



A statue of a teenage girl, symbolizing victims of the Japanese military's sex slavery system before and during World War II, positioned in front of the Japanese Embassy in Seoul

Resurfaced Dispute

Scars from Japan's wartime atrocities are far from healed **By Shi Yongming**



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The governments of Japan and the Republic of Korea (ROK) have been at loggerheads after a new statue symbolizing Japan's wartime sex slavery victims was erected in front of the Japanese Consulate General in Busan by a South Korean civic group at the end of 2016.

The Japanese Government accused the ROK of violating a bilateral agreement over the wartime sex slavery issue that was reached in 2015. To pressurize South Korea, Japan has recalled its ambassador to the country as well as suspended currency swap

talks and high-level economic dialogue between the two nations.

On the surface, the diplomatic spat shows the non-conformity between Japan and South Korea in implementing the deal. However, there was a lack of justice and impartiality in the controversial agreement reached by the two governments.

A controversial deal

Before and during World War II (WWII), an estimated 200,000 women, mostly from the Korean Peninsula as well as China and Southeast Asian nations, were forced into sexual servitude in military brothels for Japan's army. The victims were known as "comfort women."

At the end of 2015, the ROK and Japan reached a "final and irreversible" agreement on resolving the historical issue of "comfort women." According to

it, Japan promised compensation of 1 billion Japanese yen (\$8.73 million) for South Korean victims. In return, the ROK Government would no longer criticize Japan over the issue on any occasion or demand further compensation.

After the agreement was reached, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe offered an apology to those who suffered immeasurable and incurable physical and mental wounds as "comfort women" in a letter read by his Foreign Minister Fumio Kishida. However, Abe did not accept Japan's legal responsibility for the war atrocities it committed.

Despite the agreement with South Korea, the Japanese Government still refuses to admit the fact that Japan forcibly recruited women into sexual slavery before and during WWII. By fixing the amount of compensation, the Abe administration has

attempted to prevent any additional demands made by victims.

Moreover, Abe showed no sincerity in his apology. The South Korean Government claimed that Abe expressed his apology in a phone conversation with President Park Geun Hye, though he made no direct apology to the South Korean people.

Yet South Korea pays a high price for the deal. First, the country has promised not to speak on the wartime sex slavery by the Japanese army on international occasions any more. Second, the South Korean Government has undertaken the obligation to remove a statue of a girl symbolizing "comfort women" in front of the Japanese Embassy in Seoul.

Most South Koreans are discontent with the deal, which Park's administration agreed to without consulting the public. Consequently, demonstrations against the agreement occurred repeatedly in 2016. On December 28 last year, the deal's one-year anniversary, protestors erected a statue representing "comfort women" in front of the Japanese Consulate General in Busan. This prompted a swift response from the Japanese Government.

Over the past few months, a nationwide protest has developed against Park over a corruption scandal, leading to her parliamentary impeachment in December 2016. It seems that Abe is hoping to use the turmoil in South Korea to his advantage, encouraging

the South Korean Government to stifle domestic protest to the agreement.

On January 13, ROK Foreign Minister Yun Byung Se expressed that it is undesirable to set up any facility or models in front of diplomatic missions or consular missions and the "obligation" according to the ROK-Japan deal would be undertaken.

Unfortunately, the South Korean Government has overlooked the demands of its people and historical justice in dealing with the issue of "comfort women."

Abe's historical revisionism

For a long time, Japanese right-wing political forces have attempted to reverse the historical verdict on Japan's role in WWII. Some Japanese politicians have made disparaging remarks on historical issues and repeatedly visited the Yasukuni Shrine, which enshrines Class-A WWII war criminals among its war dead. These moves have always sparked criticism from China, South Korea and other Asian countries that suffered Japanese aggression during WWII.

After retaking office as Japanese prime minister in 2012, Abe has acted more boldly in carrying out historical revisionism. For example, he has not only questioned the legitimacy of the Tokyo Trials of Japanese WWII war criminals, but has claimed that there is no established definition of aggression either in academic circles or internationally.

In fact, the UN General Assembly adopted

a resolution on the definition of aggression on December 14, 1974. Considering Japan's desire to become a permanent member of the UN Security Council, Abe's cabinet has shown remarkable ignorance toward the resolution.

Abe has also retracted a Japanese government statement on the issue of "comfort women" made by then Chief Cabinet Secretary Yohei Kono on August 4, 1993. In the Kono Statement, the coercion of "comfort women" and the establishment and management of "comfort stations" by the Japanese military are acknowledged.

In 1996, the UN Commission on Human Rights carried out an independent investigation on the issue. The subsequent report published by Radhika Coomaraswamy, a Sri Lankan lawyer and then UN special rapporteur on violence against women, concluded that Japan's wartime sexual slavery violated international law, urging Tokyo to apologize and compensate for the atrocity.

In spite of this, Abe put political pressure on newspaper *Asahi Shimbun*, forcing it to withdraw a related report on "comfort women" and Coomaraswamy's report in mid-2014. From then on, Japan's domestic media has kept silent on the issue. The Japanese Government even asked Coomaraswamy to retract part of his report that it considers "false," though the request was rejected by the author. Ultimately, Abe has denied Japan's legal responsibility on the issue of "comfort women."

Behind the ROK-Japan deal, the United States has worked hard in pushing for compromises from the two sides. Barack Obama's administration attached great importance to pivoting to the Asia-Pacific region. To implement the strategy, Washington needed its allies—Japan and South Korea—to cooperate more closely. Therefore, the Obama administration took a laissez-faire attitude toward Abe's historical revisionism.

It appears that U.S.-Japan and ROK-Japan bilateral relations have become stronger. However, these relationships are not based on sincerity, credibility and honesty. For example, disputes between Japan and the ROK on major historical issues have not been fundamentally solved. Under such circumstances, Washington's efforts to enhance military alliances in the Asia-Pacific region regardless of the will of South Korean people will cause further turbulence between the two East Asian neighbors. ■



Demonstrators hold a rally in Seoul in protest against the South Korean Government's "comfort women" deal with Japan on July 28, 2016

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