

# **The Growing "Discomfort" with Comfort Women between South Korea and Japan**

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### **The Growing "Discomfort" with Comfort Women: Analysis of Factors of Growing Salience of the Comfort Women Issue between South Korea and Japan**

#### **Comfort Women as a Hurdle in Recent Korean-Japanese Relations**

This paper focuses on the comfort women issue between Korea and Japan to see why this issue alone has become so controversial, especially since 2011. The latest finding in a joint report on the public perception in Korea and Japan lends support to the severity of the dispute. According to the report, 63.5 percent and 58.0 percent of Korean and Japanese respondents respectively think that the comfort women issue is an obstacle in improving bilateral relations.[1] The worsening relations have been attributed to current Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and his revisionist position on the Kono Statement of 1993, which expressed apologies and remorse and recognized the involvement of military authorities back then. This has angered President Park Geun-hye, culminating in the absence of bilateral summit for the third consecutive year, indicating the poor state of bilateral ties.[2] While recognizing that Prime Minister Abe and his nationalist views on Japan's history has worsened bilateral relations by triggering furor in Korea, this paper argues that the increasing adamancy of the South Korean government in demanding a Japanese apology to the comfort women, especially since 2011, is connected to the rising confidence in South Korea in terms of economic and soft power.

This paper looks at the respective positions of both countries on the comfort women issue in the period between 1998 and 2013 because the year 1998 marked a new era of Korean-Japanese relations as Kim Dae-jung entered the office. The outline of the paper is as follows: first, the gap in the power of Korea and Japan will be measured in economic and soft power terms. Second, the positions of the Korean and Japanese governments on the comfort women issue from 1998 to 2013 will be examined. This is followed by an analysis on whether or not the relative power of both countries vis-à-vis each other has affected the severity of the comfort women issue. Finally, the paper concludes that other factors – Abe's revisionist view in the Kono Statement and the internationalization of the comfort women issue – have also made the comfort women issue a sticking point between the two countries recently.

#### **Power Gap Between South Korea and Japan**

The power 'gap' between Korea and Japan is measured in two aspects – economic and soft power – and excludes military power since Japan is constrained by Article 9 in its Peace Constitution which limits the use of force to defensive purposes only.

##### *Relative Economic Power*

The relative economic power of Korea and Japan will be compared in terms of economic growth rate, gross national product (GDP) per capita, and gross national income (GNI) based on purchasing power parity. As shown in Figure 1, Korea has enjoyed higher rates of economic growth than Japan since 1998, although the gap has narrowed since 2012.[3]

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As for GDP per capita, the gap has remained somewhat consistent, although Japan has experienced greater fluctuations while Korea has maintained a gradual rise.[4]

However, GNI based on purchasing power parity (PPP) shows a different picture. The gap between Korea and Japan has narrowed as shown in Figure 3.[5]

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Putting these data together, Korea's economy has been catching up with that of Japan since 1998. Moreover, as Korea's economic growth rate remains higher than that of Japan, we can expect the economic power gap between the two to have narrowed further after 2013.

## *Relative Soft Power*

While there is no commonly-used soft power index to measure a country's soft power, this paper chose two criteria to compare the soft power of Korea and Japan. The first is the American public perception of both countries. The U.S. was chosen because it is still the global hegemony and hence wields significant influence over almost all global matters. Favorable American perception on a country therefore would be a merit for a country's reputation. The second criterion considers the self-perception of Korea and Japan regarding their global reputation in multilateral diplomacy.

According to a survey conducted by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs, Americans' favorability towards Japan and Korea on a score of 0 to 100 has narrowed significantly between 2006 and 2014.[6] This is also supported by the poll published by the Japanese ministry of foreign affairs, which shows that both the general population and opinion leaders in the U.S. started viewing Korea as the "most important partner of the U.S. in Asia" starting from 2010 although the figure is dwarfed by that corresponding to Japan. Nevertheless, it is the relativity between Korea and Japan that counts, and thus the increasing positive views in America on Korea in recent years points to a narrowing gap on soft power in the U.S.[7]

As for their self-perception in diplomacy, Korea has experienced significant changes. First, it became the first aid-recipient country in the world to become a donor as it joined the OECD Development Assistance Committee in 2009,[8] making its economic growth model more attractive to developing countries. Second, Korea has also promoted global agenda like 'green growth,' hosted international summits – the Group of 20 (G20) summit meeting in 2010, the Nuclear Security Summit in 2012, and the Seoul Conference on Cyberspace in 2013 – and also began housing new international organizations such as the Global Green Growth Institute and soon in the future, the Global Climate Fund. The Korean foreign ministry took such events as meaningful to Korea's international status as an "advanced country." [9] Korea's increasing leadership in global affairs therefore would boost its overall confidence in conducting diplomacy.

As for Japan, its economic stagnation continuing into the 2000s, with China overtaking it as the world's second largest economy in 2010. Also, the Great East Japan Earthquake in 2011[10] lowered a Japanese self-confidence that was built upon its economic power in the 1980s.[11] This had adverse impact on Japan's soft power, as it delegitimized the previously-awed Japanese economic model and diminished its diplomatic influence.[12] Therefore, when compared, the two countries had experienced changes in their diplomatic influence in opposing directions – Korea, positive and Japan, negative.

## **Korea and Japan's Approach toward the Comfort Women Issue**

This section looks at the importance of comfort women issue in the bilateral relations between 1998 and 2013. Basically, while the Japanese government has been insisting that it has been expressing its apologies and remorse on many occasions,[13] its consistency on the upholding of the Kono Statement is unclear. This is especially so for Prime Minister Abe, who questioned the coerciveness of the comfort women system in 2007 while allegedly upholding the statement. [14] In his second term, his position is again ambiguous as will be explained later. Moreover, many of the apologies or statements regarding history by previous leaders like Keizo Obuchi in 1998, Yukio Hatoyama in 2009; Naoto Kan in 2010 did not mention comfort women, and therefore were not accepted by Koreans.[15]

As for the Korean government, its demand for apology depends on how salient the issue is domestically. Whether the issue gets raised by the Korean government officially depends on how strong the Korean public's demand is. This was so during the Roh Moo-hyun and Lee Myung-bak's administrations. In the early days during Roh's term, the

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Korean Council for the Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan called for Roh's government to settle the issue. Although Roh initially took a passive stance in his first year in office by not raising the issue of Japanese colonization, he became more active in calling for Japan to resolve the comfort women from 2003.[16] The succeeding government under President Lee Myung-bak was also initially soft on the comfort women issue.[17] Even when Prime Minister Naoto Kan's message on the 100th anniversary of Japanese annexation of Korea left out the comfort women issue, the Blue House responded positively to the speech by welcoming Japan's efforts in improving bilateral ties.[18] Even after the Korean constitutional court ruled that the Korean government ought to resolve the issue in August 2011, it was not raised at the summit-level meetings in September and November 2011. However, as the weekly protest outside the Japanese embassy in Seoul was reaching its 1000<sup>th</sup>, and the comfort women monument was erected in front of the Japanese embassy in December 2011, President Lee for the first time in his term demanded apology at the summit level in December 2011.[19] It was since then the comfort women became a key bilateral issue including at the summit level as Prime Minister Naoto Kan responded by demanding the statute to be removed.[20]

The dispute escalated in 2012 as Lee constantly called for Japan to resolve the comfort women issue, even to the extent of calling for the Japanese emperor to apologize if he wants to visit Korea.[21] The current administration under Park Geun-hye, however, has been different from her predecessors as the comfort women issue became a huge hurdle for the bilateral relations right from the beginning of her term. The dispute soon spilled over into the international arena as the South Korean government started involving the U.S. after realizing that the latter was paying attention to Korean-Japanese dispute over the issue.[22] President Park even criticized Japan regarding history in front of U.S. Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel, saying that "trust has not been built" as Japan is "repeatedly making regressive remarks on historical and territorial issues." [23] Hence, over the years the comfort women issue has emerged among the different historical issues to become a conspicuous source of Korean-Japanese diplomatic tensions.

## Analysis of Korea-Japan Power Gap and the Comfort Women Issue

This section analyzes the comfort women issue in Korean-Japanese relations from 1998 to 2013 to see if the narrowing power gap between Korea and Japan escalated the dispute over the comfort women issue.

### *Korea's Rising Confidence in the Recent Years*

As already seen in the second chapter of this paper, economic power gap has narrowed between the two countries, albeit insignificantly. As for soft power, while it is hard to discern whether the gap has indeed narrowed, Korea has played a more active role in global issues spanning from security to environment, allowing it to be more confident in exerting global influence than in the past. Former president Lee Myung-bak also believed that Japan had lost its global clout. After his visit to Dokdo/Takeshima on August 10 2012, he was quoted as saying that he expected an uproar in Japan, but added that he thinks Japan "no longer has the influence it previously had" in the international society.[24]

The current Park administration also expressed Korea's confidence as an influential actor as it pushed for the Northeast Asian Peace and Cooperation Initiative ("NAPCI") in 2013. This initiative envisions Korea building a "new order of multilateral cooperation" with bigger powers like the U.S., China, and Russia,[25] signaling its rising confidence in multilateral diplomacy. Japan, however, is left out of the picture, indicating that Korea does not perceive Japan as important as it does the U.S., China, or Russia. This could be the reason why presidents Lee and Park have been more persistent in demanding Japan to apologize and resolve the comfort women issue, since they believe that Korea now has greater global clout and therefore faces a lower diplomatic risk. Therefore from these two administrations, Korea's rising confidence in diplomacy in the last decade has allowed Korea to take a harder stance towards Japan in the comfort women issue.

### *Why the Comfort Women Issue over Others?*

Rising Korean confidence in the recent years alone cannot explain why the comfort women issue has received

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greater limelight than other historical issues. Three other factors could also account for this: first, Prime Minister Abe's plan to revise the Kono Statement, second, the comfort women issue has become a human rights issue, and lastly, the dispute over comfort women issue has spilled over to the U.S.

First, Prime Minister Abe is the only Japanese leader since the 1993 Kono Statement to have explicitly questioned its qualification. During his term in 2007, he said that there was no evidence to prove that there was coercion in the comfort women system. In his current term, Abe has been giving unclear signals on the upholding of the Kono Statement. Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoshihide Suga once said at a press conference that it would be "desirable for experts and historians to study" the statement.[26] Five months later, he said that Japan had no plans to alter its stance on the statement.[27] However, in February 2014, Prime Minister Abe told a Japanese lawmaker that "there is a need to seriously discuss [this] without missing the timing".[28] He reversed that again in March and reiterated in October 2014 that he would "inherit the historical perception of past governments," but did not mention that the perception is the Kono Statement.[29] The stance that Japan would not alter it stood after the fact-finding on the drafting process of the Kono Statement in June 2014 which concluded that Korean diplomats were involved in the drafting. Nonetheless, Abe denounced the "baseless, slanderous claims" of sexual slavery.[30] The ambiguity is also suggested in the latest policy guideline by the foreign ministry, which does mention the Kono Statement, but interestingly it does not state that the current administration upholds it.[31]

The Korean government criticized the review study harshly, accusing Japan of "distorting facts through arbitrarily compiling and editing" Japan's version of the discussions during the drafting and that Japan put on a "pretense" by alleging that the review was to strengthen the legitimacy and the credibility of the Kono Statement.[32] Thus, the comfort women issue became a hot potato in Korean-Japanese relations especially since Abe's term from 2013 because of Abe's seemingly revisionist position on the Kono Statement.

Second, the comfort women issue has also become global as it became related to human rights violations. Korea has taken the issue to the international stage such as the United Nations, making appeal for Japan to acknowledge the coercive wartime sexual slavery and also claiming that the comfort women issue is a "universal human rights issue." [33] Navi Pillay, who was the High Commissioner for Human Rights in August 2014, also expressed regret that Japan has "failed to pursue a comprehensive, impartial and lasting resolution" to address the rights of comfort women.[34] Korea's push to "internationalize" the issue has also to do with its self-perception of Korea's increasing global clout as explained earlier.

Third, Korea and Japan are no longer disputing the issue between the two countries but are competing with each other in a third country – the U.S., their common ally. Japan's right-wing activists campaigned against comfort women monuments in the U.S. and its diplomats contacted McGraw-Hill publishers, asking them to delete two paragraphs regarding comfort women in the world history textbook.[35] Meanwhile, a comfort women statue, the same as the one in Seoul has also been erected in Glendale, California in 2013. This statue has triggered a lawsuit filed by two individuals in August 2013 against Glendale for violating the U.S Constitution, but it was dismissed by a federal judge in August 2014.[36] Therefore, the three above factors also help explain the growing saliency of the comfort women issue as an obstacle in improving Korean-Japanese relations.

## **Conclusion**

Korean-Japanese relations have often been negatively affected by historical issues since the end of second World War, but the current prolonging stalemate is unprecedented in the post-Cold War era. Korea has been increasingly adamant in demanding Japan to apologize and resolve the comfort women issue as it became more confident in not only its economic power but also its diplomatic influence as compared to Japan in the recent years. There are, however, other factors contributing to the escalation of bilateral tensions. Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's revisionist views on the 1993 Kono Statement, the increasing global attention on the comfort women issue as a human rights issue, and the involvement of the U.S. have all increased the complexity of the issue. Resolving it has become harder as the tug-of-war between Korea and Japan is now at the global level. De-escalation of the dispute might come only when Japanese leadership changes its revisionist views especially regarding the Kono Statement and bears responsibility for the wartime sexual slavery, both of which are unlikely at least during Abe's term in office.

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