

## South Korean attitudes toward Japan have worsened dramatically, annual survey finds

By Yasushi Kudo | President, The Genron NPO

South Korean impressions of Japan, and their recognition of bilateral relations between Seoul and Tokyo have comprehensively and rapidly deteriorated during the past year, according to the results of the latest joint opinion survey conducted by The Genron NPO and South Korea's East Asia Institute (EAI) think tank.

While perceptions of South Korea by Japanese respondents remain severe, no substantial change has been observed, and even more, the deterioration of South Korean impressions of Japan is singularly noticeable. The worsening of both nationals' impressions of each other is having serious repercussions on actual exchanges between the two countries and the understanding of Japan by South Koreans.

The opinion poll in Japan was conducted between September 12 and October 4 nationwide using the in-home self-administered questionnaire method, resulting in a collection of 1,000 valid responses. In South Korea, the face-to-face interview method was used to collect 1,008 valid responses between September 11 and September 25.

In what follows, based on the poll's findings, I hope to shed light on what lies behind the rapid worsening of South Korean impressions of Japan and the likelihood of improving the deplorable situation.

### **Complete and rapid deterioration of South Korean perceptions of Japan**

In retrospect, South Korean impressions of Japan have improved for the fourth consecutive year since 2015 while Japanese impressions of South Korea have continued to be unfavorable with little sign of improvement. However, this make-up of public opinion in Japan and South Korea has totally collapsed during the past year. To my astonishment, as many as 71.6 percent of South Korean respondents said they had either a "bad" or "relatively bad" impression of Japan, up by a large 21.5 percentage points from the previous survey. Eventually, the percentage of those who had a "good" or "relatively good" impression of Japan dipped from 31.7 percent to a meager 12.3 percent in the same comparison, down by a large 19.4 percentage points.

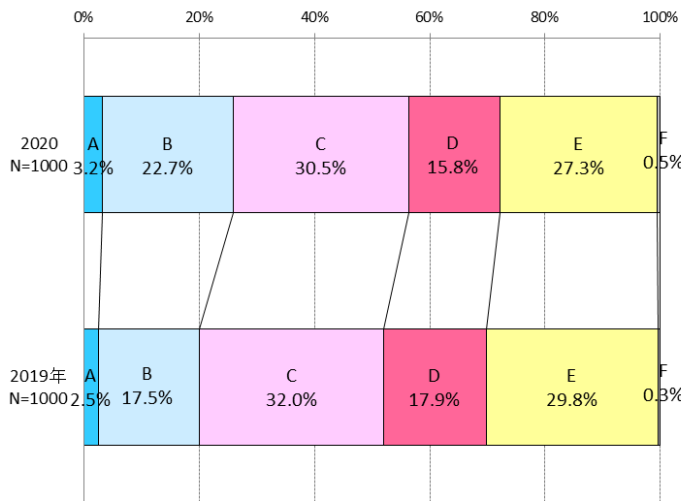
Furthermore, nearly 90 percent (88.4 percent) of South Korean respondents perceived the current state of Japan-South Korean relations as being either "relatively bad" or "extremely bad," as compared to 66.1 percent in the previous poll.

This figure was the worst in the past eight years since The Genron NPO commenced the annual joint opinion poll with the South Korean think tank, meaning almost all South Korean nationals view the current state of bilateral relations as being bad. In particular, the percentage of those who said the bilateral relationship was "extremely bad" almost tripled from 16.8 percent last year to 47.1 percent this year.

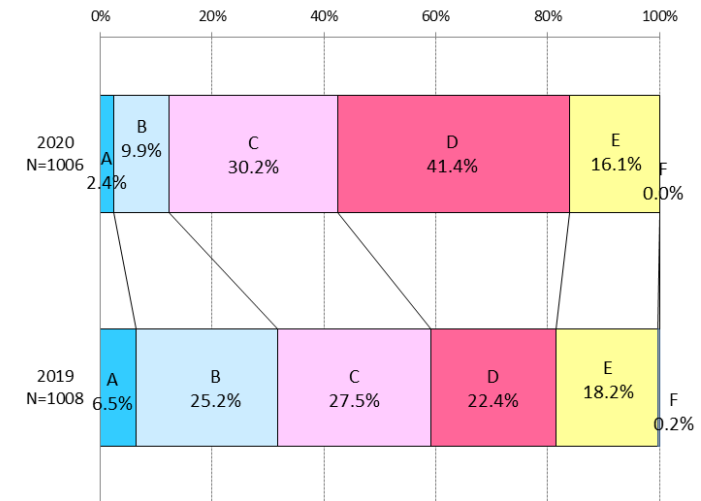
Meanwhile, 54.7 percent of Japanese respondents consider the present state of Japan-South Korea relations either “relatively bad” or “extremely bad” – an improvement from 63.5 percent last year, resulting in a marked change for the worse among South Koreans.

**Your impression of the other country**

**Japanese Public Opinion**



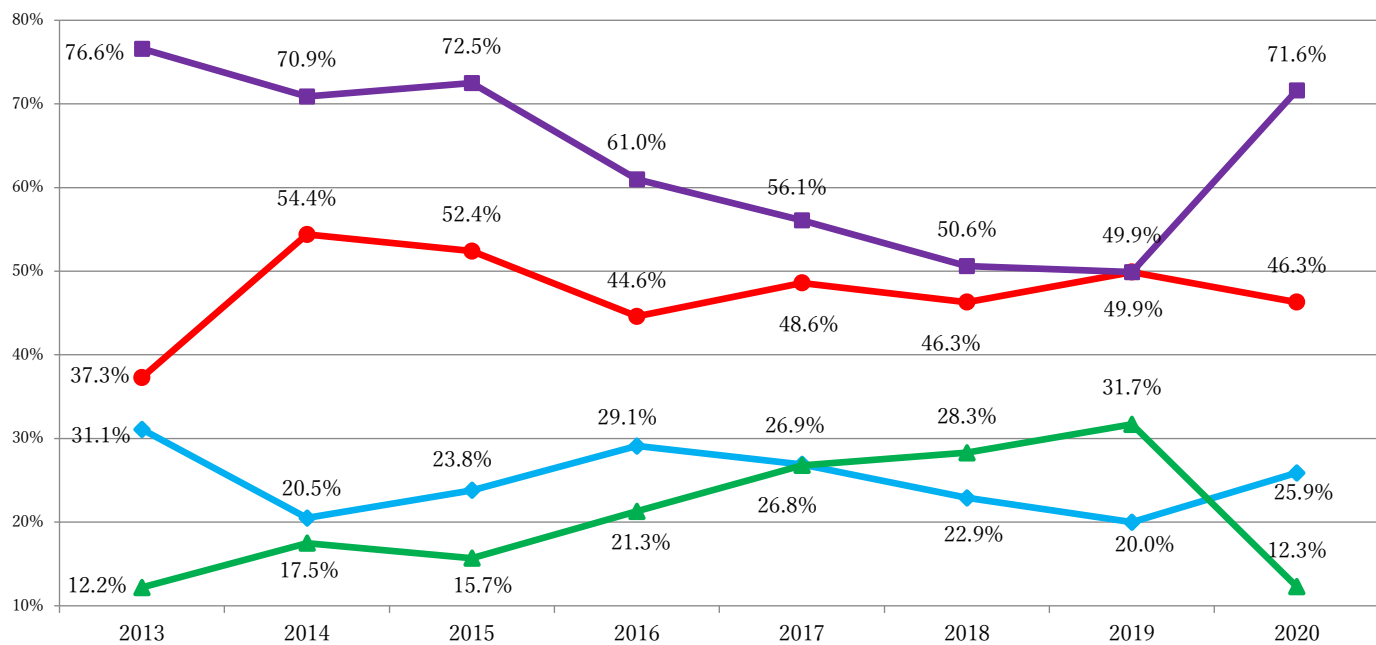
**South Korean Public Opinion**



	A	B	C	D	E	F
	Good Impression	Relatively good impression	Relatively bad impression	Bad Impression	Neither	No response
20	3.2%	22.7%	30.5%	15.8%	27.3%	0.5%
19	2.5%	17.5%	32.0%	17.9%	29.8%	0.3%

	A	B	C	D	E	F
	Good Impression	Relatively good impression	Relatively bad impression	Bad Impression	Neither	No response
20	2.4%	9.9%	30.2%	41.4%	16.1%	0.0%
19	6.5%	25.2%	27.5%	22.4%	18.2%	0.2%

**Your impression of the other country (2013-2020)**



◆ Japanese Survey : Good/ somewhat good impression

◆ Japanese Survey : Bad/ somewhat bad impression

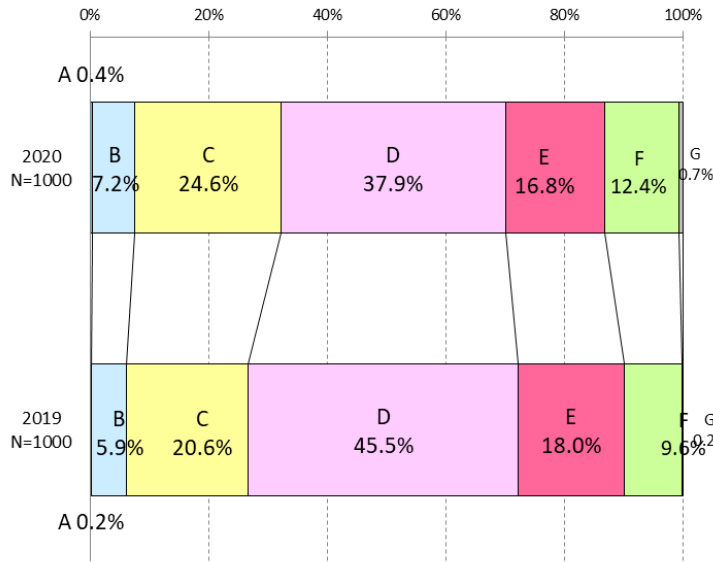
◆ Korean Survey : Good/ somewhat good impression

◆ Korean Survey : Bad/ somewhat bad impression

**Japan-Korea Relations**

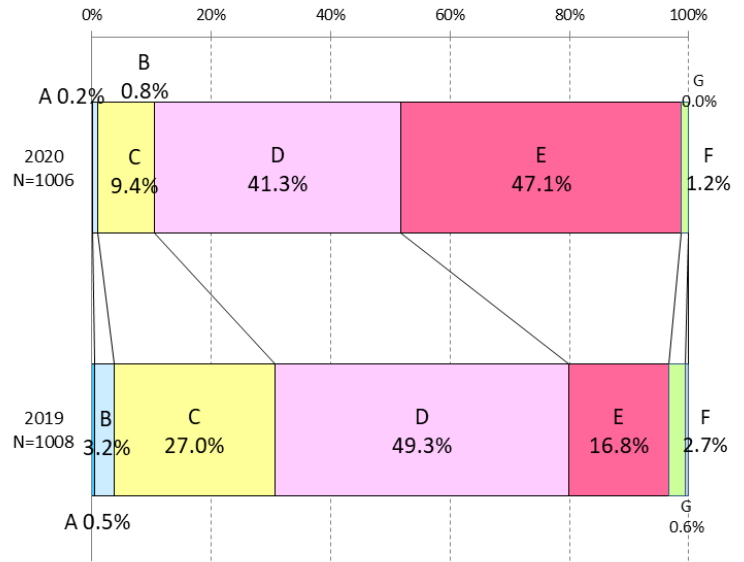
*What do you think of current Japan-South Korea relations?*

**Japanese Public Opinion**



	A	B	C	D	E	F	G
	Extremely good	Relatively good	Neither good nor bad	Relatively bad	Extremely bad	Not sure	No response
20	0.4%	7.2%	24.6%	37.9%	16.8%	12.4%	0.7%
19	0.2%	5.9%	20.6%	45.5%	18.0%	9.6%	0.2%

**South Korean Public Opinion**



	A	B	C	D	E	F	G
	Extremely good	Relatively good	Neither good nor bad	Relatively bad	Extremely bad	Not sure	No response
20	0.2%	0.8%	9.4%	41.3%	47.1%	1.2%	0.0%
19	0.5%	3.2%	27.0%	49.3%	16.8%	2.7%	0.6%

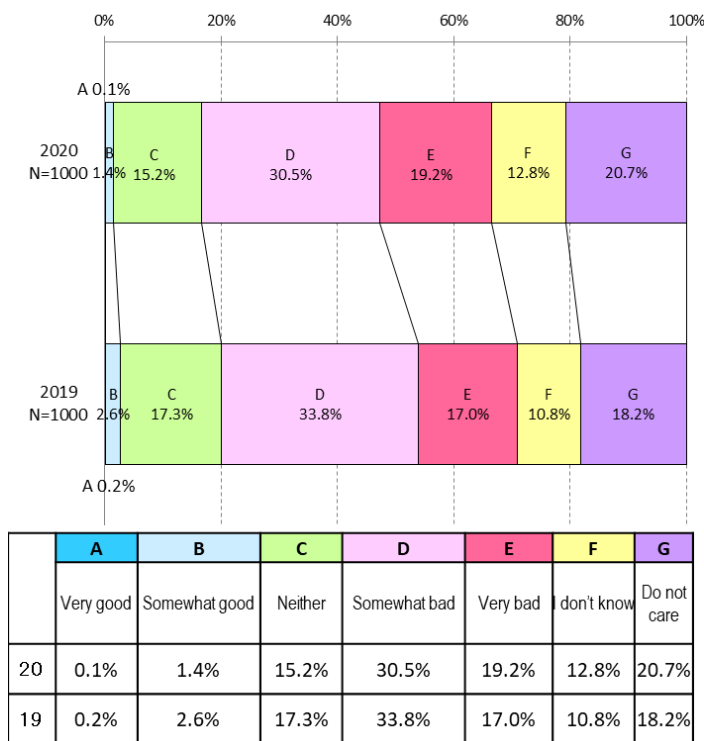
In this context, it should be mentioned that the deterioration of the impression of the other country’s political leader was conspicuous in South Korea. The percentage of South Korean respondents who maintained either a “somewhat” or “very bad” impression of then Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe amounted to 90 percent, up from the previous year’s 79.3 percent. Only 1.1 percent of South Korean respondents had a good impression of Abe.

Contrary to the South Korean change, the percentage of Japanese respondents who had a “somewhat” or “very” bad impression of South Korean President Moon Jae-in remained almost unchanged, 49.7 percent for last year and 50.8 percent for this year. However, only 1.5 percent of Japanese respondents said they had a “good” impression of Moon while 20.7 percent replied they had no interest in the current administration of South Korea. In the previous survey, 18.2 percent of Japanese respondents said they had no interest in the South Korean administration. This could be interpreted as evidence of the presence in Japan of a certain proportion of Japanese who ignore President Moon’s administration.

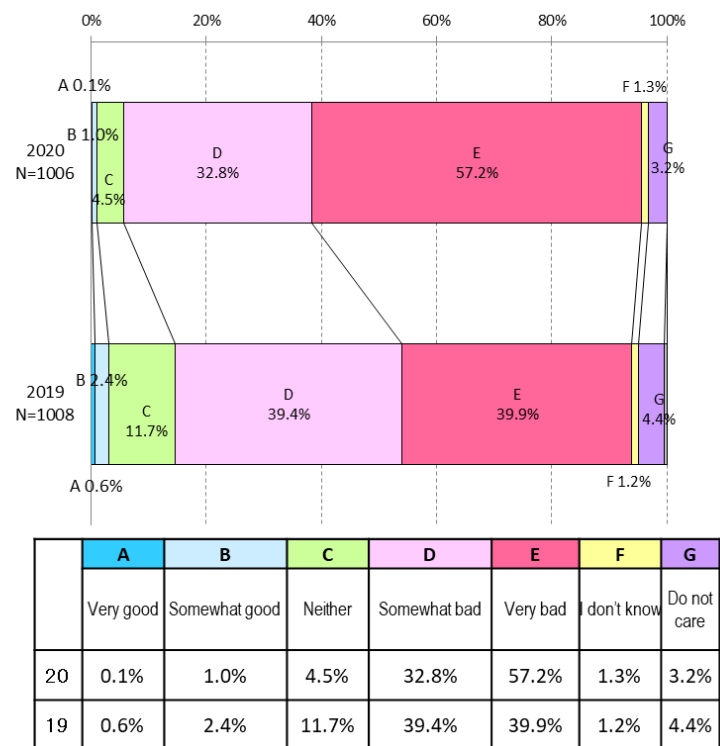
**Your impression of the other country's political leader**

*-What is your impression of the other country's leader? (To Japanese, President Moon Jae-in / To South Korean, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe)*

**Japanese Public Opinion**



**South Korean Public Opinion**



It should be noted that such an astonishingly serious deterioration of South Korean nationals' impressions of Japan has happened during the past 12 months. For instance, 75.1 percent of South Korean respondents said their impression of Japan worsened during the past one year, up 41.3 percentage points from the previous survey's 33.8 percent. Similarly, as many as 86.8 percent of the respondents said their perception of bilateral relations with Japan worsened over the past year, up 35.4 percentage points from the previous year's 51.4 percent.

Moreover, 90.3 percent of South Korean respondents said their impression of then Prime Minister Abe worsened over the past year, up 22.4 percentage points from 67.9 percent in 2019. Contrary to such a marked change for the worse in South Korea, the percentage of Japanese respondents who said their impression of Japan-South Korea bilateral relations or of the South Korean president deteriorated during the past year, either stayed unchanged or even decreased.

**Grave implications for personnel exchanges and understanding of Japan**

The marked deterioration of South Korean perceptions of Japan is generating apprehension on two fronts. One is its negative effect on personnel exchanges between nationals of both countries while bolstering a biased perception of Japan among South Koreans. The number of South Korean visitors to Japan continued to increase, reaching a peak in 2018, but diminished by 2 million to 5.58 million in 2019. Then came the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

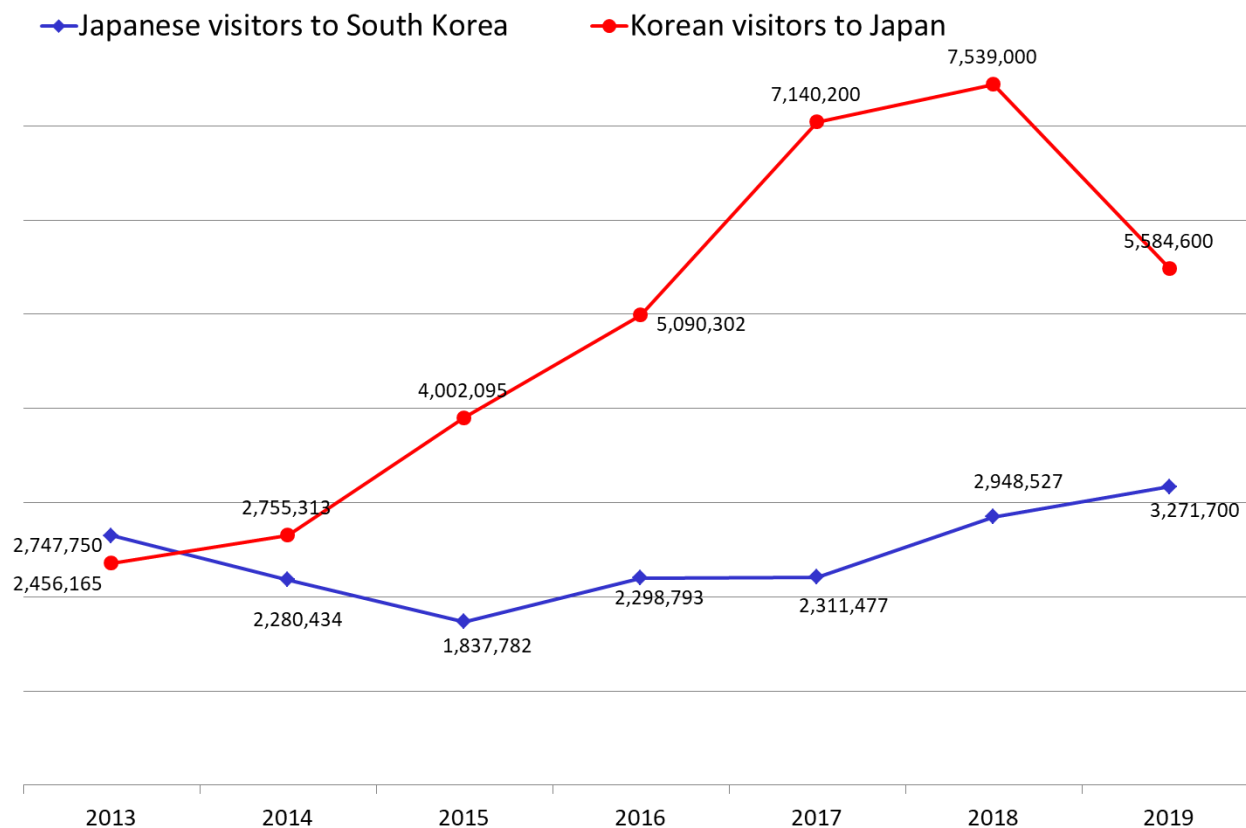
Behind the abrupt drop in the number of South Korean visitors to Japan, however, lies the change in the

overall attitude of South Koreans toward Japan.

The latest survey shows that the percentage of South Korean respondents who said they did not want to go to Japan surged by 16 percentage points from the previous year to 38.8 percent. Suppose the personnel exchanges with Japan, currently suspended due to COVID-19, were to be resumed, it is highly unlikely that the number of tourists from South Korea will recover to the previous level.

### The number of Japanese visitors to South Korea / Korean visitors to Japan

(Source: Japanese National Tourism Organization and Korean Tourism Organization)



Furthermore, the latest poll shows a marked change in the basic understanding of Japan by South Koreans, which has become obvious during the past year.

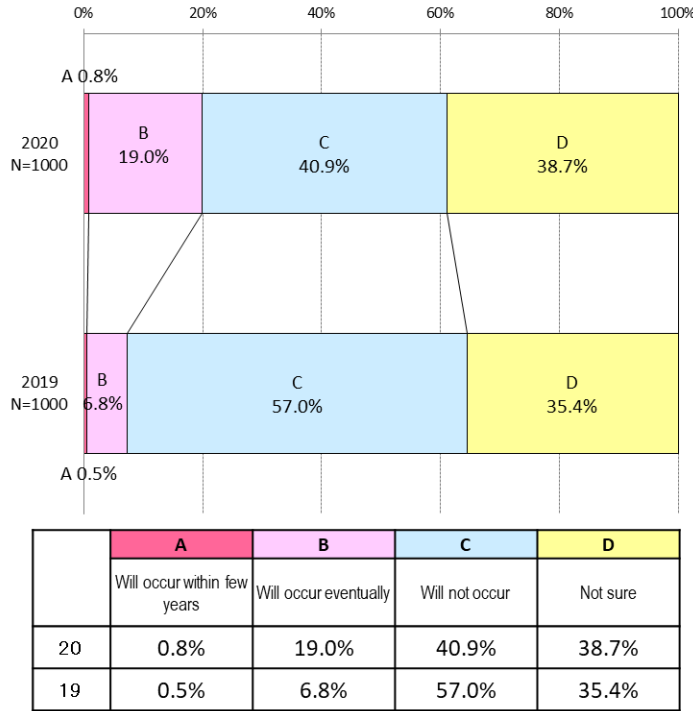
For instance, 59.9 percent of South Korean respondents replied they viewed Japan as a “militaristic” country, up more than 10 percentage points from 49.1 percent in the previous survey. Some 44.1 percent said they felt a military threat from Japan, up from 38.3 percent in 2019 with an increasing number of South Koreans seeing a tilt to the right in Japanese politics. In addition, 49.8 percent of South Korean respondents feared a military conflict might erupt in the future between Japan and South Korea over the disputed Takeshima islands.

In this connection, it should be noted that from the beginning, only a small minority of both nationals viewed the other country as a “friendly country.” But the latest poll shows a further setback in the attitudes of South Koreans toward Japan. Last year, 12.7 percent of South Korean respondents said they viewed Japan as a “friendly nation,” but the percentage fell to a miniscule 3.2 percent this year. Instead, those who said they “used to be a friendly nation, but do not think so now” accounted for 24.4 percent of respondents, showing a twofold increase from the previous year’s 12.7 percent.

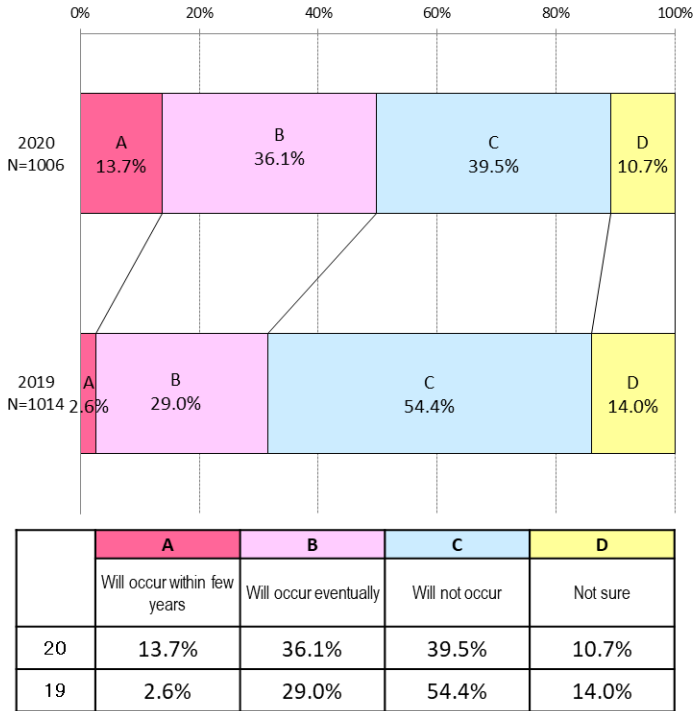
On the other hand, the percentage of Japanese respondents who said they viewed South Korea as a “friendly nation” stayed at the same 8 percent in 2019 and 2020 with little sign of an upturn.

### The possibility of military conflict between Japan and South Korea

#### Japanese Public Opinion



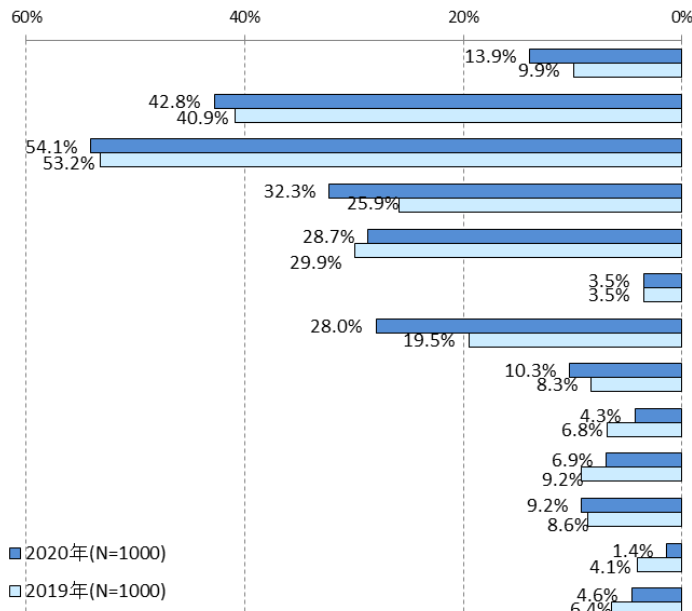
#### South Korean Public Opinion



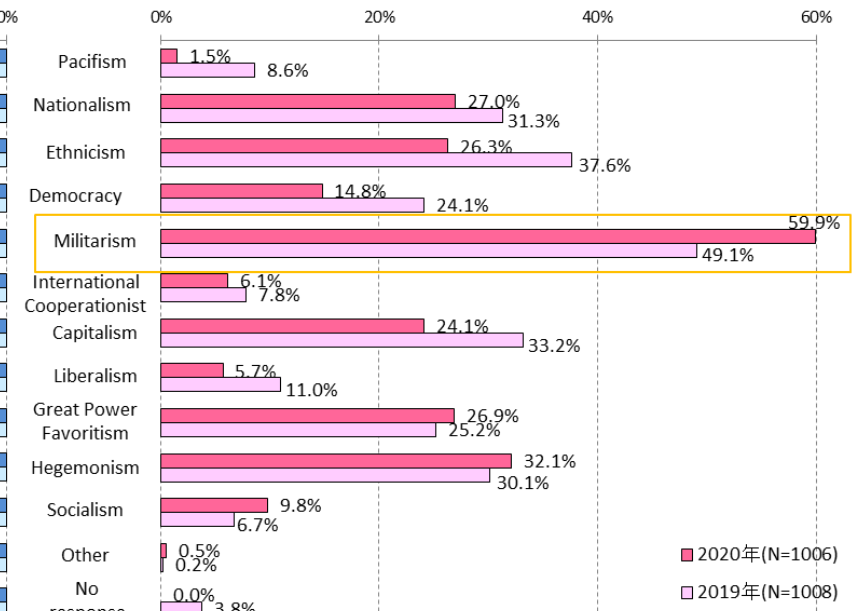
### Understanding of the social / political systems

-What do you think of the social, political system of the other country?

#### Japanese Public Opinion

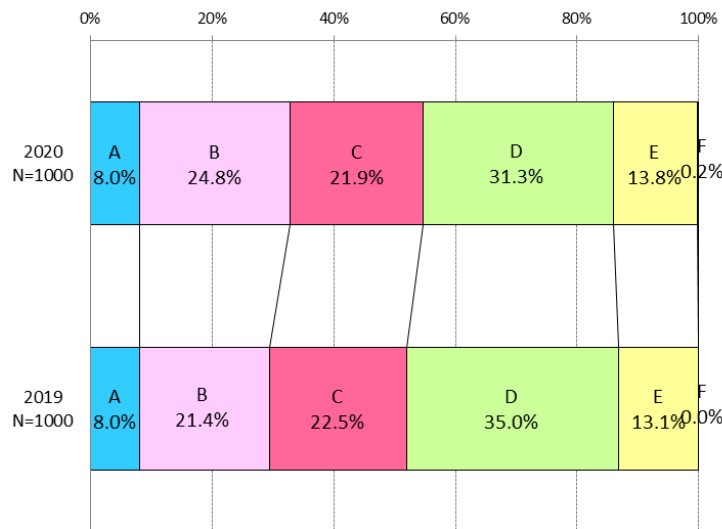


#### South Korean Public Opinion



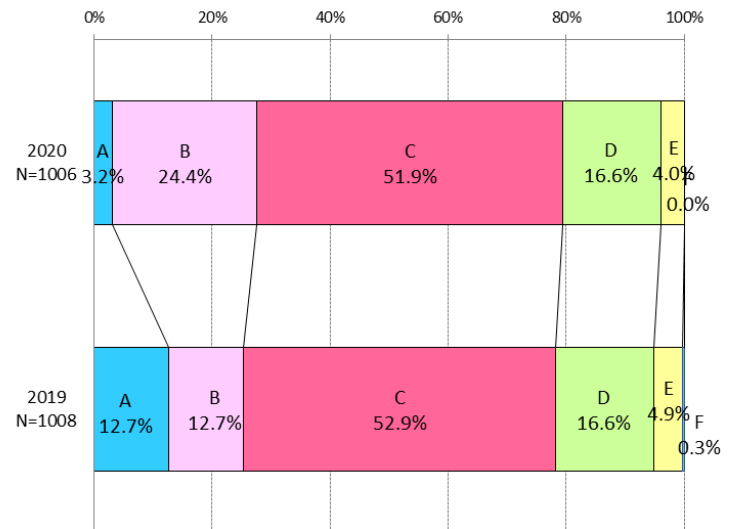
### Is Japan / South Korea a friendly nation?

#### Japanese Public Opinion



	A	B	C	D	E	F
	Still a friendly nation	Used to be a friendly nation, but do not think so now	Never considered as a friendly nation	Neither	Do not know	No response
20	8.0%	24.8%	21.9%	31.3%	13.8%	0.2%
19	8.0%	21.4%	22.5%	35.0%	13.1%	0.0%

#### South Korean Public Opinion



	A	B	C	D	E	F
	Still a friendly nation	Used to be a friendly nation, but do not think so now	Never considered as a friendly nation	Neither	Do not know	No response
20	3.2%	24.4%	51.9%	16.6%	4.0%	0.0%
19	12.7%	12.7%	52.9%	16.6%	4.9%	0.3%

### No way out for both governments

Using the findings of the latest poll, I would like to try to identify the reason for the alarmingly rapid worsening of South Korean impressions of Japan.

The latest survey implies that the policy measures toward South Korea taken by the Japanese government of then Prime Minister Abe have drawn a strong response from the South Korean government. Japan's export controls of photoresists and other hi-tech materials mainly used for manufacturing semiconductors and display screens could hurt Korean economy. South Korean media reports exaggerated the confrontation, leading to the development of anti-Japanese sentiments among South Koreans. In retrospect, the general attitude of South Koreans toward Japan has been characterized by two major issues – the difference in perceptions of history and a territorial dispute. The latest survey shows the two issues are the most important challenges both countries must address, as seen by the South Korean respondents' answers to some of the questions posed by the survey. Nonetheless, the relative weight in importance of the two issues diminished conspicuously.

Asked to cite the reasons for their negative impressions of Japan, most South Korean respondents referred to the lack of a correct Japanese reflection on Japan's invasion of the Korean Peninsula and the presence of the territorial dispute. However, the percentage of those who replied so declined by 10 points, respectively, as compared to the previous year's figures. Instead, the percentage of those who cited "Japanese politicians' remarks on South Korea" increased while a strong response was seen to the newly installed question of "Japan's imposition of export curbs on sensitive items."

In 2019, relations between Tokyo and Seoul are said to have slumped to their worst level in years. The administration of South Korean President Moon virtually dishonored the 2015 agreement in which both

governments had agreed to “finally and irreversibly” settle the long-running bilateral feud. The South Korean top court decision in October 2018, which ordered Japanese companies to pay compensation for forced labor during the 1910-1945 period of colonial rule on the Korean Peninsula, has inflicted significant damage on bilateral relations. Japan insisted that the ruling goes against a 1965 bilateral agreement under which financial aid was provided to South Korea with the understanding that the compensation issue was settled “completely and finally.” It amounts to the nullification of the 1965 Japan-South Korean agreement, which Japan cannot accept.

As relations of mutual trust collapsed, Japan tightened controls in July 2019 on shipments to South Korea of three key materials that are crucial for South Korea's chip and display-panel industries. The following month, Japan removed South Korea from a “white list” of countries that enjoy minimum restrictions on buying goods that can be diverted for military use. In September that year, South Korea took the dispute to the World Trade Organization (WTO), claiming the tightened policies were based on political considerations. Alarming, the South Korean government decided to withdraw from the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) – a military intelligence-sharing pact between South Korea and Japan, though Seoul later averted the termination of the agreement conditionally. The soured bilateral relations finally spilled over to security issues, as well as to bilateral trade and economic relations.

More reasons will be given to help us understand why the government-to-government rivalry between the two countries has altered the general perceptions of South Korean nationals to such an extent.

The joint opinion polls, which have been jointly conducted by The Genron NPO and the EAI to date, showed that two approaches have greatly helped to improve the perception of, and attitude toward the other country by nationals of both countries. One is the direct exchanges among the people of Japan and South Korea, and the other is diversification of information sources used to understand the other country. Indeed, the marked improvement of South Korean sentiment toward Japan, which has been seen for four years in a row, was attributed to the dramatic increase in the number of South Korean visitors to Japan, as well as to the intensive use of information apps for mobile phones aimed at collecting information related to Japan.

The tangible effects of the two approaches are confirmed in the results of the latest poll. However, the positive effects were overshadowed by the intensive coverage and reporting of the government-to-government rivalry by media organizations. This trend was identically observed in the answers by South Korean respondents, irrespective of age and type of information sources.

While the two governments are unable to express their desire to address the difficulties facing Japan and South Korea, moves to boycott Japanese goods have been gaining momentum in South Korea. To make matters worse, both countries are too busy coping with the COVID-19 pandemic, which has virtually put a halt to the personnel exchanges between the two countries. The latest joint opinion poll was carried out at such a critical time and as anticipated, the deterioration of South Korean sentiment toward Japan has been brought to the fore.

On the other hand, the latest poll shows Japanese impressions of South Korea have stopped short of worsening conspicuously, although they are certainly cool. My understanding is that many Japanese have become distrustful of the Moon administration due to its failure to honor bilateral agreements, for instance, leading to an attitude of neglect or indifference. Asked how best to cope with the worsening bilateral relations, the largest percentage (31.1 percent) of Japanese respondents said “no action should be taken



to rectify the situation while President Moon is in power.”

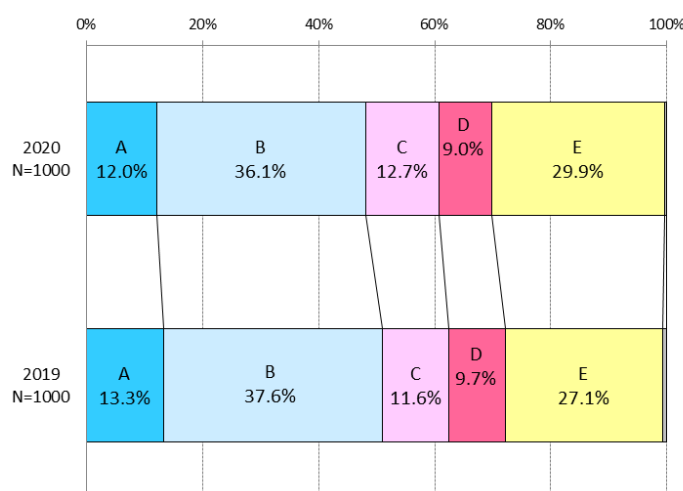
### What should we do to cope with difficulties in Japan-South Korea relations?

The question is whether there is a ray of hope that the two countries will be able to come through this difficult period in their relationship. I would suggest that the latest survey tells us there is a possibility but that it will be hard to overcome the difficulties unless the governments of both countries actually open the door when the other comes knocking.

I have two reasons to be optimistic. One is that nationals of both countries attach great importance to the bilateral relationship, and the other is they maintain their will to break the stalemate even in such a critical situation. The latest poll shows that 82 percent of South Korean respondents replied Japan-South Korea relations are either “important” or “relatively important.” The corresponding figure for Japanese respondents was 48.1 percent. The Japanese figure is low, compared to the South Korean, but it was much higher than the 21.7 percent of those who said bilateral ties are either “unimportant” or “relatively unimportant.”

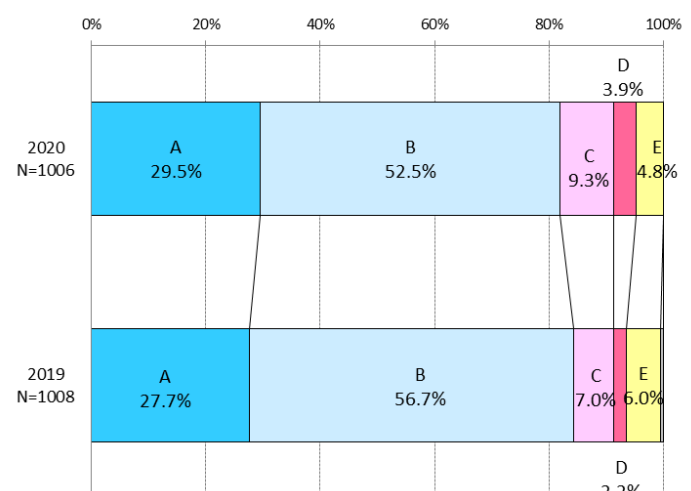
### Importance of relations between Japan and South Korea

#### Japanese Public Opinion



	A	B	C	D	E	F
	Important	Relatively important	Relatively unimportant	Unimportant	Neither/not sure	No response
20	12.0%	36.1%	12.7%	9.0%	29.9%	0.3%
19	13.3%	37.6%	11.6%	9.7%	27.1%	0.7%

#### South Korean Public Opinion



	A	B	C	D	E	F
	Important	Relatively important	Relatively unimportant	Unimportant	Neither/not sure	No response
20	29.5%	52.5%	9.3%	3.9%	4.8%	0.0%
19	27.7%	56.7%	7.0%	2.2%	6.0%	0.4%

The downtrend in the attachment of importance to Japan-South Korea relations by Japanese has been conspicuous since the start of the Moon administration in South Korea. Some 71 percent of Japanese respondents to the latest poll replied they don’t trust the present South Korean government that overturned the agreements with Japan over the history issue, demonstrating the deep-rooted distrust of the Moon administration.

As reasons for the importance of bilateral relations, however, many Japanese respondents clearly pointed

to the common interests as allies of the United States, commonly shared stances amid the intensifying U.S.-China economic and military rivalries, and mutual dependency and common benefits in economic and business relations.

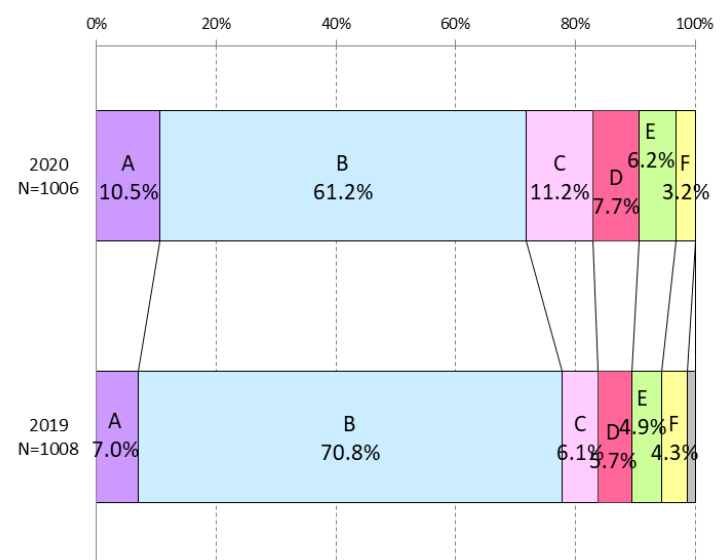
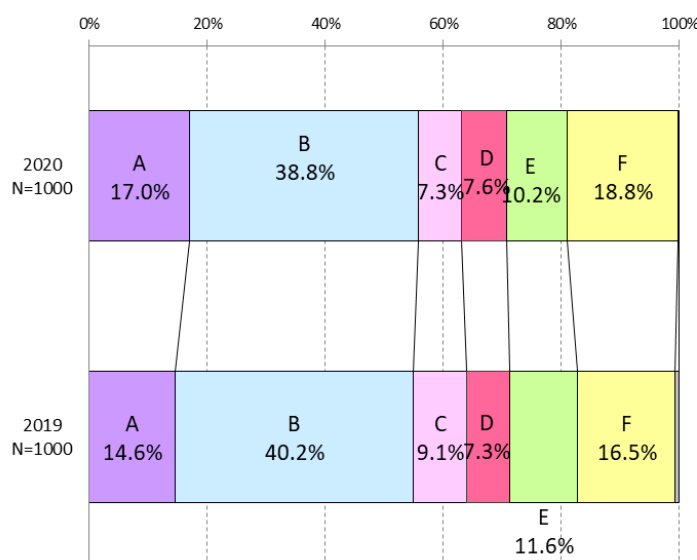
Moreover, the highest percentage (61.2 percent) of South Korean respondents and the highest percentage (38.8 percent) of Japanese respondents replied both countries should “make an effort to improve the relations,” whereas the national sentiment toward Japan is deteriorating dramatically in South Korea.

Due to the distrust of the government of the other country, 17 percent of Japanese and 10.5 percent of South Korean respondents said they “should ignore” (leave the current situation as it is) for the time being. But I believe those with such a cynical view are harboring expectations in their own mind that there will be government-to-government action. Therefore, it may not be too much to say that everything depends on what the governments of both countries do.

**How can Japan/South Korea manage the difficult Japan-Korea relations?**

**Japanese Public Opinion**

**South Korean Public Opinion**



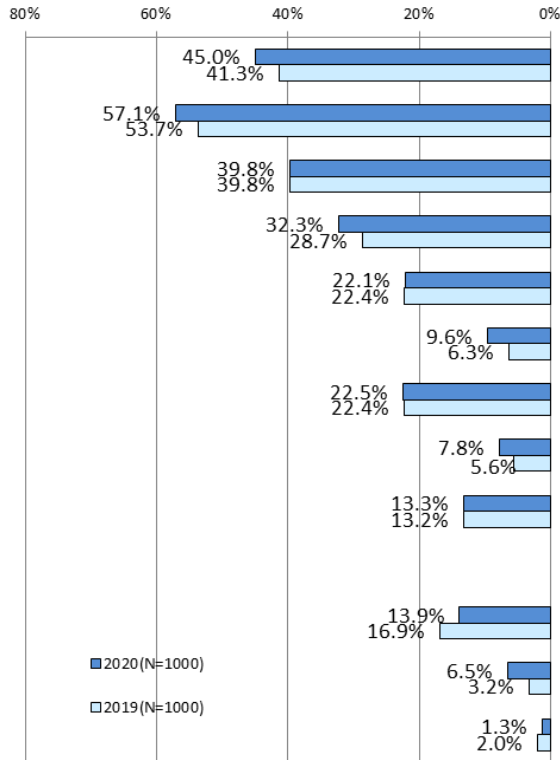
	A	B	C	D	E	F	G		A	B	C	D	E	F	G
	Should ignore	Should make an effort for improving the relations	No need for any action	I am not interested in Japan-Korea relations.	Neither	Do not know	No response		Should ignore	Should make an effort for improving the relations	No need for any action	I am not interested in Japan-Korea relations.	Neither	Do not know	No response
20	17.0%	38.8%	7.3%	7.6%	10.2%	18.8%	0.3%	20	10.5%	61.2%	11.2%	7.7%	6.2%	3.2%	0.0%
19	14.6%	40.2%	9.1%	7.3%	11.6%	16.5%	0.7%	19	7.0%	70.8%	6.1%	5.7%	4.9%	4.3%	1.3%

Concrete actions will be needed, however, to break the diplomatic standoff. Asked what kinds of action they think should be taken, 32.3 percent of South Korean respondents (up a large 13 percentage points from the previous year’s 19.6 percent) cited “government-level communications and relations of mutual trust.” Also, those who called on local media and politicians to refrain from engaging in anti-Japan agitation, increased dramatically from the previous year’s 1.9 percent to 18.9 percent this year. As for Japanese respondents, 32.3 percent called for “government-level communications.” But 57.1 percent said the history issue, including compensation for wartime labor, should be solved.

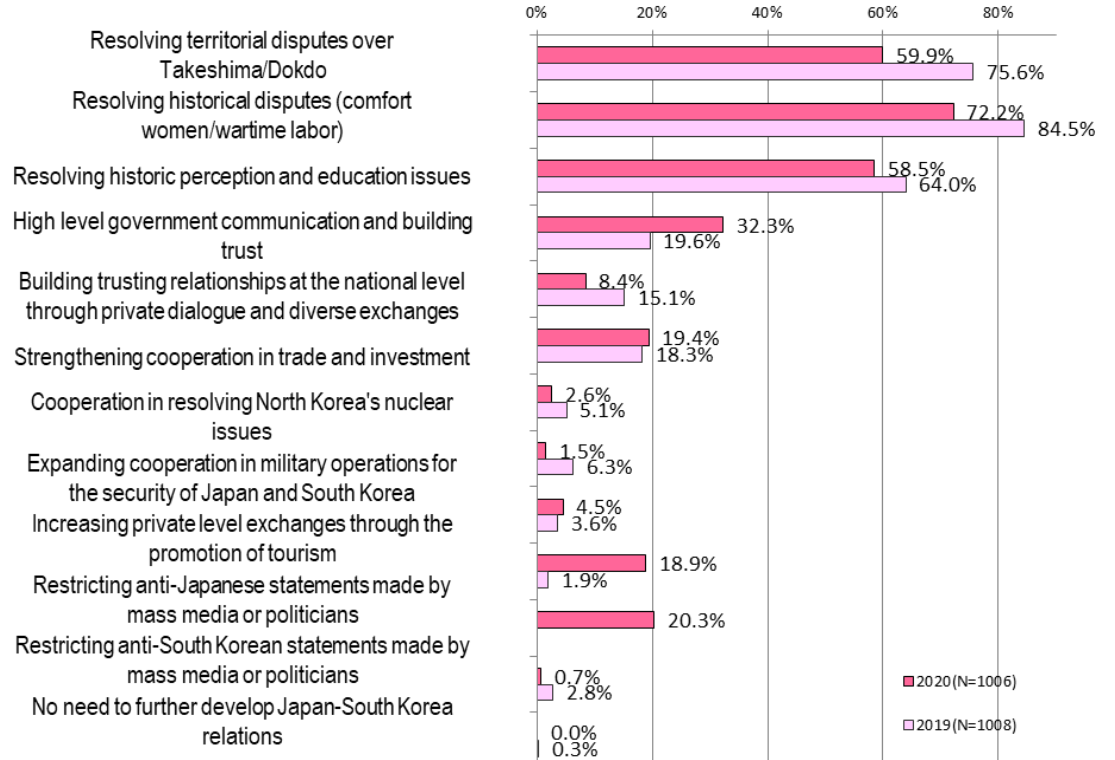
In sum, I believe renewed efforts by both governments must be directed to settling the history issue, which was rekindled by the ruling from South Korea’s top court on compensation for wartime labor.

### How to build a better bilateral relationship

#### Japanese Public Opinion



#### South Korean Public Opinion



## About The 8th Japan-South Korea Joint Public Opinion Poll (2020)

### <Survey Overview>

From September 11 to October 4, 2020, The Genron NPO and East Asia Institute (EAI) conducted joint public opinion polls in Japan and South Korea. The purpose of this annual survey is to grasp the state of mutual understanding and perception of each other between the Japanese and South Korean public and to monitor the changes over time, in order to contribute to reducing various misunderstandings among the two countries, and to promote greater mutual understanding between them. The result of this survey will be presented and utilized in bilateral track II dialogue 'Japan-Korea Future Dialogue' on October 16-17, 2020.

The opinion poll in Japan was conducted between September 12 and October 4, targeting men and women across the country over the age of 18. Questionnaires were delivered to participants and self-administered, resulting in a collection of 1,000 valid samples. 48.6% of the respondents were men and 51.4% of them were women. The academic qualifications of the respondents were as follows: elementary/middle school graduates: 6.6%, high school graduates: 47.5%, junior college/technical college graduates: 21.3%, four-year university graduates: 22.3% and graduate school graduates: 0.9%. Age distribution of the respondents were as follows: under 20: 2.5%, between 20 and 29: 11.8%, between 30 and 39: 14.9%, between 40 and 49, 17.4%, between 50 and 59, 14.6%, and 60 and above: 38.8%.

The opinion poll in South Korea was conducted between September 11 and 25 by face-to-face interview method, targeting men and women aged 18 and over. 50.0% of the respondents were men and 50.0% of them were women. The number of total valid responses was 1,006. The academic qualifications of respondents were as follows: middle school graduates or below: 12.0%, high school graduates: 41.7%, junior college graduates, four-year university graduates and above: 46.2%. Age distribution of the respondents were as follows; between 19 and 29: 17.6%, between 30 and 39: 16.0%, between 40 and 49, 18.9%, between 50 and 59, 19.7%, and 60 and above: 27.5%.



The Genron NPO



East Asia Institute

In Cooperation with:

Japan : Public Opinion Research Institute Corporation

South Korea: Hankook Research Co.Ltd

#### Edited by

Yasushi Kudo      President, The Genron NPO

#### Editorial Assistant:

Yuho Nishimura      Director, The Genron NPO

Mei Takehana      Volunteer (University of Oxford)

Hitomi Hata      Volunteer (Akita International University)

Please send all inquiries concerning this survey to:

#### The Genron NPO, JAPAN

LAUNCH 5F, 3-7-6 Nihonbashiningyocho, Chuo-ku Tokyo Japan 103-0013

[info@genron-npo.net](mailto:info@genron-npo.net)