

Toward the Kim Dae-jung–Obuchi Keizo Joint Declaration 2.0: Strategic Partnership as a Peacebuilding Mechanism in East Asia

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This article re-examines the 1998 Kim-Obuchi Joint Declaration by integrating the strategic partnership framework with peacebuilding theory, moving beyond traditional leadership-centric narratives. It argues that although the Declaration established a rare partnership of choice, its evolution has been sectorally asymmetrical: while sociocultural and economic cooperation flourished, political and security institutionalization remained volatile and contingent on shifting political will. The study finds that the Declaration functioned as a partial conflict-mitigation mechanism, providing a normative buffer even during high-politics tensions. Following the sixtieth anniversary of diplomatic normalization, the article proposes a “Kim-Obuchi Declaration 2.0.” This renewed framework emphasizes anchoring reconciliation in universal principles and institutionalizing autonomous high-level strategic dialogue to ensure a resilient and sustainable Korea-Japan partnership.

Keywords Korea-Japan relations, Kim-Obuchi Declaration, strategic partnership, partnership of choice versus necessity, institutionalized peacebuilding

Introduction

Since its proclamation in October 1998, the “New Partnership between Korea and Japan for the 21st Century”—commonly referred to as the Kim Dae-jung–Obuchi Keizo Joint Declaration (hereafter Kim-Obuchi Declaration)—has remained a seminal reference point for the trajectory of bilateral relations (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 1998a). Accompanied by a detailed action plan specifying multisectoral cooperation (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 1998b), it represented a substantial and innovative effort to elevate bilateral ties beyond the legacies of colonial rule and postwar antagonism. Nevertheless, the Declaration is frequently viewed as having lost efficacy amid recurring historical and political disputes.

Existing scholarship has tended to evaluate the Kim-Obuchi Declaration through a dichotomous lens, portraying it either as a landmark achievement in reconciliation or as a fragile diplomatic arrangement undermined by resurgent nationalism. Cha (2001) contends that Korea-Japan relations sharply diverged from the path of cooperation following the 2001 history textbook controversy, while Park (2008) highlights how differing threat perceptions regarding North Korea entrenched cycles of friction. Okonogi (2018) attributes the erosion of the Declaration's effectiveness to territorial tensions triggered by Shimane Prefecture's designation of "Takeshima Day," and Kim (2011) emphasizes the suspension of summit diplomacy amid disputes over historical memory and political symbolism. Hosaka (2005) further argues that the emergence of conservative leaders like Mori Yoshiro and Koizumi Junichiro marked a significant regression from the Declaration's spirit.

Despite being publicly framed as a partnership, the Kim-Obuchi Declaration has rarely been examined from the perspective of strategic partnership and even less frequently analyzed as a mechanism for peacebuilding. Instead, much of the literature explains fluctuations in Korea-Japan relations through leadership change, domestic politics, or external shocks. As a result, the Declaration is often interpreted either as a symbolic gesture of reconciliation or as an arrangement undermined by renewed confrontation, which obscures its role in shaping institutionalized patterns of interaction and cooperation over time.

Departing from conventional narratives, this article conceptualizes the Kim-Obuchi Declaration as a peace-oriented strategic partnership and examines its utility as a functional mechanism in post-conflict East Asia. Rather than viewing peace as a mere byproduct of improved ties, this study examines how the institutionalization of cooperation serves as a deliberate tool to mitigate conflict recurrence. From this perspective, strategic partnership is not an alternative to peacebuilding but a practical institutional framework for pursuing reconciliation. Building explicitly on the literature on strategic partnership, the article treats it as the principal analytical framework for examining the peace-oriented design and implementation of the Kim-Obuchi Declaration. By linking the literature on strategic partnership with insights from peace studies—particularly the distinction between negative peace and positive peace—this article situates Korea-Japan relations within a broader framework of post-conflict reconciliation.

The Kim-Obuchi Declaration was distinctive in the East Asian context. In contrast to other regional partnerships driven primarily by strategic necessity, the Declaration emerged as a partnership of choice, by foregrounding shared values—such as liberal democracy and market economy principles—and a mutual commitment to future-oriented relations. This "choice," however, was not an abstract preference; it represented a decisive, leadership-driven commitment to institutionalize cooperation in response to mounting domestic and regional pressures. In this sense, choice and necessity functioned as interacting dimensions

of the partnership's formation. The Declaration's value-based language distinguished it from overtly necessity-driven alignments and framed it as an uncommon attempt at institutionalized reconciliation between former adversaries. The Declaration also expanded cooperation across multiple domains, embedding peace-oriented cooperation within a broad institutional framework.

Despite these ambitions, the Korea-Japan partnership has evolved unevenly. While cooperation in economic and sociocultural domains has generally progressed with relative stability, political reconciliation and security coordination have remained vulnerable to domestic political pressures and historical disputes. In particular, the decline of political will to absorb the costs associated with reconciliation has constrained the deepening of the partnership. This article specifically addresses the following questions: What type of partnership did Seoul and Tokyo seek to construct, how was it implemented across sectors, and to what extent did it contribute to peacebuilding and reconciliation in Northeast Asia?

To address these questions, this article analyzes the formation and implementation of the Kim-Obuchi Declaration through the lens of strategic partnership, while reinterpreting its outcomes in terms of peacebuilding. It argues that although the Declaration constituted one of East Asia's most advanced attempts at institutionalized reconciliation, the partnership that followed developed in a procedurally uneven and politically contingent manner across sectors. Cooperation advanced unevenly, deepening in lower-politics domains while remaining volatile in areas requiring sustained political commitment. These limitations stemmed from both structural constraints and declining domestic political will, the latter becoming increasingly decisive over time.

This paper is organized as follows. The second section examines how the political leadership of Kim Dae-jung and Obuchi Keizo served as the central impetus for developing the Declaration as a peace-oriented strategic partnership. The third section evaluates how the partnership was enacted across different realms, analyzing both the successes achieved and the obstacles encountered. The conclusion discusses the durability of the partnership and the prospects for a "Kim-Obuchi Declaration 2.0" as a renewed institutional framework for peacebuilding.

Forming Partnership: Ambitious Political Design

Strategic Partnership as an Analytical Framework

In the post-Cold War order, strategic partnerships have become a prominent form of inter-state alignment. Unlike formal alliances, strategic partnerships are non-binding and emphasize flexible cooperation across multiple domains without targeting specific third parties. Scholars characterize strategic partnerships as flexible instruments designed to manage uncertainty and accommodate diverse

interests when traditional alliance mechanisms prove politically costly or institutionally unstable (Wilkins 2008, 360-61; Nadkarni 2010, 48-9; Tyushka and Czechowska 2019, 20-22). Their rising prominence reflects post-Cold War structural shifts, including economic globalization, regional integration, and the limitations of alliance-based frameworks in addressing non-traditional security challenges. Consequently, states have increasingly utilized these partnerships for hedging and selective cooperation rather than rigid balancing or bandwagoning (Nadkarni 2010, 48-9; Shiraishi 2014, 1; Envall and Hall 2016, 89-91).

Recent scholarship conceptualizes strategic partnership as a dynamic process rather than a static form. This process-oriented view distinguishes between “partnerships of choice” among like-minded states and “partnerships of necessity,” in which converging priorities must be actively negotiated (Grevi 2012, 9). Furthermore, these alignments follow a lifecycle—formation, implementation, and potential termination—shaped by shared threats or opportunities (Ostapiak 2019, 63). While deep value convergence can lead to an upgrade to comprehensive strategic partnerships, shifts in external environments or the erosion of political will often result in stagnation or decline (Wilkins 2019, 129-35).

Wilkins (2019, 129-31) identifies three main considerations guiding political leaders in the formation of strategic partnerships. First, partnerships function as tools for managing unpredictable or unstable environments. Such uncertainty extends beyond bilateral disputes to encompass broader regional and global challenges, including security instability and economic volatility. Second, decisions regarding partnership formation are shaped by assessments of mutual interests, the alignment of core values, and the perceived strengths of prospective partners. Third, political leaders formalize their arrangements through official agreements that articulate the partnership’s ideology, purpose, and guiding tenets. Although these ideational foundations may endure, they remain open to reinterpretation as circumstances evolve.

Building on this theoretical foundation, this study employs four criteria to evaluate the Kim-Obuchi Declaration’s formation and implementation. First, it examines the institutional framework established through official declarations and consultation mechanisms (Cihelkova et al. 2020, 1728-9). Second, it assesses the breadth and depth of sectoral cooperation to determine the partnership’s substance and sustainability (Kumar et al. 2011, 1). Third, it analyzes the convergence of shared values and norms (Wilkins 2019, 126; Cihelkova et al. 2020, 1729-30). Finally, it evaluates the partnership’s capacity to facilitate cooperation beyond bilateral ties, particularly in regional and global governance (Renard 2012, 303-4; Cirlig 2012, 5; Cihelkova et al. 2020, 1730). Together, these criteria provide a multidimensional lens for analyzing the Korea-Japan strategic partnership.

In applying these criteria, however, the formation of a strategic partnership should not be understood through a rigid dichotomy between partnerships of choice and partnerships of necessity. In practice, political leaders rarely operate

in the absence of structural or domestic constraints. Rather, what appears as a “choice” often reflects a political decision to interpret, frame, and institutionalize cooperation under conditions shaped by strategic necessity. In this sense, choice and necessity function as interacting dimensions rather than mutually exclusive categories. This conceptual clarification is particularly relevant to the Kim-Obuchi case, where value-based rhetoric and future-oriented language coexisted with acute regional uncertainty and domestic political pressures.

Political Leadership of Kim Dae-jung and Obuchi Keizo as the Main Driver

In the early stages of a strategic partnership, political leadership is crucial for institutionalizing cooperation amid uncertainty. As established in the analytical framework above, partnership formation hinges on leaders’ assessments of regional stability, partner reliability, and the need for formalized agreements. This subsection examines how President Kim Dae-jung and Prime Minister Obuchi Keizo acted as the primary drivers of the Kim-Obuchi Declaration. Their leadership-driven “choice” was not independent of structural pressures; rather, it represented a strategic decision to frame bilateral cooperation in normative, future-oriented terms to manage mounting regional instability. By intertwining value-based rhetoric with strategic necessity, both leaders sought to mitigate domestic constraints through a robust institutional framework.

Prior to the Declaration, both countries confronted heightened and interconnected uncertainties. The first involved instability in bilateral relations throughout the 1990s, shaped by disputes over historical issues, disagreements related to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and fisheries management, and debates over food assistance to North Korea. Of these, the issue of historical memory created the greatest political strain. Advocacy groups in South Korea pressed for investigations and reparations, prompting official responses from Tokyo such as the Kono (1993) and Murayama (1995) statements. While the former acknowledged the coercive nature of the recruitment of comfort women and the Japanese military’s involvement, the latter offered an official apology for Japan’s colonial rule and aggression. At the same time, growing resistance among conservative political actors in Japan provoked reciprocal responses in Seoul, exemplified by President Kim Young-sam’s confrontational rhetoric in late 1995.

The second uncertainty concerned compounding regional security and economic instability. The Asian Financial Crisis of 1997 rapidly spread across East Asia, including Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and eventually South Korea. Furthermore, North Korea’s advancing nuclear and missile programs posed an immediate security challenge, culminating in the alarming launch of the Taepodong-1 missile in August 1998.

Against this backdrop, the Kim Dae-jung administration and the Obuchi cabinet moved toward the conclusion of the Declaration, with political leadership

on both sides playing a central role. President Kim pursued a leadership-driven approach to improving relations with Japan, guided by three core principles (Moon and Suh 2005; Suh 2017, 35-6; Kim 1998). First, he regarded a sincere Japanese apology regarding historical issues as essential for enhancing bilateral relations, maintaining that such an apology must be voluntary rather than the result of external pressure. Second, Kim emphasized shared values—liberal democracy, a market economy, and the alliance with the US—leveraging the logic of democratic peace and the stabilizing effects of economic interdependence. Third, he adopted a pragmatic, interest-based approach to diplomacy, securing Japanese financial assistance during the economic crisis and fostering support for the Sunshine Policy toward North Korea.

Importantly, the Kim-Obuchi Declaration was not an isolated event but a culmination of preceding diplomatic efforts (Yoon 2019, 246-51; Lee 2019, 13). The Declaration built upon the “Three Principles” from the Roh Tae-woo-Kaifu Toshiki summit in 1991—focusing on genuine partnership, regional prosperity, and global engagement (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 1991). It also drew from the Kim Young-sam-Hosokawa Morihiro summit of 1993, which had already established a precedent for expressing remorse for colonial rule while identifying both nations as partners for the 21st Century based on shared democratic values.

Prime Minister Obuchi’s leadership was equally critical in enabling the Declaration (Lee 2019, 16-7). Upon assuming office in July 1998, Obuchi promoted “neighborhood diplomacy,” centered on trust-building with South Korea and China (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 1998a). Several factors reinforced his commitment: the rising strategic importance of Korea-Japan relations amid regional threats; Seoul’s forward-looking acceptance of Japanese apologies; South Korea’s support for Japan’s expanded international role; and Obuchi’s high regard for President Kim’s persistent initiative in rapprochement (Green 1999, 14).

Notably, both governments deliberately adopted the concept of a “partnership” as the organizing framework for their relationship. In the spring of 1998, Japan’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs proposed a state visit by President Kim, accompanied by the announcement of a partnership declaration. South Korea accepted this proposal, and under the leadership of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, spearheaded the formulation of the declaration’s conceptual structure (Cho 2018, 2-3; Cho 2014, 194-211). Subsequent interagency consultations and bilateral negotiations culminated in the finalization of the agreement prior to the state visit.

The choice of a partnership framework was closely linked to broader post-Cold War trends. During the mid-1990s, strategic partnerships emerged among major powers such as the US, China, and Russia. In East Asia, a wave of partnership announcements followed the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis, including ties between ASEAN and regional powers (1997), as well as Korea-China and

China-Japan alignments (1998). The Korea-Japan Partnership was concluded within this regional context, reflecting a shared recognition that a flexible, non-alliance framework was ideally suited for managing post-Cold War uncertainty.

Taken together, these dynamics suggest that the Kim-Obuchi Declaration was largely shaped by leadership-driven strategic choice. Under conditions of bilateral tension and regional instability, President Kim and Prime Minister Obuchi mobilized their political authority to institutionalize cooperation, thereby laying the foundation for multi-sectoral implementation.

Kim-Obuchi Declaration as a Practical Strategic Partnership

The Korea-Japan partnership articulated in the Kim-Obuchi Declaration can be characterized as follows. Feng (2015, 15) distinguishes four partnership types: (1) a simple partnership aimed at reducing mutual threats; (2) an economic partnership centered on economic collaboration; (3) a security partnership focusing on shared security concerns; and (4) a full partnership characterized by extensive cooperation across comprehensive domains. Among these, a full partnership most closely approximates a strategic partnership, because it necessitates multidimensional coordination rather than being confined to a single policy area.

Importantly, a strategic partnership is defined not only by the breadth of cooperation but also by its substantive orientation. Depending on policy priorities, such alignments may be politics-, economy-, or security-driven. While most strategic partnerships in East Asia have historically prioritized economic and trade cooperation, the Kim-Obuchi Declaration represented a distinctly politics-driven effort to institutionalize a pragmatic strategic partnership aimed at stabilizing bilateral relations.

The Declaration articulated guiding principles and identified five broad areas of cooperation across political, security, economic, sociocultural, and regional domains. These principles were operationalized through the “Action Plan for a New Korea-Japan Partnership in the 21st Century,” which enumerated forty-three specific cooperative measures (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 1998b). Rather than imposing binding legal obligations, the Declaration established a robust institutional and normative foundation for bilateral engagement.

At the normative level, the Declaration emphasized mutual respect for national identity as the basis of the partnership. Tokyo acknowledged Seoul’s rapid economic development and democratic consolidation, while Seoul recognized Japan’s postwar pacifist orientation—including its defensive security posture and commitment to the Three Non-Nuclear Principles—alongside its global economic contributions (Article 3). These shared values were further reflected in mutual commitments to liberal democracy, market principles (Article 3), human rights (Article 4), and the maintenance of the US alliance (Article 6).

The Declaration embedded political reconciliation within a broader pragmatic framework. At its core, it reflected a shared recognition that rigid positions risked

triggering reciprocal hardline responses, thereby undermining intergovernmental trust (Kim 2010, 109). Accordingly, the partnership was framed around a reconciliation agenda encapsulated in the principle of “facing the past squarely and pursuing future-oriented relations” (Okonogi 2018, 83-4). This logic was codified in Article 2, which incorporated Prime Minister Obuchi’s official apology for colonial rule. This arrangement rested on “negative common interests,” where both governments recognized that containing historical disputes was essential for protecting national interests and ensuring bilateral stability. While Seoul sought to document the apology to prevent future regression, Tokyo aimed to secure Seoul’s commitment to a future-oriented trajectory. To sustain this, the Declaration institutionalized consultation mechanisms—including regular summits and ministerial reviews—to ensure continuous dialogue and mitigate episodic tensions (Articles 4 and 5).

Beyond reconciliation, the Declaration expanded cooperation into security, economic, sociocultural, and regional domains. In the security sphere, North Korea remained the primary third-party challenge. Although Seoul and Tokyo maintained divergent preferences—engagement-oriented versus pressure-based—the Declaration sought to reconcile these through intensified policy coordination. Specifically, Article 7 demonstrated Tokyo’s cautious accommodation of Seoul’s Sunshine Policy, while committing both governments to strengthened bilateral consultations and existing non-proliferation frameworks (Lee 2019, 21).

The conclusion of a new fisheries agreement in September 1998, achieved despite domestic opposition, underscored the decisive role of top-down leadership. In parallel, the Obuchi cabinet responded proactively to Seoul’s request for financial support during the Asian Financial Crisis through export-import bank loans and the New Miyazawa Initiative (Nishino 2017, 190-1). Furthermore, early discussions on a potential free trade agreement (FTA) signaled the partnership’s forward-looking economic orientation and its broader regional implications (Chung and Cho 2008, 107).

Sociocultural exchanges played a central role in fostering societal-level trust through initiatives like the joint hosting of the 2002 FIFA World Cup and joint historical research projects. Notably, President Kim’s decision to open South Korea to Japanese popular culture represented a bold strategic departure from decades of protectionism, reflecting a commitment to reconciliation through cultural openness (National Institute of Korean History 1998; Ryu 2018, 54).

Finally, the Declaration situated Korea-Japan cooperation within a broader regional and global context, enhancing multilateral dialogue to promote regional peace and prosperity (Articles 4 and 6). This regional orientation facilitated the subsequent institutionalization of Republic of Korea-Japan-China trilateral cooperation. As Lee (2018, 98-105) notes, the Declaration was the first official document to link the Korea-Japan partnership to evolving East Asian multilateral architectures, framing bilateral stability as a prerequisite for regional peace.

Implementing Partnership: Uneven Institutionalization Across Domains

Political Relations: Gradual Accumulation of Norms and Its Limits

Within the framework of the Kim-Obuchi Declaration, the advancement of political relations served as the cornerstone of the broader partnership. The Declaration explicitly emphasized the institutionalization of dialogue and consultation as a primary mechanism for stabilizing bilateral ties, particularly amidst deep-seated historical disputes. Over time, however, the implementation of this political dimension has revealed a complex interplay between the gradual accumulation of normative understandings and the persistent structural limitations in managing historical conflicts.

An examination of summit diplomacy provides a critical metric for assessing the level of political engagement. During the Kim Dae-jung administration, bilateral summitry was exceptionally active (eighteen summit meetings, comprising eight mutual visits, while excluding summits held on the sidelines of multilateral meetings), demonstrating a robust top-down dedication to partnership building. While subsequent administrations also experienced periods of intensive engagement—most notably during the Lee Myung-bak (twenty-three summits including eight mutual visits) and Yoon Suk-yeol (fifteen summits including three mutual visits) eras—the frequency and depth of these high-level interactions fluctuated significantly according to the prevailing political climate. In contrast to these active phases, summit diplomacy frequently stagnated or was suspended during critical junctures, particularly 2012–2014, 2016–2017, and 2019–2022.¹ The total absence of summits in 2013 and during the 2020–2021 period—the latter exacerbated by both intensifying forced labor disputes and the COVID-19 pandemic—illustrates the acute fragility of institutionalized dialogue. These prolonged interruptions highlight how even the most established diplomatic channels remain vulnerable to the destabilizing effects of unresolved historical grievances and domestic political pressures.

Historical controversies consistently dictated the trajectory of political relations, often overriding institutionalized cooperation. During the Kim-Mori/Koizumi periods, tensions escalated significantly over Japan's history textbook screening process and Prime Minister Koizumi's repeated visits to the Yasukuni Shrine between 2001 and 2003. Seoul contended that these actions directly violated the spirit of both the Murayama Statement and the Kim-Obuchi Declaration, while Tokyo cited domestic institutional constraints to justify the lack of governmental intervention. Although Koizumi attempted to mitigate tensions—most notably through his symbolic apology at Seodaemun Prison in October 2001—these gestures ultimately proved insufficient to prevent the deep-seated politicization of historical memory.

These adversarial dynamics intensified during the Roh-Koizumi period,

driven by persistent shrine visits and a widening array of disputes, including Shimane Prefecture's designation of Takeshima Day and Japan's pursuit of a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council. President Roh explicitly framed these developments as fundamental breaches of prior agreements, signaling a strategic shift toward diplomatic confrontation. Consequently, political dialogue became increasingly reactive, governed more by volatile domestic pressures than by the cooperative mechanisms envisioned in the 1998 Declaration.

The Lee Myung-bak period, characterized by a rapid turnover of Japanese leadership (Fukuda, Aso, Hatoyama, Kan, and Noda), further illustrates that the high frequency of summits does not inherently lead to deeper political institutionalization. In its initial phase, bilateral engagement was sustained by pragmatic agendas, such as coordination on North Korea policy and cooperation during the global financial crisis. However, the substance of these interactions remained acutely vulnerable to the re-politicization of sovereignty. Relations deteriorated sharply following President Lee's visit to Dokdo and his remarks regarding the Japanese emperor, underscoring the shallow roots of political trust within the partnership. This episode highlights that political institutionalization remained fragile despite frequent high-level contacts.

The Park-Abe period marked a qualitative escalation, as historical disputes became the central axis of diplomatic confrontation. The Abe administration's revisionist posture, paired with the Park administration's emphasis on the comfort women issue, led to suspended summitry and intensified normative contestation in international forums. Although Abe's "70th Anniversary Statement" and the subsequent Comfort Women Agreement in 2015 were intended as compromises, they ultimately failed to generate durable political trust.

Bilateral tensions reached a nadir during the Moon-Abe period following the 2018 South Korean Supreme Court ruling on forced labor compensation. Tokyo's stance on the 1965 Claims Agreement clashed directly with Seoul's prioritization of judicial independence. This legal friction triggered a shift toward systematic linkage politics, exemplified by Japan's 2019 export controls and Seoul's threatened termination of the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA). This deterioration was preceded by the 2019 formal dissolution of the Reconciliation and Healing Foundation, an act that symbolized the profound erosion of prior institutional arrangements and signaled the collapse of diplomatic trust.

Political relations stabilized during the Yoon Suk-yeol-Kishida Fumio period, largely through significant executive intervention. President Yoon's 2023 proposal for a third-party compensation mechanism for forced labor victims, alongside commitments to restore GSOMIA, marked a strategic shift to resolve the long-standing deadlock. While Japan reciprocated by lifting export controls, these advancements remain heavily dependent on top-down leadership rather than on

a settled societal consensus.

Viewed through the lens of strategic partnership, these developments suggest a mixed outcome. On the one hand, certain norms regarding the management of historical disputes have accumulated incrementally. Ogura (2018, 142) refers to these accumulated bilateral efforts to address historical issues as a distinct Korea-Japan model of reconciliation. Successive Japanese prime ministers have reiterated political apologies, including the 2010 Kan Naoto Statement, which contained an apology for Japan's colonial rule against the Korean people's will (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2010a). Moreover, no prime minister has visited the Yasukuni Shrine since 2013. While textbook disputes persist, their political salience has relatively declined, and historical issues no longer singularly define the bilateral agenda. If reconciliation is conceptualized as encompassing the acknowledgment of historical facts, the issuance of apologies, and the joint pursuit of a shared future, one can argue that the first two stages have at least been partially achieved.

On the other hand, the limitations of normative institutionalization remain evident. During the Park and Moon administrations—particularly under the leadership of Abe Shinzo—bilateral relations were characterized by the prolonged suspension of dialogue channels, entrenched exclusive nationalism, and pronounced linkage politics. The principles of facing the past squarely and fostering future-oriented relations, which were central to the Kim-Obuchi Declaration, were repeatedly challenged by domestic political shifts and reciprocal distrust. Moreover, efforts to resolve historical disputes were frequently shaped by US intervention, reflecting Washington's prioritization of trilateral security cooperation over the specifics of bilateral reconciliation.

Taken together, the political dimension of the Korea-Japan partnership demonstrates a gradual yet fragile accumulation of norms governing historical issues. While acknowledgment and apology have been partially institutionalized, the translation of these norms into resilient political trust has remained uneven, contested, and non-linear. As a result, political relations continue to fluctuate between cautious stabilization and renewed confrontation, highlighting the persistent difficulty of consolidating norm-based reconciliation in high-politics domains within a strategic partnership framework—a pattern that suggests structural complexity rather than outright failure.

From a peacebuilding perspective, this pattern suggests that the Kim-Obuchi framework functioned more as a partial conflict-mitigation mechanism than as a vehicle for full reconciliation. Even when political trust deteriorated, the institutionalized expectations of dialogue, apology, and future-oriented cooperation provided a normative buffer that constrained escalation and preserved the possibility of renewed engagement. In this sense, the political sphere reveals both the limits and the residual stabilizing effects of an institutionalized, peace-oriented strategic partnership.

North Korea Policy: Marginalization of the Partnership

Beyond persistent territorial disputes, South Korea and Japan have fundamentally shared convergent security interests. From the conclusion of the Kim-Obuchi Declaration through the early 2000s, bilateral security coordination reached a relative high point. Key summits in June 2000 and September 2002 temporarily reduced tensions and fostered cautious optimism regarding a peace regime on the Korean Peninsula.

Nevertheless, despite these favorable conditions, the Korea-Japan security partnership gradually became marginalized within the broader bilateral relationship. A widening policy divergence between Seoul and Tokyo constrained the depth of security cooperation. Although both governments shared a common perception of North Korea as a security threat, this convergence did not translate into a sustained alignment of policy objectives or preferred instruments. Even during the Kim-Obuchi period, fundamental differences existed between South Korea's dialogue-oriented approach, emphasizing negotiations and economic assistance, and Japan's pressure-oriented strategy, centered on diplomatic isolation and military deterrence. Despite domestic opposition, the Obuchi Cabinet supported the Kim administration's Sunshine Policy. This alignment was broadly consistent with the US Clinton administration's Perry Process and contributed to the establishment of the Trilateral Coordination and Oversight Group (Kimiya 2015, 22).

However, following the Koizumi-Kim Jong-il summit and North Korea's admission of the abduction of Japanese citizens, dialogue-centered approaches became rapidly and politically untenable in Japan. While Japan's stance hardened, South Korea's approach shifted according to partisan changes in government. Progressive governments under Roh Moo-hyun and Moon Jae-in favored dialogue-based strategies, whereas conservative administrations under Lee Myung-bak and Park Geun-hye pursued pressure-oriented policies more closely aligned with Tokyo's preferences. As a result, security cooperation weakened under progressive leadership and strengthened only intermittently under conservative governments, thereby preventing stable institutionalization.

Second, negotiations surrounding GSOMIA illustrate both the drive toward institutionalization and its inherent fragility. In the wake of repeated North Korean provocations—including nuclear tests, the sinking of the Cheonan, and the shelling of Yeonpyeong Island—both governments sought to formalize security cooperation. Initial steps included the 2009 “Letter of Intent on Defense Exchanges between South Korea and Japan” and renewed discussions on the Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement and GSOMIA in 2011 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2010b, 18; Government of the Republic of Korea 2011).

Yet, domestic political constraints in South Korea delayed this institutionalization. The planned signing of GSOMIA in June 2012 was postponed amid strong public backlash against perceived secrecy, rendering subsequent progress

limited and piecemeal. The 2014 establishment of the Trilateral Information Sharing Arrangement served as a strategic workaround, allowing intelligence sharing via the US while avoiding direct bilateral legal obligations. However, the limitations of this indirect format eventually led to the conclusion of GSOMIA in November 2016, underscoring the narrow political space for autonomous bilateral security cooperation (Ministry of Government Legislation of Korea 2016). The Moon administration's later suspension threat revealed how vulnerable security cooperation remained to broader political disputes, frequently necessitating US mediation to preserve the trilateral security architecture (Ogawa 2020, 133).

Seoul's repeated adoption of a "Japan-passing" strategy further constrained bilateral security cooperation. During the early Park Geun-hye administration, Seoul prioritized a triangular approach involving South Korea, North Korea, and China, attempting to bypass Japan in favor of a more China-centric regional framework. However, expectations regarding China's capacity to restrain North Korea proved overly optimistic. The subsequent decision to deploy the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system in 2016, made without regard to Chinese objections, led to severe economic retaliation and underscored the structural limits of this approach.

Under the succeeding Moon administration, attention shifted toward inter-Korean reconciliation and direct US-North Korea engagement. By utilizing the 2018 PyeongChang Winter Olympics as a diplomatic opening, Seoul facilitated inter-Korean summits and played a pivotal role in enabling the first US-North Korea summit in Singapore. This strategy prioritized Washington-Pyongyang engagement, relegating Korea-Japan coordination to a secondary priority. Moreover, the Abe Cabinet's active skepticism toward the Korean Peninsula Peace Process further complicated bilateral security cooperation (Bolton 2020, 491-520).

Taken together, these developments indicate that while North Korea remained a shared security concern, cooperation in this domain was persistently subordinated to domestic constraints, divergent strategic preferences, and the overriding influence of US-centered alliance structures. From a strategic partnership theory perspective, shared threat perception alone proved insufficient to produce stable security institutionalization. As a result, North Korea policy became a domain in which the partnership operated in a limited and politically contingent capacity, failing to evolve into a consolidated security pillar.

From a peacebuilding perspective, this reveals the distinct sectoral limits of a peace-oriented strategic partnership. Unlike the political sphere, where institutionalized norms mitigated escalation, the security domain remained too deeply embedded in alliance structures and divergent national strategies to function as an effective mechanism for conflict prevention. Ultimately, peacebuilding effects varied by issue area and depended on the degree of bilateral autonomy and normative convergence.

Sociocultural and Economic Relations: Uneven Progress in Institutionalization

Following the Kim-Obuchi Declaration, scholarly consensus suggests that South Korea and Japan made tangible progress in economic and sociocultural relations (Choi 2018a). While institutional development in global and economic cooperation remained moderate and frequently constrained by political factors, sociocultural and people-to-people exchanges experienced substantial and sustained expansion. This asymmetry highlights a distinctive pattern of partnership implementation, where cooperation in low-politics domains often flourished independently of the volatility characterizing political and security spheres.

On global issues, the two governments established basic institutional mechanisms, such as an extradition treaty and a memorandum of understanding on crime prevention cooperation. At the same time, several cooperative frameworks stagnated or functioned only intermittently. Notably, the Korea-Japan Environmental Cooperation Joint Committee did not meet between 2000 and 2024, while the Korea-Japan Development Cooperation Policy Consultation on Official Development Assistance remained suspended from 2018 to 2022. These limitations were compounded by protracted issue-specific disputes and the disruptive effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Economic cooperation advanced gradually but remained constrained. During the Kim Dae-jung administration, several milestones were achieved, including the 2000 Korea-Japan Business Forum, the 2001 Investment Agreement, and the launch of the Economic Ministers' Meeting in November 2001. Under the Roh Moo-hyun administration, formal negotiations for a bilateral FTA were initiated and later expanded during the Lee Myung-bak administration into trilateral discussions involving China in response to the global financial crisis.

Nevertheless, bilateral FTA negotiations were eventually suspended due to intertwined political and economic disagreements. Recurring tensions over Prime Minister Koizumi's visits to the Yasukuni Shrine drastically narrowed Seoul's negotiating space. Economically, South Korea expressed concerns over a burgeoning trade deficit and Japan's limited commitment to technology transfer, while Tokyo prioritized an Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA) over a comprehensive FTA to protect domestic agricultural interests (Lee 2014).

Export control measures introduced by the Abe Cabinet—though officially justified on economic security grounds—were widely perceived in South Korea as politically motivated retaliation. Tokyo's invocation of security concerns directly conflicted with its broader commitment to free trade and fundamentally undermined the principles articulated in Article 8 of the Kim-Obuchi Declaration, which emphasized the advancement of an open international economic system (Ogawa 2020, 133-4).

The most pronounced and resilient progress in the partnership occurred in sociocultural and people-to-people exchanges. The Kim-Obuchi Declaration and its Action Plan promoted a wide range of initiatives, including the joint hosting

of the 2002 FIFA World Cup and the expansion of youth and civic exchange programs, which significantly fostered mutual recognition between the two societies.

By 2018, bilateral travel exceeded 10 million, and despite the temporary disruption of the pandemic, it rebounded to approximately 12 million by 2024. This growth was facilitated not only by economic factors but also by institutional foundations such as permanent visa waiver agreements. Moreover, President Kim's phased opening to Japanese popular culture marked a pivotal shift away from protectionism, fostering a more reciprocal relationship that simultaneously supported the global diffusion of the Korean Wave (*Hallyu*) (Han 2023, 272-86).

Consistent with these developments, public perceptions in both countries improved over time. According to joint surveys, favorable impressions of Japan among South Koreans more than doubled from 12.2% in 2013 to 28.9% in 2023, while unfavorable views declined substantially (East Asia Institute 2023). These trends suggest that sociocultural exchanges have evolved into the most durable pillar of the partnership, exhibiting greater continuity than political or security cooperation.

From a peacebuilding perspective, this domain illustrates how sustained societal interaction can gradually foster what Galtung (1969) conceptualizes as “positive peace.” Even when political tensions resurfaced, the continued density of people-to-people exchanges acted as a social buffer, limiting the escalation of antagonism and preserving channels for future rapprochement. Consequently, the sociocultural sphere demonstrates that the peacebuilding effects of a strategic partnership are often most resilient at the societal level, where cooperation accumulates incrementally and endures beyond the volatile fluctuations of high politics.

US-China Strategic Competition and South Korea-Japan Relations: From Fragmented Responses to Trilateral Security Cooperation

The intensification of US-China strategic competition from the 2010s onward was not a central concern during the formulation of the Kim-Obuchi Declaration. Instead, the Declaration emphasized a peaceful international order through United Nations reform, development assistance, non-proliferation, and the maintenance of security ties with the US. It also underscored policy coordination within multilateral economic institutions, such as the World Trade Organization and the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation, to uphold a free and open international economic system.

Against this background, a key question is the extent to which South Korea and Japan developed a partnership-based response to the challenges generated by US-China rivalry. In practice, few coordinated bilateral initiatives emerged initially. Rather than forming a coherent partnership framework to address this competition, the two governments largely pursued fragmented and independent

responses. Over time, however, this pattern was partially reconfigured through the institutionalization of trilateral security cooperation involving the US in the 2020s.

Seoul and Tokyo diverged significantly in their strategic approaches toward China. Under the second Abe administration, Tokyo actively promoted trilateral and minilateral security frameworks designed to counterbalance China's growing influence (Kotani 2018, 184-5). These initiatives were closely associated with Japan's Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) strategy and its alignment with the Trump administration's regional approach. Indeed, Tokyo played a decisive role in persuading Washington to adopt the "Indo-Pacific" concept originally articulated by Japan (Rossiter 2018, 120-1). Through FOIP, Japan pursued the dual objectives of constraining China's maritime expansion while simultaneously reinforcing US security commitments (Hughes 2015, 116).

In contrast, Seoul maintained a more cautious posture. Under both conservative and progressive administrations, South Korea pursued a policy of "strategic ambiguity," aiming to balance its military alliance with the US against its strategic cooperative partnership with China. For Seoul, stable relations with Beijing were considered indispensable due to deep economic interdependence and China's influence over North Korea. This approach, however, entailed significant geopolitical costs. Beijing interpreted the Park administration's decision to deploy the THAAD system as a direct alignment with US-led missile defense architectures, prompting unprecedented retaliatory measures (Wang 2017, 146-8).

The pressures exerted on Seoul by Washington and Tokyo were broader than those from Beijing. While China's demands were largely confined to participation in regional economic initiatives—such as the Belt and Road Initiative, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, and discussions on a China-Japan-Korea FTA—the US and Japan pressed South Korea across broader economic, technological, and security domains. Successive US administrations encouraged Seoul to join initiatives such as the Trans-Pacific Partnership, the Indo-Pacific Strategy, technology sanctions, and minilateral security arrangements. Both the Park and Moon administrations thus faced persistent constraints in reconciling competing strategic expectations from major powers.

A qualitative shift occurred under the Yoon Suk-yeol administration, which moved from strategic ambiguity toward strategic clarity following its inauguration in May 2022. As Nishino (2024, 68-9) observes, the Yoon government has emphasized solidarity among liberal democratic countries, pursuing a strategy that systematically links the deepening of the Korea-US alliance, the improvement of Korea-Japan relations, and the expansion of trilateral cooperation. This shift culminated in the August 2023 Camp David summit, where Seoul, Washington, and Tokyo issued three joint documents—the Spirit of Camp David, the Camp David Principles, and a commitment to regular trilateral consultations—that explicitly identified North Korea and China as focal points of regional security

cooperation (US Embassy & Consulate in the Republic of Korea 2023a; US Embassy & Consulate in the Republic of Korea 2023b; US Embassy & Consulate in the Republic of Korea 2023c).

Some observers interpret this development as the emergence of a *de facto* trilateral alliance (Kim 2023). In parallel, the Yoon administration articulated a Korean version of the Indo-Pacific Strategy closely aligned with those of the US and Japan, while discontinuing the less geopolitically oriented New Southern Policy. Importantly, as Pardo et al. (2025, 3, 16-7) note, this transition toward strategic clarity had already begun during the later stages of the Moon administration, driven by China's retaliatory behavior following THAAD, its growing assertiveness in regional maritime disputes, and its perceived support for North Korea.

This evolution underscores a reconfiguration of the partnership's strategic environment rather than a simple weakening of bilateral ties. Rather than deepening bilateral strategic coordination in response to US-China rivalry, Seoul and Tokyo increasingly relied on trilateral and minilateral frameworks anchored by the US. As a result, bilateral partnership mechanisms came to operate alongside and within a broader US-centered security architecture, with their security functions increasingly articulated through trilateral formats. This shift highlights how the strategic partnership envisaged in the Kim-Obuchi Declaration was not supplanted but rather adapted to a changing regional order, with parts of its security dimension expressed through trilateral cooperation amid intensifying great-power competition.

This outcome cannot be attributed solely to the degree of institutionalization of the Korea-Japan partnership. Structural factors also shaped the limits of bilateral coordination. Japan's security posture remains more tightly embedded in the US alliance framework, while South Korea has historically sought a more flexible balance between alliance commitments and regional autonomy. In addition, the two countries differ in the depth and composition of their economic interdependence with China, which has influenced their respective risk calculations in responding to US-China rivalry. These structural asymmetries constrained the scope of feasible joint responses regardless of institutional design.

Nevertheless, institutionalization still mattered. A more deeply embedded and routinized bilateral framework might have provided additional channels for policy consultation, expectation management, and incremental alignment even under structural divergence. The limited development of such mechanisms under the Kim-Obuchi framework helps explain why responses to US-China competition tended to remain parallel rather than jointly articulated.

The uneven development of cooperation across sectors should not be interpreted merely as stagnation or regression. Rather, it reflects the inherently asynchronous nature of strategic partnerships, in which different domains evolve at varying speeds under distinct political constraints. Even in the

security domain—often regarded as the most fragile pillar—recent forms of operational coordination, such as Japan’s provision of aerial refueling support to South Korean aircraft, have demonstrated that practical cooperation may be consolidating incrementally despite political volatility (*Yomiuri Shimbun* 2026). These developments indicate that the trajectory of the partnership is better understood as a gradual and sectorally differentiated adaptation, rather than movement toward or away from a single, fixed end state.

From a peacebuilding perspective, the stabilizing effects of a strategic partnership may persist even when security functions are mediated through wider alliance frameworks. Rather than disappearing, bilateral peace-oriented cooperation can become embedded within broader regional architectures, thereby maintaining partial conflict-mitigation effects under conditions of intensifying great-power rivalry. In this sense, the Korea-Japan case illustrates how peacebuilding mechanisms may adapt institutionally to shifting structural environments rather than operate exclusively within bilateral formats.

Conclusion

This study has examined the formation, evolution, and inherent limitations of the Korea-Japan partnership under the Kim-Obuchi Declaration through the lens of strategic partnership theory. The findings demonstrate that the Declaration represented one of East Asia’s most advanced attempts to institutionalize a strategic partnership between former adversaries. Nevertheless, this partnership evolved with significant unevenness across sectors, contingent upon the specific policy domain and the degree of political commitment. This procedurally differentiated trajectory stemmed from two interrelated sets of constraints.

First, the Kim-Obuchi Declaration rested on an inherently optimistic assumption regarding the political sustainability of reconciliation-driven cooperation. As a politically driven, top-down initiative, the partnership sought to stabilize bilateral ties by addressing historical legacies while simultaneously expanding cooperation in security, economic, and sociocultural spheres. However, in practice, political reconciliation proved tenuous. Recurrent historical disputes generated persistent friction, which systemically constrained the deepening of cooperation in non-political domains. As a result, progress in low-politics sectors functioned only as a marginal feedback mechanism for high-politics reconciliation.

Second, the partnership suffered from fluctuating political will among successive administrations in both Seoul and Tokyo. Despite the evolving security environment, efforts to fundamentally revise or upgrade the core objectives remained limited. Instead, political leaders prioritized the mitigation of domestic political costs over ambitious strategic initiatives. This pattern challenges existing

assessments that emphasize linear progress in economic and cultural domains despite political stagnation (Choi 2018b, 14). This analysis suggests that sectoral developments were not merely divergent but structurally asymmetrical: high-politics tensions functioned as a structural brake on low-politics cooperation, whereas advances in the latter failed to generate sufficient spillover effects to catalyze political reconciliation.

Importantly, the absence of a fully consolidated comprehensive strategic partnership should not be equated with institutional failure, nor should such a form be viewed as the inevitable teleological endpoint of partnership development. Strategic partnerships do not necessarily evolve toward a single institutional state; rather, they undergo continuous processes of upgrading, stagnation, and partial recalibration. In the Korea-Japan case, political and security cooperation have advanced in fragile ways, yet they have also produced resilient, incremental layers of coordination embedded within broader regional architectures. By conceptualizing this trajectory as sectorally differentiated adaptation—rather than a binary success-or-failure outcome—this study provides a more nuanced assessment of how institutionalized cooperation facilitates conflict mitigation despite structural constraints.

These findings indicate that the Korea-Japan partnership has functioned as a procedurally uneven and politically contingent alignment. This outcome should be interpreted not as the failure of reconciliation per se, but as a reflection of the systemic limits of sustaining reconciliation within a bilateral strategic framework.

From a peacebuilding perspective, success ought to be measured by the extent to which institutionalized cooperation prevents the recurrence of conflict. In this sense, the Kim-Obuchi Declaration represents a historically situated and conditional process of institutionalizing reconciliation. More broadly, this case suggests that peacebuilding through strategic partnership is a sectorally differentiated process rather than a linear progression toward comprehensive harmony. Even when partnerships fall short of deep political trust, they may still operate as partial stabilizing mechanisms that constrain escalation. Notably, the quality of this partnership has remained comparatively higher than that of the Korea-China or China-Japan strategic alignments (Suh 2024), reinforcing its enduring analytical significance.

Following the sixtieth anniversary of diplomatic normalization, a renewed exercise of statecraft grounded in mutual political will is imperative. In this context, the proposal for a “Kim-Obuchi Declaration 2.0” should be envisioned not merely as a strategic upgrade, but as an effort to reconstruct a sustainable peace architecture. Such an initiative would integrate the accumulated lessons of the past three decades while signaling a renewed commitment to institutional resilience and future-oriented cooperation. The urgency of this undertaking is compounded by shifting geopolitical realities, including intensifying great-power rivalry and North Korea’s advancing nuclear capabilities, which narrow the space

for norm-based cooperation.

A renewed framework should address three interrelated challenges. First, Seoul and Tokyo should formally accelerate the conclusion of FTA or EPA negotiations. Beyond economic benefits, these agreements would enhance bilateral strategic resilience and provide collective leverage amid major-power pressures. Second, the partnership must establish a jointly endorsed framework for reconciliation through history education. Anchoring this in universal principles—such as human rights and transitional justice—should be viewed as a strategic mechanism to distribute the political burden of reconciliation across institutions and international frameworks. By establishing procedural reference points, both states can reduce the degree to which reconciliation depends on the volatile discretionary will of individual leaders. Finally, both governments should prioritize the institutionalization of high-level strategic dialogue. As this study has shown, the role of the United States has often functioned as a structural constant that limited bilateral strategic depth. Strengthening autonomous bilateral dialogue would enable Seoul and Tokyo to address regional challenges more proactively.

In sum, the Kim-Obuchi Declaration should not be judged solely by its failure to achieve a comprehensive strategic synthesis. Such a critique risks imposing an idealized, static benchmark on what is, in practice, a fluid and politically contingent process. Rather, its enduring significance lies in its function as a pioneering peacebuilding experiment—one that illuminates the complex interactions between reconciliation, institutionalization, and strategic cooperation under conditions of historical division. The partnership's limitations stemmed not from its normative ambitions, but from the volatility of domestic politics and an increasingly unstable regional order. Revisiting this legacy through a renewed, adapted framework offers the most viable pathway toward a resilient and sustainable Korea-Japan partnership in a changing East Asia.

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Notes

1. All bilateral summits and mutual visits (excluding multilateral sidelines) are as follows: Kim Dae-jung (eighteen summits and eight mutual visits in October 1998, March 1999, May 2000, June 2000, September 2000, October 2001, March 2002, and July 2002); Roh Moo-hyun (twelve summits and six mutual visits in February 2003, June 2003, July 2004, December 2004, June 2005, and October 2006); Lee Myung-bak (twenty-three

summits and eight mutual visits in February 2008, April 2008, July 2008, January 2009, June 2009, May 2010, October 2011, and December 2011); Park Geun-hye (five summits and one mutual visit in November 2015); Moon Jae-in (six summits and one mutual visit in February 2018); Yoon Suk-yeol (fifteen summits and three mutual visits in March 2023, May 2023, and September 2024). Diplomatic suspensions occurred during 2012–2014, 2016–2017, and 2019–2022, with no summits held in 2013 or during 2020–2021 due to historical disputes and the COVID-19 pandemic.

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