



## What the Korean government should do after the March 1 Independence Movement Day presidential speech

**Dr. JIN Chang Soo**

*Director of the Center for Japanese Studies,  
The Sejong Institute  
(jincs@sejong.org)*

President Moon Jae-in proposed a dialogue with Japan in his speech on March 1. President Moon said, "The Korean government is always ready to hold a dialogue with the Japanese government," adding that the only obstacle that Korea and Japan must overcome in order to cooperate and develop history after the Japanese invasion is the mix of the problems of the past and the future. President Moon said that the Korean government will always seek a wise solution from a victim-centered standpoint and make efforts for cooperation and future development between Korea and Japan.

It is questionable whether Japan will accept President Moon's proposal for dialogue. This is because even though President Moon proposed a dialogue at a press conference at the beginning of the year in January this year, Japan is demanding concrete actions rather than words. Regarding President Moon's March 1 Independence Movement Day speech, Kato reiterated his previous stance, saying, "in order to restore healthy relations between Korea and Japan, we are still strongly demanding appropriate measures from Korea based on Japan's consistent stance." Even if South Korea suggests a dialogue, Japan no longer believes it. The reason for this situation was that the Korean and Japanese governments were buried in the history frame and could not have a proper conversation.

Now is the time to make a sharp decision. As issues regarding the Korea-Japan relationship have become domestic politics recently, they tended to be buried in domestic political interests rather than strategic diplomacy. In a situation where diplomatic relations with Japan are shifting toward public opinion, the space for diplomatic authorities is becoming smaller. President Moon is showing

his will to improve the relationship between Korea and Japan, but he does not show such enthusiasm in the negotiations between the Korean and Japanese authorities. The reason is that even if President Moon proposes a dialogue with Japan, the atmosphere will change depending on the domestic politics of Korea. Foreign officials are also suspicious about having a policy will to support the idea, although they are aware of the need for a dialogue. In order to dispel such doubts, President Moon needs to take concrete and active actions for a dialogue. First of all, the presidential office and the Prime Minister's Office should directly participate in the breakthrough of the Korea-Japan relationship rather than the director-level dialogue channel. The candid dialogue between the Blue House and the Prime Minister's Office should start with the Korea-Japan summit. In order to change the current atmosphere between Korea and Japan, the meeting between the leaders of Korea and Japan should show their determination not to worsen the relationship between Korea and Japan any longer. A 'gentleman's agreement' should be made to prevent worsening relations between Korea and Japan.

And the Moon Jae In administration must demonstrate its willingness to practice a two-track approach (separation of past history and economic and security cooperation). In his March 1 Independence Movement Day speech, President Moon insisted on cooperation between Korea and Japan in dealing with COVID-19, but it has not been fully implemented in reality. As an example, it is questionable whether the Japanese and Korean governments will actively promote the business fast track, which has been under way since last year, despite its many advantages. In the past, the Moon administration has put more emphasis on victimism than on the two-track approach. The Japanese government has not shown any flexibility in its stance on past historical issues, only repeating its claim that it violated international law. In order to avoid current conflicts between Korea and Japan, it is necessary to promote cooperation between Korea and Japan separately from past history. In order for the Korean government to achieve the two-track approach, it should start by preparing institutional devices that can persuade the victims. Unfortunately, it is hard to believe that the Moon administration was active in a dialogue with the victims. If the Moon administration tried to talk with the victims (sexual slavery and forced labor) with the will to manage past history issues, the South Korean government's policy toward Japan would have expanded its options. If the Moon administration, which advocates victim-centered policies, had created a situation in which the victims understood their position and reached an agreement, the two-track approach would

have been successful. Even now, the Moon administration must actively meet with the victims and seek their understanding of Japan's policies. When domestic conditions for a two-track approach are met, Korea-Japan cooperation can produce tangible results. Also, cooperation between Japan and South Korea is very important in North Korean issues. The Moon administration has a strong tendency to view Japan as an obstructionist in the North Korean issue. Korea and Japan should not give up their strategic stance that they should cooperate even if their methodologies differ.

Cooperation among Korea, the U.S., and Japan is another issue that Korea and Japan should pursue. With the inauguration of the Biden administration, Korea and Japan are now required to cooperate in international solidarity based on the values of liberal democracy. During his time as vice president in December 2013, President Biden emphasized the need to improve Korea-U.S.-Japan cooperation and Korea-Japan relations-against China. President Biden, along with his allies, emphasizes military restraint, international norms through human rights and democracy to counter China's challenges. In this respect, the Biden administration is expected to emphasize cooperation between Korea, the U.S., and Japan more aggressively than before. Under the current circumstances, cooperation between Korea and Japan is essential to expand the role of middle-ranking countries and to avoid the challenges of major power politics. Korea and Japan should come up with concrete cooperation plans to promote mutual interests despite conflicts over past history issues. Historical issues should be discussed from a long-term perspective, but what we need to do now is to restore trust by expanding cooperation between Korea and Japan. It is time for the South Korean government to proactively seek a solution for the national interest.

*※ Translator's note: This is a third party's unofficial translation of the original paper which was written in Korean. All references should be made to the original paper.*

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