

## “Comfort” Women and “Uncomfortable” East Asian Geopolitics

**Author:** Shahana Thankachan\*

**Date:** 06 February 2018

On 27 December 2017, South Korean President Moon Jae-in, publicly criticized the 2015 Comfort Women Agreement reached between South Korea and Japan, and appointed a task force to review the Agreement— which in turn concluded that the Agreement was flawed.<sup>1</sup>This created a diplomatic furore in Japan, and the Japanese Foreign Minister warned of serious repercussions for Japan-South Korea relations.<sup>2</sup> Although this tension was resolved on 11 January 2018 when the South Korean Foreign Minister agreed that South Korea will not seek renegotiation of the agreement, history tells us that this is no guarantee of South Korea’s commitment.<sup>3</sup> Japan and South Korea have had a very edgy relationship and this is complicated by the fact that Japan and South Korea are very strong US allies, and their mutual rivalry has and can have major ramifications for regional geopolitics. This paper attempts to analyse Japan-South Korea relationship and its impact for the region and the world, in the light of current events.

Part of Benedict Anderson definition of a nation is an “imagined community” with a deep horizontal comradeship.<sup>4</sup> One way of building this deep horizontal comradeship is by fabricating an “other”. A nation needs an “other” to give itself the sense of being one nation. Sometimes this “other” is found within the nation itself, however, in largely homogenous societies such as Japan, Korea and China, the “other” is found mostly outside the nation. A common way of keeping the “other” alive is through using history. Each state in the region plays its history cards to further its domestic and foreign policy and keeps the “other” alive. China plays the ‘victim card’, wronged by Japan and the West. Rana Mitter argues that China used nationalism to articulate resistance to the domination of the country by other powers.<sup>5</sup> She further argues that resistance to Japanese imperialism also shaped Korean Nationalism. North Korea sees both Japan and South Korea as an enemy. Japan, on the other hand, tries to absolve itself of its militarist history by portraying itself as a victim of the atomic bombings. However, the common factor in the region is hatred for Japan. Japan is

the only Asian nation to have had imperialist ambitions in that it tried to create a Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere.

South Korea makes no effort hiding its hatred for Japan. When travelling through South Korea a ubiquitous feature across all public places is the government's propaganda videos against Japan. These videos deal principally with the issue of the disputed islands between Korea and Japan, and, with the 'comfort women' issue. What is surprising is that the videos target only Japan, and not China or North Korea. This is not the only example of South Korea's vehement anti-Japanese views. Most commoners, when asked to rate China, Japan and North Korea in a descending order of hatred, place Japan right at the top of their 'hatred rating'.<sup>6</sup> There is nothing new or surprising about the South Korean attitude towards Japan. However, it stands out like a sore thumb in the current geopolitical circumstances. North Korea is an all-time looming threat to both Japan and South Korea, and both are threatened by the rise of China in varying degrees. While the hatred for Japan by North Korea and China is not something easily reconcilable, the hatred for Japan by South Korea is something within the purview of reconciliation.

## **Background**

The history of Japan-South Korea relations is a fascinating tale of two very proud civilizations trying to mark their place in the world. Korea was Japan's bridge to mainland Asia. Unsurprisingly, Japan also had a very strong direct trade with Korea. Both Korea and Japan were considered as tributary states by China. Korea, however, did not consider itself as being subordinate to Japan.<sup>7</sup> This was despite the fact that Korea faced a long invasion by Japan in the late Sixteenth Century. A constant reminder of this invasion is the mound of 10,000 Korean and Chinese ears and noses sent to the Japanese city of Kyoto as a war trophy. This monument still exists in Japan.<sup>8</sup> Horrendous as it was, in the grand sweep of history this was a relatively minor glitch in the largely peaceful relations between the two nations. Things, however, changed after the second invasion of Korea by Japan, in 1910. The situation was exacerbated by the atrocities of the Japanese military in Korea. One of the most striking of these atrocities was the forceful use of Korean women as sexual slaves in the Japanese military.<sup>9</sup> These women were recruited under the false pretext of serving in "comfort stations" and are therefore euphemistically called comfort women.<sup>10</sup> This gross abuse of these Korean women persisted right through the Second World War.

Japan-South Korea diplomatic relations were re-established only in 1965, twenty years after Korea was liberated from Japanese rule. Relations remained stable through most of the Cold War period, however, towards the end of the Cold War period, South Korea began accusing Japan of teaching a watered down history of South Korea in its history textbooks, rather than historically accurate descriptions of Japan's atrocities.<sup>11</sup>

In 1993, Japan issued its first apology in the form of a statement issued by the then Cabinet Secretary, Yohei Kono, in which Japan acknowledged responsibility for the conscription of comfort women.<sup>12</sup> Following this, a private fund, called the "Asia Women's Fund", dedicated to resolve the issue of "comfort women" was created in Japan. Japan's second apology came in 1995, when Prime Minister Tomiichi Murayama issued a statement.<sup>13</sup> South Korea rejected the fund, claiming that it had not been launched by the Japanese government. Further, it rejected both the statements, too, claiming that they came in the personal capacity of the leaders, and were not official apologies.

The issue seemed to be finally resolved on 28 December 2015, when Japan and South Korea reached an agreement on resolving the 'Comfort Women' issue. This Agreement, too, came after three and a half years of deteriorating relationships between the two countries.<sup>14</sup> The Agreement included three main components: an official apology by the Prime Minister of Japan; Japan paying one billion Yen to a foundation established by the South Korean government to work for the welfare of these 'Comfort Women'; and, finally, South Korea giving the assurance that it would work on the removal of the emblematic statue of the 'Comfort Woman', from its provocative location just outside the Japanese embassy in Seoul. This Agreement was a win-win for both South Korea and Japan. For Japan, it meant that it was consistent with the Japanese position that all issues pertaining to these 'Comfort Women' had been resolved by the Japan-South Korea Basic Treaty of 1965 and Japan, therefore, did not have to deal with the 'Comfort Women' directly. For South Korea, it meant that Japan had rendered an official apology and also paid reparations towards this end.<sup>15</sup> The Agreement included an assurance from South Korea that it would be "final and irreversible".

The success of the Agreement also led to the conclusion of the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) between the two nations in November 2016.<sup>16</sup> This Agreement lets the United States share intelligence received from either of its two allies with the other. This is deemed to be crucial in dealing with any security situation in the region. However, as mentioned earlier, South Korea reneged on the 2015 Agreement when

Moon Jae-In publicly criticized it on 27 December 2017. This confirmed the Japanese apprehension that South Korea would keep shifting the goal post when it came to the 'Comfort Women' issue and that Seoul was not actually interested in resolving the issue at all. This time, South Korea claimed that the Agreement was flawed as it did not deal with the 'Comfort Women' directly. While this is true, the South Korean government is to be equally blamed for keeping the women out of the talks.

## **Factors Affecting Japan-South Korea Relations**

Nationalism — in Japan, South Korea and China, used and fuelled by domestic politics in each of these nations — is the prime cause of the bitterness affecting relationships between these nations.<sup>17</sup> Of course, this nationalism is derived and fed by history as has been explained above. Hatred for Japan, or a manifestly anti-Japanese foreign policy, is invariably used as a major item within any election agenda and almost always ensures electoral success. A recent example of this was the intense pressure upon President Park Geun-hye to maintain a virulently anti-Japan image, so as to allay public suspicion that she was sympathetic towards the Japanese because her father had been a member of the Imperial Japanese Army. In Japan, on the other hand, since nationalism is generated by a pervasive notion of the greatness of Japanese civilization, nationalist fervour is generated through acts such as visits by Prime Ministers of the country to the Yasukuni Shrine, which memorialized fourteen A-Class war criminals of the Second World War. This, of course, invariably infuriates South Korea and China.

Another reason for discord between the two countries, apart from history and historical issues, are contemporary territorial disputes. Japan and South Korea have mutually contestable claims over several islands, islets and rocks. These include the Liancourt Rocks, also known as Takeshima/Dokdo islands, which are claimed by both South Korea and Japan. The Tsushima islands are also disputed between the two nations, even though it is only a small minority of Koreans who articulate a Korean claim to these islands, and not the government as such. The nomenclature of the Sea of Japan is also a source of ill-feelings between the two countries. South Korea argues that the name used for the water body in historical maps was the East Sea/ Eastern Sea, while Japan argues that it was historically referred to as the Sea of Japan.

Yet another factor that causes a deterioration of the Japan-South Korea relationship is the fact that the strategic concerns of Japan, South Korea and the United States are

actually very different. The primary strategic concern for South Korea is North Korea, for Japan it is China, while the US gives equal importance to both China and North Korea amongst its own strategic concerns. This creates discord in strategic approaches that these countries take towards the region and fuels disaffection between Japan and South Korea.

## **Geopolitical Impact of the Rivalry**

The biggest geopolitical impact of the Japan-South Korea troubled relationship is that it is detrimental to US interests in the region. The discord between these two closest US allies manifests itself in several areas. For instance, the GSOMIA was signed as late as 2016. In 2012, when it was first negotiated – that too after much deliberation – South Korea abruptly pulled out of this agreement, hours before it was to be finalized. Even in 2016, in the immediate aftermath of the GSOMIA being signed, South Korea refused to share information with Japan on any matter other than North Korean missile activities in the peninsula. Likewise, it refused to divulge any information on Chinese military activities in the South China Sea.<sup>18</sup>

Another Agreement that could have been potentially strategic is the ‘Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement’ (ACSA). This would have allowed for logistical cooperation in the event of peacekeeping operations, and humanitarian and disaster relief. However, all efforts to date to have this be negotiated between Japan and South Korea have been in vain. In November 2017, an attempt by the Trump administration to present a joint front against North Korea in the Sea of Japan by conducting a trilateral military exercise involving Japan, South Korea and the US met with resistance by South Korea. This was because South Korea was hesitant of Japan Maritime Self Defence Forces (JMSDF) presence so close to the Korean peninsula.<sup>19</sup>

The usage of US bases in Japan, too, is contingent on Japan-South Korea relationship. The US military presence in the region is centred upon its bases in Japan and it is contingent for the US to use these bases in the eventuality of North Korean aggression against either South Korea or Japan. However, in order to allay domestic fears of Japan getting engulfed in another’s war, Japan declared that it would not allow the USA to use Japanese bases against North Korea, in case the latter were to attack South Korea. While it is widely believed that Japan will not withhold the use of these bases should such a scenario actually unfold, Japanese claims to the contrary create immense insecurity in South Korea and unnecessary problems for the United States in terms of reassuring South Korea. Japan, on the other

hand, can allay the fears of its people only if its domestic populace is convinced that South Korea is indeed friendly towards Japan.

Japan's military normalization is a fact necessitated by the current geopolitical environment and the United States is very keen on Japan expediting this process. However, South Korea is against any move by Japan in this direction. This, of course, is a sentiment that stems from the historical distrust of Japan and its propensity for militarism. South Korea has repeatedly iterated that Japan is using the North Korean threat as an excuse to further its militarization agenda. South Korea cites this as a reason to not participate in US regional missile defence systems. The ROK clarified in November 2017 that it would not consider any further deployment of the THAAD missile system, and further, that it sees trilateral cooperation only through a peninsular lens and not as a trilateral military alliance extending beyond the North Korean threat and the Korean Peninsula.

The country that gains the most from the rivalry between Japan and South Korea is China. For China, a divided region is probably the most suited for the advancement of its own interests. This is a further cause for regional concern, considering the increasing affinity that South Korea has been showing towards China. Moon Jae-In has been following a tough balancing act in terms of his diplomatic approach between the United States and China.

## **Conclusion**

There is no doubting that the historical wounds inflicted by Japan on Korea and other countries are not easily forgettable or even forgivable. However, Japan must be given due credit for the constancy of its pacifist attitude since the end of the Second World War. Despite the gradually increasing assertiveness in its security policy, there is no denying the fact that Japan is a benign power which has seen a peaceful rise.

It is high time for the United States and India to shed their reluctance of getting more deeply involved in the Japan-South Korea relationship, as the penalty of such reticence might well mean losing South Korea to China. This is something that Japan, too, should consider and Tokyo needs to walk the extra mile towards Seoul.

The bitterness in Japan-South Korea relations comes at a great cost to the region and to the two nations as well. South Korea needs to reassure Japan that it is serious about

irreversibly resolving past historical disputes. Japan, on the other hand, needs to stop its dual approach of showing the will to resolve the ‘Comfort Women’ issue, even while continuing with provocative visits by its political leaders to the Yasukuni war memorial. The mere resolution of the ‘Comfort Women’ issue will not automatically make Japan and South Korea the best of friends, but this issue is far more emotive and probably more easily resolvable than the territorial disputes between the two countries. As such, it will surely go a long way in bettering the relationship between the two neighbours.

\*\*\*\*\*

\* *Shahana Thankachan is a Research Associate at the National Maritime Foundation (NMF), New Delhi. The views expressed here are her own, and do not reflect the official policy or position of the NMF. She can be reached at [shahana629@gmail.com](mailto:shahana629@gmail.com)*

## Notes and References

<sup>1</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Japan, Press Briefing Spokesperson and Deputy Minister for Public Relations Noh Kyu-duk, Accessed on January 15,

2018, [http://www.mofa.go.kr/eng/brd/m\\_5679/view.do?seq=319619](http://www.mofa.go.kr/eng/brd/m_5679/view.do?seq=319619)

Yukari Easton, Japan Must Not Renegotiate the Comfort Women Agreement, The Diplomat , Accessed on January 15, 2018, <https://thediplomat.com/2017/12/japan-must-not-renegotiate-the-comfort-women-agreement/>

<sup>2</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Japan; The Announcement of the Results of the Assessment by the Taskforce to Review the Agreement on Comfort Women Issue reached between the Governments of Japan and the ROK, Accessed on January 16, 2018, [http://www.mofa.go.jp/press/release/press4e\\_001857.html](http://www.mofa.go.jp/press/release/press4e_001857.html)

<sup>3</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Japan ;Press Briefing

Spokesperson and Deputy Minister for Public Relations Noh Kyu-duk, Accessed on 22 January, 2018, [http://www.mofa.go.kr/eng/brd/m\\_5679/view.do?seq=319622&srchFr=&srchTo=&srchWord=&srchTp=&multi\\_itm\\_seq=0&itm\\_seq\\_1=0&itm\\_seq\\_2=0&company\\_cd=&company\\_nm=&page=1&titleNm=](http://www.mofa.go.kr/eng/brd/m_5679/view.do?seq=319622&srchFr=&srchTo=&srchWord=&srchTp=&multi_itm_seq=0&itm_seq_1=0&itm_seq_2=0&company_cd=&company_nm=&page=1&titleNm=)

<sup>4</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London: Verso, 1991

<sup>5</sup> Rana Mitter, “Nationalism in East Asia, 1839-1945” in *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Nationalism* ed. John Breuilly, Oxford Handbooks Online

<sup>6</sup> BBC World Service Poll Conducted in 2014, 79% of South Koreans view Japan’s influence negatively.

<sup>7</sup> Lim Robyn, *Geopolitics of East Asia*, London: Routledge, 2003

<sup>8</sup> This war memorial called *Mimizuka* (literal translation is earmound) is situated in the historical city of Kyoto. <http://www.nbr.org/publications/analysis/pdf/vol10no1.pdf> (Accessed on January 20, 2018)

<sup>9</sup> Argibay, Carmen (2003), “Sexual Slavery and Comfort Women of World War II”, *Berkley Journal of International Law*, Vol21:2

<sup>10</sup> *ibid*

<sup>11</sup> Tae-hyo Kim, “Japan and Korea: Why Can’t they Reconcile?,” *Korean Journal of Defence Analysis* 29(2), 2017: 273

---

<sup>12</sup> Japan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Statement by the Chief Cabinet Secretary Yohei Kono on the result of the study on the issue of "comfort women" , Accessed on 18, January 2018, <http://www.mofa.go.jp/policy/women/fund/state9308.html>

<sup>13</sup> Japan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Statement by Prime Minister Tomiichi Murayama "On the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the war's end", Accessed on 18 January 2018, <http://www.mofa.go.jp/announce/press/pm/murayama/9508.html>

<sup>14</sup> Japan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Announcement by Foreign Ministers of Japan and the Republic of Korea at the Joint Press Occasion, Accessed on 19 January, 2018, [http://www.mofa.go.jp/a\\_o/na/kr/page4e\\_000364.html](http://www.mofa.go.jp/a_o/na/kr/page4e_000364.html)

<sup>15</sup> Japan in order to avoid dealing with the comfort women directly had created the Asia Women's Fund but this initiative was not accepted by South Korea.

<sup>16</sup> Japan Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Press Conference by Foreign Minister Fumio Kishida [http://www.mofa.go.jp/press/kaiken/kaiken4e\\_000321.html#topic2](http://www.mofa.go.jp/press/kaiken/kaiken4e_000321.html#topic2)

<sup>17</sup> Hideshi, Tanaka, Domestic Politics and Foreign Policy in East Asia, East Asia Forum

<sup>18</sup> South Korea refuses to share military intelligence with Japan , Accessed on 25 January 2018, <http://www.straitstimes.com/asia/east-asia/south-korea-refuses-to-share-military-intelligence-with-japan-report>

<sup>19</sup> Hiroshi Minegishi, "South Korea rejected Japan involvement in joint US military drills", Asia Nikkei , Accessed on 22, January 2018, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics-Economy/International-Relations/South-Korea-rejected-Japan-involvement-in-joint-US-military-drills>