Good morning. My name is Youngkwan Yoon. And it is my great honor to chair this panel on improving South Korea-Japan relationship. We had a very productive discussion this morning in session one. And one of the most important issues related to the topic we discussed in the previous session is the relationship between Japan and South Korea. As we all know, both countries share democracy, a market system, and we also face common security stress coming from North Korea and some other countries.

And I think it is important to improve bilateral relationship between two countries. Also, both countries are allies of the United States. In some sense, when we confront North Korean security threat, South Korea – if South Korea is forward base, I think Japan is rear base. It is kind of unreasonable to see the relationship between those two bases are not working well. So I think how to improve Japan and ROK – ROK and Japan relationship in the future, that's an important subject.

As we know, bilateral relationship between ROK and Japan hit the lowest point in the recent few years, probably mainly because of some history issues. And today’s topic – I mean, this – the topic for this panel, this question is how to fix the problem and how we can improve the relationship between two big countries – two countries. And President Yoon Suk-yeoFl made it clear that his policy is to improving bilateral relationship between South Korea and Japan. And he also said that he would reinvigorate 1998 Kim Dae-jung-Obuchi declaration. And I sincerely hope that his goal can be achieved in coming years.

And to discuss this important topic we have four distinguished panelists today. And first Dr. Shelia Smith is participating through Zoom. And let me briefly introduce her to you. Dr. Smith is John E. Merow senior fellow for Asia-Pacific Studies at the Council on Foreign Relations. She is an expert on Japanese politics and foreign policy. And she’s the author of “Japan Rearmed: The Politics of Military Power,” “Intimate Rivals: Japanese Domestic Politics and the Rising China,” and “Japan’s New Politics and the U.S.-Japan Alliance.” She is also the author of the CFR interactive guide, “Constitutional Change in Japan.”

Dr. Smith is a regular contributor to the CFR blog, Asia Unbound, and a frequent contributor to major media outlets in the United States and Asia. She was a visiting scholar at Keio University in 2007-2008. And there, she researched Japan’s foreign policy toward China. And it was supported by Abe Fellowship. Dr. Smith is also chair of the Japan-U.S. Friendship Commission and the U.S. advisor to the U.S.-Japan Conference on cultural and educational interchange. She teaches as an adjunct professor at the Asian Studies Department of Georgetown University. She got her Ph.D. degree from Columbia University.
Next, to my left, Dr. Yul Sohn. Professor Sohn is the president of East Asia Institute, a think tank in Korea. And he is a professor of Graduate School of International Studies at Yonsei University. Dr. Sohn is the professor in the Yonsei University, and he served as president of the Korean Association of International Studies in 2019, and also as dean of GSIS from 2012 to 2016. Dr. Sohn taught at Chung-Ang University and University of Tokyo and was visiting scholar – visiting scholar at institutions in the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill and also University of California at Berkeley.

He was also senior fellow of the Fulbright Foundation, MacArthur Foundation, Japan Foundation, and Waseda University's Institute for Advanced Studies. He served as policy advisor on a number of government advisory committees, including the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Industry and Trade, et cetera. And he has many publications, including a publication – some title is “Japan and Asia’s Contested Order, co-authored with Dr. T.J. Pempel in 2019.

OK, then to his left, Dr. Eunbong Choi. She is professor of political science and diplomacy of Ewha Womens University. Dr. Choi is professor in the Department of Political Science and diplomacy at Ewha Womens University, and the director of the Ewha Institute of Politics. She received her doctoral degree from Ohio State University in 1991. And she previously served as assistant professor and associate professor at Kangwon National University, and a visiting research fellow at the University of Tsukuba, Japan.

She has numerous publications in the field of Japanese politics, the East Asian region, and comparative politics. And also she has served as president of Korean Association of Contemporary Japanese Studies in Korea, and also served as vice president of the Korea Political Science Association and Korean International Political Science Association. She also served as the dean of college of social sciences at Ewha Womens University.

And to her left, Dr. Ellen Kim. And she is deputy director and senior fellow of Korea Chair at CSIS. Her research focuses on U.S.-Korea relations and U.S.-China strategic competition in the Indo-Pacific. And she joined the Korea Chair upon its inception in 2009, and previously served as associate director and fellow before her departure in 2015.

Her recent publications include "North Korea without Change,” co-authored with Victor Cha, and "Between a Rock and a Hard Place: South Korea’s Strategic Dilemma with China and the United States” in 2016. And she holds a Ph.D. in political science from the University of Southern California, and master’s degree from Kennedy School of Harvard University. And her – she got a B.A. degree in international relations from Wellesley College.
So we have wonderful panelists here to discuss this important topic. And I’d like to give you probably about five minutes to discuss this topic. And please, Dr. Smith, please go first.

Sheila Smith

Thank you very much. Is it OK, can you hear me OK? OK, I hear an echo in the background. I apologize for not being there in person. I so wanted to be with you all, but we are still living in a world of COVID and so I have to be isolated a bit. I wanted to say, President Lee, Korea Foundation, I’m sorry that I won’t get a chance to see you. And thank you, Victor and CSIS, for including me. Foreign Minister Yoon and I had a chance earlier, a few weeks ago, to talk a little bit about these issues. And I have a couple of very basic points to make about the trilateral relationship and, within it, obviously, the more complex Japan-South Korean relationship.

You know, we are not in the same moment as 1998. And yet, I think that President Yoon’s endorsement of the Obuchi-Kim joint statement was very positive because it sent a message, I think, of the kind of relationship that he would like to build again with Japan. I think we’re in a moment of confidence building for the Japan-Korea relationship. And I think on both sides the publics will scrutinize what the new administration in Seoul and what the Kishida Cabinet is able to do. So I think it’s important that we recognize what’s changed a little bit since 1998.

I think the domestic political changes obviously are the most important indicator. There are longstanding issues that are sensitive, and they always have been. And I think what’s important here is to recognize that there’s a domestic audience and there is, perhaps, a more serious scrutiny now of some of the steps that will need to be taken. I think the other issues that were brought up in the previous – by the previous speakers and the previous panel in particular, and that is we need to be realistic, I think, about our expectations. The world is changing, and changing very quickly. And I think that also means that the stakes are higher for Japan and South Korea and the United States to try to get this relationship on a more positive footing.

We can be slow and steady in the way we approach it, but we could also recognize where some of this accelerated geostrategic change offers, perhaps, new opportunities. And these came up, I think, in our previous panel. Sustaining the liberal order today is not something any of us can take for granted. And I think that is an opportunity, I think, for us – the three countries that we’re discussing this morning. China often is something that we often hear diplomats and statesmen in either Tokyo or Seoul perhaps speaking in a differently – slightly different tone, because of their different opportunities and their different ways of approaching the problem.

But I think we are at a moment where we can recognize some of the specific challenges that we all face, and we all have faced, in terms of dealing with
China. So I think we are a little bit more – there is more opportunity here, given that we have the same strategic concerns about the changing balance of power in the Indo-Pacific and, indeed, globally. I think, therefore, there’s some constants in the bilateral Japan-South Korea relationship. There’s some constants even in our trilateral relationship. But there’s also, I think, opportunity for reframing the way we think about our partnerships.

So I had a couple of issues that I had written about a few weeks ago for the Wilson Center, but I think the most important one, of course, as we look at North Korea’s recent behavior, is to make sure that we are frank with each other about what deterrence looks like. And again, I think I too was very happy with the summit meeting that President Biden had with President Yoon. It was a very positive statement of that not only extended deterrence but also the willingness of the two leaders to make sure that there is no miscalculation, or there should be no miscalculation.

Now I think the time – it’s time to build Japan into that mix. So I hear in the trilateral U.S.-Japan-ROK relationship hope that we can work towards a moment where there’s greater exercising, greater demonstration of the willingness of these two alliances to combine capabilities and to be able to ready, should it become necessary, to act on the – on the need for extended deterrence and deterrence more broadly.

On the economic side of things, this is where previous speakers have already made their points as well, and there’s going to be a whole panel discussion, so I won’t belabor this point. But it’s clear to me that all three of us – the United States, Japan and the ROK – need to elevate economic security in the way we think about our alliance structure and our priorities. And I’m delighted to see that this is something that President Yoon and his administration also feels very strongly about it. This can be done, obviously, in various venues.

And, again, this has already been discussed. The supply chain resilience issue has been a – is a priority. But I wouldn’t – I would also put a second issue up on the table here for consideration. And that is the future of technological innovation. We can’t be benign, I think, about the kinds of challenges ahead. And this is something where Japan, Korea, and the United States, perhaps, can begin to think about what it is they can do together to ensure that technology is protected, but also that we are working on the same pathways towards innovation.

Let me just briefly mention two other things, Foreign Minister Yoon, and then I’ll turn it back to you. One is, of course, on the – on the very difficult question of historical legacy issues. It seems to me that we – Japan and South Korea – got very narrow in the way they construed the venues through which they could consider these issues over the last several years. And I
would very much like to see a broadening. I don’t see the United States here as having a direct role, but as a supporting or facilitating role, should we be asked for it.

But I think it’s really important to understand that reconciliation is a process that is not just accomplished by statesmen and diplomats, by state leaders. It also has to be embraced by civil society and private sector leaders as well. And I am quite hopeful that the private sector in both Japan and South Korea can come into this conversation and offer some constructive pathways forward.

Finally, I think – and this is an obvious point, but I will make it simply because it’s an area that I work on in the U.S.-Japan partnership – but we really need to invest in our next generation. And I think there’s lots of opportunity here for investment not only in bilateral next generation efforts but also perhaps trilateral. Younger people in the United States, Japan and South Korea really do have different ideas about the opportunities of this partnership. And I think it would behoove us to invest a little bit on creating opportunities for them also to contribute to the U.S.-Japan-South Korean relationship more broadly.

So with that, let me stop there, Minister Yoon. Thank you.

Minister Yoon

Thank you very much for your wonderful, excellent comments. And when you emphasized the importance of educating young people, I fully agree, as a person who taught at university for a long time. And I think that’s certainly a very important subject. Also let me ask – I mean, as you mentioned, the situation has changed a lot since 1998. Kim Dae-jung-Obuchi declaration. But at that time, around 1997-1996, I still remember there were strong domestic political opposition against Kim Dae-jung or any political leader’s possible policy of approaching to Japan, improving bilateral relationship or something like that.

But he was very, I mean, kind of strong in his view about the desirability of improving bilateral relationship. And could you, I mean, draw some – what kind of – I mean, what kind of lessons we can draw from Prime Minister Obuchi at that time and Prime Minister – I mean – President Kim Dae-jung in 1998? Is there anything they can teach for their, I mean, predecessors and successors, like Yoon Suk-yeol and – Prime Minister Kishida and President Yoon Suk-yeol?

Dr. Smith

Oh, excellent question. Thank you for that. I was in Japan at the time that President Kim visited and I was amazed, and positively amazed, at the extend of understanding that he demonstrated for the audience that he was trying to reach in Japan. So those who advised him, or perhaps it was just President Kim Dae-jung himself, but he spoke to the Japanese people when
he came in 1998 to Japan in a way that I had not heard a previous leader – South Korean or otherwise, frankly – speak. And so I think the Japanese people really heard what he had to say, and took it to heart that he intended for this relationship between Japan and South Korea to really begin to be a more positive, constructive and, you know, directed at the humanity of both societies.

So there was a real impact that he had. You know, and it was televised throughout Japan at the time, whether it was in the Diet or his dinner with the emperor. He was on TV for the duration of his stay. And he very consciously spoke out to the Japanese people. He understood that that was who was listening to him, not just the government officials of whoever was at the banquet. And so I think that’s very important. I think when President Yoon does visit Japan, whenever that may be, that engagement with the Japanese people is going to be really important. You have to recognize the challenges, but also set of a pathway of optimism for the future. And I think speaking to that next generation would also help.

The second thing I would emphasize for President Kim Dae-jung’s approach is that he obviously in Prime Minister Obuchi had a very receptive leader on the other side. And here I think also President Yoon has a very receptive leader on the Japanese side. I think Prime Minister Kishida and his Cabinet, including Foreign Minister Hayashi, want to do the hard work required. They recognize, again, the challenges, but I think they see also the strategic importance of making sure that the Japan-South Korea relationship has a foundation that goes beyond one president, one prime minister, but builds upon the relationship – or, builds a foundation that then subsequent leaders can follow forward with.

So I think it’s really important that the partners – Prime Minister Kishida and President Yoon – set out not just what are we going to do in the first, or the second, or the third conversation we have, but what is our plan that will really plant some roots among politicians, among educators and civil society, but also among the diplomats and statesmen that will have to manage the relationship going forward. So I think there’s a holistic plan that they can approach this with, and I would certainly urge them to take that approach.

Minister Yoon

Great. I think that’s very good, and excellent advices for policymakers like both President Yoon Suk-yeol and Prime Minister Kishida.

OK, next, Dr. Sohn Yul, please go ahead and take your time.

Sohn Yul

Thank you very much. I am honored to be here. And I’d like to thank Korea Foundation and CSIS for this great conference. And I am – it is a bit unusual when you do U.S.-Korea Strategic Partnership, and here’s a session about Korea-Japan relationship. It means – seems like this particular bilateral
relationship is vital to the bilateral relationship between the United States and South Korea. In that regard, you know, I’d like to make three comments. And those three comments should be related to U.S.-Korea bilateral relationship.

One is that are we – I mean, the key question is, what’s the future of this bilateral relationship, U.S.-Japan – I mean, Japan-South Korea? Will it be improved? It should be improved. And, you know, today we see certain improvements. I think the rising expectations for improved bilateral relationship. I think United States played a role, important role, in ways that reactivate, you know, U.S., South Korea, Japan trilateral relationships to meet the challenges – you know, economic and security challenges. So in that trilateral relationship, cooperation has been mentioned in two joint statements in Tokyo and in Seoul.

So it seems that United States, in that sense, played a role, and particularly President Biden. You remember that, you know, Vice President Biden came to, you know, Tokyo and Japan back in 2013. And he tried to, you know, play sort of a mediating role. That eventually led to a trilateral summit meeting in the Hague next year, 2014. And I think that, you know, grounded the foundation for the ultimate, you know, comfort woman agreement, concluded in December 2015. So this time I sense that the United States is playing a similar role, not directly involved in the historical issues but in a more sort of, I mean, strategic ways in which you have this pressing economic and security issues, and there’s no way that two countries continue to struggle.

So that’s a very important message. And I sense that Yoon – President Yoon is very much proactive. And also what’s interesting to the Japanese side is that the Japanese government position so far has been, like, here’s an issue of, you know, forced labor and supreme court ruling. And now, you know, ball is on the Korean court. You study, homework, come up with a solution, and then we discuss, and also discuss on other issues – security, economics, and others. And now Prime Minister Kishida says that this bilateral relationship is too important to be left out. So we got to work now.

So I think that’s a big change. And that change comes out of, you know, United States role, I think, and particularly the recent visit. So we are now on the right track, I think. But the issue is that – it’s a, you know, perennial issue of, OK, here is the security issues, economic issues we got together. So we’ve got to improve the relationship on those fronts. But at the same time, there’s a history issue. And you have to make a parallel progress on the history issues, otherwise ultimately it will be slowed down and interrupted.

So particularly the history issue – I mean, here the problem line between the two country is that, OK, why don’t we just, you know, set aside the history
issues and, you know, work hard on security, economics, climate change, and all others? That’s theoretically possible, but we have a time bomb ticking issues. You know, that there’s a supreme court ruling, and also the court ruling over sort of implementing the sale of the assets of the Japanese companies, you know, to compensate the plaintiff, the victims.

And, you know, you don’t really have much time. So far, you know, both governments are buying time to postpone the decisions but, you know, that has a limit. So within a year, two parties – two governments need to find solutions to stop this, you know, time bomb ticking. So you’ve got to handle this issue while, at the same time, promoting security and economic cooperation. So how to, you know, resolve this forced labor, you know, selling – I mean, stop selling the assets of the former Japanese companies, I mean, here the Mitsubishi.

So that’s one really big task for the Yoon government and also the Kishida government. And there are already the choices made, prepared, I think. And the Yoon – I mean, in Korea, and also in Japan, kind of, you know, consensus that you only have three choices. One is to, you know, establish a foundation donated by the Japanese companies and also Korean companies, particularly the Korean companies who – like POSCO, who received economic cooperation, money, back in 1965. So they establish a foundation, and then they provided money to the plaintiff. That’s one choice.

And second choice is so-called Kim Young-sam choice that, OK, the money issues, we don’t want Japanese to be paid. You know, it is South Korean government that deals with all this compensation. In return, Japanese make sincere apologies. So that’s the second choice. And the third choice is go to the third-party legal arbitration, including ICJ ruling. So I think the choices are right there. And it is the decision by President Yoon and also with help of, you know, Prime Minister Kishida, which one you choose.

We know that it involves huge political decision because, one, at the moment – I wrote it in this paper – talking points that we see sort of identity clashes between the two countries, that the Koreans view the identity of Japan as still former colonial aggressor, unrepentant aggressor, no apology. And the Japanese depict the Korean sort of national character, what’s very interesting it has been shaped during the past several years, that Korea is emotional, irrational, and unreliable partner. So got to take, you know, distancing, unless they come up with a new proposal and a changed attitude.

So these, you know, public attitudes and also top leaders’ attitude toward each other has been an obstacle. So somehow you’ve got to move, you know, away from that. That’s one obstacle. And two obstacle is to Korea. I gave you the data of the public opinion survey that there’s a sharp divide within Korea that here all the Korean people, I mean, according to the public
opinion survey, you know, conducted by East Asia Institute – overwhelming number supports improvement of the bilateral relationship. But the next thing is what is priority?

And the progressives say that you got to resolve history issues first. Conservatives say you got to do future-oriented cooperation in security and economics. And two are sharply divided. And now it is President Yoon who has conservative base. But when you, you know, come up to this, you know, liquidation issue, you got to deal with, you know, those history issues. And there is a sharp divide between the Korean public. So there are two obstacles. And we’ll see how President Yoon will deal with these particular historical issues in the context of – broader context of bilateral security and economic cooperation.

And I think Victor just mentioned before that whether Korean or bilateral – I mean, the U.S.-Korea alliance will go regional and global, we’ll see, you know, the NATO summit and what President Yoon said. We’ll see, you know, whether summit meeting – bilateral summit meeting will be held after the Japanese election, and what all the messages they are saying, particularly with regard to those historical issues. With that, let me stop. Thank you.

Minister Yoon
Excellent. I think you succinctly pointed out important issues there. If bilateral issue between South Korea and Japan becomes the issue of identity, it becomes much more complicated and difficult to resolve. And do you think both governments – I mean, both political leaders in South Korea and Japan will be able to mobilize enough political support to overcome that kind of difficulties coming from identity, I mean, confrontation between two countries?

Dr. Sohn
It should be a very difficult task, particularly – you know, I think that the identity clash came out of the leaders clash between Park and Abe, between Moon and Mr. Abe. And that has spread into the public – whole public. So that is really demonstrated in the public opinion survey that, you know, Japanese perception of Korean leader, President Moon, is – their favorability is less than 3 percent. It’s almost statistical error, and vice versa. So very low level of, you know, positive image because, I mean, each country, the public views the other country as what the other country’s leader said and done. I think that’s very important. So in that sense, you know, the leader is the key agent of public diplomacy.

So I think we might hope that President Yoon should play a very important and effective public diplomacy to the Japanese public, that this is a leader who views Japan or the Japanese identity – not strictly Japan as a former colonial aggressor, but this is a kind of new Japan that you – South Korea really needs to cooperate in order to deal with the global challenges, and also regional challenges, including the China challenge. And also, the Kishida –
Mr. Kishida should play a very important role that, you know, this is – the country, Korea, a previous session we talked about, and also President Lee, you know, in his – the opening remarks, saying that it’s the 10th largest economy in the world, with most sophisticated technologies and culture.

And the Korean, you know, defense budget will almost equal, in two years, with that of Japan. So this is a new Korea, not – you know, you can’t say irrational, emotional. You’re not really, you know, abiding by the rule of law kind of thing. So there should be the gap between the real Korea and the Japanese image of Korea. So I think Mr. – I think, really believe. I think that Mr. Kishida should address the real Korea, the real face of Korea, that you should deal with. So I think that’s the starting point. And then obviously it will take time to address the sort of distorted identity – I mean, image of the other country's identity. So it'll take time, but I’m hopeful that we can – we can, you know, improve in that way.

Minister Yoon

Yeah. In that regard, I think Dr. Smith’s advice to Korean political leader, President Yoon Suk-yeol, to try to speak directly to the Japanese people, I think that’s an important issue here.

Please, Professor Eunbong.

Choi Eunbong

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for your warm introduction. And it is a great honor and privilege for me to participate in this exciting and timely conference with distinguished scholars, experts, intellectuals, and the policymakers, and informed journalists. I have learned a lot from the keynote speeches and presentations in the first session.

For these initial brief remarks, I broadly focused on the current situations of the relationship between Korea and Japan for a contextual understanding. If we look at the broadcasts and newspaper for couple of recent years, we frequently find the words “catastrophe,” “total difficulty,” “credibility gap,” “disfavor,” “widespread frictions,” even a “failure of communication.” But recently it is good news to hear, partnership and friendship about Korea and Japan. But this observation leads me to summarize the current situation as an abnormality.

So then the question comes up, is it possible to improve conflict, create federations to be sustainable, and sincere in new normal? How to get back normalization and reconciliation and confidence rebuilding, as mentioned by previous speakers? I’m not a naïve optimist, but I’m cautiously positive for the future of Korean relations as I think now is the first moment. So in order to prepare for the task, I think four pillars needs to be highlighted. I’ll mention the first pillar now. But the four pillars include: The balanced understanding, the circumstance of struggling Korea-Japan relations. The second, the figuring out characteristic of new government, Korea
government’s, policies to Japan. The third, pinpointing orders surrounding
the new government. First, mapping out the policy positions and
alternatives for forward-looking relations.

Let me move to the first pillar in detail now. Korea-Japan relations have
been neglected for quite a long time. Cycles of action and reaction and tit for
tat by both countries, who were depicted in a negative way. Even the forced
labor issue, which was called as a time bomb, as mentioned by Professor
Sohn, was not controlled effectively. In the case of Japanese military sexual
slavery issue, the Korean government dissolved in 2018 the Reconciliation
Healing Foundation, which was established in 2016 based on the 2015
agreement. The moment in implementing the 2015 agreement was lost.
Some victims even planned to refer the case to the U.N. Anti-Torture
Commission Committee.

Let’s look at Japan. Japan implemented export regulations and deleted Korea
from its white country list. Korea declared the termination of GSOMIA. As
you know, Japan filed a complaint with the WTO. In addition, other conflict
issues were ruptured. Fukushima nuclear power plant water discharge,
territorial disputes, tax controversies, application for UNESCO registration of
Sado mine, this is located in Niigata Prefecture, by the Japanese government,
et cetera. Historical disagreements then were deteriorated and spread to
complex conflicts. Two countries were bashing and passing each other and
fell in the losing game against both.

In the latter half of the ruin previous Korean government actually insisted on
dialogue with Japan. But Japanese counterparts did not respond, let alone
the actual conversation. Japan considers that Korea prioritized the loose
Korean agenda, while recognizing of Japan not as a partner but as a spoiler.
This is not true. But moreover, a phenomena appears in which the victims
and perpetrators are reversed in Korea-Japan relations. Growing Japan is
compared in juxtaposition with decreasing Japan. The scholar argues that
the Korea-Japan relations have been transformed for last six decades from
asymmetrical and complementary status to symmetrical and competitive
ones.

According to GDP, as the professor mentioned, Korea and Japan was one to
30 in 1965, the year of normalization. And one to ten in 1990s, and one to
five in 2010. And one to three in 2020, almost. In terms of GDP per capita,
one to eight in 1965. And recently always closer to each other. And R&D
budget and even defense spending, the gap between Korea and Japan has
become narrowed. As a result of shift of power and stature, kind of cognitive
dissonance occurred, and influenced paradoxically on the relations to be
shattered. Based on all these outcomes, it is arguably estimated that the
previous administration – Korean previous administration policy towards
Japan, not successful, even failed, for the lack of accountability and adaptability.

It left a negative legacy. However, the previous government is not the only one that was wrong. Cause is indeed historical, structural, and reciprocal. With due regard to Japan’s attitude, Japanese government gave Korea cold shoulder with disfavor and without any efforts to have a dialogue with Korea. Eventually, without a summit meeting, antagonistic race was pervasive in both societies. Some scholars in international politics and foreign policy say three things is essential. One, national interest. Two, value, including democracy, rule of law, market economy, human rights, et cetera. And third, perception, the psychology and identity.

So, however, natural interests were sacrificed, common values unshared, only emotional showdown was built with the fervor of patriotic nationalism and the populistic propaganda by both governments. So walls were built up to keep two countries apart. Then COVID-19 certainly attacked all over the world. Moreover, the rivalry between U.S.-China has grown more intense over global supply chain and economic security. Furthermore, Russian invasion of Ukraine brought unprecedented shock as a return of geopolitics, Korea-United States alliance, and the trilateralism Korea, United States and Japan, under Biden administration, become serious matters as a political chapter. This is reality.

What is more important is that Kishida became prime minister in last year and Yoon became president in Korea recently. In this context, the theater has been changed, and top leaders as leading actors of both countries could be game changers and icebreakers, in spite of many obstacles. In the first session, the panelists and the moderator mentioned that leaders matter. So let me stop here.

Minister Yoon

OK. Thank you very much for your excellent presentation. Let me ask just one question. That is, President Yoon Suk-yeol said he would improve South Korea’s relationship with Japan. And to succeed – I mean, to make his policy of improving relationship with Japan successful, he needs to mobilize full support of opposition party members, for example, in the National Assembly. But he won the presidential election with very slim margin of 0.73 percent. And as you know, the majority seats are occupied by the opposition party. I think they are occupying 169 seats while the ruling party occupied 114. Do you think President Yoon will be able to mobilize support of the opposition party in pursuing this quite difficult policy of improving bilateral relations?

Dr. Choi

Yeah. Thank you for the question. The answer is very difficult. But logically without co-governance in National Assembly, many things will be impossible. That’s the obstacles the Yoon government has to meet with. For
instance, Sohn Yul mentioned the liquidation issue. Even that – you mentioned the three ideals. Number one is just –

Dr. Sohn

Three options.

Dr. Choi

- (inaudible)–, then the kind of clean up or the moral legitimacy. The third one is the international domain, quarter. But I think the first – (inaudible)– idea, we can divide three the scenarios.

The first is the broad, - (inaudible)– Second is a little bit separate, - (inaudible)–. The third, which is introduced in Korea, the formal speaker of National Assembly idea, that is two-plus-two – (inaudible)– proposal. It’s a two-plus-two ARPA idea. I think that this is – it is quite reasonable. But by that time, further schedule of time, it is not accepted. It is not proposed in National Assembly. So even though that kind of idea highlighted, readdressed, that is National Assembly process must be required for that process. So in that sense, political struggle is very high for them.

Minister Yoon

Thank you very much.

Dr. Ellen Kim, please.

Ellen Kim

Thank you, Korea Foundation and CSIS, for giving me this opportunity to talk about this very important topic. So – and also, it’s my great pleasure to be on this panel with the very distinguished scholars on Japan and Korea and Japan relations. So thank you for having me.

So I have three points to make. First, the ROK-Japan relationship in the past several years really deteriorated in unprecedented ways that serve neither country’s interest. Trust was depleted, not only between the two governments but also between the people of two countries. And when the existing and new historical disputes sort of got politicized and spill over to economic and secure realms, I think that really hurt the very important foundation of the ROK-Japan relationship, and also undermined the regional cooperations, including U.S.-ROK-Japan trilateralism.

And a lack of trust, lack of dialogue certainly made it difficult for both countries to manage some of the military skirmishes and other adverse developments, which could have been handled better under normal circumstances. So overall, although many of – each one of these dispute are – really matters a lot in both countries, and carries enormous weigh in both countries, the overall outcome of these tensions and confrontations over these disputes at the front and center of the bilateral relationship I think really hurt – did no good to both countries, but only inflicted more pains to the victims of the summit disputes, and hurt the businesses and people in both countries.
Second, with the change in government of both countries, I think that South Korea and Japan have now the opportunity to reset their bilateral relationship. And I think the bilateral relationship got off to a good start already. And I think President Yoon and Prime Minister Kishida now need to build on this positive momentum to normalize their ties. And I think they’re in a very good position to do that. Both countries have aligned – they’re aligned in North Korea policy. They have a very strong commitment to democracy, freedom, rules-based international order. Both countries also wanted to establish a stable supply network in both – in the regions.

And finally, President Yoon’s recent decision to join the U.S. Indo-Pacific Economic Framework, and interest in Quad and maybe CPTPP, may bring both countries to come together and move the dialogue forward. So where do these countries go from there? I think my final point is that there are both short-term and long-term tasks facing both countries. On the short-term side, I think that both countries need to focus on trust-building by working on the issues of their shared interests and use that progress to restore the trust and build the – and deepen the – expand and enhance their bilateral cooperation.

And at the NATO at this end of this month I think could be very good opportunity for the in-person summit between President Yoon and Prime Minister Kishida, which can be followed by their bilateral summit sometime after the – Japan’s upper election in June 10th, I think. And both countries – both leaders can recognize the importance of each other, strategic importance of both countries for their countries, and agree on the future-oriented cooperation. And as a sign of goodwill gesture, both my – both countries may consider putting both countries back on their whitelist of the favorable preferable trading partners.

And at the same time, both countries should agree on the two-check approach, separating their disputes – ongoing disputes from the issue of their bilateral cooperation. And also, as Professor Sohn mentioned, sort of proactively manage some of the time-sensitive issues, like wartime slavery issues, in ways that sort of prevent the rupture from – and rupture in the bilateral relationship and spoiling the future-oriented cooperation between the two countries.

And finally, on the longer-term issues, I think that both countries should approach the historical disputes with more restraint and patience, and through continuous dialogue. These – as history shows, many of these historical issues are really hard to resolve. And unfortunately, many of these issues got much more complex and much more difficult now as they involve legal cases that requires a lot of delicate handling. And leadership in both country also faces enormous domestic barriers that they have to overcome.
So I think that years of reciprocal efforts with a sincere commitment in both countries should be required to make meaningful progress in these issues.

I’ll stop there.

Minister Yoon

Thank you very much for your excellent presentation. And let me ask this question: You are staying here in this country, in the United States. And let me ask a question about the role of the United States. Already that issue has been discussed a little bit, but the nature of the difficulties we are facing in trying to improve bilateral relationship between Japan and South Korea is very kind of complex and complicated, in the sense that in Korea, as I already mentioned in my question to Dr. Choi, President Yoon should be able to, I mean, mobilize those majority seats of opposition party from the National Assembly. And in Japan, Prime Minister Kishida should be able to mobilize a strong support from even ultra-conservative and very hardliners.

And I think both countries’ leaders should be able to do that at the same time. But that is very difficult. And without solving that kind of dilemma, there is no hope, I think, to solve this problem – difficulties facing those two countries. And do you think, I mean, American – I mean, U.S. way of intervening in this issue that is kind of behind us in quiet diplomacy – do you think that will be enough to resolve, I mean, this kind of difficult, complicated problem?

Dr. Kim

Maybe yes and maybe no. (Laughter.) Back in, I think, 2014-13, when South Korea and Japan already have a difficult relationship over these historical disputes, President Biden actually sort of played a mediative role to bring President Park and Prime Minister Abe to have a summit together. So at that time, sort of this sort of put a stop in the ongoing tensions in the visiting countries. So in that sense maybe it worked that way, but eventually that, actually, saw bad results, after the collapse of the comfort woman agreement fell apart.

So but right now I think that there is certain roles that America can play, certainly, but not in an open way but in a back channel. I think encouraging both sides to think about their broader national interest. Ultimately, I think that you – ROK-Japan cooperation is very vital for the national interest in addressing the regional and global challenges. Both countries should not overlook their strategic importance of each other. South Korea’s national security in part relies and tied to the U.S. forces stationed in Japan, and also military assets there. And Japan also needs South Korea to deal with North Korea, as well as China and other regional issues.

So I think that both South Korea and Japan need to really step out from their ongoing disputes, and then really see their – reassess their national interests and bilateral relationship in a holistic way. And most importantly, I think
that both countries should not let these discordant historical issues be
driving a wedge between them when they're facing these greater challenges
in North Korea and China.

Minister Yoon

OK. Thank you. Thank you very much.

Dr. Smith, may I invite your view on the same question that I raised, please?

Dr. Smith

Thank you, Minister Yoon. On the U.S. role, is that correct?

Minister Yoon

Yeah. Yeah.

Dr. Smith

So I – you know, it’s not to say that – I think during the Obama years there
was a very concerted effort to facilitate – and that’s the word I like to use as
opposed to mediate – on some of these issues. And I think Dr. Kim is quite
right to reference that period as being a very difficult period in the bilateral,
and where the United States could play a quiet, supportive role that actually
ended up being productive in terms of the comfort woman agreement. But
again, at the end of the day, I feel that we should recognize that the United
States cannot push the people of South Korea or the people of Japan to a
position that is not inherently welcome.

And I think we need to recognize our limits here. But there is a quiet,
supportive role. There is a referential role, perhaps, the United States could
play. I was intrigued by Dr. Sohn’s three possibilities. Well, maybe there’s a
different possibility. There is reconciliation efforts that were made in the
United States in our domestic political world where we had to deal, of
course, with behavior by the U.S. government towards its citizens that was
not, you know, conductive to our constitutional rights. And so there’s other
ways, perhaps other cases, other instances of reconciliation that could be
reference points for the U.S. – I’m sorry – for Japan and South Korea.

I honestly have gone back to look at the 1965 agreement and the
accompanying agreements on the compensation issues. And I am sort of
stuck by how wise negotiators were back then about creating this third-
party mediation framework, because I think they understood that this may
not be the end of the conversation between the citizens of both countries.
And I think it’s really going to be incumbent on both governments to be
flexible in thinking about ways in which they can approach this. But the
United States actually is in a referential role, rather than a direct mediation
role, if that makes sense. That would be my approach to that.

Minister Yoon

OK. Thank you very much.

Dr. Sohn, you – I mean, you talked about three options, three choices that
both South Korea and Japan can choose. But you didn’t, I mean, evaluate
them. I mean, which is the most reasonable option for both countries? What is your personal view or personal evaluation among those three options you mentioned? And why?

Dr. Sohn

My preference is second, that, you know, this is an issue that the Japanese government and Japanese companies do not want to pay. If that’s the case, then my government will take care of it, and we take the position of moral superiority on the issue. (Laughs.) Then president really need the courage, you know, to persuade the people. That was made in 1993 when the comfort woman issue erupted. And that was during the time when Japanese government prepared so-called Kono statement. So I think the timing was right at that time, before Japanese government made their statement. So the Kim Young-sam’s decision, and his decision kind of supported, you know, Kono statement in that way, I mean, having Kono statement as progressive as possible.

But this time it’s difficult. It’s different. And the Korean president is much more difficult position than President Kim was. But I think still, that’s the possibility. I mean, that’s the thing that you resolve it, because the first choice Professor Choi mentioned – (inaudible) – or the revised – (inaudible) – I think that’s reasonable and I think that’s desirable. But I’m not – I’m not sure. It’ll take time, but during that time – I mean, we saw the history problems like, you know, comfort women and forced labor. When this, you know, issue came out in the government, if you don’t handle it quickly then it lasts for the whole five years, shackled the relationship. That was Park’s case and Moon’s case.

So if you do not really, you know, address this issue progressively in your first year of presidency, I think it’ll go on and on until the end of this – I mean, the current Yoon government. So you need a decisiveness and courage to, you know, get it done within one year when you have a high time and also honeymoon, not with the opposition party, but with the public. So I prefer the second choice.

Minister Yoon

OK. Thank you very much. I think we have three minutes left, and probably I can open the floor to the audience, and just probably have one question from the audience, if you have any. OK. Then I think it’s time for us to wrap up our discussion. I think it was very productive discussion. We touched on almost every important subject related to our topic, improving relationship between South Korea and Japan.

And I think probably one conclusion, I mean, which comes from all of your presentation is that we need to, I mean, kind of delink history issue from the economic and security issues. And we don’t have to hurry about the – hurry to deal with the history issue, which is very difficult, complicated issues. And I think with that in our mind, I think we had better expect, I mean, both
governments in South Korea and Japan be able to succeed in their commitment to improve bilateral relationship in coming years.

Thank you very much for your excellent presentations. And, Dr. Smith, thank you. And thank you very much for listening, audience. Thank you. (Applause.)

(END)