

How can we face the past seriously? A Comment on the 'Comfort Women'-Agreement

Written by Kan Kimura

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On December 28, 2015, the Japanese and South Korean governments announced a dramatic agreement on the comfort women disputes. The comfort women issue is one of the biggest diplomatic obstacles between the two countries, and they have been afflicted with the issue since the early 1990s, when the victims started coming forward. How were the two governments able to come to an agreement on such a difficult issue so suddenly? Does this really signal the end of the dispute, as the two foreign ministers claim that “this issue is resolved finally and irreversibly with this announcement”?

On the latter question, the answer is clearly “No,” because this is just an agreement between two governments, hence the victims and civil society groups supporting them are not legally bound by it. In addition, the South Korean government has not held any serious meetings with the victims or the supporting groups, who are now very frustrated with the agreement from whose process they were excluded. According to a survey by Gallup Korea, 56% of Koreans want a re-negotiation of the agreement with Japan.

The reason why the South Korean people are frustrated with the agreement is because they feel that their government has conceded too much to the Japanese. It seems as though South Korea got less than Japan did with the agreement. In it, the South Korean government has agreed to give up on a quest for legal compensation from Japan on the issue, but instead has secured an apology and 1 billion Japanese yen for the foundation established to care for the victims. However, the level of apology by the Japanese government was almost same as that of Kohno Statement, another apology issued by the Japanese government in 1993. Further, the Japanese foreign minister has confirmed that the 1 billion yen is not being paid as legal compensation, but instead as a gift to show sympathy. In this agreement, the South Korean government has also agreed to make plans about how to use the money to help the victims. The negotiation with the victims and the supporting groups is their task too. In short, the Japanese government has forced the South Korean government to take almost all responsibility for the situation simply by repeating almost the same ritual of apologies it made in the 1990s.

So, why has the South Korean government accepted such an agreement, which seems to be very disadvantageous for them? One of the major characteristics of the agreement is that it seems not to have been made because of the emergent importance of mutual understanding between the countries. In fact, sincere diplomatic efforts to enhance economic ties between the states, such as preparations to conclude the Japan-South Korean FTA (Free Trade Agreement) or to recover the swap agreement, did not occur soon after the agreement. It is also unknown at this moment if new plans for social, educational, or military cooperation are being made, as was expected at the time of first summit meeting between Abe and Park in November 2015.

At the same time, it is very difficult to think of the agreement as a sincere product of the effort by the governments to resolve the serious situation of the comfort women program's victims. As discussed, it was already known that the governments did not hear from the victims, and most of them have strongly criticized it. The opposition in South Korea also declared its refusal of the agreement with Japan, insisting the agreement is the product of an unprincipled deal between conservative political powers. The agreement was also condemned in Japan by some conservative members of the cabinet and the ruling party, because they believed that the Japanese government has no

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responsibility for the issue, thus there is no need for an apology. It is very clear that the agreement was made without securing the support of the governments in their respective countries.

So why did they enter into this agreement? One possible answer is that they needed the agreement, not to tangibly improve the relations between the two states, nor to resolve the problem once and for all, but to prove, somehow, they are at least making efforts to improve relations. For the South Korean government, which was criticized as leaning strategically toward China, the agreement was needed to demonstrate that it was paying the utmost respect to US-Japanese-South Korean relations, which the United States regards as the key relationship in Northeast Asia against China.

To understand the situation, we have to be aware of how rapidly the situation has changed in the Northeast in recent years. As is well known, the Park Geun-hye government, which came to power in 2013, regards China as one of the most important strategic partners with US, and it has established very good relations – something no previous South Korean government achieved with China. Behind that, they have the expectation that US and China will maintain smoother relations with each other, despite their hegemonic competition in the region, because they must depend on their relationship in today's increasingly globalized world. For this reason, such a diplomatic move would not be criticized very strongly by the US. However, with increasing tensions between the two powers, in particular on the South China Sea, the US is gradually changing its diplomatic stance against China toward a hard-line one. In that situation, the US has begun to be irritated by the South Korean government's policy toward China. This is especially true after Park joined Chinese President Xi Jinping in Beijing for a massive military parade commemorating the end of World War II. US policy circles began to criticize the South Korean government very strongly after the incident. The image of Park standing alongside Russian President Vladimir Putin and other dignitaries in Tiananmen Square as thousands of troops paraded past was seen as a symbol of the South Korean government's welcoming Chinese hegemony in the region.

In this context, the accusations of the South Korean government against Japan on historical issues have come to be understood as actions that serve the interests of China against a US-Japan alliance. However, it is difficult for South Korea, whose economy and unification strategy against the North are heavily dependent on China, to directly join the US campaign against China. Hence, they chose to enter into an agreement with Japan about the historical issue to show that their policies leaning toward China are not made ignorant of the strategic cooperation that comes with a US-Japan alliance.

This South Korean situation provided a good chance for the Japanese government to extract a favourable deal from South Korea about the comfort women issue. At the same time, Japan could enjoy another benefit in international society from this agreement. For the Japanese Abe government, which has been criticized for its revisionist views of the past, the agreement was an excellent chance to show that it sincerely wanted to resolve these concerns. Actually, the agreement was welcomed even by liberal journalists, for example at *The New York Times* and London's *Guardian*, and it has helped to change perceptions of the Abe government in international society.

In short, the agreement was not a result of Japanese and South Korean economic or strategic cooperation, nor of historical compromise, but rather a result of each state's consideration of its international reputation. However, as long as the agreement is not dependent on its importance but on the temporal needs in international relations, it is destined to be unstable. More importantly, because the agreement was made ignoring the opinions of victims, it will be very hard for them to accept it.

Lastly, the agreement at the end of 2015 between the Japanese and South Korean governments revealed the impossible reality regarding the past issues in this region. The agreement was just a result of negotiations between two governments and ignored the voices of the victims. This not only means that the two governments failed to think seriously about the situation, but, more seriously and despite strong criticism against the agreement, public support for the governments has shown no major changes. As mentioned, in particular in South Korea, a majority of the people are against the agreement, but their support for Park's government has not dropped; rather, the rate has increased after the nuclear test conducted by North Korea in early January 2016.

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Of course, it may be natural for people to consider today's difficulties, such as ongoing economic slumps or security threats, as being more serious than the comfort women issue. However, as long as we sacrifice past issues for ongoing problems, these issues of the past will never be resolved and the victims will never see any salvation. How can we face the past seriously? Seventy-one years after the war, our wisdom and sincerity are still being questioned.

About the author:

Professor Kan Kimura is a Professor at Kobe University's Graduate School of Cooperation Studies. He has also been a visiting scholar at various institutions, including Korea University, the Australian National University and Harvard. He was a member of the first and second Japan-Korea Collaborative History Research Committees initially set up by Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi and Korean President Kim Dae-jung. Throughout his career he has published on many aspects of Japanese-Korean relations.