

The South Korea-Japan Relationship and Domestic Politics in South Korea: How the Relationship Influences Presidential Approval*

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It has often been argued that South Korean leaders tend to exploit their country's tensions with Japan as a means of boosting their domestic support. However, the *actual* influence of the South Korea-Japan relationship on domestic government support in the nation has rarely been examined quantitatively. This study provides a systematic quantitative analysis of this issue, by investigating the influence on presidential approval ratings in South Korea of developments in the country's relationship with Japan—in particular, its involvement in conflicts with Japan and the adoption of Japan-friendly policies by its government. The research finds that significant positive effects of the former and meaningful adverse impacts of the latter are both confined to occurrence in small segments of voters only, and further that the scales of these impacts are all quite marginal. These findings suggest that the actual influence of the South Korea-Japan relationship on South Korean domestic politics may be more limited than is conventionally perceived.

Key Words: anti-Japanism, anti-Japan sentiment, South Korea-Japan relations, South Korea-Japan relationship, South Korean politics

I. Introduction

South Korea and Japan are East Asian neighbors that share many economic and

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political, as well as social and cultural, commonalities. Both are advanced open-market economies and established democracies, as well as close allies of the United States. They are also major economic partners of each other.¹ Additionally, both countries see North Korea as a major geopolitical threat. However, the two nations' turbulent history—especially Japan's colonialization of Korea in the first half of the 20th century, on top of its invasion of it in the 16th century—has resulted in lingering animosities between them, which may seem inexplicable to many outsiders. Anti-Japanism remains strong in South Korea, while anti-Korean sentiment is also seen frequently in Japan.

This hostility between South Korea and Japan has been a principal obstacle to close cooperation between them, despite their holding of shared policy goals such as coping effectively with security threats from North Korea (Easley 2014; Easley and Park 2018). During the 2010s, in fact, the countries' relationship deteriorated to one of its lowest levels since their normalization of diplomatic ties in 1965,² although it has begun to recover since the early 2020s. Moreover, going beyond their own bilateral relations, the antagonistic relationship between the two countries has also significantly affected the international relations involving them, including US policy toward East Asia as well as cooperation among countries in the region (Rozman 2004, 2008; Berger 2008; Glosserman and Snyder 2015).

Related to this, the academic literature as well as the media frequently hold that the South Korean government often deliberately exploits anti-Japan sentiment in its nation to win domestic political support. They argue that conflicts with Japan are useful for boosting domestic support for the government, while any adoption by it of policies amicable to Japan risks weakening its domestic political position (Berger 2008; Glosserman and Snyder 2015; Jo 2022). This suggests the existence in South Korea of considerable domestic political hurdles to amelioration of its relationship with Japan, and that close and stable cooperation between the countries is accordingly fairly difficult to expect.³

Quite surprisingly, however, there has been little empirical research done that

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- 1 In 2023 Japan was South Korea's fourth largest export market and third biggest source of imports, while South Korea was Japan's third largest destination for exports and seventh greatest source of imports.
 - 2 For instance, in 2018, when the South Korean Supreme Court ordered Japanese firms to compensate South Korean citizens who had been forced to work in their factories during World War II (when Korea was under Japanese colonial rule), Tokyo responded by imposing economic sanctions against the country. And, in a backlash, a "No Japan" boycott of Japanese products arose in Korea.
 - 3 Of course, it has often been indicated as well that Tokyo likewise takes advantage of anti-Korea sentiment in Japan and tensions with South Korea as a means of improving its domestic support. See Hwang and Nishikawa (2017) and Kim et al. (2021). However, that phenomenon in Japan is beyond of the scope of this study, which concentrates on the South Korean case.

quantitatively investigates whether South Korea's tensions with Japan *actually do* strengthen Seoul's domestic support, and whether its Japan-friendly policies *indeed* undermine its domestic position. Yet the answers to these questions are critical for grasping more precisely how the two neighboring nations' relationship shapes South Korean domestic politics *in actuality*, and, in turn, Seoul's policy toward Tokyo.

Does the South Korea-Japan relationship truly influence domestic government support in Korea substantially? This study provides a systematic quantitative analysis of this issue, so as to enhance understanding of the actual influences of the two countries' relationship on domestic politics in Korea. More specifically, this research examines how South Korea's involvement in conflicts with Japan and the South Korean government's pursuit of policies amicable to Japan affect the domestic approval ratings of its presidents, using weekly survey data. It builds and analyzes various regression models that estimate these effects across diverse segments of society separated in terms of age, political ideology and political party support, as well as on the aggregate of survey respondents overall.

This analytical method is hence distinct in two particular respects, and contributes significantly to the literature thereby. First, most of the previous studies of this subject tend to limit their analyses largely to the impacts of conflicts between South Korea and Japan only, while this research extends its analysis to explore the effects of Seoul's pursuit of policies friendly to Japan as well. Second, this study relaxes the assumption employed by much of the earlier research, that the public responds as a unitary actor to occurrences of external conflicts with or amicable policies toward foreign countries, to thus provide insights into which domestic groups are more and which less responsive to such events and policies.⁴

This research finds that Seoul's involvement in tensions with Japan has a significant positive effect on presidential support in just one group, that of centrists, and that the magnitude of that impact is limited to a mere 1.1 percentage point rise in their approval of the president. It demonstrates additionally that the government's pursuit of policies friendly to Japan also has a significant negative impact on one group only, that of those 60 years old and above, whose scale is quite marginal as well, lowering that group's rate of approval for the president by just 1.6 percentage points.

The findings of this study suggest that even if, as is often claimed, the Korean government attempts to boost its domestic support by heightening tensions with Japan, the actual resulting benefit to it is likely to be quite trivial, while its adoption of policies cooperative with Japan is also unlikely to undermine its domestic political position

4 I thank an anonymous reviewer for clarifying this point.

to any considerable extent. Furthermore, the outcomes of this research appear to imply that the actual influence of anti-Japanism in South Korea on its domestic politics may be more limited than is conventionally believed.

The rest of this paper is organized as follows. The next section briefly discusses anti-Japanism in South Korea and how it affects the government's policy. The following section explicates the research question and analytical framework of this study, while the section after that discusses how its empirical analysis is designed. The subsequent section reports and discusses the results of the empirical research. The final section then summarizes the major findings of this study, and deliberates on their implications.

II. Anti-Japanism in South Korea and its Impacts

While the historical conflicts between South Korea and Japan date back to Japan's invasion of the Korean Peninsula from 1592 to 1598, the defining modern event was the country's colonial subjugation of Korea between 1910 and 1945. This has been felt as a painful memory for most Koreans; although 80 years have now passed since Korea's liberation from Japanese rule, anti-Japan sentiment remains deeply entrenched in South Korean society (Lind 2008; Jo 2022). Many Koreans perceive historical issues dating back to the colonial period, concerning matters such as the "comfort women" and "forced labor," to have not yet been fully resolved. Furthermore, Japan continues to claim territorial sovereignty over the Dokdo/Takeshima islets that are now under effective South Korean control. For Koreans these islets are a principal symbol of national sovereignty, which they regard as the first Korean territory that Japan occupied when colonizing their nation.⁵ In addition, some Japanese leaders have been reluctant to concede Japan's past aggressions. A good number of conservative Japanese politicians, including the late Prime Minister Abe Shinzo, have also continued to visit the Yasukuni Shrine, which honors Japanese soldiers and civilians who died in wars during the 19th and 20th centuries, including 14 class-A war criminals, and is thus viewed by Koreans (and many other Asians, including the Chinese) as a main symbol of Japanese militarism. Concerning these historical issues, a large number of Koreans feel that Japan has not expressed adequate and sufficient acknowledgement of and apologies for its past injustices in colonial Korea, and hold strong hostility toward the country (Lind 2008; Jo 2022).

5 Japan incorporated the Dokdo/Takeshima islets into its territory in 1905 during the Russo-Japanese War, five years before its annexation of Korea in 1910.

One group of studies addressing this anti-Japanism in Korea investigates its impacts on the international relations involving the nation.⁶ Many of them analyze how South Korea's anti-Japanism influences its relations with Japan, while viewing their historical enmity as a principal determinant of their relations.⁷ Some research examines how the lingering animosities between South Korea and Japan affect their relations with the United States and that country's interests.⁸ There are also studies that explore the impacts of this South Korea-Japan conflict on the regional political economy in East Asia.⁹ They tend to see the history problem, involving imperial Japan's colonialism and expansionism in that region in the past, and the associated anti-Japanism in Asian nations including South Korea, as the prime factor impeding deeper East Asian regional cooperation and integration.

Meanwhile, a good number of studies analyze the domestic politics in South Korea that has led and shaped the development of anti-Japanism there.¹⁰ Not surprisingly, they generally share the view that the aforementioned turbulent historical relations between Korea and Japan are the fundamental source of the Korean people's anti-Japanese feeling. Going beyond this consensus on the long shadow of history, however, many studies also see the democratization of South Korea, along with the end of the Cold War, as having contributed substantially to the development of anti-Japanism in the nation, by heightening public demands on its government to rectify its historical grievances and redefine its foreign relations with neighboring countries.¹¹

In connection with this, many observers argue that the anti-Japanese sentiment in South Korea has been deliberately exploited by its leaders as a means of boosting their popularity and support or furthering their agendas.¹² Glosserman and Snyder (2015,

6 From the theoretical perspective, these studies stress the influence of domestic politics on foreign policy. In fact, much international relations research emphasizes the importance of domestic affairs as the centerpiece for understanding international relations, asserting that international relations offers politicians a venue for gaining or losing domestic political advantages, and that international affairs is a normal and routine aspect of ordinary domestic politics (Bueno de Mesquita 2002). Bueno de Mesquita (2002, 4), for example, holds that the analysis of leaders and their domestic incentives is crucial to understanding the motivations and constraints that shape international politics and economics. Fearon (1998) also argues that domestic politics is important in determining states' foreign policies, since it can give rise to suboptimal foreign policies or since domestic differences among states can lead to differences in their foreign policy choices.

7 See Cha (1999, 2003), Easley (2014, 2022), Easley and Park (2018) and Deacon (2022).

8 See Glosserman and Snyder (2015).

9 See Rozman (2004, 2008) and Berger (2008).

10 There are also a few studies that address how Japanese policies unreceptive to South Korea have aggravated anti-Japan sentiment in the country. See, for example, Park (2008) and Choi et al. (2014).

11 See Berger (2008), Glosserman and Snyder (2015), Hwang et al. (2018) and Jo (2022).

12 Of course, neither South Korean leaders nor the government itself have explicitly admitted any exploiting of conflicts with Japan aimed at diverting attention from domestic issues or boosting their domestic support.

99-100), for instance, hold that, especially since the consolidation of democracy in South Korea, "anti-Japanese nationalism [has] proved a ready tool for South Korean politicians," as presidents, including Kim Young Sam (1993 to 1998) and Roh Moo-hyun (2003 to 2008), have capitalized on domestic anti-Japanese sentiment to bolster their sagging approval ratings by pursuing anti-Japan policies. John Bolton (2020, 339-340), a National Security Advisor of US President Donald Trump during his first term, also remarked on how the Moon Jae-in administration (2017 to 2022) used the tactic of heightening tensions with Tokyo to deflect attention from domestic problems. "My view," Bolton said, "was that, like other South Korean political leaders, Moon tried to make Japan an issue when times at home were difficult."¹³

III. The Question and the Analytical Framework

Surprisingly, however, there has been very little quantitative research analyzing whether the South Korea-Japan relationship has *in actuality* had significant influences on South Korean governments' domestic popularity. Most studies addressing this issue are qualitative ones, although they do provide systematic empirical analyses.¹⁴ And as a result, the precise impact of the two countries' relationship on the Korean government's domestic support has rarely been analyzed quantitatively. One notable exception here may be a study by Hwang et al. (2018), presenting a regression analysis of how South Korea-Japan disputes over history have impacted South Korean politics, from the viewpoint of the rally-round-the-flag effect theory. The authors find that South Korean presidents tend to enjoy increased popularity domestically when engaging in historical disputes with Tokyo, and especially territorial conflict over the Dokdo/Takeshima islets. However, while this research does contribute significantly to the literature, it has some notable limitations as well. For one thing, it overlooks the possibility of meaningful variations in the effects of such disputes across different segments of society, such as different age or political ideology groups. It also focuses only on the impacts of conflicts between the two countries, without considering those of policies adopted to promote amicable relations between them.

Does South Korea's relationship with Japan *actually* influence domestic support for its government significantly? This study aims to provide a systematic quantitative

¹³ See also Berger (2008, 110) and Jo (2022).

¹⁴ See Lind (2008) and Jo (2002).

analysis of this issue, which is of critical importance to the two neighbors' relations. But before beginning, it should first be clarified how the South Korea-Japan relationship might affect domestic government support in the country. In this regard, this research identifies two distinct mechanisms through which it is likely to do so, from the perspective of identity politics that some recent studies of Korea's relations with Japan have adopted.¹⁵

To elucidate these two mechanisms in detail, let it first be noted that a nation's conception of its identity is what it thinks it is and how it sees itself, and that this shapes the things which it believes to be important—i.e., its interests—and its conceptions of who its friends and its enemies are, to thus affect its foreign policy (Glosserman and Snyder 2015, 14-18).¹⁶ While a national identity is forged by various factors including nationally inculcated values, one of its essential elements is the collective historical memory of its people, which is an intersubjective understanding of the past (Becker 2014; Deacon 2022; Jo 2022). It is notable in this regard that trauma, occurring when a nation's people have been subjected to a horrific event that has left stubborn scars on their group consciousness, tends to cast a long, weighty shadow over the construction of their collective memory and hence identity (Becker 2014; Deacon 2022). In fact, as discussed in the previous section, the strong and widespread anti-Japan sentiment in South Korea has been closely connected to painful memories of the Japanese colonial experience, as well as to Japanese impenitence for it (Glosserman and Snyder 2015; Deacon 2022; Jo 2022).

The adoption of this understanding of South Korean anti-Japanism allows us to examine two discrete types of occurrences through which South Korea's relationship with Japan might affect its domestic government support: its conflicts with Japan, and the pursuit of Japan-friendly policies by its government. First, the emergence of tensions between Korea and Japan may boost anti-Japan sentiment and work to reinforce domestic support for the government, as they may be perceived in connection with the collective memory of historical threats from Japan (Deacon 2022). The Korean colonial memory positions Japan as an aggressor that repeats its aggression, leading Koreans to resist (Deacon 2022, 812). In this way, conflicts between the two neighboring nations may have rally-round-the-flag effects in Korea, boosting popular support for its government, as noted by Hwang et al. (2018).

15 See Glosserman and Snyder (2015) and Deacon (2022).

16 Deacon (2022) notes that a nation's identity is the lens through which it filters information on contemporary international interactions.

This is not the only possible manifestation of anti-Japanism in the country, however. Korea's painful historical memories of Japan may in addition shape the boundaries of what is considered legitimate and acceptable in its government's interactions with that country. As a result, if the government pursues policies that appear favorable to Japan, anti-Japan sentiment can also be exhibited in the opposition to these policies, which may be perceived as ignoring, denying or clashing with the distressing historical memories of Japan (Deacon 2022, 807). Therefore, Seoul's adopting of policies seen as cordial to Japan may undermine its domestic political position. The empirical analysis of this study examines both of these two discrete ways in which Korea's relationship with Japan may influence the domestic political support of its government, by employing Korea's conflicts with Japan and the adoption of Japan-friendly policies by its government as the independent variables, as will be explained in greater detail in the following section.

Meanwhile, it also bears stressing that, while collective historical memory plays a critical role in the construction of a nation's identity, it is an arena of political contestation, both within and across nations, and is therefore shaped by social conflict and power struggles and is hence mutable and subject to alteration (Deacon 2022; Jo 2022). And national identity is accordingly also not static, but contested and constructed and subject to change (Glosserman and Snyder 2015, 18). In fact, Jo (2022), for instance, notes the existence of domestic political contestation concerning the anti-Japanese memory in South Korea. She highlights some notable divides related to anti-Japanism between liberal and conservative politicians, especially since the time of Korea's democratization, suggesting that differences in people's political positions might lead to differences in their levels of anti-Japanism as well. Recent surveys also find the degrees of affinity toward Japan varying across different age groups in Korea.¹⁷ Against this background, this study analyzes whether the impacts of the South Korea-Japan relationship on Seoul's domestic support vary across segments of the domestic Korean population differing, in particular, in terms of age, political ideology, and political party support.

IV. Research Design

This study conducts a quantitative analysis of whether South Korea's relationship with Japan *actually does* affect domestic backing for its government. The observation period is from January 2012 to August 2023—during which time four presidents were

17 See the annual public opinion polls conducted by the East Asia Institute on South Korea-Japan relations.

in power in Korea: Lee Myung-bak (2008 to 2013), Park Geun-hye (2013 to 2017), Moon Jae-in (2017 to 2022) and Yoon Suk Yeol (2022 to the present). Meanwhile, this research does *not* address the issue of whether Korean politicians actually capitalize on anti-Japan sentiments for domestic political purposes, as is often claimed in the literature and media.

A. Dependent Variables: Presidential Approval Ratings

This study employs as its dependent variables the weekly presidential approval ratings of the aggregates of respondents in the surveys considered, as well as those of diverse segments comprising them broken down by age, political ideology and political party support. The surveys asked the question, "Do you think that the president is performing his/her duties well or that he/she is not?", and the respondents had four options for their replies: "performing well," "performing neither well nor not well," "not performing well," and "don't know/decline to answer." The approval rating attributed to a group is defined as the percentage of its respondents who chose the answer "performing well" to the question.¹⁸

There are five age groups into which the respondents are divided: of those from 18 to 29 years old (19 to 29 until the second week of January 2020), 30 to 39, 40 to 49, 50 to 59, and 60 years of age and over.¹⁹ In terms of political ideology, meanwhile, respondents are separated into three clusters, comprising conservatives, centrists and progressives. With regard to the political parties that they support, they are also sorted into three groups: of supporters of the leading conservative party (the People Power Party and its predecessors), supporters of the main liberal party (the Democratic Party of Korea and its predecessors) and people who do not support any party in particular. This research examines the presidential approval ratings expressed by both the three political ideology groups and the three groups of political party supporters, considering that the former groups do not necessarily correspond to the latter. The total number of these diverse dependent variables is 12.

The data are from the Gallup Korea Daily Opinion survey, a weekly poll conducted

18 I built and tested models using presidential disapproval ratings (the percentages of the respondents who selected the answer "not performing well" in the surveys) as well, and found their results to be quite similar to those for the models estimated in this study. This paper therefore does not include these additional results, since that would double the number of its models, and risk inundating readers with data while making only limited additional contributions.

19 The voting age was lowered from 19 to 18 beginning from 2020.

by the major public opinion survey company Gallup Korea. The surveys during the observation period were conducted through calls made to cellular phones of people who were 18 years old (19 until the second week of January 2020) or older, and the total number of respondents in each survey was around 1,000.²⁰ Surveys were not carried out during election weeks, the Korean New Year's Day (Seollal) holidays, the Korean Thanksgiving Day (Chuseok) holidays, or the period of President Park's suspension from her duties (December 2016 to May 2017). The Gallup Korea Daily Opinion survey was started from January 2012, and that date is accordingly the beginning of this study's observation period.

B. Independent Variables: Conflict with Japan and Japan-friendly Policy

This study uses two independent variables, in order to reflect the two categories of developments in the South Korea-Japan relationship discussed above that might influence approval for the Korean president: conflict between the two countries (*Conflict with Japan*) and South Korean policy amicable to Japan (*Japan-friendly policy*). The events assessed in this research as conflicts between the two nations consist of policies or actions of their governments or other public actors that could generate unfavorable views of Japan in South Korea—in particular, those related to issues such as Dokdo/Takeshima, the comfort women, the Yasukuni Shrine, the Japanese right of collective self-defense, Japan's bid for permanent membership on the United Nations Security Council, the contents of Japanese textbooks regarding historical issues, the forced Korean labor under Japanese colonial rule, Japanese economic sanctions imposed on South Korea, and Japan's decision to release contaminated water from the Fukushima nuclear power plant. Meanwhile, the Korean policies evaluated as friendly to Japan comprise summit meetings between the two countries' leaders, the 2015 agreement between Seoul and Tokyo on the comfort women issue,²¹ military cooperation between the two nations, through for example the General Security of Military Information Agreement, and the Yoon Suk Yeol administration's policies pursued to resolve the forced labor issue and its support of the Fukushima waste water release.²²

20 Before July 2023 the survey used the method of random digital dialing, in which telephone numbers were generated randomly. However, it has since employed a new method under which virtual phone numbers are received from the three major mobile carriers, along with the information on each customer's region, gender and age.

21 South Korea and Japan signed a deal in December 2015 to put an end to their historical feud over this issue, with the latter agreeing to donate one billion yen for the establishment of a foundation to support the surviving Korean comfort women.

Both of the two independent variables are binary ones, and are coded 1 for the weeks when relevant events occurred and 0 otherwise for the primary models, as I will explain in detail later when elucidating how the models for regression analysis are built. The data on all of South Korea's conflicts with Japan and its Japan-friendly policies were also collected from the Gallup Korea Daily Opinion survey, which reports every week on the occurrence of major events that might affect public opinion, including those examined in this study.

The expectation is that the impacts of these two explanatory variables will vary across different age, political ideology and party supporter groups. In this regard, it is worth noting recent survey findings that the older South Korean generations tend to hold more unfavorable impressions of Japan than do the younger generations.²³ This may be due to the shorter temporal distances from Korea's colonial past of the older generations, which lead them to view this history as more personally relevant than the younger generations do. Meanwhile, it is argued in some studies that liberal politicians have utilized anti-Japan narratives to signal their democratic credibility, and to try to delegitimize conservative politicians by linking their Japan-friendly policies with the nation's colonial past as well as its post-colonial authoritarian history, while conservative politicians have on the other hand tended to distance themselves from the colonial-authoritarian framework and from engagement with the anti-Japan discourse.²⁴ Considering these findings and arguments in the literature, positive impacts of *Conflict with Japan* on presidential approval and negative effects of *Japan-friendly policy* would seem more likely to be observed among the older groups, the political progressives and the liberal party supporters.

C. Control Variables

This analysis controls for the impacts on the dependent variables of several factors that are often found significant in the literature on presidential approval ratings in South Korea:²⁵

South-North Korean relations. Although the Korean War ended in 1953, South and North Korea are still in a state of truce only, and the South sees the North as

22 The public opposition to these policies in South Korea may not have been driven by anti-Japan sentiment alone. However, it is unlikely that this sentiment can be ruled out from being at least one of the factors underlying that opposition.

23 See East Asia Institute and the Genron NPO (2022).

24 See Jo (2022) and Chey and Jeon (2024).

25 See Cho and Han (2010), Hwang et al. (2018) and Jeon and Nam (2023).

its biggest security threat. Indeed, the two Koreas have occasionally engaged in military clashes. On the other hand, however, there are also strong voices in the South calling for the cultivation of friendlier relations with the North, with many of them wishing for Korean reunification. As a result, South-North relations have affected politics in South Korea significantly in diverse ways. This research thus controls for the impacts of North Korean security threats (*NK security threat*), including nuclear weapons tests and missile launches by the North. It also controls for the effects of other conflicts between the South and the North (*Other conflicts with NK*), such as those over the Gaeseong Industrial Complex (a former inter-Korean manufacturing complex in Gaeseong, North Korea)²⁶ and Pyongyang's criticisms of policies adopted by Seoul. Additionally, this study controls for the impacts of improvements in South-North relations (*Improvement of South-North relations*), by considering such events as cooperative policies agreed to by the South and the North, reunions of separated family members in the two countries, and friendly inter-Korean exchanges. These three variables of South-North relations are all dichotomous ones, which are coded 1 for weeks of occurrence of relevant events and 0 otherwise. The data were obtained from the Gallup Korea Daily Opinion survey.

President. Presidential popularity varies across different presidents. To control for presidents' unique characteristics, therefore, this study creates three dummy variables, for Presidents Park Geun-hye (*PD: Park*), Moon Jae-in (*PD: Moon*) and Yoon Suk Yeol (*PD: Yoon*), while leaving President Lee Myung-bak as the reference category.

Honeymoon effect. In general, presidents tend to enjoy high approval ratings during the honeymoon periods immediately following their elections, owing to constituents' high expectations for their new governments. This study therefore includes a binary variable (*Honeymoon*) to control for such effects, coding it as 1 for the first six months after presidential inaugurations and 0 otherwise, in line with the analysis of honeymoon effects by Hwang et al. (2018).

Macroeconomic conditions. The literature tends to find that macroeconomic conditions affect presidential approval ratings,²⁷ and two of the indicators of macroeconomic conditions most commonly employed in the literature are a stock index and the consumer price index (CPI). This study accordingly includes among its control variables the Korea Composite Stock Price Index (KOSPI), the major stock market index in South Korea, as well as the nation's CPI. Concerning the KOSPI, weekly data are available, and

26 The Gaeseong Industrial Complex was launched in 2004, with financing largely by the South, as a means of increasing inter-Korean cooperation. However, the North shut it down in 2016.

27 See Cho and Han (2010), Hwang et al. (2018) and Jeon and Nam (2023).

the closing prices of the last weekdays (usually, albeit not always Fridays) are used. The data are from the KRX Market Data System. In the case of the CPI, meanwhile, weekly data are unavailable but monthly data are. This research therefore uses the CPI of a specific month for each of that month's individual weeks. The CPI data are from the Bank of Korea, the South Korean central bank.

The descriptive statistics for all of the variables are presented in Table 1.²⁸

Table 1. Descriptive statistics

Variables	Obs.	Mean	SD	Min.	Max.
PAR [*] , total respondents	532	43.594	14.936	4.000	84.000
PAR, ages 18 to 29	530	35.523	21.252	0.000	94.000
PAR, ages 30 to 39	530	39.285	23.417	0.000	95.000
PAR, ages 40 to 49	530	43.687	21.062	2.000	93.000
PAR, ages 50 to 59	530	46.840	15.287	3.000	82.000
PAR, ages 60 and over	530	51.958	18.393	9.000	88.000
PAR, conservatives	390	36.744	17.544	5.000	82.000
PAR, centrists	390	40.300	18.649	2.000	87.000
PAR, progressives	390	50.826	32.532	1.000	97.000
PAR, CPS ^{**}	503	43.654	32.270	1.000	91.000
PAR, NPS ^{***}	503	28.519	12.428	2.000	70.000
PAR, LPS ^{****}	503	45.915	36.216	0.000	98.000
Conflict with Japan	609	0.077	0.267	0.000	1.000
Japan-friendly policy	609	0.062	0.242	0.000	1.000
NK security threat	609	0.095	0.294	0.000	1.000
Other conflicts with NK	609	0.053	0.223	0.000	1.000
Improvement of South-North relations	609	0.084	0.277	0.000	1.000
PD: Park	609	0.363	0.481	0.000	1.000
PD: Moon	609	0.427	0.495	0.000	1.000
PD: Yoon	609	0.113	0.317	0.000	1.000
Honeymoon	609	0.131	0.338	0.000	1.000

28 Given that presidential popularity tends to decline over time, some quantitative research controls for this by including in the regression model a variable to capture the gradual erosion in presidential approval. However, since the regression models in this study take the first differences of the dependent variables, as will be discussed later, they analyze the changes in presidential approval ratings rather than their levels. And this may allow for examination of the independent variables' effects without concern about the influence of long-term trends in presidential approval. In fact, I did nevertheless also build and run regression models with variables included to control for gradual declines in presidential approval, and found the effects of the two independent variables, *Conflict with Japan* and *Japan-friendly policy*, to be quite similar to their effects in the models considered in this study.

Table 1. Continued

Variables	Obs.	Mean	SD	Min.	Max.
KOSPI	609	2241.445	354.992	1566.150	3302.840
CPI	609	98.585	5.310	91.242	112.330

*presidential approval rating, **conservative party supporters, ***no party supported, ****liberal party supporters

D. Models and Estimation Method

This study builds two sets of models, each consisting of 12 models, to investigate the impacts of the two independent variables on the various dependent ones. The first set comprises the prime models for this research, Models 1 through 12. Model 1 examines the impacts on the presidential approval rating expressed by all respondents to the weekly Gallup poll as a whole, while Models 2 through 6 analyze the effects on different age groups of respondents—those 18 to 29, 30 to 39, 40 to 49, 50 to 59, and 60 and over years of age, respectively. Meanwhile, the groups of respondents used for the dependent variables of Models 7 to 12 are, respectively, conservatives, centrists, progressives, supporters of the main conservative party, those who don't support any particular party, and backers of the chief liberal party. In all of Models 1 to 12, the independent variable *Conflict with Japan* is coded 1 for weeks during which conflicts between South Korea and Japan emerged and 0 for those when they did not, while the other independent variable *Japan-friendly policy* is coded 1 for weeks when Seoul introduced policies amicable to Japan and 0 otherwise.

For the second set of models, numbered 13 to 24, the two independent variables representing the South Korea-Japan relationship and the three control variables of South-North relations are coded 1 for weeks when corresponding events occurred and *also* the single weeks following, and 0 for other weeks. This is done to consider the lagged effects of those events as well. Except for these differences in terms of the five variables, Models 13 to 24 are constructed identically with Models 1 to 12 respectively.

The stationarity of time series data is crucial for their regression analysis, since non-stationary data can yield misleading or spurious results. Therefore, to assess the stationarity of the time series data in this study—for all of the 12 dependent and the two control variables of the KOSPI and the CPI—Augmented Dickey-Fuller unit root tests were conducted. The test results indicated that, at the 1% significance level, all variables except for two (the approval ratings given by survey respondents in their 50s and by those who do not support any particular party) are non-stationary. This study therefore takes the first differences of all 14 variables, thereby rendering them

all stationary at the 1% significance level.

Meanwhile, the existence of multicollinearity between variables can undermine their statistical significance by inflating standard errors. This study thus tested for multicollinearity by examining the variance inflation factor (VIF) values of all independent and control variables. The VIF values for the two independent variables, *Conflict with Japan* and *Japan-friendly policy*, are 1.03 and 1.07, respectively, while the mean VIF for all variables is 1.49. These results indicate an unlikelihood of this study encountering significant multicollinearity issues, as VIF values that are close to 1 suggest minimal multicollinearity.

Durbin-Watson tests indicated significant first-order autocorrelation in most of the 24 models,²⁹ and Prais-Winsten regression was hence used to address that issue.

V. Results and Discussion

The regression results for the set of primary models, Models 1 to 12, are presented in Table 2. They show that South Korea's conflicts with Japan do not significantly affect the presidential approval ratings given by either the survey respondents as a whole or any of their five age, three political ideology, and three party supporter groups. A Seoul policy amicable to Japan does show a significant negative impact on presidential approval, but only in the single model concerned with the group of those 60 years old and above (Model 6). The scale of this impact also appears to be quite limited, pulling approval for the president down by 1.6 percentage points only.

The results for the second set of models, Models 13 to 24, which take into account the potential lagged effects of the two independent variables involved with the South Korea-Japan relationship (and of the three control variables reflecting South-North relations as well) appear in Table 3. The outcomes differ to a certain extent from those found for the 12 primary models. *Conflict with Japan* does show a significant effect, but only in one model—that for centrists—where its magnitude seems modest, raising the presidential approval rate given by just 1.1 percentage points. Meanwhile, *Japan-friendly policy* has no significant effects on any of the age groups or any of the groups based on different political ideologies or party support, or on total respondents in the aggregate either.

To briefly report the effects of the control variables in the full 24 models, *NK security threat* has no significant impact in any of them, while *Other conflicts with NK* has significant negative effects in the two models examining the presidential support expressed

29 The tests found absences of significant autocorrelation in a mere one-quarter of the models.

Table 2. *Impacts on presidential approval ratings*

	M1	M2	M3	M4	M5	M6	M7	M8	M9	M10	M11	M12
Total	18 to 29	30 to 39	40 to 49	50 to 59	60 and over	Conservatives	Centrists	Progressives	Conservative party supporters	No party supporters	Liberal party supporters	
Conflict with Japan	0.087 (0.500)	0.078 (0.761)	0.234 (0.736)	0.847 (0.736)	0.507 (0.830)	-0.552 (0.847)	1.538 (1.178)	0.619 (0.830)	-0.025 (0.870)	-0.346 (0.970)	0.461 (0.665)	0.312 (0.748)
Japan-friendly policy	-0.794 (0.547)	-0.796 (0.828)	-0.108 (0.802)	-0.626 (0.802)	-0.806 (0.905)	-1.616* (0.925)	-1.017 (1.213)	-0.170 (0.858)	0.205 (0.899)	-1.070 (1.098)	-0.674 (0.752)	0.137 (0.847)
NK security threat	0.311 (0.463)	0.617 (0.718)	-0.177 (0.694)	1.002 (0.694)	0.016 (0.780)	0.419 (0.792)	-1.070 (1.146)	1.273 (0.830)	1.067 (0.867)	-0.085 (0.913)	-0.363 (0.635)	0.719 (0.705)
Other conflicts with NK	0.938 (0.590)	0.020 (0.922)	0.668 (0.891)	0.727 (0.891)	1.416 (1.000)	-0.041 (1.015)	-0.105 (1.756)	-2.465** (1.245)	0.077 (1.304)	0.289 (1.151)	0.528 (0.808)	0.509 (0.889)
Improvement of South-North relations	0.487 (0.465)	0.046 (0.679)	0.341 (0.660)	0.720 (0.659)	0.499 (0.747)	0.028 (0.771)	-0.436 (1.042)	-1.293* (0.726)	-0.638 (0.762)	0.147 (0.901)	0.223 (0.594)	1.204* (0.692)
PD: Park	-0.220 (0.457)	-0.063 (0.599)	-0.116 (0.586)	-0.292 (0.584)	-0.093 (0.674)	-0.397 (0.713)	-1.147 (1.025)	-0.524 (0.694)	-0.477 (0.730)	-0.460 (1.147)	-0.327 (0.694)	-0.217 (0.874)
PD: Moon	-0.347 (0.442)	-0.066 (0.579)	-0.432 (0.567)	-0.580 (0.564)	-0.296 (0.651)	-0.315 (0.690)	-0.332 (0.803)	0.237 (0.544)	-0.002 (0.573)	-0.697 (1.125)	-0.470 (0.679)	-0.234 (0.857)
PD: Yoon	-0.066 (0.579)	-0.039 (0.766)	-0.719 (0.748)	-0.387 (0.746)	-0.290 (0.858)	0.407 (0.905)	1.010 (1.049)	0.215 (0.714)	-0.724 (0.751)	0.718 (1.332)	-0.376 (0.812)	-1.341 (1.016)
Honeymoon	-0.305 (0.404)	-0.906* (0.531)	-0.235 (0.519)	-0.516 (0.517)	-0.263 (0.595)	0.315 (0.628)	-0.102 (0.886)	-1.447** (0.605)	-1.237* (0.636)	0.518 (0.754)	-0.137 (0.460)	-0.627 (0.575)
KOSPI	-0.002 (0.003)	0.002 (0.004)	-0.000 (0.004)	-0.002 (0.004)	-0.003 (0.005)	-0.003 (0.005)	-0.007 (0.005)	0.006 (0.004)	-0.002 (0.004)	0.000 (0.005)	-0.001 (0.004)	0.003 (0.004)
CPI	0.564 (0.823)	-0.169 (1.333)	2.120* (1.285)	0.406 (1.287)	0.068 (1.436)	-0.570 (1.445)	1.885 (1.643)	-0.258 (1.196)	-1.447 (1.250)	0.377 (1.632)	0.504 (1.180)	-0.094 (1.264)
N	493	491	491	491	491	491	361	361	361	464	464	464
R ²	0.016	0.010	0.012	0.017	0.009	0.012	0.032	0.048	0.030	0.011	0.007	0.026

Note: Standard errors in parentheses. *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$.

Table 3. Impacts on presidential approval ratings in light of lagged effects of South Korea-Japan relations

	M13	M14	M15	M16	M17	M18	M19	M20	M21	M22	M23	M24
	Total	18 to 29	30 to 39	40 to 49	50 to 59	60 and over	Conservatives	Centrists	Progressives	Conservative party supporters	No party supporters	Liberal party supporters
Conflict with Japan	0.171 (0.393)	0.498 (0.553)	0.265 (0.538)	0.583 (0.539)	-0.163 (0.613)	0.037 (0.637)	0.244 (0.926)	1.080* (0.641)	-0.182 (0.675)	0.054 (0.749)	0.329 (0.481)	0.179 (0.574)
Japan-friendly policy	-0.620 (0.436)	-0.817 (0.613)	0.110 (0.597)	-0.166 (0.598)	-1.015 (0.680)	-1.148 (0.708)	-0.454 (0.946)	-0.381 (0.654)	0.414 (0.689)	-0.678 (0.861)	-0.435 (0.553)	0.173 (0.660)
NK security threat	0.189 (0.368)	0.462 (0.526)	-0.109 (0.512)	0.484 (0.512)	0.446 (0.581)	-0.028 (0.603)	-0.790 (0.845)	0.700 (0.590)	0.717 (0.621)	-0.488 (0.715)	-0.391 (0.466)	0.464 (0.549)
Other conflicts with NK	0.426 (0.463)	-0.006 (0.655)	-0.105 (0.637)	0.571 (0.638)	1.070 (0.726)	-0.091 (0.754)	-0.960 (1.292)	-2.507*** (0.894)	-0.778 (0.941)	-0.538 (0.895)	0.435 (0.579)	0.623 (0.687)
Improvement of South-North relations	0.295 (0.390)	-0.005 (0.534)	-0.099 (0.521)	0.408 (0.521)	0.162 (0.595)	0.271 (0.622)	-0.986 (0.873)	-1.037* (0.599)	-0.913 (0.631)	0.341 (0.741)	0.180 (0.466)	0.650 (0.566)
PD: Park	-0.208 (0.465)	-0.094 (0.610)	-0.020 (0.596)	-0.372 (0.596)	-0.067 (0.686)	-0.403 (0.726)	-1.111 (1.022)	-0.358 (0.692)	-0.502 (0.730)	-0.324 (1.160)	-0.332 (0.701)	-0.339 (0.882)
PD: Moon	-0.338 (0.442)	-0.100 (0.578)	-0.342 (0.566)	-0.580 (0.566)	-0.234 (0.651)	-0.383 (0.691)	-0.054 (0.802)	0.266 (0.543)	0.154 (0.573)	-0.702 (1.126)	-0.458 (0.678)	-0.252 (0.856)
PD: Yoon	-0.050 (0.585)	-0.020 (0.773)	-0.816 (0.755)	-0.498 (0.755)	-0.096 (0.867)	0.426 (0.916)	1.084 (1.058)	0.200 (0.719)	-0.770 (0.758)	0.711 (1.346)	-0.346 (0.817)	-1.403 (1.024)
Honeymoon	-0.295 (0.410)	-0.884 (0.538)	-0.126 (0.526)	-0.481 (0.526)	-0.463 (0.604)	0.369 (0.638)	-0.297 (0.894)	-1.387** (0.609)	-1.355** (0.642)	0.667 (0.768)	-0.139 (0.467)	-0.659 (0.585)
KOSPI	-0.002 (0.003)	0.002 (0.004)	0.000 (0.004)	-0.002 (0.004)	-0.002 (0.005)	-0.003 (0.005)	-0.007 (0.006)	0.006 (0.004)	-0.002 (0.004)	-0.000 (0.005)	-0.001 (0.004)	0.003 (0.004)
CPI	0.582 (0.821)	-0.154 (1.327)	2.105 (1.281)	0.407 (1.286)	-0.062 (1.431)	-0.459 (1.441)	1.831 (1.637)	-0.118 (1.184)	-1.459 (1.242)	0.476 (1.625)	0.517 (1.176)	-0.210 (1.262)
N	493	491	491	491	491	491	361	361	361	464	464	464
R ²	0.011	0.014	0.011	0.013	0.011	0.011	0.031	0.062	0.036	0.013	0.009	0.024

Note: Standard errors in parentheses. *** p < 0.01, ** p < 0.05, * p < 0.1.

by centrists (Models 8 and 20). *Improvement of South-North relations* pushes presidential approval up in one of the two models concerned with liberal party supporters (Model 12), but has the opposite effect in both models estimating centrists' approval (Models 8 and 20). The presidential dummy variables and the KOPSI do not show significant effects in any of the models. *Honeymoon* is negatively significant in one of the two models involving those from 18 to 29 years old (Model 2), and in all models analyzing the presidential approval expressed by centrists and progressives (Models 8, 9, 20 and 21), while the CPI has a significant positive impact on backing for the president by those in their 30s in Table 2 (Model 3).

VI. Conclusion

A number of studies addressing South Korea's relations with Japan have argued that the stubborn anti-Japan sentiment seen in the former country affects its government's policies related to the latter, which in consequence complicates the two neighbors' relations and, going further, the broader international relations involving them. Moreover, many observers have held that South Korean leaders tend to capitalize on strong anti-Japan sentiment in their country in order to strengthen their domestic political positions, by adopting anti-Japan policies or acting to heighten tensions with Japan. However, there has been surprisingly little research that quantitatively analyzes how Korea's relationship with Japan does in reality influence the domestic support for its government, although this is a critical issue for understanding how the two nations' relationship actually affects domestic Korean politics.

This study has attempted to fill that important gap in the literature, by providing a systematic quantitative analysis of how South Korea's conflicts with Japan, and its government's pursuit of policies cordial to Japan also, impact the approval ratings of its presidents. It has constructed and analyzed various regression models that estimate these effects on diverse segments of constituents separated in terms of age, political ideology and political party support, as well as on the aggregate of survey respondents as a whole. The analysis has found a significant positive impact of South Korea-Japan conflicts in boosting presidential support in only one cohort, that of centrists, where its scale is quite marginal as it raises their presidential approval by just 1.1 percentage points. Significant negative effects of Japan-friendly policies adopted by Seoul have also been seen in only one group, that of those 60 years of age and older, where their magnitude is modest as well and lowers the approval for the president stated by the

survey respondents by just 1.6 percentage points.

Some of these results meet the initial expectations presented earlier in this study, but others do not. In greater detail, it would be fair to state overall that, as expected, the impacts of South Korea's conflicts with Japan and of its government's Japan-friendly policy have been found to vary across different age, political ideology and political party supporter groups, given that significant effects are seen in only a limited number of segments.³⁰ Further, as was also anticipated, the impacts of Japan-friendly policies are negative and significant in the elderly group of those 60 years old and above. On the other hand, running counter to the initial expectation, a positive impact of South Korea-Japan conflicts has been observed among centrists. One potential explanation for this unanticipated outcome might be that, in a situation of conflict with a foreign country, centrists may perhaps value national stability to a larger extent than do more politically-oriented groups, and that their support for the government therefore increases as they tend to show greater preferences for practical policies. However, this is certainly an issue that needs further research going forward.

One more point that merits stressing is that the regression results show the effects on presidential approval of South Korea-Japan conflicts and Seoul's adoption of policies amicable to Japan to be, overall, much more limited than is conventionally believed. As discussed above, significant impacts of these variables are confined to appearances among small segments of voters only. Furthermore, their scales are all quite marginal.

These findings suggest that, even if, as some studies argue, Seoul might attempt to heighten conflicts with Japan, as a means of strengthening its domestic political position by taking advantage of anti-Japan sentiment in Korea, the effects are likely to be substantially limited in practice. They also imply that a South Korean government's policy favoring cooperation with Japan is unlikely to weaken its overall domestic support to any extensive degree. In this regard, it may be worth noting that criticisms of politicians' exploitation of anti-Japanism appear to have been growing in South Korea recently. For instance, one poll conducted in 2021 found that about 20 percent of respondents assessed Seoul's policy toward Japan negatively, citing as their reason for this its attempts to capitalize on anti-Japan sentiment for domestic political purposes.³¹ The results of the present study may be a reflection of such recent changes in anti-Japanism in South Korea.

30 This finding makes a meaningful contribution to the broader international relations literature on the relationship between domestic politics and foreign policy, by highlighting that different socio-political segments of the public respond differently to their nation's relationship with a foreign country, rather than responding in a unitary fashion.

31 There is also some recent research that gives heed to the growing criticism of anti-Japanese narratives among Korean elites in recent years. See, for example, Phillips et al. (2020).

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