Japanese leaders over the South Korean government's policy or attitude in the past, it is unprecedented that Japanese leaders have denounced South Korea's national identity since the normalization of diplomatic ties between the two countries. Such harsh statements not only brought about strong backlash by the South Korean government and the media, but also inflamed national sentiment, which in turn led to the vicious cycle of antagonism between the two countries.

The most notable point from this development is the reaction by South Korean young generations who are in their 20s and 30s. They do not view Japan with anti-Japan sentiment which had been simmering along with a sense of humiliation, antagonism or inferiority caused by the colonial memory. They have equal perception towards Japan that it is an advanced country like South Korea, and see Japan as an attractive travel destination with fascinating pop-culture and cuisine. The fact that this young generation had led the trend of increasing favorable perception towards Japan lies in this previous trend. At the same time, the South Korean young generation have strongly expressed their feelings about the export control and any statements made by the Abe administration which they saw as unjust and unfair, through boycott movements on Japanese products and tourism over the past year. This may be different from the deeply-rooted anti-Japanese sentiment among the older generation which is based on historical issues. In addition, this implies that young people's favorability towards Japan can be retrieved, once the Japanese government corrects its unjust policy towards South Korea.

## 2. Public Opinions in Japan - Unexpected Improvement from the downward trend

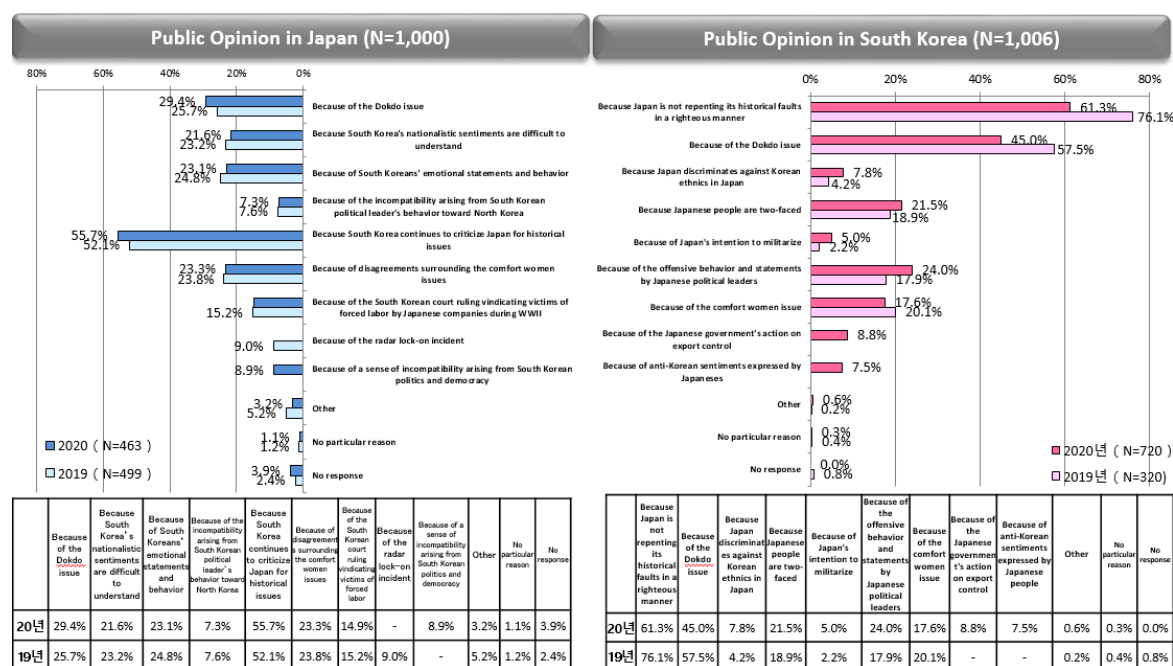
- Limitations of anti-Korean sentiments
- Importance of bilateral relations still highly regarded, with the majority supporting improved relations

In contrast with the drop in South Korean favorability towards Japan, Japanese favorability towards South Korea has risen in 2020. Japanese favorability towards South Korea was 31.1% in 2013, and since then, it had been on the decline, which dropped to 20% in 2019. While further decrease was expected against the background of strained relations between the two countries over the past year, favorability towards South Korea has managed to increase by 5.9% point, which was largely seen as unexpected (Figure 1). While it needs to be seen whether or not this change can lead to a steady increase in favorability, it is still worth noting that Japanese favorability towards South Korea has retrieved from its downward trend.

The media and the intellectual community in South Korea have expressed concerns over the anti-Korean sentiment which is widespread in Japanese society. Figure 5 clearly demonstrates the reasons why Japanese people have negative perceptions towards South Korea. Public opinions in Japan display a sense of incompatibility towards South Koreans' attitude rather than showing any oppositions to certain policy or incidents in South Korea. As indicated in the survey result, Japanese people continue to choose the answer "Because South Korea continues to criticize Japan over historical issues (55.7%)" the most as they did last year, which indicates that Japanese people feel a sense of incompatibility towards the way in which South Koreans address historical issues, rather than their historical perspective *per se*. The second-most answers that Japanese respondents chose include "Because of South Koreans' emotional statements and behavior (23.1%)" and "Because of South Koreans' nationalistic behavior which is difficult to understand

(21.6%)”, which implies that Japanese public opinions tend to believe that South Koreans are dealing with historical issues caught up with anti-Japanese sentiment. These survey results can be interpreted as a sign that challenges Korean identity

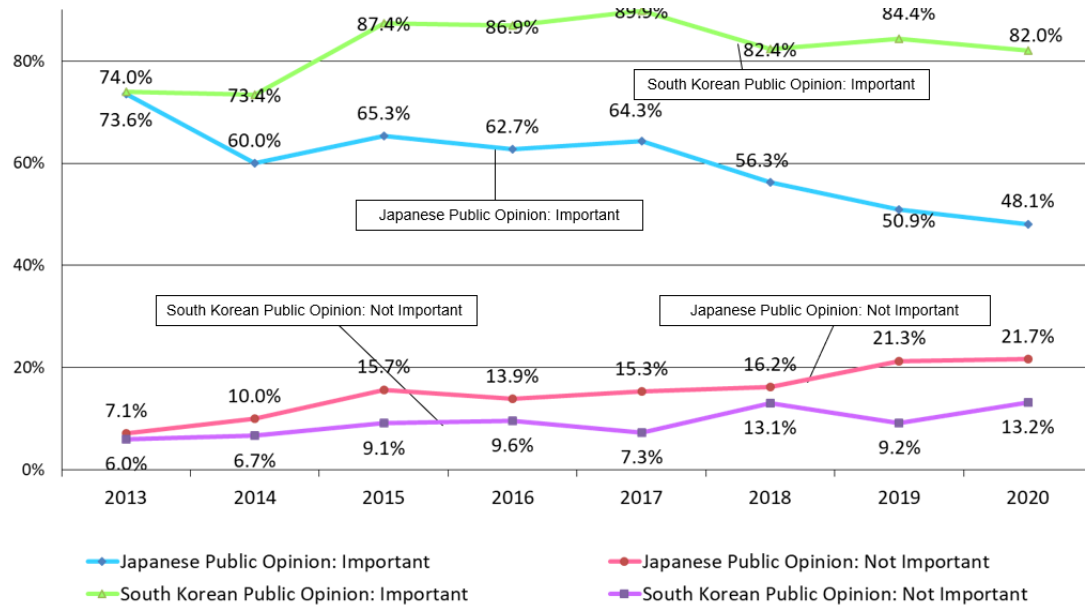
[Figure 5] Reasons for Unfavorable Perception towards the Other Country



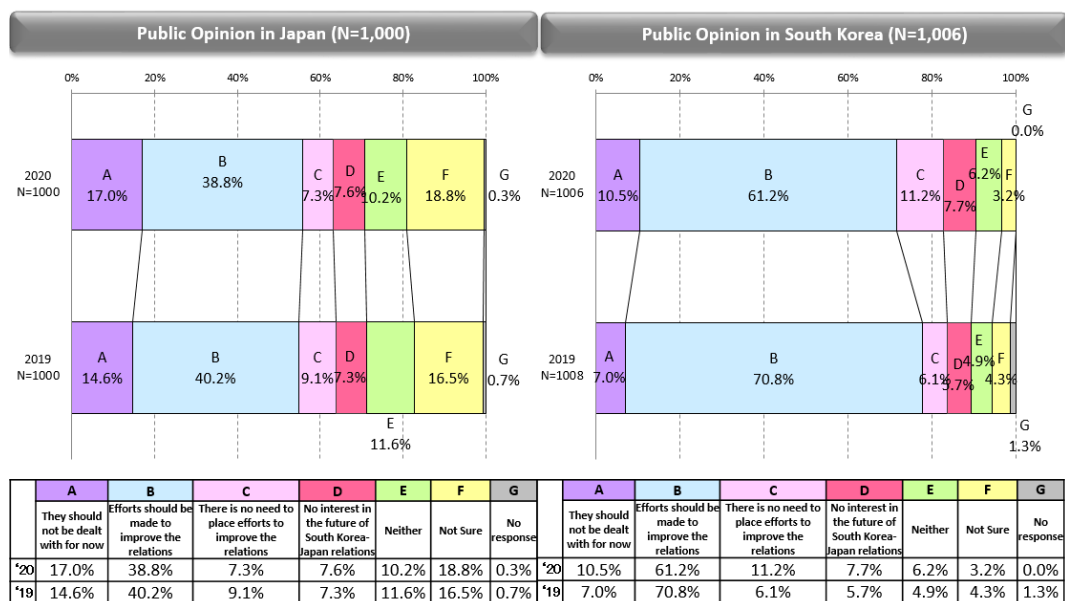
On the other hand, the majority of Japanese people acknowledge the importance of Korea-Japan relations and support the efforts to improve the relations between the two countries. 48% of Japanese respondents, which are almost half of the whole respondents, believe that Korea-Japan relations are important (Figure 6) and 38.8% of the respondents support improvement in relations, which are certainly the majority compared to those who answered that there is no need for efforts to improve relations (7.3%) or that they are not interested in the future of Korea-Japan relations (7.6%)(Figure 7).

We cannot predict whether or not Japanese favorability towards South Korea would continue to increase in the future just because 20% of Japanese respondents are found to see South Korea in a favorable light. Whether the percentage of favorable perception towards South Korea would remain around 20% or would make lead to a new trend of increasing favorability depends upon political will and diplomacy of both countries.

[Figure 6] Importance of South Korea-Japan Relations (2013-2020)



[Figure 7] Efforts to Improve South Korea-Japan Relations



### 3. Not many South Koreans/Japanese support their own country's policy towards the other country

- South Korean favorability towards the former Prime Minister Abe Sinzo and Japanese favorability towards President Moon remain the range of 1% respectively
  - [South Korea] Favorability towards the former PM Abe is 1.1%, while unfavorability is 90%
  - [Japan] Favorability towards President Moon is 1.5%, while unfavorability is 49.7%

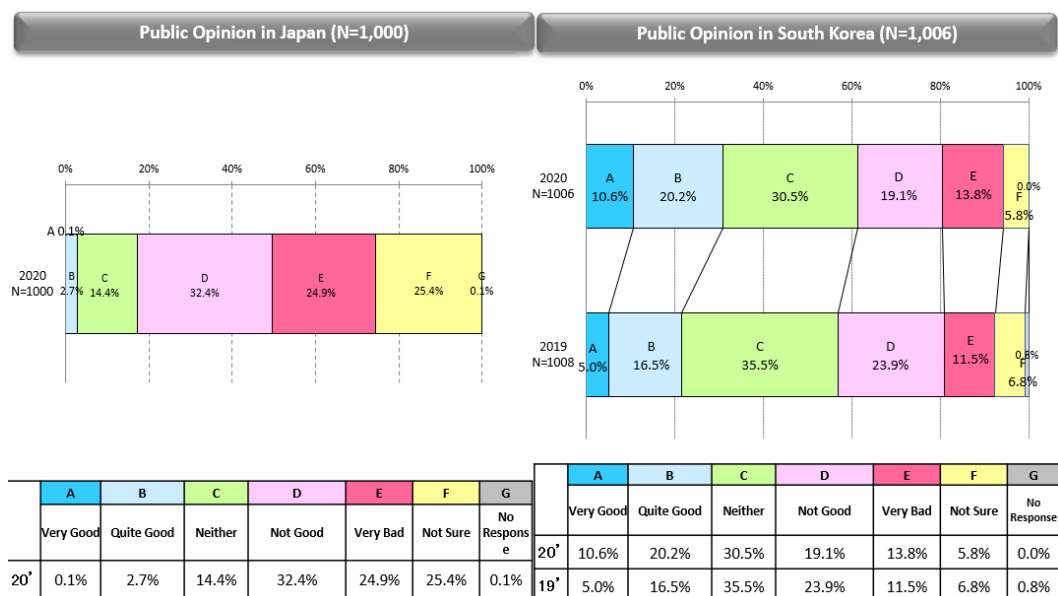


- Support for South Korean gov. policy towards Japan is 30.8%, while support for Japanese gov. policy towards South Korea is 29.6%

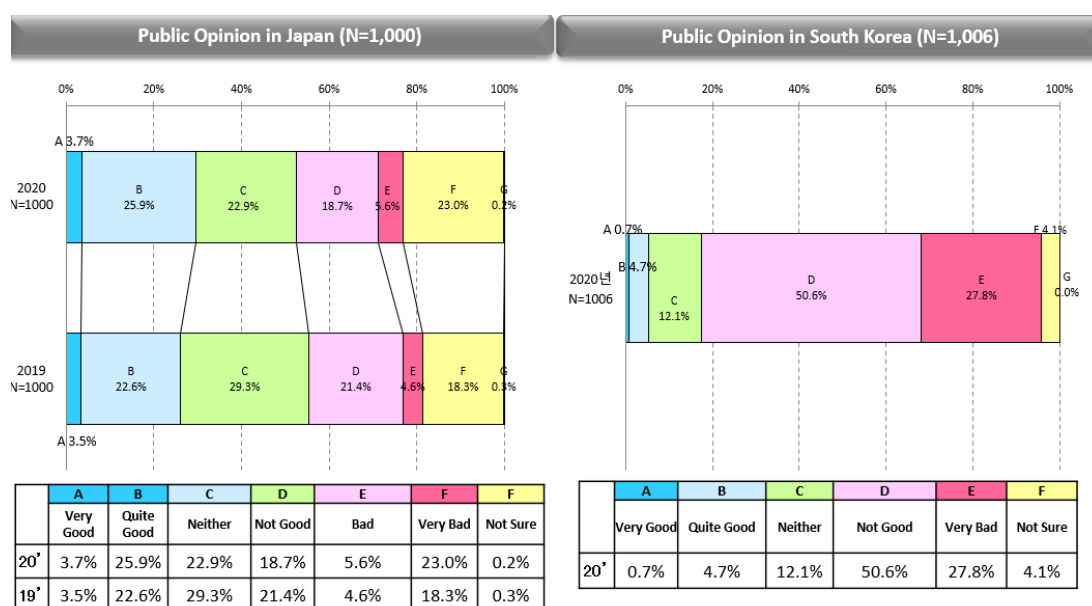
While South Korean/Japanese favorable perception towards each other remain low, their favorable perception towards leaders of the other country remain even lower. South Korean favorability towards the former Prime Minister Abe Sinzo and Japanese favorability towards President Moon Jae-in are around 1% respectively, while South Korean unfavorable perception towards the former Prime Minister Abe reaches 90%, which is the highest since the survey was first conducted in 2013. Given that South Korean general impression towards Japan is 12% (32% in 2019) and Japanese impression towards South Korea is 26%, there seems a kind of decoupling effect that has taken place between countries and leaders/governments.

When people in a certain country express a strong feeling of animosity towards their own national leaders, diplomacy towards that particular country is bound to get considerable pressure, especially in the domain of public diplomacy. In fact, 2.8% of Japanese respondents made positive assessment on Moon administration's policy towards Japan, while 57.3% of respondents made negative assessment. South Korean positive assessment on Abe administration's policy towards South Korea is 5.4%, while those who made their negative assessment are 78.4%.

[Figure 8] Assessment on Moon administration's policy towards Japan



[Figure 9] Assessment on Abe administration's policy towards Korea



Furthermore, people in both countries show limited support to their own government's diplomatic policy towards the other country. 29.6% of Japanese respondents made a positive assessment on Abe administration's policy towards South Korea, while 30.8% of South Korean respondents made a positive assessment on Moon administration's policy towards Japan. These figures are 10% point lower than South Korean/Japanese support rate for their respective government, which are around 40–50%.

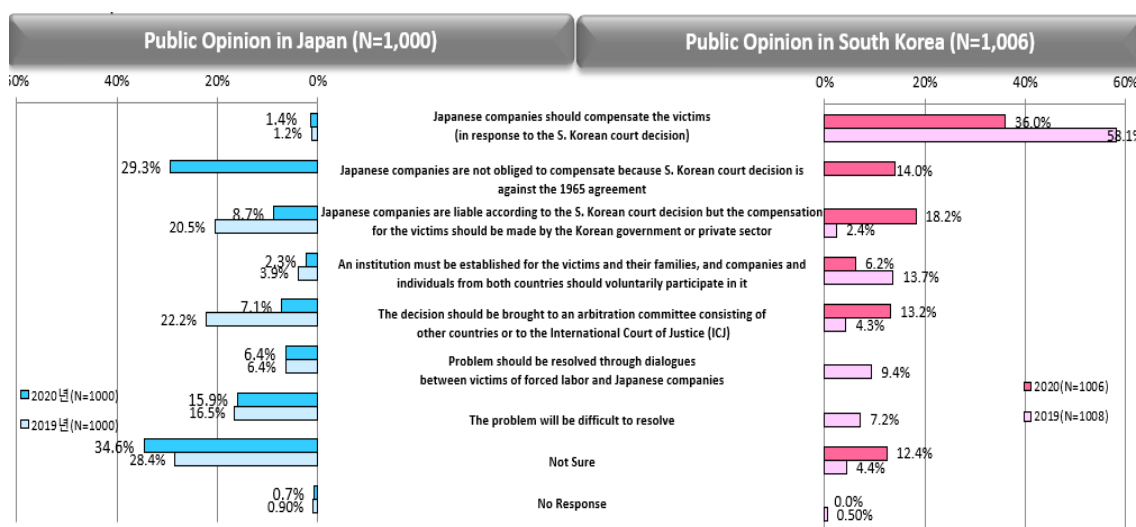
As mentioned earlier, South Korean/Japanese perception towards the importance of Korea–Japan relations remain unchanged despite the plunge in favorable perception towards each other. Over the last eight years, more than 80% of South Koreans and around 50% of Japanese continue to see Korea–Japan relations as important (Figure 6). In sum, despite the importance of Korea–Japan relations, national fatigue over the prolonged impasse between governments of the two countries over the South Korean court ruling combined with concerns over the worst bilateral relations since the establishment of diplomatic ties and a feeling of anxiety over a series of developments that had broken out from historical issues to economic retaliation and then to security tensions, have all led to the negative assessment of their own government's policy towards the other country. For the governments of both countries, they need to see this change as a momentum to adjust their policy towards the other country.

#### 4. People want a new solution on the forced labor issue

- 36% of South Korean respondents believe that Japanese companies should compensate the victims in response to the South Korean court decision, which is a drop from 58.1% in 2019
- 29.3% of Japanese respondents view that Japanese companies are not obliged to compensate because the South Korean court decision was against the 1965 agreement

The most pressing issue with which both countries are faced is about the South Korean court ruling on forced laborers. An interesting point from this year's survey is that there is a change in public opinions over the ways to resolve the forced labor issue. The key point is that public support for the South Korean government's basic stance over the issue has changed. 36% of South Korean respondents believed that "Japanese companies should compensate the victims in response to the South Korean court decision, and if the companies are not in compliance with the court decision, the decision must be enforced", which is a 22% point decrease from 58.1% in 2019. In addition to this, 6.2% of South Korean respondents answered that companies and the private sector in both countries should establish a foundation to compensate the victims, which means that around 42% of South Korean respondents support the South Korean government's stance. On the other hand, support for arguments such as "...the compensation for the victims should be borne by the Korean government or private sector" and "The decision should be brought to an arbitration committee consisting of other countries or to the International Court of Justice (ICJ)" has increased to 18.2% and 13.2% respectively. Also surprisingly, 14% of respondents chose that "Japanese companies are not obliged to compensate because South Korean court decision is against the 1965 agreement" which is the Japanese government's position. These results imply that public opinions that the government needs to find a new solution are growing increasingly in South Korea.

[Figure 10] Ways to Resolve Bilateral Tensions Resulting from the South Korean Supreme Court Decision



The results from the Japanese side are also interesting. Only 29.3% of Japanese respondents agreed with the Japanese government's claim that "Japanese companies are not obliged to compensate because the South Korean court decision was against the 1965 agreement". 34.6% of respondents answered they were "not sure", which is one third of the total number of the respondents, and 15.9% of respondents chose that "The problem will be difficult to resolve", which is the third largest in the answer choice. These results indicate that most of the respondents either think none of the solution is available or they simply have limited knowledge on the issue concerned so it is difficult for the respondents to express their own opinions. In sum, public opinions in Japan also show limited support to the Japanese government's stance on the issue, because they think the issue cannot be resolved in this way.

In other words, Japanese public opinions are critical of South Korea, viewing that South Korea is violating the 1965 Korea–Japan treaty, and also perceive that it is difficult to resolve the issue especially with the Moon administration. On the contrary, increasing public opinions in South Korea view that the government needs to explore forward-looking solutions.

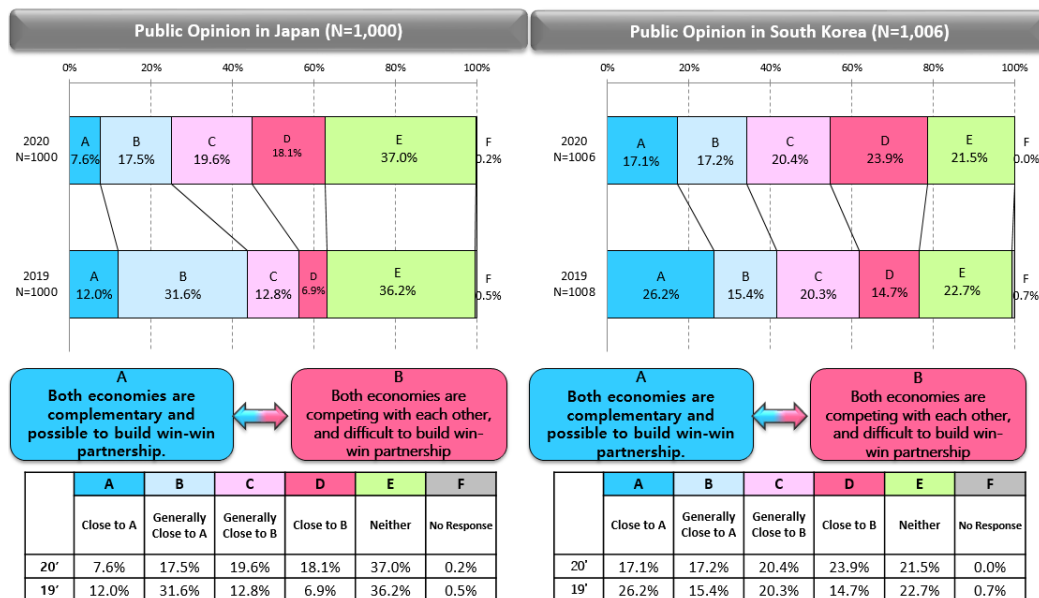
## 5. Consequences of Historical Dispute: Possibility of Further Crisis

- Speedy settlement is preferred to hardline approach over trade disputes
- South Korean/Japanese both support hardline approach in case the liquidation of Japanese assets takes place
- Possibility of Win–Win Cooperation after Export Control

Political and diplomatic confrontations surrounding the court ruling over the forced labor issue has spill-over effect on economic and security relations between the two countries. The principle of the separation of economy and politics has been damaged, following the Japanese government's announcement of export control and the South Korean government's announcement on its plan to terminate GSOMIA, which has set forth the precedent of the worst Korea–Japan relations. Not only that, the actions by the governments of both countries have had impact on increasing negative public perception towards economic and security cooperation between the two countries.

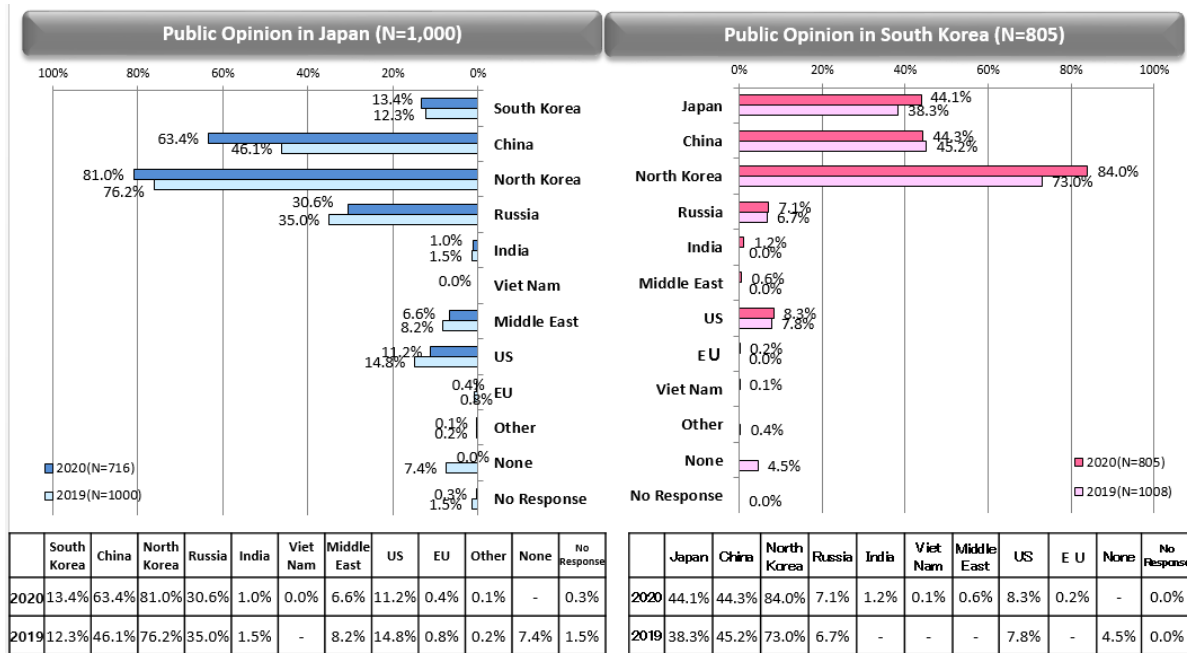
With regards to economic relations between the two countries, 34.3% of South Korean respondents said that "it is possible to build a win-win partnership" with Japan, which is a drop from 41.6% in 2019, while those who answered that "it is difficult to build a win-win partnership" have increased from 37.4% to 45.4%. In Japan, positive response has dropped from 43.6% to 25.1%, while negative response has jumped from 19.7% to 37.7%. These results indicate that trust in economic interdependence between the two countries has declined.

[Figure 11] Assessment on Economic Relations between the two countries

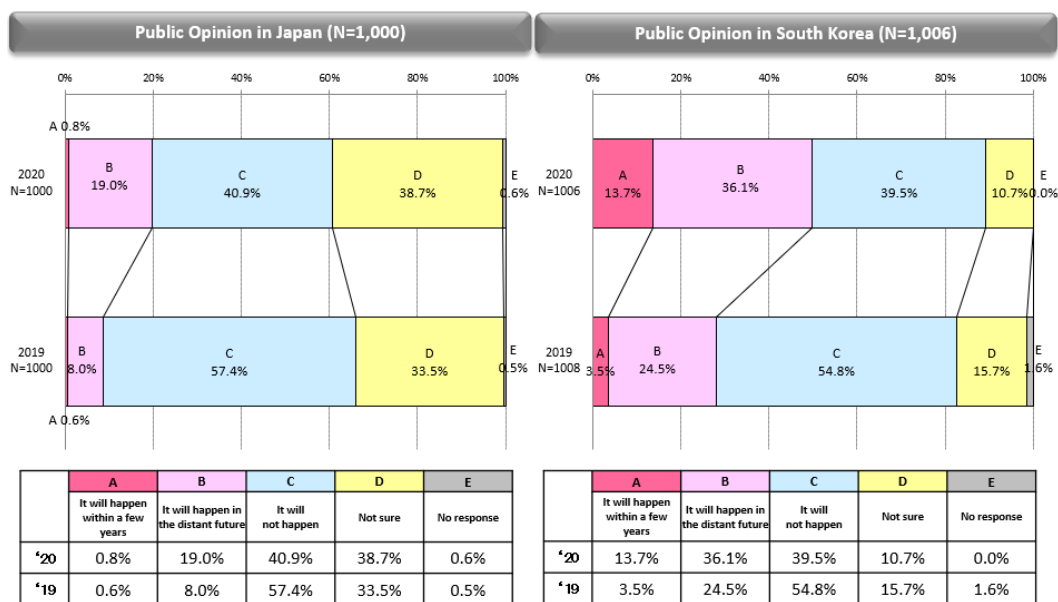


In terms of military and security aspects, trust between the two countries has also plummeted over the past year. For South Koreans, perceived military threats towards Japan have increased from 38.3% to 44.1%(Figure 12). For Japanese respondents, there has been a slight increase in perceived military threats towards South Korea, with the increase from 12.3% to 13.4%. Regarding the question on prospects of a military conflict around Dokdo Island between South Korea and Japan, answer choices for “It will happen within a few years” and “It will happen in the distant future” have increased to 13.7% and 36.1% respectively among South Korean respondents. Those who answered that “It will not happen” have decreased from 54.8% to 39.5%. For Japanese respondents, those who answered that “It will happen in the distant future” have increased to 19%, while those who answered that “It will not happen” have dropped from 57% to 40.9%.

[Figure 12] Perceived Military Threats by Country and Region



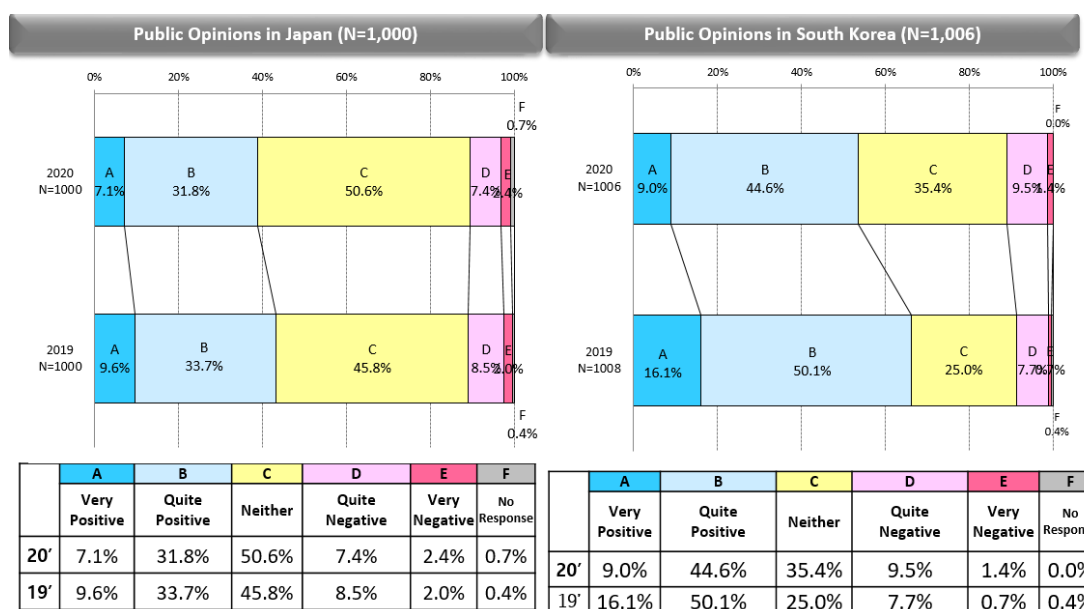
[Figure 13] Prospects of a Military Conflict between South Korea and Japan



In the meantime, South Koreans who support the argument that security alliance between South Korea, the US and Japan must be strengthened have decreased from 66.2% in 2019 to 53.6% in 2020. South Koreans who chose “neither” have increased from 25% to 35.4%. For Japanese respondents, those who chose “neither” have increased from 45.8% to 50.6%, holding a majority. As there were some controversies

regarding the GSOMIA issue back in 2019, concerns over military conflicts have increased as much as concerns over trade disputes, with a cautious view of security cooperation between Korea and Japan, or between Korea, the US and Japan.

[Figure 14] Importance of Strengthening Security Alliance between South Korea-US-Japan



In sum, the increase in perceived economic/military threats between South Korea and Japan can be attributed to diplomatic tensions resulting from historical issues. In this regard, it is ever more important to resolve the pending issues facing both countries for the sake of strategic interests of their own. The point is, if the liquidation of assets from Japanese companies is enforced, the Japanese government is likely to take retaliatory measures, of which Japanese people are supportive. 54.2% of Japanese respondents agree with the idea of taking countermeasure, while only 5.4% are opposed to the idea.

In contrast, more South Koreans support the reconciliatory ideas that “South Korea and Japan should try to resolve the trade dispute immediately” (30.6%) and “It is concerning that South Korea and Japan are pitted against each other under the COVID-19 pandemic” (17.7%), than the strong stand that “It is necessary to have a hardline stance towards Japan despite any possible damage that might be caused” (17.9%). The point is when a retaliatory action is taken against Japan. Public opinions in South Korea indicate that more people support the idea that “The South Korean government should also take any measure against the Japanese government” (54%), than those who support that “Countermeasure would only bring about the vicious cycle of retaliation, and therefore, diplomatic efforts must be increased to resolve the issue” (33.9%). Furthermore, if the South Korean government takes any countermeasure, the majority support the hardline stance such as “The South Korean government should respond strongly to any action taken by the Japanese government by all means available” (46%) and “The South Korean government should respond by using security means such as the termination of GSOMIA” (9.4%). In sum, if

the governments of both countries are negligent of resolving the pending issues between the two countries, hard lines are more likely to emerge, and both countries are more prone to further confrontations and crisis.

## Conclusion

People in both countries feel fatigue over the prolonged confrontation between the governments of the two countries as well as the deterioration of Korea–Japan relations. It has been more than one year and four months since the diplomatic impasse started, with another wave of crisis approaching in sight. Public opinions in South Korea indicate that the government needs to find a solution on the forced labor issue by extending the deadline for the liquidation of assets from Japanese companies, while weighing viable options as much as possible.

However, the point in question is that distrust and emotional confrontation between the two governments have reached the alarming level. The forced labor issue is a phenomenon of Korea–Japan conflicts, rather than a cause. Both South Korean and Japanese governments are entangled in a cycle of ignorance and retaliations, from disputes over the forced labor issue to retaliatory actions such as export control and the plan to terminate GSOMIA, which only deepens distrust between the two countries.

Under those circumstances, Korea–Japan relations might be wrecked with endless antagonism towards each other, no matter how both countries reach the agreement on the forced labor issue. It is rather a wishful thinking that Korea–Japan relations will be normalized once the forced labor issue is resolved. Multiple efforts to restore bilateral relations need to be made in a comprehensive manner.

The role of citizens in both countries is tremendously important in this regard. Political leadership in both countries has not been free from exclusive and regressive nature of nationalism. Leadership in both countries have exacerbated the situations by taking emotional response characterized as anti–Japanese and anti–Korean sentiments respectively, which in turn have a negative impact on public opinions in both countries. In this respect, people in both countries need to continue and increase people–to–people exchange, which does not necessarily go through the governmental interaction. Above all, constructive dialogue and an increased understanding between young people in both countries are key to Korea–Japan relations in the future. Civil society in both countries are main actors who build constructive relations based on the principles of co–existence and co–prosperity, and they should open the way for the young generations in Korea and Japan to work for a better future. ■



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