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South Korea-Japan Relations Six Months After the Comfort Women Agreement

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Silent Korea-Japan Relations

It has been over six months since an agreement was reached on December 28, 2015 between the Republic of Korea (ROK • Korea) and Japanese governments on the issue of the comfort women who were forced to serve the Japanese army, but the two sides seem to be saving their words. Amidst a flurry of meetings during the Nuclear Security Summit in Washington D.C., Korean President Park Geun-hye and Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe took twenty minutes to meet each other on March 31st. However, the governments made an unprecedented move to keep the contents of that meeting secret.

The secretive meeting signifies that Korea-Japan relations have remained in the same poor state as the December agreement has not been well received. According to a Gallup Korea poll conducted on January 8, 2016, 56 percent of Koreans are opposed to the agreement with only 26 percent supporting it. The poll also showed that 72 percent of Koreans believe that Japan has not apologized sincerely, and the same percentage of people are opposed to the removal of the comfort woman statue in front of the Japanese embassy. Meanwhile, *The Mainichi* surveyed the atmosphere in Japan and found that 65 percent of Japanese people view the agreement favorably. However, only 19 percent of those surveyed in Japan thought the agreement would solve the comfort woman issue. With Japanese right-wing

groups initiating vicious rumors that Korea would quash the agreement, Koichi Hagiuda, a Deputy Chief Cabinet Secretary, stated on April 6th that the removal of the statue and the establishment of the foundation must be implemented as a package deal. Overall, Korea seems to be in a wait and see mode.

The ball is now in Korea's court. Because of public opinion and the potential political backlash to those directly involved, the government is being silent and cautious. However, the original schedule for establishing a foundation to implement the agreement has been pushed back. If it is established without convincing some former comfort women and civic groups that support them of its merits, the issue will again rise up and the efforts to rehabilitate Korea-Japan relations will come under the microscope.

The comfort women problem is a special diplomatic issue between Korea and Japan. Given the identity politics of these two countries surrounding the tragic history of colonialism and war, the issue is deeply tied to domestic politics and demands a high-level political decision. Meanwhile, the comfort women problem is also closely connected with international politics in East Asia. In the middle of the U.S. and Chinese competition over leadership in designing the East Asian regional architecture, history problems are part of each country's pursuit of their own national interests, and Japan has skillfully competed in this arena. Therefore, because the comfort women issue is playing out on several

levels, a highly strategic and complex approach is needed.

New Situation: China's Wedge Strategy and U.S. Intervention in History

If we wish to understand the significance of the December 28 comfort women agreement, we need to return to the beginning of high-level talks over this issue in April 2014.

Following Shinzo Abe's re-ascension to Prime Minister and the election of Park Geun-hye in December 2012, Korea-Japanese relations deteriorated uncontrollably, and U.S.

President Barack Obama, in an effort to improve relations between these two American allies, arranged a meeting of leaders from all three countries on the sidelines of the Nuclear Security Summit in The Hague in March 2014. Through this mediation, the high-level talks to solve the comfort women issue were launched as a litmus test of the improvement of Korea-Japan relations. This is the first time the issue was tied to Korea-U.S.-Japan relations because the U.S. has never made any direct effort to provide a top-level forum for discussing reconciliation between Korea and Japan since 1945.

The reason for U.S. intervention into the history problems of Korea and Japan is that the negative effect of deterioration in ROK-Japan relations on U.S. strategy in the region was growing. The U.S. is in the middle of its rebalance to Asia and is looking to shift more of the burden in East Asia onto its two core allies in the region given the decline of its hegemonic status. However, the U.S. realized that tension between its two allies over history problems was damaging its national interests.

These concerns of the U.S. were amplified by China. Chinese President Xi Jinping had been on a charm offensive toward Korea and was using history problems as the hook.

When President Xi made an official state visit to Korea in July 2013, he emphasized China and Korea's destiny as "great friends" and suggested a Korea-China "history" alliance against the revisionism of Japan. He also promised to build a memorial to the colonial era resistance fighter Ahn Jung-guen which President Park had requested as he tried to buy the favor of Korea. The U.S. reacted sensitively to this Chinese "wedge strategy" which sought to divide the Korea-U.S.-Japan trilateral cooperation by keeping Korea away from Japan and drawing it closer to itself. Prime Minister Abe's December 2013 visit to the Yasukuni Shrine was strenuously opposed by Korea and China, and the U.S. also engaged in a critical diplomatic campaign toward Japan at the time. However, the U.S. still used its influence to negotiate the trilateral meeting at The Hague in order to improve Korea-Japan relations.

The U.S. had hoped that Korea could take a two-track approach to Japan to solve history problems with high-level talks on one track and active cooperation on security and economic issues separated into another. Meanwhile, Korea held fast to the idea that the normalization of their relationship and the summit meetings were linked with a sincere effort by the Japanese government on the comfort women issue. This resulted in increased expectations in Korea of a successful resolution to history problems given the strengthening of identity politics and the firm stance toward Japan.

The U.S. was more active in its intervention into history problems than it had been before. In February 2015, Under Secretary of State Wendy Sherman warned against the use of history problems in domestic politics when she stated that "Nationalist feelings can still be exploited, and it's not hard for a political leader anywhere to

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earn cheap applause by vilifying a former enemy. But such provocations produce paralysis, not progress.” This was a roundabout way of insisting that domestic politics and diplomacy be separated.

Abe’s Counterattack

This form of pressure from the U.S. and Japan’s shrewd response aggravated the dilemma which Korean diplomacy faced. Prime Minister Abe closely consulted the U.S. about the history related contents of his addresses to a joint session of Congress in April 2015 and about his address in August 2015 commemorating the Japanese surrender to end World War II, and afterwards Washington welcomed the remarks made in both speeches. The U.S.-Japan Joint Vision Statement which was released on April 28, 2015 states that the two countries will band together in order to secure regional and global peace and security through the combination of the U.S. “rebalance to Asia strategy” and Japan’s “active pacifism based on international cooperation” stating that “the security and prosperity of our two countries in the 21st century is intertwined, inseparable, and not defined solely by national borders,” creating a “U.S. and Japan vs. China” type of situation in East Asia.

The improvement of China-Japan relations also acted as diplomatic pressure on Korea. Prime Minister Abe took time during the October 2014 APEC summit to hold a brief meeting with President Xi, and on the sidelines of the 60th Bandung Conference in April 2015 the two leaders met again and produced a statement resolving to make efforts not to allow the tensions in the East China Sea to devolve into armed conflict and to not let disagreements on security issues impede real cooperation on other issues.

With Japan integrating its alliance with the U.S. and improving relations with China, Korea’s diplomatic isolation grew more concerning, and its ability to maintain a firm position against Japan weakened considerably. The Korean government went on to publicly mention the “two-track” approach and, ahead of the events to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the normalization of relations between Korea and Japan, the high-level talks on concluding an agreement on the comfort women issue began. “Preconditions” to talks vanished and the response to Abe’s speech on August 15th commemorating the end of the war was moderated. Also, while the purpose of President Park’s attendance of China’s September 3, 2015 celebration of the victory over Japan in World War II in Beijing was to secure Chinese support in dealing with North Korea, it also made the ROK vulnerable to U.S. demands that it improve relations with Japan during President Park’s subsequent visit to Washington in October 2015. It was under these circumstances that the leaders of Korea and Japan held their first summit meeting since taking power, and a quick resolution to the comfort women issue was promised.

What Should and Should Not Be Done Following the Agreement on the Comfort Women Issue

If viewed in this way, the December 28 agreement on the comfort women issue is a product which reflects the reduced diplomatic elbow room of Korea due to the emergence of the “U.S. and Japan vs. China” structure in East Asia and improved China-Japan relations. It could be said that Korea did all it could given the range of limitations placed upon it. However, where there is a will there is a way, and one can constitute circumstances. If it had been clearly recognized that the history

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problem is a unique issue in Korea-Japan relations and at the same time is more widely connected to the competition over the regional architecture, then the naive diplomatic strategy of placing preconditions regarding history problems on normal diplomatic relations would have been rejected, the two-track approach would have been recognized as a complex diplomatic strategy which could have resolved the situation, and excessive emotional responses such as the prosecution of the reporter from the *Sankei Shimbun* could have been controlled. Accordingly, a larger window of opportunity could have been secured from the structure and process of the situation.

With this in mind, what should and should not be done from here on out?

First, the December agreement was successful in genuinely starting the normalization of Korea-Japan relations, but work must begin under the premise that the agreement is only part of a longer process of finding a solution to the comfort women issue. This agreement is not "final" and "irreversible" until the former comfort women agree to accept the establishment of a foundation, the provision of 1 billion yen, and the removal of the comfort woman statue.

Second, honest and persistent dialogue and consultation between the government and the victims must take place. There was a lack of close communication with the victims before and after the agreement, and the fact that the Japanese Prime Minister did not express his apologies and reflections directly to the victims during the summit meeting on March 31st of this year is regrettable.

Third, further research and investigation should continue. History issues should be relegated to the domain of experts to the furthest extent possible while leaders in both countries need to refrain from the temptation

of using history as a means of political mobilization. The comfort women issue cannot be allowed to be swept away in the dynamics of international relations and the domestic political disagreements over the results of consultations cannot detract from the true goal of the movement, which is to help the real victims recover their dignity and honor and to help them overcome their psychological wounds.

Fourth is the implementation of two-track diplomacy. The politicization of history problems is an inevitable phenomenon as they emerge from identity politics, and thus final and irreversible solutions are difficult to achieve. If identity clashes along with quibbling and fighting with Japan are inevitable, then Korea will pay for it in the form of a heartless diplomatic battle. Leadership needs to be displayed in order to keep identity politics from metastasizing to other areas and to not allow these issues to hinder cooperation on security, economic, and emerging issues.

Lastly, the international politics of the comfort women which has developed on the three interconnected domestic, bilateral, and regional levels needs to be organized through a system of complex diplomacy. ■

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