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Executive Summary

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Policy Recommendations for the Lee Jae-myung Administration's Pragmatic Diplomacy With Japan: Toward a "New Normal" in Korea-Japan Relations

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Marking the 60th anniversary of the normalization of diplomatic ties in 2025, Korea–Japan relations have entered an entirely new phase. All eyes are now on whether the positive momentum achieved under the resumption of shuttle diplomacy between the two leaders in 2023, as well as the historic Camp David trilateral summit among the leaders of Korea, the United States, and Japan, will continue, given that all three heads of state who orchestrated these breakthroughs have since been replaced. Against this backdrop, the newly inaugurated Lee Jae-myung administration, which took office on June 4, has emphasized policy consistency and a national interest–oriented pragmatic diplomacy. Nevertheless, concerns persist in Japan. This reflects the extent to which Japan's willingness to improve bilateral relations had been reliant on the Yoon Suk-yeol administration, and it exposes the inherent instability and fragility of Korea–Japan relations, which have largely depended on top-down government initiatives.

However, a new dynamic is emerging in South Korea–Japan relations. South Korea's rapid progress across various sectors—including politics, the economy, society, and culture—has positioned it as an equal to Japan on the global stage. Public sentiment between the two countries is more favorable than ever. Notably, such a trend among the younger generations in both countries is driving a broader shift in attitudes, setting the stage for a new era in bilateral relations. Over the past several decades, Korea's economic growth and rising status in the international community have fundamentally realigned Korea–Japan relations. What

was once an asymmetrical relationship is now evolving into one of symmetry, characterized by equality and mutual warmth—a foundation for entering a new phase of partnership.

Based on these structural and perceptual changes in Korea–Japan relations, it is essential to revisit the significance of bilateral cooperation and manage the relationship strategically to ensure its stable development. To this end, several priorities must be addressed.

First, the new administration must clearly define the concrete standards, diplomatic goals, and directions of its “pragmatic diplomacy grounded in national interests.” This clarity is indispensable not only for Japan but also for earning the trust and cooperation of the broader international community. The turning point in Korea–Japan relations in 2023 was initiated by the South Korean government’s solution to the Supreme Court ruling on forced labor. However, what enabled the improvement and continued development of bilateral ties over the subsequent two years was the alignment of Korea’s and Japan’s perspectives on the international community and the directions of their foreign policies. Forums such as the G7, NATO, APEC, as well as ROK–U.S.–Japan and ROK–China–Japan summits, serve as key platforms where such strategic challenges are addressed. Going forward, South Korea must continue to articulate clear foreign policy directions rooted in liberal democracy and a market economy, which are the foundation of the Republic of Korea’s existence.

Second, cooperation programs should be strengthened around common structural challenges facing both countries, such as job creation, the economy, demographics, and climate change. A public–private cooperation ecosystem needs to be established in future growth sectors such as advanced industries, green energy, AI, and digital biotechnology, supported by institutional and financial backing from both governments. This will reinforce the foundations of future industries as well as economic security.

Third, it is vital to expand the scope for cooperation, especially among people in their twenties and thirties, who are leading the improvement of mutual perceptions between the two countries. Enhancing favorability and understanding among younger generations will become a new driving force for change in Korea–Japan relations. In particular, cooperation agendas must be proactively identified in areas of keen interest to young people, such as climate change, environment, human rights, and digital issues, and policies should be designed to increase their acceptance among the public. For instance, in celebration of the 60th anniversary of Korea–Japan diplomatic normalization this year, it would be worthwhile to consider designating a “Korea–Japan Future Generation Action Day for Global Challenges” (tentative title) and establishing a “Korea–Japan New Media Era Information Exchange Agora” (tentative title), thereby creating sustainable online and offline platforms for exchange and cooperation among the younger generations. On a more practical level, institutional measures could be considered at the national level to support a seamless transition for young people in both countries—from tourism to education, from education to employment, and from employment to permanent settlement—given the high rates of exchange among Korean and Japanese youth. (As of 2022, the employment rate for

international students who studied in Japan was 44.3%, compared to just 8% for those who studied in Korea.)

Fourth, historical issues must be handled with a strategic approach focused on conflict management and mitigation, rather than through emotional reactions. The new administration must maintain consistent principles and clear positions on recurring matters such as history textbooks, Yasukuni Shrine visits, the comfort women issue, and forced labor. In the near term, two issues may also draw attention: the “Korea-Japan Joint Development Zone (JDZ) agreement”¹ which can be raised at any time over the next three years starting June 22 of this year, and the “Sado Mine Memorial Ceremony” scheduled for the second half of this year. Simultaneously, the administration should engage in active diplomacy to elicit a constructive response from the Japanese government.

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(‘이재명 정부의 실용적 대일외교를 위한 제언: 한일관계의 ‘뉴노멀(New Normal)’을 향해’)

¹ In full: Agreement between the Republic of Korea and Japan concerning the Joint Development of the Southern Part of the Continental Shelf adjacent to the Two Countries, with Agreed Minutes and Exchanges of Notes