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A new path ahead for Korea and Japan: it's still too early to celebrate

There was a summit meeting between President Yoon Suk Yeol and Prime Minister Fumio Kishida on March 16. Twelve years have passed since a Korean president visited Japan for a bilateral meeting, and it came only 10 days after the Korean government came up with a solution to the Supreme Court's 2018 ruling on the wartime forced labor issue. With the Seoul-Tokyo relationship at a turning point, could Korea and Japan move toward a new era of cooperation?

Despite the two leaders' strong will to improve Korea-Japan relations, it's still too early to celebrate. While the international community applauded Korea's announcement of the solution and the Korea-Japan summitry that came into being after a 12-year hiatus, the backlash in Korea has become more intense.

First of all, three surviving forced labor victims out of the 15 victims who are eligible for the solution are expressing their clear opposition, and dissenting opinions remain strong. The partisan conflict is getting worse and blatant accusations are unceasing. That's because it's a decision Korean society feels hard to accept.

Moreover, Japanese companies accused of forced labor — the parties concerned — keep silent, and the Japanese government's response is tepid, too. These are reasons why public opinion in Korea is rarely favorable even if Seoul's resolution was hammered out as a desperate countermeasure at a time when there was no agreement between Korea and Japan and the Korean president made a decision, braving all political risks.

And if the ongoing backlash grows bigger, the decision will follow in the footsteps of the 2015 agreement on "comfort women." Namely, such a situation — the two countries agreed but the agreement was not accepted, and a resolution was suggested but things were not resolved — would continue.

After all, to tackle this problem, Japan's active and sincere response is absolutely necessary, and the problem won't be resolved ultimately without Japan's responsive measures. Rather, no one can rule out the possibility that Seoul-Tokyo relations may deteriorate further from the last four years.

One can expect Kishida's leadership, but it remains to be seen whether Kishida, who only goes over things without deciding, will take the lead. (Kishida's nickname is "Mr. Consideration." He is famous for not crossing the stone bridge even after knocking on it.)

Nor is Kishida likely to change his attitude suddenly, given the dissenting voices of hardline conservatives in Japan, his weak political ground as the fourth-largest faction of the Liberal Democratic Party and the ambiance of Japanese society indifferent to politics and history.

However, it won't be consistent with the diplomatic direction of Japan which wants to stand tall as a leader of the international community and guardian of the international order.

Above all, it's difficult for anyone to accept that Japan, which is pursuing liberal democracy, rule of law and universal human rights, doesn't even express sympathy and words of consolation to victims suffering from its unfortunate past with Korea, a neighboring country and friendly partner, and show an attitude of consideration and respect.

If a country cannot comfort and care for the pain and wounds of its cooperative partner while talking about the future and cooperation, could it be called a true partner?

To improve the Korea-Japan relationship which has worsened for a prolonged period, the Korean government made a bold decision despite the domestic backlash and political risks. Thus Japan owes a lot to the Korean government.

And to this Korean government that has solidified cooperation among Seoul, Washington and Tokyo and strengthened solidarity with liberal democracies, the United States, its like-minded countries and the international community are heavily indebted.

It's a bold step Korea has taken first in a hard way. Japan should respond sincerely to this, and the roles of the United States, many countries hoping for better Seoul-Tokyo relations and the international community are urgently needed more than ever so that Japan can respond. It's still too early to pop the champagne.

* The view expressed herein was published on April 6 in the Korea Times and does not necessarily reflect the views of the Asan Institute for Policy Studies