



**The Japan-Korea comfort women deal: this is only the beginning** by Scott Snyder and Brad Glosserman

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The cycle of negativity surrounding Japan-South Korea relations since the Abe-Park era began in early 2013 has at times eclipsed North Korea as a source of angst among observers of Northeast Asia. Even the modest improvements that accompanied commemorations of the 50th anniversary of diplomatic normalization in June 2015 were tinged by frustration over the two governments' failure to move forward on the comfort woman issue. The chief problem was the acknowledgement of Japanese responsibility for the coercion of girls and women to provide sexual services to the military in imperial Japan, and this disagreement extended to other issues that hung over the relationship.

It was especially surprising, then, that Abe Shinzo and Park Geun-hye cut a deal on Dec. 28 to resolve the comfort woman issue. The agreement reached at the end of the year followed more than a dozen rounds of consultations between the two governments, a process that unfolded under intense media scrutiny and ever-growing suspicion of the other side's intentions. President Park made resolution of the problem a condition of the "re-normalization" of relations with Japan, while Prime Minister Abe and many of his supporters appeared increasingly frustrated and fatigued by the inability of the two sides to move past this and other historical issues.

In his statement – one of two released simultaneously by the two foreign ministers – Japanese Foreign Minister Kishida Fumio said that Abe, as the "cabinet prime minister of Japan," extended his "heartfelt apologies and remorse to all those who suffered immeasurable pain and incurable physical and psychological wounds as comfort women." He acknowledged that "the honor and dignity of many women were severely injured with the involvement of the Japanese military," and "From this perspective, the Japanese government fully realizes responsibility." Japan will provide ¥1 billion from the government budget to fully finance a foundation, run by the Korean government, to support the comfort women.

The two countries agreed that the settlement is "final and irreversible" as an issue between the two governments as long as Japan faithfully follows through with its promise, and the two governments agreed to refrain from criticizing each other over the issue in the international community, including at the United Nations. ROK Foreign Minister Yun Byung-se said the settlement is final and irreversible as long as Japan keeps its

promises. As part of the deal, the Seoul government "acknowledged the Japanese government's concerns" over a statue erected in front of the Japanese embassy in Seoul that honors the comfort women.

The commitments by both leaders are to be commended as acts of political leadership and statesmanship of the sort that we called for last year in our book, [The Japan-South Korea Identity Clash](#). Abe, a man widely believed to harbor personal doubts about the validity of the comfort women claim, who insisted that all legal claims were settled in the 1965 agreement to normalize relations between the two countries, and who repeatedly said that Japan (and the world) should look forward rather than back, plainly acknowledged Japanese responsibility, and opened the Japanese purse to assuage some of the pain. Park is also brave in her pursuit of justice and finality between governments and to seek support of the Korean public for a solution to difficult issues that, in the personal view of many victims, can never be forgiven.

A Korean Realmeter poll taken following the agreement showed that the deal was initially opposed by 51 percent of Koreans and supported by 43 percent, while Japanese polls such as a mid-January *Asahi* poll have shown strong support (63 percent supporting and 19 percent opposing) for the settlement in Japan.

Divided Korean public opinion over the agreement places greater pressure on the governments to move forward with implementation if the agreement is to be sustainable. Ironically, the Park administration will only be successful in winning public support for the deal if it receives support and cooperation from the government of Japan in two critical aspects. First, Tokyo must quickly fund the foundation as a first step. Ideally, the government of Japan would take initial steps to allocate funding for the Korean-operated foundation prior to the April Korean National Assembly elections so as to prevent the agreement from becoming a political football in that campaign.

Second, the Abe administration must marginalize voices within Japan who for their own reasons seek to prevent the agreement from moving forward. A critical step is a zero-tolerance policy among Japanese Cabinet members and top party and government officials toward statements or acts that challenge this agreement. Yes, Japan is a democracy and there is freedom of speech and religion, but Prime Minister Abe (and his successors) should demand full and complete compliance by anyone who accepts a senior post in his party or government. Tokyo appears to be taking this line. When conservative lawmaker Sakurada Yoshitaka, a member of the ruling LDP, said earlier in January that the comfort women "were prostitutes by occupation" and that people have been "heavily misled by propaganda work treating them as if they were victims," he was forced to apologize for and retract the

remarks. Japan could even go further by acknowledging that the comfort women statue is a valid tribute that memorializes the experience of the victims rather than merely demanding its removal. Ultimately, any evidence of foot-dragging or backsliding by the Abe administration in moving forward will only motivate those who are opposed to the agreement.

In this respect, there are two immediate challenges. The first is the comfort women statue. Constructed by civil society groups, the Seoul government has limited leverage to deal with it. It could be forcibly removed, but the justification, legal or otherwise, would be thin. Despite the split in Korean reactions to the agreement, polls showed strong public support for keeping the statue in its current location. Support will remain high unless Japan provides the Korean government with funds to establish the foundation. Any effort within Japan to reverse the sequence of actions implied in the agreement would likely be fatal to it. Ultimately, success in dealing with the statue will depend on the second challenge – winning support for the agreement from the comfort women. This task has been made even more difficult by the way the deal was concluded.

Understandably, negotiations were conducted in secret. But in doing so, the most important constituency, the comfort women themselves, was blindsided by the announcement. They had no input into the process and have complained about being victimized once again. The challenge of outreach to the comfort women has been made worse by the fact that South Korea's Ministry of Government Administration and Home Affairs was the primary point of contact for the comfort women within the government, but was not included in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Blue House-led negotiations with Japan.

The Park administration must do its best to win over the comfort women while building broad public support for reconciliation with Japan. The best way to do this would be for those women to be deeply engaged in the process of establishing the new foundation; it must be seen as theirs, rather than an instrument of the Korean government. In reality, there is a limit to what governments can do, since confession and repentance, as matters of the human heart, cannot be resolved irreversibly or with finality by governments.

*PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed and encouraged.*