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JAPAN-KOREA RELATIONS

CONTINUATION OF DUAL TRACK APPROACH

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In the final four months of 2017, South Korea-Japan relations continued on the same trajectories as they had over the summer – both countries adopted a dual-track approach to bilateral relations. While controversy over the comfort women issue and Dokdo/Takeshima continued with numbing predictability, Seoul and Tokyo moved forward in developing what they called a “future-oriented relationship” centered on economics and North Korea. While officials on both sides regularly expressed hopes for reviving high-level shuttle diplomacy, the most significant element of the past few months has been how directly Washington was influenced by, but also influenced, Seoul-Tokyo relations. Although it has been an important element in Korea-Japan relations since the end of the Pacific War, recent events have demonstrated the importance of the triangular relationship.

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Trump's state banquet: comfort women and Dokdo shrimp

One of the biggest events for South Korea and Japan in the final months of 2017 was US President Donald Trump's visit to the region. The advent of Trump's presidency caused unprecedented confusion and concern in East Asia as leaders tried to figure out how best to deal with the mercurial US leader. The visit was even more significant for Seoul because it was the first official state visit by a US president to South Korea in 36 years. Both Korea and Japan attempted to lavish Trump with all the pomp and ceremony they could muster. In Japan, Trump played a round with professional golfer Hideki Matsuyama; in South Korea, he received a 21-gun salute, a 300-person military honor guard, and military band performance.

While both countries outdid themselves with elaborate receptions, Trump's Nov. 8 state banquet at *Cheong Wa Dae*, South Korea's presidential Blue House, became a diplomatic flashpoint between Seoul and Tokyo because President Moon Jae-in's office put 88-year-old Lee Yong-soo, a Korean victim of Japan's wartime sexual slavery, on the guest list. Chief Cabinet Secretary Suga Yoshihide said in a news conference that the invitation [breached](#) the spirit of the 2015 comfort women agreement, which aimed to "finally" and "irreversibly" resolve the comfort women issue, and demanded that Seoul faithfully implement the agreement. The [Korea Herald](#) quoted an official from the South Korean presidential office saying under condition of anonymity that "Lee's invitation was designed to deliver a message to Trump and ask him to have a balanced view of the comfort woman issue and historical dispute between South Korea and Japan." The [Asahi Shimbun](#) highlighted the fact that Lee supports scrapping the 2015 agreement and that she has traveled to the US to share her wartime experiences.



Another point of contention was the banquet menu. Japan's government expressed frustration over the decision to serve "[Dokdo Shrimp](#)" from waters off the Dokdo/Takeshima islands at the banquet, expressing its [displeasure](#) at South Korea for claiming territorial sovereignty over disputed territory by using an ingredient with the name "Dokdo." Chief Cabinet Secretary Suga said, "At a time when stronger coordination between Japan, the United States and South Korea is required to deal with the North Korea issue, and when President Trump has chosen Japan and South Korea as the first stops on his trip, there is a need to avoid making moves that could negatively affect the close coordination between [the three countries]." In response to Japan's protests, South Korea's Foreign Ministry said, "The food served at the dinner and those invitees were determined by reflecting all necessary factors," and it is "inappropriate" for Japan to take issue with how South Korea arranges a state dinner. South Korea's stance on the matter was also delivered via diplomatic channels, according to [Yonhap](#).



The invitation of a former comfort woman to the state dinner, along with the South Korean parliamentary panel's passing of a bill in September to designate a special [day](#) commemorating victims of Japan's wartime sexual slavery, reflects the Moon administration's determination to revisit the 2015 comfort women agreement between Japan and Korea. The use of the term "Dokdo Shrimp" at the state dinner, along with the South Korean Marine Corps' announcement in October of [plans](#) to set up a new military unit dedicated to defending the Dokdo islands, demonstrates Seoul's continued stance of claiming territorial sovereignty over the islands. Japan's strong protest, quoting the 2015 comfort women agreement, suggests the Abe administration expects Seoul to abide faithfully to the deal.

If Trump's state visit to South Korea shows how Seoul-Washington relations influence Seoul-Tokyo relations, it also shows how Seoul-Tokyo relations affect Tokyo-Washington relations. On Sept. 21, a statue of victims of Japan's wartime sexual enslavement, including a message that urges the Japanese government to "acknowledge its responsibility and formally apologize," was [unveiled](#) at St. Mary's Square in San Francisco, despite Japan's efforts to stop it. Osaka Mayor Yoshimura Hirofumi requested that San Francisco Mayor Edwin Lee halt construction, but Lee rejected the request and signed a confirmation that the city council officially [accepts](#) the monument. Frustrated by Lee's decision, Yoshimura said on Nov. 24, that Osaka will [end](#) the six-decade sister-city relationship it has had with San Francisco.

Civil society and historical and territorial contentions

Given the rise of civic activism on historical and territorial issues, it is worth noting how civil society shaped the development of both the comfort women issue and the dispute over Dokdo/Takeshima. This fall, 15 civic groups from eight countries, including South Korea and China, regularly demanded the registration of 2,700 types of documents related to Japan's wartime sexual slavery of women as a "Memory of the World" listing of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). The ROK government has not been officially involved in requesting document registration to UNESCO, but the Foreign Ministry said on Oct. 27 that the government [supports](#) the civic group-led push for the listing, and that the government will facilitate diplomatic efforts for the matter to be "fairly" discussed by the UN. Despite these efforts, the International Advisory Committee (IAC) of UNESCO decided to [postpone](#) the review. South Korean media attributed the postponement to Japan's diplomatic campaign that included the possibility of [withholding](#) funding for UNESCO.

South Korean civic groups also took part in the dispute over the Dokdo/Takeshima islands. On Oct. 25, civic groups, including "the Headquarters for the People's Action to Defend Dokdo," held a ceremony celebrating the "Day of Dokdo," proclaimed by some local municipalities and civic groups in 2010, and issued a statement [urging](#) Japan to withdraw its claim over the islands and to abolish the

designation of "Takeshima Day." Although a recent Japanese Cabinet Office [poll](#) of 1,790 adults revealed that the Japanese public has grown [less](#) interested in the Dokdo/Takeshima issue compared to three years ago, the majority of respondents still expressed interest in the dispute. In 2014, 66.9 percent of respondents expressed interest in the islets; that number dropped to 59.3 percent in 2017. Of those expressing an interest, 73.5 percent said Japan's claim is legitimate.

Hopes for high-level shuttle diplomacy and the emperor's visit

Despite contention over historical and territorial issues, both South Korea and Japan regularly expressed hope for the resumption of high-level shuttle diplomacy – annual reciprocal visits by the leaders that were suspended in December 2011 – to enhance bilateral ties. At the first meeting between new South Korean Ambassador to Japan Lee Su-hoon and Japan's Foreign Minister Kono Taro on Nov. 14, they agreed to resume the [visits](#). Lee said, "Shuttle diplomacy will be recovered if Moon's visit to Japan during [Japan's] hosting of a South Korea-China-Japan summit meeting next month or in January next year is followed by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's visit to South Korea for the Pyeongchang Winter Olympics next year." On Dec 7, Minister and Deputy Chief of Japan's Embassy in Seoul Mizushima Koichi reaffirmed Japan's hopes to resume [shuttle diplomacy](#). Emphasizing the urgency he said, "Shuttle diplomacy has an important and symbolic meaning in that it could help enhance trust between leaders of the two countries and show the trust to their people."

In an additional move to enhance bilateral ties, South Korean officials formally invited Emperor Akihito to visit South Korea. In an interview with the [Asahi Shimbun](#) on Sept. 22, South Korean Prime Minister Lee Nak-yeon proposed that Akihito visit South Korea before his abdication. "If (the emperor) visits South Korea before his abdication and removes obstacles that have hindered efforts by the two countries to date, the visit will become a big help for the development of bilateral relations.... I hope that the climate for such a visit can be achieved as early as possible," said Lee. Ambassador Lee Su-hoon also [cited](#) Akihito's possible visit to Seoul as a way to tackle the current diplomatic logjam and vowed to "make efforts to generate the political environment and mood that will enable (it) to

happen.” The Japanese government has not yet responded to the proposal, but given Akihito’s and Empress Michiko’s September [visit](#) to the Koma shrine in Hidaka that is related to the ancient Korean kingdom of Koguryo (37B.C.-A.D.668), the visit may be possible if the political environment continues to improve.

Future-oriented cooperation: economy and social issues

Two areas where South Korea and Japan did make progress were in the economy and North Korea. For instance, on Sept. 13, the heads of the [central banks](#) of South Korea, Japan, and China held their annual meeting in Songdo, South Korea and exchanged views on economic and financial developments in the three countries. Also, about 300 South Korean and Japanese [business leaders](#) attended a meeting hosted by the Korea-Japan Economic Association on Sept. 26 and discussed ways to boost ties in the technology and energy sectors and facilitate multilateral free trade with other Asian nations. South Korea’s Finance Minister Kim Dong-yeon and Trade Minister Paik Un-gyu met the Japanese business delegation and discussed a number of economic issues between the two countries. More recently, senior financial regulators from South Korea, Japan, and China met in Incheon on Dec. 1, 2017 to discuss steps to ease [volatility](#) over US interest rates hikes.

South Korea and Japan discussed cooperation on social issues that both countries face, such as a low birth rate, rapidly aging population, and a fluctuating job market that could influence long-term economic development of both countries. As the rising trend of [low birthrates](#) threatens the economies of both countries, South Korean Health and Welfare Minister Park Neung-hoo and Japanese counterpart Matsuyama Masaji agreed on Oct. 19 to jointly address the problem to enhance the growth potential of the two economies. Given that low birth rate and rapid aging population are tightly intertwined, Seoul plans to study the case of Japan, which has been dealing with both issues for the past decade. South Korea and Japan also promoted trilateral cooperation with China on these issues. On Nov. 12-13, health ministers of the three countries met in Jinan, China to discuss and share domestic policies aimed at helping the elderly population live healthy and active lives and facilitating a research network among them on aging issues. The ministers also agreed to strengthen information and

technology exchanges relating to the prevention and management of chronic diseases and vowed to develop traditional medicine among the three countries.

After a sharp [increase](#) in South Korea’s unemployment rate in August, Seoul made efforts to address the issue by expanding job opportunities for Koreans in Japan. On Nov. 14, South Korea’s Vice Foreign Minister Cho Hyun met Japan’s Vice Foreign Minister Sugiyama Shinsuke, other senior government officials, and heads of main business associations and [agreed](#) to find ways to help Koreans study and work in Japan and to offer information about Koreans seeking jobs in Japan to Japanese firms.

Cultural exchanges also continued to increase between the two sides. According to data from the Korea Tourism Organization (KTO) and Japan National Tourism Organization (JNTO), the number of South Korean tourists to Japan [increased](#) by 40 percent in the first 10 months of 2017. While 4.17 million South Koreans visited Japan in the January-October period of 2016, 5.84 million South Koreans visited Japan in the same period of 2017. The number of South Korean travelers to Japan was exceeded only by the number of Chinese tourists to Japan. Industry data shows that South Koreans’ weekend trips abroad in the first nine months of 2017 [increased](#) 6.6 times compared with the same period in 2015 and that the most popular destination was Osaka.

Meanwhile, South Korea fell out of favor with Japanese travelers. A survey published in November by the KTO showed that Korea dropped in [ranking](#) of favorite trip destinations of Japanese from fifth place in 2014 to 10th in 2017. Reasons for the decline include dwindling interest in the Korean Wave (31.4 percent), the weak yen (29.7 percent), poor impression of the country (25.8 percent), and deteriorating South Korea-Japan relations (9.8 percent). Tourism industry officials expect a further decline in South Korea’s ranking as concerns over North Korea’s nuclear and missile threats increase in Japan. Despite South Korea’s decline in ranking of preferred trip destination, Japanese still make up 74.8 percent of foreign [visitors](#) who come to South Korea for Korean Wave related events, according to a study by the Korea Culture and Tourism Institute. Further, Yamaguchi Natsuo, leader of the Komei party, [vowed](#) during his visit with Ambassador Lee Su-hoon at the embassy on Dec. 7 to encourage Japanese to visit South

Korea for the 2018 Pyeongchang Winter Olympics, promising enhancement of people-to-people exchange between South Korea and Japan in 2018.

Cooperation on North Korea: good and bad

Cooperation between Japan and South Korea over North Korean provocations and its nuclear program increased dramatically over the past year. It would be ironic if shared concerns over North Korea prompt them to cooperate on military and security matters – after years of stalling or dissembling.

North Korea [conducted](#) two long-range missile tests in the final months of 2017, launching the *Hwasong-12* on Sept. 15 and the *Hwasong-15* on Nov. 29. After each launch, South Korean and Japanese [leaders](#) and foreign [ministers](#) held telephone talks and reaffirmed that North Korea's development of nuclear weapons is totally unacceptable and that South Korea and Japan will work closely to coordinate on strengthening pressure on North Korea along with the US. Also, South Korea appointed Lee Do-hoon to be the envoy on the North Korean nuclear program. After assuming the role, Lee discussed ways to cooperate on a peaceful resolution of the North Korean issue with Japanese counterpart Kanasugi Kenji over the [phone](#) on Sept. 29, and "discussed plans to bring North Korea to a venue for serious dialogue while toughening sanctions and pressure to the extent that North Korea gives up its nukes and preparing for the possibility of various changes in the future situation" at their [meeting](#) in Tokyo on Dec. 22. The US, South Korea, and Japan conducted a two-day [joint missile warning](#) exercise designed to prepare against North Korean provocations in late October. While no actual missile was fired, the mobilized vessels jointly detected and tracked a computer-simulated missile launch and shared their information.

Despite the cooperation, there was friction between Seoul and Tokyo. A diplomatic spat over North Korean refugees in Japan arose due to a controversial speech by Deputy Prime Minister Aso in Utsunomiya, Japan on Sept. 24 regarding the inflow of [North Korean refugees](#) to Japan in the event of contingency on the Korean Peninsula. Aso said, "Can police handle them? Will the Self-Defense Forces be dispatched and shoot them down? We'd better think about it seriously." In [response](#), a South Korean

spokesperson said on Sept. 26, "The government thinks it is very regretful in that a responsible government official of Japan recently made such a prejudiced remark with regard to North Korean refugees in a hypothetical situation that is based on a nationalistic perspective and it also runs counter to international norms related to refugee protection." The spat suggests that although South Korea and Japan may cooperate in response to North Korea's nuclear and missile programs, they differ widely in overall approach to North Korea and its people.

The months ahead

As promised, the Moon administration issued an assessment of the 2015 comfort women agreement. On Dec. 27, Oh Tae-gyu, the head of a task force examining the issue, said the group [concluded](#) that "A victim-oriented approach, which has been accepted as a norm of the international community for human rights of wartime women, has not been fully reflected (in the deal)." Foreign Minister Kang Kyung-wha said that the government accepts the review of the task force "in a serious and humble manner." A day after the report was released, President Moon [said](#), "It has been confirmed that the negotiations on the comfort women issue between South Korea and Japan in 2015 had significant defects in terms of procedures and content. It is regrettable but something that we can't evade." Moon stressed that the agreement, "runs afoul of the established universal principle of the international community for settling history issues, and above all, it was a political agreement that excludes victims themselves and citizens," adding that, "Along with the citizens, I, as president, make it clear again that the comfort women issue can't be settled through the deal." In response, a Japanese government source [said](#) the Abe administration's "position of seeking the steady implementation of the agreement is unchanging."

Even though the task force report contained no policy recommendations, Moon's approach to the issue and the Japanese government's unchanging position make a diplomatic spat seem inevitable. According to a source connected with South Korea's Foreign Ministry, the government is likely to [postpone](#) making any policy decision or adjustments until after the 2018 Pyeongchang Winter Olympics. However, the report already appears to be

straining bilateral relations between Seoul and Tokyo. On Dec. 29, a Japanese government source said Prime Minister Abe might [decline](#) to attend the Pyeongchang Olympics given the South Korean government's report casting doubt on the 2015 agreement. Hence, the trajectory of Seoul-Tokyo relations in early months of 2018 seems to be contingent on how contentions over comfort women issues unfold.



Another issue that will likely affect bilateral relations is North Korea. In his annual New Year's Day speech on Jan. 1, Kim Jong-un expressed hope that the two Koreas might seek to resolve problems among themselves rather than seek help from outside the region. Kim said, "It's about time that the North and the South sit down and seriously discuss how to improve inter-Korean relations by ourselves and dramatically open up." Regarding the Pyeongchang Olympics, Kim noted, "We're willing to take necessary steps including sending our delegation, and for this, the authorities from the North and South could urgently meet," reversing Pyongyang's earlier position of no participation. South Korea will welcome such initiatives from the North and that could drive a wedge between South Korea and Japan on North Korea policy.

CHRONOLOGY OF JAPAN-KOREA RELATIONS

SEPTEMBER – DECEMBER 2017

Sept. 3, 2017: Japan's Minister of Foreign Affairs Kono Taro and South Korea's Foreign Minister Kang Kyung-wha [hold](#) telephone talks following the North Korean nuclear test.

Sept. 4, 2017: South Korea's President Moon Jae-in and Japan's Prime Minister Abe Shinzo [hold](#) telephone talks to discuss the North Korean nuclear test.

Sept. 6, 2017: South Korea's Defense Minister Song Young-moo and Japan's Defense Minister Onodera Itsunori talk by telephone and [condemn](#) North Korea's nuclear test.

Sept. 7, 2017: President Moon and PM Abe meet in Vladivostok on the sidelines of a regional economic forum and vow to seek an [oil supply cut](#) to pressure North Korea. The foreign ministers also agree to [coordinate](#) closely on North Korea.

Sept. 13, 2017: The heads of the [central banks](#) of South Korea, Japan, and China hold an annual meeting in Songdo, South Korea to exchange views on recent economic and financial developments in the three countries.

Sept. 13, 2017: A stolen cultural asset of Korea's Joseon Dynasty [returns](#) to South Korea from Japan after 20 years, according to the Overseas Korean Cultural Heritage Foundation.

Sept. 14, 2017: South Korea's Ministry of Foreign Affairs posts video clips online in Japanese and four other languages to promote wider use of the name "[East Sea](#)" for the waters lying between Korea and Japan instead of "Sea of Japan."

Sept. 15, 2017: South Korea's and Japan's foreign ministers hold [telephone talk](#) on North Korea's launch of a ballistic missile earlier in the day.

Sept. 17, 2017: House of Sharing in Gwangju says a statue of victims of Japan's wartime sexual enslavement will be [unveiled](#) at St. Mary's Square in San Francisco on Sept. 21.

Sept. 19, 2017: The army chiefs of South Korea, US and Japan – Gen. Kim Yong-woo, Gen. Mark A. Milley, and Gen. Koji Yamazaki Koji – [exchange](#) views on North Korea at a meeting held on the sidelines of the 10th Pacific Armies Chiefs Conference (PACC) in Seoul.

Sept. 20, 2017: Japan's Emperor Akihito and Empress Michiko [visit](#) Koma Shrine, which is related to the Koguryo Kingdom, in Hidaka South Korea.

Sept. 20, 2017: Japan and the US [vow](#) "maximum pressure" on North Korea in response to the *Hwasong-12* intermediate-range ballistic missile test by Pyongyang.

Sept. 21, 2017: South Korea, Japan, and the US hold a [trilateral summit](#) in New York on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly.

Sept. 22, 2017: South Korea's and Japan's foreign ministers [affirm](#) their close coordination on the issue of North Korea during a bilateral meeting in New York.

Sept. 23, 2017: South Korea's Prime Minister Lee Nak-yon [proposes](#) Emperor Akihito's visit to South Korea before his abdication to enhance the bilateral relationship.

Sept. 24, 2017: Regarding the potential inflow of [North Korean refugees](#) to Japan in a contingency on the Korean Peninsula, Deputy Prime Minister Aso Taro says, "Can police handle them? Will the Self-Defense Forces be dispatched and shoot them down? We'd better think about it seriously."

Sept. 25, 2017: Korean comedy-drama, "[I Can Speak](#)," a movie about a woman who served as a sex slave during Japan's colonial rule of Korea, attracts over 480,000 people on its opening weekend in South Korea.

Sept. 25-26, 2017: South Korea's Ministry of Gender Equality and Family announces plan to build a comfort women [monument](#) at the National Mang-Hyang Cemetery in Cheonan, South Korea. Japanese Chief Cabinet Secretary Suga Yoshihide says the plan [runs counter](#) to the spirit of a 2015 bilateral agreement. South Korean Foreign Ministry says that the monument installation is [not in breach](#) of the agreement.

Sept. 26, 2017: About 300 business leaders gather in Seoul to [attend](#) a meeting hosted by the Korea-Japan Economic Association to discuss ways to boost ties in the technology and energy sectors and facilitate multilateral free trade with other Asian nations.

Sept. 26, 2017: South Korea [expresses](#) regret over Deputy Prime Minister Aso's remarks on North Korean refugees in Japan. Japanese government expresses [concern](#) over South Korea's plan to install comfort women statue in a national cemetery.

Sept. 27, 2017: South Korean parliamentary panel passes bill to designate a [day](#) commemorating victims of Japan's wartime sexual slavery. An elderly South Korea sexual slavery victim visits the US [Embassy](#) and calls for Washington's help in pressuring Tokyo to offer an official apology and compensation.

Sept. 29, 2017: South Korea's [new envoy](#) on the North Korean nuclear program Lee Do-hoon has first telephone conversation with Japanese counterpart Kanasugi Kenji.

Oct. 13, 2017: A comfort women [statue](#) is unveiled at the Museum of Korean American Heritage in Manhattan, New York.

Oct. 17, 2017: South Korea's Foreign Ministry expresses concerns over a [ritual offering](#) sent by PM Abe to Yasukuni Shrine.

Oct. 18, 2017: South Korea's Vice Foreign Minister Lim Sung-nam, Japan's Vice Foreign Minister Sugiyama Shinsuke, and US Deputy Secretary of State John Sullivan agree to seek [all possible](#) diplomatic options on North Korea in trilateral talks held in Seoul.

Oct. 19, 2017: South Korean Health and Welfare Minister Park Neung-hoo and Japanese counterpart Matsuyama Masaji agree to jointly address the [low birthrate](#) in both countries.

Oct. 19, 2017: South Korean and Japanese [nuclear envoys](#) meet to discuss a coordinated approach toward North Korea.

Oct. 19-20, 2017: South Korea's Marine Corps [unveils](#) plans to set up a new military unit dedicated to defending Dokdo. Foreign Minister Kono strongly [protests](#) the plan.

Oct. 24, 2017: President Moon extends congratulations to PM Abe on his [re-election](#) and reaffirms coordination on North Korean issues over a summit telephone talk.

Oct. 24, 2017: South Korean Defense Minister Song Young-moo, Japanese Defense Minister Itsunori Onodera, and US Secretary of Defense James Mattis hold a [trilateral](#) meeting on the sidelines of the ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting-Plus (ADMM-Plus) in the Philippines.

Oct. 24, 2017: South Korea, Japan, and the US carry out [joint missile warning](#) exercise, designed to prepare against North Korean provocations.

Oct. 25, 2017: South Korea's new Ambassador to Japan Lee Su-hoon [reaffirms](#) a two-track approach to Japan, separating historical disputes from future-oriented cooperation on North Korea and economy. Lee expresses hopes for a visit by Emperor Akihito to Seoul.

Oct. 25, 2017: South Korean civic groups [urge](#) Japan to apologize over its claim over Dokdo/Takeshima and abolish the designation of "Takeshima Day."

Oct. 27, 2017: Seoul High Court [overturns](#) a lower-court's acquittal of Park Yu-ha and convicts her of defaming wartime sexual slavery victims and charges a fine.

Oct. 27, 2017: South Korea's Foreign Ministry says the government [supports](#) efforts to register documents related to comfort women as a "Memory of the World" listing of UNSCO.

Oct. 28, 2017: Poll conducted by the Japan's Cabinet Office in July shows Japanese have grown [less](#) interested in Dokdo/Takeshima issue than three years ago.

Oct. 29, 2017: Japan [renews](#) territorial claim to Takeshima in teaching materials posted on a government website.

Oct. 31, 2017: UNESCO [postpones](#) its review of multinational civic group's request to register document related to comfort women on the list of "Memory of the World."

Nov. 1, 2017: South Korea's Foreign Ministry issues a [statement](#) congratulating Japan on the launch of its new Cabinet and voices hopes for "a future-oriented, cooperative partnership based on the right understanding of shared history."

Nov. 11-12, 2017: Health ministers of South Korea, Japan, and China meet in Jinan, China and vow to enhance cooperation on the growing [aging](#) population.

Nov. 14, 2017: Ambassador Lee Su-hoon meets Foreign Minister Kono and they agree to [resume](#) shuttle diplomacy between two countries' leaders.

Nov. 14, 2017: South Korea's Vice Foreign Minister Cho Hyun meets Vice Foreign Minister Sugiyama, other senior government officials, and heads of main business associations to discuss ways to provide more [job](#) opportunities for Koreans in Japan.

Nov. 23, 2017: President Moon and the head of New Komeito Yamaguchi Natsuo vow to [improve](#) South Korea-Japan relationship during their meeting at Cheong Wa Dae.

Nov. 24, 2017: South Korea's National Assembly passes bill to [designate](#) Aug. 14 as a day to commemorate comfort women.

Nov. 24, 2017: Osaka Mayor Yoshimura Hirofumi decides to [end](#) the six decades of sister-city relationship with San Francisco over a comfort women monument set up in the city.

Nov. 28, 2017: Foreign Minister Kono says Japan may use its military airplanes and ships to [evacuate](#) its Japanese nationals from the Korean Peninsula in the event of a contingency.

Nov. 29, 2017: President Moon and PM Abe agree in a [telephone](#) conversation to seek additional UN sanctions against North Korea after its missile launch earlier in the day. Foreign Ministers Kang and Kono also have emergency [phone conversation](#) to discuss the launch.

Dec. 1, 2017: South Korea, Japan, and China's senior financial regulators meet in Incheon to discuss steps to ease [volatility](#) over US interest rates hikes.

Dec. 5, 2017: ROK Foreign Ministry expresses [regret](#) over Japan not commemorating victims of its forced hard labor after adding Hashima Island to UNESCO World Heritage list in 2015.

Dec. 8, 2017: *Kyodo* reports that Japan plans to publicize [testimony](#) denying that Korean were forced to work "under harsh conditions" at UNESCO-listed Hashima island.

Dec. 8-9, 2017: South Korea, US, and Japan [conduct](#) a joint missile tracking exercise.

Dec. 12, 2017: South Korean man jailed for detonating a bomb at Yasukuni Shrine in 2015 claims that he is [suffering](#) from human rights abuses during his incarceration.

Dec. 15, 2017: South Korean Navy and Japan's Maritime Self-Defense Forces conduct a [joint](#) search and rescue drill in waters southwest of Yokosuka.

Dec. 19, 2017: Foreign Minister Kang [visits](#) Japan – for the first time since taking office – to meet Foreign Minister Kono. They discuss North Korea and the controversy over Japan's wartime sex slavery.

Dec. 22, 2017: Nuclear envoys Lee Do-hoon and Kanasugi Kenji [discuss](#) "plans to bring North Korea to a venue for serious dialogue while toughening sanctions and pressure."

Dec. 27, 2017: South Korea issues report that casts [doubt](#) on 2015 comfort women deal, saying it did not fully reflect "a victim-oriented approach." Japan [dismisses](#) the criticism saying the accord "followed a legitimate negotiation process between the two governments."

Dec. 28-29, 2017: South Korean Navy [conducts](#) military exercise for the defense of Dokdo. The head of Japan Foreign Ministry's Asian and Oceanian Affairs Bureau [protests](#).

Dec. 29, 2017: Japanese government source says PM Abe might [decline](#) to attend the 2018 Pyeongchang Winter Olympics in February given South Korean government's report casting doubt on the 2015 comfort women agreement.