

Toward Final Agreement on the Comfort Women Issue

In December 2015 the foreign ministers of Japan and the Republic of Korea announced a “final agreement” on the comfort women issue. **Professor Kimura Kan** comments.

It was in the early 1990s that Japan and the Republic of Korea began seriously discussing the comfort women problem as a diplomatic issue. It is already a quarter century since then, and the issue has come to symbolize the differences between the two nations over historical interpretation. During this time, Japan and the ROK have had differences over this issue a number of times, making it a major obstacle in diplomatic relations between the two countries.

The comfort women issue has been important not just in the realm of diplomacy. As diplomatic ties have continued frosty for a quarter century, both governments have come to have differing views on this matter, and one result has been that these differences have come to be reflected at the level of public opinion. A good example is seen in the public opinion surveys carried out by various media sources last year, which marked the fiftieth anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between the ROK and Japan. Results showed that large majorities in both countries have come to support the claims of their own governments on this question independently of any differences between the ruling and opposition parties regarding domestic politics. Such firm views on the part of the public in each country have in their turn caused the respective governments to harden their positions further such that relations between the two countries reached an impasse over the matter.

This is why, even after an agreement on the problem was concluded between ROK and Japanese governments, many people remained doubtful about its future. After all, many observers be-

lieved it unlikely that the agreement would be accepted either by the Japanese public or by the South Korean public in particular since the latter consider it obvious that Japan should pay legal compensation in regard to the issue. Under the agreement, moreover, the Japanese government accepted responsibility in regard to the issue and agreed to pay 1 billion yen into a fund established by the Korean side in exchange for an agreed recognition by both governments that the matter has been settled finally and irreversibly.

Indeed, in a public opinion poll taken in South Korea immediately after the agreement was concluded, more than 70% of respondents expressed opposition to it. Against this background, South Korea's ruling Saenuri sustained a major defeat in parliamentary elections held in April, giving a majority of seats to opposition parties demanding that the agreement either be scrapped or reviewed. Observers believe that, under these circumstances, the agreement will be even more difficult to implement. For if the ruling party diligently proceeds to carry out an agreement that is opposed by the great majority of the public, its support can only erode further, so it will not be in its interest to make vigorous efforts to address the issue with the next presidential election coming up at the end of next year.

Obstacles to implementing the agreement exist on the Japanese side as well. One important issue in this regard is the problem of removing the “Young Girl” statue symbolizing comfort women in front of the Japanese embassy in Seoul. Some Japanese claim that, since the South Korean government pledged under the agreement to make

effort to resolve the statue problem, its removal should have been a precondition for Japan's release of the 1 billion yen. Stressing that the 1 billion yen does not constitute legal compensation, the Japanese government has argued that the funds should be used solely for medical and nursing care. The ROK government rejected this view, however, arguing that it wants to have a free hand in disposing of the funds.

Nevertheless, the issue evolved in a direction that betrayed all expectations. The South Korean government, which at the end of May had established a preparatory committee for establishment of a foundation, formally launched the “Reconciliation and Healing Foundation” at the end of July. In response, the Japanese side agreed to pay the 1 billion yen in August, and the funds were duly transferred to the Korean side within the same month.

The question is how the governments of both countries were able to come this far despite opposition from the public in each country. One factor in this regard was the fact that the media coverage of the issue and the high degree of public interest for the most part did not impact the political base of each government. The public support rating of the government of President Park Geun-hye edged lower immediately after the agreement but quickly recovered and continues to hold at above 30%, which is very high indeed for a president more than three years into her term of office. And despite the apology to the Korean government and the unsettled issue of the comfort women statue, nationalists in Japan continue to support the Abe government as before.

Thus the question is why the

Announcement by Foreign Ministers of Japan and the Republic of Korea at the Joint Press Occasion

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1. Foreign Minister Kishida

The Government of Japan and the Government of the Republic of Korea (ROK) have intensively discussed the issue of comfort women between Japan and the ROK at bilateral meetings including the Director-General consultations. Based on the result of such discussions, I, on behalf of the Government of Japan, state the following:

- (1) The issue of comfort women, with an involvement of the Japanese military authorities at that time, was a grave affront to the honor and dignity of large numbers of women, and the Government of Japan is painfully aware of responsibilities from this perspective. As Prime Minister of Japan, Prime Minister Abe expresses anew his most sincere apologies and remorse to all the women who underwent immeasurable and painful experiences and suffered incurable physical and psychological wounds as comfort women.
- (2) The Government of Japan has been sincerely dealing with this issue. Building on such experience, the Government of Japan will now take measures to heal psychological wounds of all former comfort women through its budget. To be more specific, it has been decided that the Government of the ROK establish a foundation for the purpose of providing support for the former comfort

women, that its funds be contributed by the Government of Japan as a one-time contribution through its budget, and that projects for recovering the honor and dignity and healing the psychological wounds of all former comfort women be carried out under the cooperation between the Government of Japan and the Government of the ROK.

- (3) While stating the above, the Government of Japan confirms that this issue is resolved finally and irreversibly with this announcement, on the premise that the Government will steadily implement the measures specified in (2) above. In addition, together with the Government of the ROK, the Government of Japan will refrain from accusing or criticizing each other regarding this issue in the international community, including at the United Nations.

2. Foreign Minister Yun

The Government of the Republic of Korea (ROK) and the Government of Japan have intensively discussed the issue of comfort women between the ROK and Japan at bilateral meetings including the Director-General consultations. Based on the result of such discussions, I, on behalf of the Government of the ROK, state the following:

- (1) The Government of the ROK values the GOJ's announcement and efforts made by the

Government of Japan in the lead-up to the issuance of the announcement and confirms, together with the GOJ, that the issue is resolved finally and irreversibly with this announcement, on the premise that the Government of Japan will steadily implement the measures specified in 1. (2) above. The Government of the ROK will cooperate in the implementation of the Government of Japan's measures.

- (2) The Government of the ROK acknowledges the fact that the Government of Japan is concerned about the statue built in front of the Embassy of Japan in Seoul from the viewpoint of preventing any disturbance of the peace of the mission or impairment of its dignity, and will strive to solve this issue in an appropriate manner through taking measures such as consulting with related organizations about possible ways of addressing this issue.
- (3) The Government of the ROK, together with the Government of Japan, will refrain from accusing or criticizing each other regarding this issue in the international community, including at the United Nations, on the premise that the Government of Japan will steadily implement the measures it announced.

Source: www.mofa.go.jp/a_o/na/kr/page4e_000364.html

conclusion of such an unpopular agreement has failed to cause its critics to withdraw their support from their respective governments. The reason is that, for the Korean and the Japanese public, this issue is simply not that vital in comparison with economic and national security issues. In other words, this unpopular agreement has highlighted an inconvenient truth: Appearance notwithstanding, the Japanese and Korean public do not ascribe such great importance to this issue. Indeed, the comfort women issue was not debated as an important issue during the South Korean parliamentary elections which handed the opposition party such a big victory.

Whatever the conventional wisdom may say, the Japanese and Korean public simply do not regard issues surrounding the past as having vital importance. This inconvenient truth also reveals that the governments of both

nations have considerable leeway to act in order to resolve problems. Over the quarter century since the comfort women issue first emerged as a diplomatic problem, the governments of both countries have misjudged public opinion on the issue and over-estimated the influence of pressure groups presumed to have influence. Indeed, the number of former comfort women having direct ties to such groups is in fact not very large. As a result, governments have needlessly hardened their positions and repeatedly engaged in wasteful confrontation. That said, it mustn't be forgotten that the original parties to this issue are not the governments of the two countries, nor the public of either, nor the pressure groups engaged in boisterous activities concerning the issue. Rather, they are the former comfort women themselves and the families supporting them, or the surviving families of those

who are deceased.

Nevertheless, as the comfort women issue has played out so far, the views of these support groups have sometimes been given more political weight than the voices of the persons directly involved. As a result, their voices have gone unheard. What do the former comfort women and their families or surviving families want from the governments of Japan and South Korea and how can we respond to those needs? Exactly because they are now free from public pressure regarding the comfort women issue, the South Korean and Japanese governments can no longer cite opposition from the public as an impediment to resolving problems. Now is the time for them to show wisdom and sincerity. ▣

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