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Executive Summary

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The Ishiba-Trump Summit: Japan's U.S. Diplomacy and Implications for South Korea

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The U.S.-Japan summit on February 7 marked the first meeting since the inauguration of the Ishiba Cabinet and the second Trump administration. Contrary to concerns about potential unpredictability, the summit proceeded without any unexpected remarks or incidents and received generally positive evaluations. The United States reaffirmed its deterrence commitment to Japan, and both countries affirmed their resolute commitment to the complete denuclearization of North Korea and ROK-U.S.-Japan trilateral cooperation. Japan pledged to boost its investment in the United States and increase its defense budget. The contentious issue regarding Nippon Steel's acquisition of U.S. Steel was also defused for the time being by framing the sale from an acquisition to an investment strategy.

While it remains uncertain how faithfully the pledges made at the Ishiba-Trump summit will be upheld, several key factors contributed to the summit's smooth conclusion without major issues: (1) there is a bipartisan consensus on Japan's cooperation with the United States and the overall direction of U.S.-Japan relations despite domestic instability stemming from Japan's minority government led by the Liberal Democratic Party, which it has fewer seats than all the other parties combined in Japan's parliament; (2) both countries share common strategic objectives of balancing against China, which transcend the personal rapport or individual characteristics of the leaders; and (3) Japan's longstanding diplomatic experience and established networks with the United States played a crucial role. Although former Prime Minister Abe is no longer on the scene, many officials and key figures who built close ties and played significant roles during the first Trump administration continue to serve,

representing a lasting legacy of Abe's diplomacy.

The Ishiba-Trump summit offers three following implications for South Korea. *First*, South Korea should cooperate with Japan on top of its communication channels with the United States to enhance the ROK-U.S.-Japan trilateral cooperation and formulate its U.S. policy strategy for the Trump 2.0 era.

Second, South Korea should prepare for President Trump's possible visit to Japan and a broader tour of Asia within the year. In particular, South Korea should actively highlight its potential role in areas of high U.S. interests, such as shipbuilding, energy, and gas, and negotiate to achieve mutually beneficial outcomes for both Seoul and Washington. Moreover, in anticipation of President Trump's Asia tour and a potential visit to South Korea, efforts should be made to arrange visits to relevant industrial sites and institutions in order to deliver tangible results.

Potential windows for such a visit include: ① *April*, as President Trump had previously aimed to hold a U.S.-China summit within 100 days after taking office; ② *June*, known for the so-called "birthday summit" between the United States and China to mark their shared birthdays; ③ *July*, during the Osaka World Expo (April 13-October 13), particularly around the "U.S. Day" on July 19; and ④ *late October to early November*, when the APEC Summit is scheduled to be held in Gyeongju, South Korea. While the APEC Summit in October-November is the timeliest period for South Korea, it may not be the case for Japan which is likely to aim to invite President Trump in July or earlier to achieve tangible diplomatic results due to the upcoming July Upper House election. If President Trump visits Japan first, South Korea should proactively seek opportunities for a ROK-U.S. or trilateral ROK-U.S.-Japan summit through prior coordination with the host country Japan. In this process, South Korea should not overlook the importance of an emotional approach that presents a compelling vision for the future and demonstrates thoughtful consideration for its counterparts. If the golden samurai helmet that Prime Minister Ishiba gifted to President Trump served as a symbolic representation of Japan's diplomacy, then South Korea could consider its own version of the samurai helmet that showcases its own strengths including in science and technology (such as 5G and AI), human capital and its vision for the future.

Third, South Korea should strengthen public diplomacy that highlights common interests in ways that are tangible to both the United States and Japan. This approach will help to establish stable ROK-U.S. and ROK-U.S.-Japan relations amid ongoing domestic and international political shifts. In 2023, the two countries declared their relationship a "Global Comprehensive Strategic Alliance" in the April 26 Joint Statement, commemorating the 70th anniversary of the alliance. They also pledged to expand cooperation across the Indo-Pacific region and deepen bilateral engagement. Building on these commitments, South Korea should more clearly articulate its role and position within the ROK-U.S. alliance and

ROK-U.S.-Japan trilateral cooperation. It must also consistently communicate this message through sustained and strategic public diplomacy.

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