

What is it for? Assessing the South Korea-Japan Deal on the Comfort Women Issue

Written by Yangmo Ku

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YANGMO KU, FEB 18 2016

On December 28th, 2015, the Republic of Korea (ROK or South Korea) and Japan made a sudden diplomatic agreement to resolve the longstanding, contentious issue of comfort women.[1] According to the deal, the Japanese government acknowledged its responsibility, though not in a legal sense, for creating and operating the network of comfort women during the Asia-Pacific War. It also promised to compensate surviving victims through the provision of governmental funds. In addition, the Japanese government issued an apologetic statement to the former victims through its foreign minister. Prime Minister Shinzo Abe called South Korean President Geun-hye Park to deliver his apology for these past offenses. The ROK government in turn accepted that this agreement was a “final and irrevocable resolution” of the issue. It also promised to consider moving a statue that memorialized comfort women from in front of the Japanese embassy in Seoul to a different place. The two governments also agreed that Seoul and Tokyo would refrain from criticizing each other over the issue at the United Nations and elsewhere. It seems that this diplomatic deal finally provides for the historical needs of both nations. The United States, a close ally of the two countries, complimented the deal as a great achievement immediately after its conclusion.

Unlike these positive assessments, however, the South Korean public has vehemently criticized the ROK government, as they believe that their government made a humiliating diplomatic deal with Japan. Thus, the comfort women issue continues to work as an impediment to the reconciliation between the two former adversaries. Given this context, I will first examine why the conclusion of the deal was unexpected. I then analyze what drove the two governments to suddenly reach an agreement. In a subsequent section, I explore the deal’s potential effects on South Korea-Japan relations and U.S. strategy toward Asia. Finally, I provide concluding remarks with some policy suggestions.

Why is the Deal Surprising?

Many experts who had continually examined ROK-Japan relations were extremely surprised by the suddenness of the deal. This surprise comes from two reasons. First, current Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzo is a historical revisionist who has made great efforts to justify Japan’s misdeeds during World War II, particularly on the comfort women issue. Abe allegedly participated in pressuring the Japanese public television NHK not to broadcast a documentary about former comfort women in 2000.[2] During his first tenure (2006-2007) as prime minister, Abe denied the Kono statement, which for the first time acknowledged Japan’s involvement in the forced recruitment of comfort women in 1993, though he reversed his position later. Furthermore, after he returned to power in December 2012, Abe asserted that no official documents existed to prove Japan’s forced recruitment of comfort women. Abe also created a Japanese government panel to investigate how and why the Kono statement came about in 1993. In June 2014, this committee revealed that the statement was made as a result of a *political* compromise between the South Korean and Japanese governments, seriously damaging the credibility of the Kono statement. Considering all these facts, it was surprising that the Abe government subsequently made the admission.

Second, ROK President Park had placed the comfort women issue as a main priority in South Korean policy toward Japan soon after she came to power in February 2013. In response to Prime Minister Abe’s unremorseful stance on Japan’s past wrongs, Park continually refused to have a summit with Abe for almost two and a half years, which was

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very unusual compared to the practices of former South Korean leaders. Although the two governments had twelve rounds of negotiations to try to resolve the contentious issue since spring 2014, the news media usually reported after each meeting that the two nations' views of the issue significantly diverged. Thus, even after the media reported that the two countries' foreign ministers were scheduled to meet on December 28, 2015, many experts did not expect the making of a diplomatic deal between the two nations.

Reasons Behind the Deal

Despite such unexpectedness, the two governments signed an agreement. I think there are several catalysts for this event. First, the Abe government has yearned to end the controversies over the longstanding, cumbersome comfort women issue in order to construct a more positive version of Japanese history and to restore its seriously damaged reputation in the international community. Over the last two decades, comfort women victims and civil society groups supporting them have consistently conducted strong transnational campaigns to push the Japanese government to accept legal responsibility for its atrocities and to provide official reparations.[3] A symbolic event to show this movement has been the weekly rallies, primarily sponsored by a nongovernmental organization in Seoul, the Korean Council for the Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan. The rallies have been held in front of the Japanese embassy in Seoul every Wednesday since January 1992. To further exert pressure on Japan, the ROK government and civil society organizations often raised the issue in international forums, including the United Nations and the International Labor Organization. These acts brought shame to Japan and seriously damaged the nation's image at a time when Japan desired to take a leadership role in the international community. Furthermore, this contentious issue found its way to the United States. Korean-American communities in the U.S. constructed comfort women monuments in many places, including Glendale, California and Palisades Park, New Jersey. Needless to say, the Japanese government and Japanese-American communities have been extremely sensitive to displays of their dishonorable past. As Prime Minister Abe clearly mentioned, Japan's next generations should not continually have to keep apologizing for the actions of past generations. The agreement itself, which stated a "final and irreversible resolution," well reflects Abe's intention to end the historical burden.

Second, President Park stated that it was urgently necessary to resolve the issue because comfort women survivors are extremely old. Nine out of 55 survivors passed away in 2015 alone. Despite this urgency, however, it seems necessary to consider an economic reason in understanding the South Korean government's decision. In the wake of former President Lee Myung-bak's visit to the Dokdo/Takeshima (Dokdo's Japanese name) Islands in August 2012, Japanese perceptions of South Korea considerably deteriorated. As a Japanese professor argues, this act infuriated the Japanese people, who believe that neighboring countries such as China, Russia, and South Korea took more aggressive actions regarding territorial issues under the rule of the Democratic Party of Japan (2009-2012), which took a somewhat weak stance on the issue.[4] President Park's inflexible stance on the comfort women issue was another factor that aggravated Japanese feelings toward South Korea. Public opinion polls, conducted annually by the Japanese Cabinet Office, evidently reflected this trend. In the poll taken in January 2012, 62.2 % of Japanese respondents had favorable perceptions of South Korea, but this number sharply decreased to 39.2 % in November 2012 to 31.5 % in December 2014. As a result, the number of Japanese tourists to South Korea considerably decreased from 3,423,218 in 2012 to 1,742,531 in 2015. Japanese investment in South Korea and trade volume between the two nations notably shrank as well. In 2011, their bilateral trade volume was \$108 billion. This number decreased to \$95 billion in 2013 and to \$72 in 2015. These consequences may have been a big political burden to the Park administration, which has desperately struggled to revitalize the South Korean economy.

Third, both South Korean and Japanese governments may have had strong pressure from their common ally, the United States, which perceived that the comfort women issue has prevented its close allies from promoting bilateral cooperation. As is widely known, the U.S. has earnestly desired to consolidate the U.S.-ROK-Japan security triangle in order to effectively check and balance the rapidly rising China. In response to the more assertive China, especially regarding the territorial disputes in the South/East China Seas, it is necessary for the U.S. to maintain close cooperation with the two allies. This is an extremely important pillar that constitutes the Obama administration's Asia policy, which is seeing the U.S. pivot to Asia. For the U.S., for instance, the construction of a missile defense system in Northeast Asia is vital to weaken China's missile capabilities as well as deter the North Korean nuclear and missile threats. To establish an effective missile defense system, the U.S. needs close cooperation with both South Korea

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and Japan, including the sharing of important military intelligence between them. To this end, the U.S. government may have pushed the two governments to agree to settle historical grievances. In a Japanese magazine, Daniel Sneider provides a detailed explanation of how the U.S. government has exerted strong pressure on the South Korean and Japanese governments to resolve the dispute.

Potential Effects on ROK-Japan Relations and U.S. Strategy toward Asia

As a result of this deal, intergovernmental relations between South Korea and Japan might improve in the short term, as the two governments have now removed a longstanding impediment to their relationship through diplomatic negotiations. The ROK and Japanese governments can now pay more attention to the promotion of bilateral economic and security cooperation. The two governments seek to deepen economic ties by encouraging more mutual trade and investment. Under the aegis of the U.S., furthermore, the two neighbors will be able to enhance mutual security cooperation vis-à-vis North Korea. To better cope with the North Korean nuclear and missile threats, they might conclude a General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) that they failed to do in 2012 due to the outburst of anti-Japanese sentiment in South Korean society.[5] The upsurge in security cooperation between the ROK and Japan will strengthen the U.S.-ROK-Japan security triangle, helping to enhance the efforts of the U.S. to rebalance its position toward China.

However, this optimistic prospect is not likely to be realised in the short-term, as the South Korean public views the deal in highly negative terms. According to public opinion polls, 56% of South Korean respondents assessed the deal negatively, while only 26% made a positive assessment.[6] Many political leaders in South Korean society joined the criticism as well. For instance, a former South Korean Unification Minister stated that the ROK government gave up its sovereignty and made the deal only due to strong U.S. pressure.[7] An opposition party leader claimed that the ROK government should invalidate the deal and renegotiate to make the Japanese government take legal responsibility for its past atrocities. Above all, former comfort women themselves came out strongly against the deal. According to them, the Japanese government must take legal responsibility for its horrible crimes and provide formal reparations. The victims also blamed the ROK government for not even consulting them before the deal was made. In addition, they stated that the two governments did not have the right to move the comfort women statue in front of the Japanese embassy in Seoul. The Korean Council and other civil society organizations that have long supported the victims continue to protest against the Japanese government by holding the so-called “Wednesday Rally.”

Given these facts, the sudden deal over comfort women could serve as a catalyst, further disrupting South Korea-Japan relations, thereby causing damage to the U.S. rebalancing strategy in Asia. First of all, it will be extremely hard for the ROK government to implement the promises of the deal, including the establishment of a foundation to distribute the Japanese government’s \$8.3 million compensation fund to comfort women survivors and move the comfort women statue in front of the Japanese embassy in Seoul. As noted before, a majority of South Koreans, as well as the comfort women victims themselves, continually refuse to accept the deal and protest against both the ROK and Japanese governments. Thus, I think the comfort women issue is not resolved, as both governments expect, but it will remain a controversial subject that keeps the two governments from promoting bilateral cooperation. Therefore, the South Korean government would be confronted with far stronger resistance from the public if it sought to bolster security and/or economic cooperation with Japan. As a consequence, the maintenance of the comfort women controversy will continue to preclude the improvement of South Korea-Japan relations, thereby weakening the U.S.-ROK-Japan security triangle. In this event, it would be hard for the U.S. to effectively use the security triangle in deterring threats from North Korea while counter-balancing an ever-assertive China.

Conclusion

As noted above, the recent deal includes the Japanese government’s direct provision of compensation to comfort women survivors. In 1995, the Japanese government actually issued an apologetic statement to these victims and helped to establish a nongovernmental fund, the so-called Asian Women’s Fund (AWF), primarily established by Japanese private citizens’ donations. However, such efforts could not bear fruit, because South Koreans harshly criticized the Japanese government for avoiding its legal responsibility through the private fund. A majority of comfort women victims did not then accept the money that the AWF offered.

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Despite such an advanced component, however, the recent deal has produced unbridled controversy. The ROK government did not consult comfort women survivors before the making of the deal. This is ironic in that the South Korean government, which had reportedly aspired to relieve the victims' suffering, did not listen to what the victims really wanted.

The official agreement includes apologies and compensation measures, but it seems quite hard for South Koreans to believe that Prime Minister Abe has sincere apologetic feelings toward comfort women victims. Before the deal, Abe continued to deny Japan's involvement in the forced recruitment of comfort women that the Japanese government had acknowledged in 1993, as noted before. In the wake of the deal, he refused to accept a Japanese Diet member's request to express a sincere apology for the past offense in his own words. Abe remarked that to end the contentious issue, he should not keep issuing apologetic statements because the deal already addressed the problem.[8] In addition, Abe's close aide, Sakurada Yoshitaka, hurt the integrity of the deal by stating that the comfort women were prostitutes. Moreover, over the last two decades, South Koreans often saw many Japanese conservative politicians and groups deny Japan's responsibility for the wrongdoing. Japanese history textbooks, all of which had once described the atrocity of the comfort women issue, recently excluded all references to the issue due to either political pressure or self-censorship.

Given these hard feelings, the issue of comfort women would not be resolved without a dramatic policy shift in both governments, particularly on the Japanese side. As mentioned earlier, Japanese Prime Minister Abe has earnestly desired to overcome the atrocities embedded in Japan's World War II history. I suggest that Abe personally visit comfort women survivors in South Korea and directly apologize for the unimaginable hardships that Japanese soldiers inflicted on them. If possible, Abe should visit the comfort women statue in front of the Japanese embassy in Seoul and kneel down, as a former German Chancellor Willy Brandt did in front of the memorial of the Jewish ghetto in Poland in 1970. These dramatic acts would play a key role in soothing the controversies involved in the contentious issue of comfort women. This suggestion does not appear very plausible given current Japanese domestic politics, as conservative politicians are powerful. However, it is extremely hard to contemplate any other option to resolve this hard problem on an official inter-governmental level, once and for all.

[1] The term *comfort women* is a euphemism for women drafted for military sexual slavery by Japan during the Asia Pacific War. This article uses the term, as many scholars have commonly used it in their works.

[2] Tessa Morris-Suzuki, "Free Speech—Silenced Voices: The Japanese Media and the NHK Affair." *Asia Rights* 4 (5), 2005.

[3] Yangmo Ku, "National Interest or Transnational Alliances? Japanese Policy on the Comfort Women Issue." *Journal of East Asian Studies*, 15 (2), 2015: 243-269.

[4] Personal Interview, Tokyo, July 15, 2014: China became far more assertive in claiming its sovereignty over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands. In September 2010, for instance, China exerted pressure on the Japanese government by restricting exports of rare earths after Japan arrested the captain of a Chinese trawler that rammed two Japan Coast Guard patrol boats off the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands. And Russian President Dmitry Medvedev made the first visit by a Russian leader to the disputed Kuril Islands in November 2010.

[5] "Japan, South Korea, and the U.S. now sharing intelligence on North Korea" *The Japan Times*, December 29, 2014. Instead of the formal intelligence sharing agreement, in December 2014, the two governments actually signed a memorandum of understanding on the sharing and safeguarding of classified information about North Korea's nuclear and missile programs. As the three-way arrangement, the two nations can share military intelligence only through the U.S.

[6] "Public Opinion Polls on Korea-Japan Deal over Comfort Women: Korea's Total Defeat" *Hankyoreh Shinmun*, January 11, 2016: On the other hand, 49 percent of Japanese respondents made positive assessments, whereas only 36 percent of them assessed the deal negatively.

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[7] "President Park's agreement over comfort women, even President Lee Myung-bak did not make the deal such way" *Pressian News*, January 14, 2016.

[8] "Abe denies his direct apology to comfort women" *Hankyoreh Shinmun*, January 12, 2016.

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Yangmo Ku is an Assistant Professor of Political Science at Norwich University. His research focuses on the politics of memory and reconciliation in East Asia and Europe, East Asian security, and US foreign policy. His previous research has appeared in numerous journals, including the *Journal of East Asian Studies*, *Asian Perspective*, *Pacific Focus*, and the *Yale Journal of International Affairs*, as well as in an edited volume, *The Routledge Handbook of Memory and Reconciliation in East Asia*.