

6 Months Later: The 'Comfort Women' Agreement

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Lacking formal implementation and combined with changing political tides, the comfort women issue will drag on.

On December 28th 2015, the foreign minister of Japan and Republic of Korea reached an agreement on the "comfort women" issue, supposedly bringing an end to a decades-old bilateral issue. In his statement, Japanese Foreign Minister Fumio Kishida formally agrees that atrocities were committed with the "involvement" of the Japanese Imperial army and acknowledges the resulting dishonor to Korean women. Prime Minister Shinzo Abe expressed his "most sincere apologies and remorse to all the women who underwent immeasurable and painful experiences." Japan also agreed to a one-time contribution of 1 billion yen (\$9 million) to a foundation to be established by the South Korean government to provide support for the former comfort women. In return, South Korean Foreign Minister Yun Byung-se promised to put the whole matter to rest and agreed to find an amicable solution concerning the removal of a comfort women statue in front of Japanese embassy in Seoul.

Nearly six months later, the agreement reached at the foreign minister level needs to be formally implemented by both sides. But the growing discontent in both countries over the agreement and growing popularity for comfort women statues across the globe pose more serious challenge to both the agreement and the overall Japan-Korea relationship.

Japan and Korean reflections on the agreement

Japan views the agreement as having improved Tokyo's relation with Seoul. But in spite of the agreement, Abe's views on the matter apparently remained unchanged. In his speech in the Upper House of the Japanese Diet, he stated that the agreement with the Republic of Korea doesn't constitute an acknowledgement Japanese involvement in sex slavery or war crimes, which has greatly infuriated Koreans. Even many senior politicians from Abe Cabinet still argue there is no evidence of the imperial Japanese military coercing any comfort women into sexual services. Japanese citizens have also protested in the streets of Tokyo against the joint agreement.

However, Abe, who is himself a nationalist, views the agreement as necessary to deepening Japan's relationship with South Korea. Japan, in the midst of economic and political revisions, believes the agreement will pave the way

for regional stability.

On the other hand, South Koreans are politically divided over the comfort women case. According to South Korean opinion polls, over 50 percent dislike the agreement and around 66 percent are against the removal of comfort women statue in front of the Japanese embassy. The South Korean opinion polls also suggest younger generations vehemently oppose the relocation of statue.

Moreover, President Park Geun-hye's Saenuri Party lost its legislative majority in April's crucial elections, leading to speculation about the effective implementation of the December 28, 2015 agreement. The main opposition Minjoo Party, which has called for renegotiation on the agreement, fared reasonably well in the recent polls. The People's Party, now the second-largest opposition party in South Korea, has also opposed the agreement and joins hands with other similar voices in Korea to support the cause of comfort women.

Many in Korean civil society view the agreement as mere eyewash to cover up the wrongdoings of the Japanese Imperial Army. Lee Sang Hee, a member of the Lawyers for a Democratic Society (*Minbyun*), said that they had submitted a petition to the United Nation asking to the international body confirm whether the South Korea-Japan agreement meets international human rights standards. The public sentiment in Korea clearly is not in favor of present agreement. At the same time, South Korea has shown interest in settling the long pending issue with Japan to take the relationship to a new height.

Comfort Women: Global Phenomena

The statue of comfort women in front of Japanese embassy in Seoul has created huge discomfort in the bilateral relationship, and is one of the biggest hurdles to the implementation of the agreement. But the memorials built in memory of comfort women outside South Korea pose even more serious challenge to Japan's soft power image. Apart from Korea, many Asian countries have statues in remembrance of comfort women; some of them include an historical marker in Manila and the Comfort Women Memorial in Nanjing, China.

Outside of Asia, the United States has the most memorials built in remembrance of the comfort women. Non-profit organization such as the Washington Coalition for Comfort Women Issues have been actively involved in promoting the cause of comfort women issues. Moreover, prominent politicians like Representative Mike Honda and Wendy Sherman, the former Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs, have lent support to the cause as well. The growing support for comfort women issue is a major worrisome factor in Japanese diplomacy. Japanese who are apologetic about the issue believe that the growing popular support for comfort women could cause irreversible damage to Japan's soft power and image abroad.

In conclusion, the comfort women issue will drag on for a while. It has already 'gone global' in a sense. Both, Japan and South Korea must work closely to find a way to rescue bilateral ties from domestic politics over the issue. So far, both countries have not exchanged negative comments about the issue in international forums. However, it is imperative for the two governments to swiftly implement the agreement at earliest opportunity to not lose perspective on the issue.

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