# Japan and South Korea cautiously navigate 60 years of fraught diplomacy amid new leadership



Japan and South Korea are commemorating the 60th anniversary of the normalization of their diplomatic relations amid a complex backdrop of historical grievances, political changes, and ongoing regional security challenges. The milestone occasion highlights both progress and persistent tensions between two Asian neighbours whose relationship has long been marred by Japan’s colonial rule over Korea in the early 20th century.

South Korea’s new liberal president, Lee Jae Myung, has taken a cautious yet pragmatic approach to relations with Japan, signalling a subtle shift from his predecessor’s policies. While former president Yoon Suk Yeol, now facing a trial over his imposition of martial law, had begun to repair bilateral ties through outreach efforts and a South Korea-funded compensation plan for colonial-era forced labour victims, Lee aims to build on this cautiously, balancing pragmatism with sensitivity to historical issues. Lee has criticized Japan’s lingering imperialist attitudes, which he blames for complicating cooperation, but he has also underlined the strategic necessity of working with Japan on security and economic matters. Ahead of the anniversary of Korea’s liberation from Japan on 15 August, some South Koreans hope for a stronger expression of remorse from Tokyo, while experts warn that historical wounds will continue to test the relationship.

From Tokyo, Japanese Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba has sought to promote a forward-looking partnership with South Korea. Unlike some of his recent predecessors, Ishiba has acknowledged Japan’s wartime aggression and expressed greater empathy towards the victims of Japan’s colonial past. His recent meeting with Lee at the G7 summit marked a milestone, with both leaders describing their countries as “inseparable” neighbours and committing to deepen trilateral security cooperation with the United States, especially to counter North Korea’s nuclear threats. The renewed dialogue reflects a desire to overcome historical discord and address common challenges such as regional instability and the impact of U.S. trade policies, notably amid concerns over proposed tariffs on automobiles that threaten the trade-dependent economies of both nations.

Historical disputes, such as those over forced labour and the issue of “comfort women” — women subjected to sexual slavery by Japan’s military during its occupation of Korea — remain sensitive points. Japan’s 1965 treaty with South Korea included $500 million in economic assistance, which Japan argued settled wartime compensation issues, but these topics have continued to disrupt diplomatic ties. While Japan has twice offered atonement funds for comfort women, these efforts were complicated by South Korean administrations’ differing stances, including the unilateral dissolution of a Japan-established fund under the previous liberal government. Despite this fraught history, there is cautious optimism that the pragmatic diplomacy of Lee and Ishiba, supported by encouragement from the United States, can sustain and deepen bilateral ties.

The recently departing Japanese Prime Minister, Fumio Kishida, also played a key role in stabilizing relations during his tenure, holding multiple summits with South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol and urging his successor to maintain the diplomatic direction. Kishida’s efforts culminated in agreements to enhance cooperation against North Korea’s growing threats, deepen economic and technological exchanges, and promote a “free and open Indo-Pacific.” Ahead of the 60th anniversary, the two nations affirmed their commitment to elevate bilateral relations further, including through people-to-people exchanges and shuttle diplomacy aimed at maintaining close communication and mutual understanding.

As both nations mark this diplomatic milestone, the relationship between Japan and South Korea remains a delicate balancing act. Past wounds and nationalist sentiments continue to cast shadows, yet the evolving geopolitical landscape — marked by North Korean nuclear risks, China’s regional ambitions, and shifting global economic dynamics — compels Seoul and Tokyo to seek common ground. How Lee Jae Myung and Shigeru Ishiba, alongside their respective administrations, navigate this balance will be crucial in shaping the future of one of Northeast Asia’s most vital and historically fraught bilateral relationships.

### 📌 Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/lee-jae-myung-japan-south-korea-seoul-tokyo-b2774558.html), [[2]](https://apnews.com/article/697c0a6b00cdf0a740e5f5dd0c0145ae)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/lee-jae-myung-japan-south-korea-seoul-tokyo-b2774558.html), [[2]](https://apnews.com/article/697c0a6b00cdf0a740e5f5dd0c0145ae), [[3]](https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/south-koreas-lee-tells-japan-countries-should-cooperate-amid-trade-challenges-2025-06-17/)
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* Paragraph 4 – [[1]](https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/lee-jae-myung-japan-south-korea-seoul-tokyo-b2774558.html), [[2]](https://apnews.com/article/697c0a6b00cdf0a740e5f5dd0c0145ae), [[4]](https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/japans-departing-kishida-sends-signal-successor-with-south-korea-summit-2024-09-05/), [[7]](https://www3.nhk.or.jp/nhkworld/en/news/20241010_18/)
* Paragraph 5 – [[4]](https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/japans-departing-kishida-sends-signal-successor-with-south-korea-summit-2024-09-05/), [[6]](https://english.kyodonews.net/news/2024/05/fe2374cafc08-kishida-yoon-to-agree-to-cooperate-on-n-korea-security-threats.html), [[7]](https://www3.nhk.or.jp/nhkworld/en/news/20241010_18/)
* Paragraph 6 – [[1]](https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/lee-jae-myung-japan-south-korea-seoul-tokyo-b2774558.html), [[2]](https://apnews.com/article/697c0a6b00cdf0a740e5f5dd0c0145ae), [[3]](https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/south-koreas-lee-tells-japan-countries-should-cooperate-amid-trade-challenges-2025-06-17/), [[4]](https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/japans-departing-kishida-sends-signal-successor-with-south-korea-summit-2024-09-05/), [[5]](https://japan.kantei.go.jp/102_ishiba/diplomatic/202410/10rok.html), [[6]](https://english.kyodonews.net/news/2024/05/fe2374cafc08-kishida-yoon-to-agree-to-cooperate-on-n-korea-security-threats.html), [[7]](https://www3.nhk.or.jp/nhkworld/en/news/20241010_18/)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/lee-jae-myung-japan-south-korea-seoul-tokyo-b2774558.html> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://apnews.com/article/697c0a6b00cdf0a740e5f5dd0c0145ae> - Japan and South Korea are commemorating the 60th anniversary of their diplomatic ties amid ongoing historical disputes and political uncertainties. Despite recent efforts to improve relations, issues such as forced labour and wartime sexual abuse continue to strain bilateral relations. South Korea's new liberal president, Lee Jae Myung, is expected to cautiously continue his predecessor's pragmatic diplomacy. Japanese Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba has acknowledged Japan's wartime aggression and seeks forward-looking cooperation. Both nations aim to collaborate on regional security and economic challenges, including North Korea's nuclear threats and U.S. trade policies.
3. <https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/south-koreas-lee-tells-japan-countries-should-cooperate-amid-trade-challenges-2025-06-17/> - South Korean President Lee Jae Myung and Japanese Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba held their first summit during the G7 meeting in Canada, signalling a commitment to strengthen bilateral ties and trilateral cooperation with the United States. Both leaders underlined the strategic importance of their alliance amid regional threats, particularly from North Korea, and growing competition with China. Lee, who described the Japan-Korea relationship as 'inseparable,' called for future-oriented collaboration despite past historical grievances. The summit marks a notable shift for Lee, who had previously opposed rapprochement with Japan but has now adopted a pragmatic diplomatic stance focused on mutual benefit and security cooperation.
4. <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/japans-departing-kishida-sends-signal-successor-with-south-korea-summit-2024-09-05/> - Departing Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida is set to hold a final summit with South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol, signalling continued support for the bilateral relationship and advising his successor to maintain the current diplomatic direction. Relations between Japan and South Korea had deteriorated significantly due to historical disputes but have seen a recent improvement, influenced by U.S. President Joe Biden’s encouragement for stronger trilateral cooperation against regional challenges from North Korea and China. Kishida's visit aims to solidify these ties despite domestic pressures and potential political changes in Japan and the U.S. The summit is expected to result in a memorandum regarding civilian evacuation during emergencies and may feature conciliatory remarks addressing historical grievances. Although Yoon’s diplomatic efforts face criticism in South Korea, Kishida’s actions seek to ensure long-term partnership stability ahead of the Japanese elections for his successor.
5. <https://japan.kantei.go.jp/102_ishiba/diplomatic/202410/10rok.html> - On October 10, 2024, Japanese Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba held a summit meeting with South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol in Vientiane, Laos, during the ASEAN-related Summit Meetings. Both leaders discussed strengthening cooperation in various areas, including people-to-people exchanges, economic coordination, and security collaboration, in anticipation of the 60th anniversary of the normalization of Japan-ROK relations. They agreed to accelerate talks to elevate bilateral relations and affirmed their roles as partners in the international community, aiming to further develop Japan-ROK relations towards the upcoming anniversary.
6. <https://english.kyodonews.net/news/2024/05/fe2374cafc08-kishida-yoon-to-agree-to-cooperate-on-n-korea-security-threats.html> - Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida pledged to further develop relations with South Korea ahead of the 60th anniversary of the normalization of diplomatic ties. In their 10th in-person summit, Kishida and President Yoon Suk Yeol agreed to work together in addressing North Korea's nuclear and missile threats, amid an increasingly unstable regional security environment. Kishida emphasized deepening cooperation to tackle global issues and realize a free and open Indo-Pacific, while Yoon expressed intentions to continue high-level exchanges in areas such as finance, industry, and advanced technology.
7. <https://www3.nhk.or.jp/nhkworld/en/news/20241010_18/> - Japanese Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba and South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol agreed to further advance bilateral relations by promoting shuttle diplomacy and maintaining close communication. Meeting in Laos on the sidelines of the ASEAN leaders meeting, Ishiba emphasized the importance of close cooperation between Japan and South Korea for regional peace and stability. He expressed a desire to develop bilateral ties that have improved significantly due to efforts by his predecessor, Fumio Kishida, and President Yoon. Both leaders agreed to continue close communication, including through shuttle diplomacy, and to promote mutual understanding and people-to-people exchanges.