

# ISSUE BRIEF

## Executive Summary

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### The Lee–Takaichi Summit in Nara (Jan.2026) What It Achieved and What Comes Next: Consolidating Shuttle Diplomacy on a Stable Track

**Choi Eunmi**

Research Fellow

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The ROK–Japan summit held on January 13–14 in Nara Prefecture, Japan, marked the sixth leaders' meeting since the inauguration of the Lee Jae Myung administration (three under the Ishiba Cabinet and three under the Takaichi Cabinet) and President Lee's second visit to Japan (Tokyo and Nara). Against the backdrop of prolonged Japan–China tensions, President Lee's visits to China (January 4–7) and Japan (January 13–14) drew significant domestic and international attention. In an unusually cordial atmosphere, the two leaders sustained constructive discussions. The summit is significant in that shuttle diplomacy—resumed with President Lee's Tokyo visit last August—has been held repeatedly at short intervals, signaling a transition from the phase of “resumption and restoration” to one of “institutionalization and stability.” The two leaders reaffirmed a shared understanding of regional and global issues and agreed to expand cooperation in the economy and trade as well as in social and cultural exchanges. Notably, they agreed to cooperate on DNA identification of remains presumed to be victims of the Josei coal mine accident, an important step in opening a humanitarian channel for cooperation in the realm of historical issues.

Three key achievements stand out. *First*, shuttle diplomacy has ceased to be an “exceptional event” and is becoming an “anticipated diplomatic dialogue,” indicating entry into a stabilization phase. Moreover, the emerging pattern of holding summits in regional cities, in turn, helps broaden the center of gravity of bilateral cooperation beyond central-government diplomacy between Seoul and Tokyo.

This can widen the space for participation by local governments, businesses, academia, youth, and other stakeholders, deepen the societal foundations of cooperation, and serve as a buffer that strengthens the sustainability of the relationship. *Second*, the bilateral agenda has expanded beyond a structure overly shaped by contentious historical issues toward more comprehensive cooperation, including economic and social cooperation and responses to transnational crime.

At the same time, challenges remain clear. *First*, subtle differences emerged in the two countries' strategic needs and policy priorities regarding the bilateral relationship. While both share broad agreement on the importance of security cooperation, Japan explicitly referenced "North Korea's denuclearization," whereas South Korea referred to the "denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula," suggesting potentially different emphases in perceptions and approaches toward the North Korean nuclear issue. *Second*, sensitive and unresolved issues—including the Sado Mine memorial service, Hashima (*Gunkanjima*), forced labor, comfort women victims of the Japanese military, and the Korea–Japan Joint Development Zone (JDZ) on the continental shelf—appear not so much to be "managed" as effectively handled through "silence." Given the historical trajectory of ROK–Japan relations, this underscores the need to develop systematic mechanisms for managing such issues. *Third*, discussions on security and economic security cooperation remained relatively general, highlighting the need for concrete follow-up measures.

Accordingly, to further advance shuttle diplomacy now on a stable track, several tasks are required. *First*, summits held in regional cities should go beyond geographical symbolism by planning and implementing city-level "cooperation packages" such as joint projects among industries and firms, universities and research institutes, youth exchanges, and cultural and tourism initiatives and by making outcomes visible as deliverables linked to the host city. *Second*, mechanisms should be designed and institutionalized to absorb shocks, contain spillovers, and maintain minimal functional cooperation even when sensitive issues arise. *Third*, cooperation on DNA identification related to the Josei coal mine should not be overinterpreted as resolving historical issues. Rather, to enable meaningful follow-on progress, procedures should be institutionalized regarding bereaved families' consent, participation, and briefing processes; standards for privacy, data handling, and ethics; and avenues for objections. Trust should then be accumulated through relatively more consensus-prone areas—such as remembrance and memorial projects—so that cooperation can gradually expand.

## About the Author

**Dr. CHOI Eunmi** is a research fellow at the Asan Institute for Policy Studies. Dr. CHOI received her M.A. and Ph.D. in Political Science from Korea University. Previously, Dr. Choi was a research professor of the Center for Japanese Studies at the Institute of Foreign Affairs and National Security (IFANS) of Korea National Diplomatic Academy (KNDA), a visiting researcher at University of Michigan (USA), Waseda University (Japan) and the Sejong Institute, and a researcher at Ministry of Foreign Affairs of ROK. Her main area of research interest is Korea-Japan Relations, Japanese Diplomacy, and multilateral cooperation in Northeast Asia. Currently, Dr. Choi is a member of the advisory committee to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of National Defense, and National Security Office.

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