

Response to PacNet #14 “The Japan-Korea comfort women deal: this is only the beginning”

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I concur with most of the points in “The Japan-Korea comfort women deal: this is only the beginning” by Scott Snyder and Brad Glosserman. Let me add several points to clarify this complex issue.

Looking back at how Prime Minister Abe Shinzo started his second term in 2012, he has shifted course from a narrowly oriented nationalistic position to one characterized by restraint and humility on this complex issue. This direction was already visible in his April 2015 Washington visit, when he stated unambiguously that “just like my predecessors, my heart is aching for the immeasurable pain these women had to suffer and the Kono Statement will be maintained.” Furthermore in his August speech commemorating 70 years since the end of World War II, Abe stated that “we must not let our children, grandchildren, and even further generations...be predestined to apologize” but that “we Japanese, across the generations, must squarely face the history” and “in all humbleness pass it on to the future.” Abe’s full re-confirmation of the Kono Statement and his commitment to provide ¥1 billion to the Korean comfort woman’s foundation, with confirmation by the GOK that “the issue is resolved finally and irreversibly” seem to synthesize the two positions he declared in April and August.

As the essay’s title states, this is just the beginning. Abe should implement the ¥1 billion commitment as soon as possible, so that the political momentum engendered by the December agreement will be maintained. The suggestion that Abe not let anyone in an important public position deviate from the December agreement is certainly valid. Equally important is that Japanese people, represented by civil society (constituting scholars, intellectuals, opinion-makers, media, and so on), not treat this issue as a “done-deal past issue.” The comfort women are there, and the wound that they suffered cannot be erased. It is now the task of the Japanese people to do as Prime Minister Abe requested in his 70th year speech: face the past squarely in all humbleness. In Japan, however, some intellectuals and ideologues completely deny Abe’s position. Both Abe and centrist civil society have to be fully engaged to sustain the new direction.

What was equally, or perhaps more, surprising was President Park’s decision to accept Japan’s apology and agree that this issue is resolved finally and irreversibly, provided that the GOJ steadily implement its commitment. Some social activists find it difficult to swallow this conclusion, and now it is up to the president and her government to make her position the consensus of Korean society. This demonstrates that while

it is critical that Abe and Park follow squarely the commitment and the spirit of the agreement, Japan-Korea relations regarding the comfort women issue has moved to the next stage of civil-society exchanges and debates and a search for reconciliation at that level. Three critically important aspects need to be understood.

First, how should we understand the vehement protests by some comfort women against the December agreement? As long as these negative views are those of the comfort women themselves, it is hard to imagine that genuine reconciliation will be achieved. I do not doubt the courage and sincerity of President Park in pressuring the government of Japan to acknowledge responsibility and take concrete actions. I do not doubt that her government tried to get understanding from the comfort women: President Park stated that her government met 15 times with comfort women before the agreement was concluded. As an outsider, I understand that it would have been extremely difficult to get prior agreement to the Korean government’s position from some social activists, and efforts to engage in prior consultation with them could have ruined those efforts even before proposing anything to the Japanese side. The Seoul government is advised to continue to explain what it intended to do, and the international community should support this endeavor rather than criticize the Park government for any failures in its attempted explanations.

As for Korean social activists who surround some comfort women, they should strip this debate of ideology and depoliticize this issue. Consider the history of the Korean Council, *Teitaikyou*, in the 1990s. When the Asian Women’s Fund began its activities of apology and atonement, *Teitaikyou* not only refused its sincere wish but also castigated the 61 comfort women who accepted the Asian Women Fund’s atonement and the prime minister’s written apology statement and denounced them as a “traitor of the Korean cause.” I hope that the same mistake of putting a political cause before the interest of the comfort women themselves won’t be repeated.

On the Japanese side, there is one critical action that Prime Minister Abe can take. Abe has a real opportunity to express the feelings articulated in written statements with body language to the women who suffered by visiting them in Korea. More than any other action, this is perhaps the most effective way of transmitting Japan’s sincerity and realizing reconciliation. While Abe may have difficulty taking this action immediately given domestic pressure, other politicians and civil society groups may have a role to play. It is encouraging to see reports that some Japanese parliamentarians are planning to visit the house of *Nanum* where a few comfort women reside.

Second, how should we consider the statue in front of the Japanese Embassy in Seoul? I agree that the worst that the government of Japan can do is to make replacement of the

statue a precondition of its ¥1 billion contribution. I am relieved to observe that no one in a responsible position has said that replacement is a condition for contribution. Liberal idealists argue that since the cause of the protest is justifiable, the Japanese Embassy should accept its continued presence. Ambassador Muto Masatoshi, Japan's ambassador at the time the statue was erected, explained that he asked the Korean government to keep order on the public walkway in front of the Embassy, and that *Teitaikyou* did not obtain permission to erect such a statue in accordance with local regulations. Korea's foreign minister stated in the December agreement that, understanding the Japanese government's concern about infringing the peace and dignity of the mission, the ROK government "will strive to solve this issue in an appropriate manner through taking measures such as consulting with related organizations about possible way of addressing this issue." Naturally any physical enforcement on the part of the Korean government to remove the statute should be excluded. The statue can be replaced as a result of reconciliation between the governments but also between the two civil societies. This is what all parties should aim for now.

This brings us to the issue of Professor Park Yuha of Sejong University and her recently published book *Comfort Women of the Empire*. The book tries to look at this complex issue from a larger scope and deeper psychological ground. Readers may not agree with her conclusions, but her research is precisely what we need now when exchanges at the civic level are becoming more important than ever. Her book in my view makes one humble, forces readers to think more deeply about the suffering and despair that these women lived through and the complex historical realities that led to that suffering. Park Yuha's indictment in November 2015 by the Korean state prosecutor at the Seoul District Court for defamation, going beyond the boundaries of legitimate free scholarship and making a falsified statement, destroys the basis of freedom of thought and the right of free discussion, which are essential if the civil societies of the two countries are to reach an understanding on this complex issue. Korea-friendly Japanese, American, and other intellectuals have protested Park Yuha's indictment and their views are presented at: <http://www.ptkks.net>. History as it happened, and not history as one expects to have happened, is the only base to reach ultimate reconciliation. This requires humble, decent, and open minds to address the issue through freely conducted exchanges and discussion, not the power of the state to stifle thought and expression.

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