

# BEYOND APOLOGIES: AN ANALYSIS OF KOREAN-JAPANESE FOREIGN RELATIONS THROUGH THE LENS OF THE COMFORT WOMEN ISSUE

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## Abstract

*From Japan's avoidance to South Korea's collective memory of times of forced occupation, suppression, and abuse, historical memory is stagnant, all-absorbing, and never-fading. This paper focuses on delving into the Japan and South Korea dynamics, examining the intricate interplay of historical memory surrounding comfort women and its consequential impact on the political stability of the East Asian region. Utilizing diverse research methodologies, including policy analysis, legal examination, and content analysis, this paper builds on the work of experts Gi-Wook Shin, Soon-Won Park, Gap-Min Pyong, and Marc E. Caprio. Between apologies lacking sincerity, prominent international attention to the comfort women issue, and the memory burden on the Korean population, reconciliation never seems to be enough.*

**Keywords:** South Korea; Japan; Comfort Women; Historical Memory; Diplomacy.

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## Introduction

The *Statue of Peace* is symbolic for the purpose and the topic of this research. A representation of the Korean Japanese tensions, the statue is made of bronze, and depicts a Korean girl, wearing traditional Korean clothing – the hanbok – with bare feet and clenched fists. She is facing, with determination, the Japanese Embassy in Seoul. In winter, she is wearing a scarf and mittens, during summer, paper butterflies adorn her. She is hugged, she is slapped. Her shoulder is stroked affectionately by passers-by and money is thrown at her feet by the adepts of Japanese revisionism. She represents an array of things and elicits various reactions from the people. Among the many perspectives, two opposing ones rise to the surface. For Koreans, the statue embodies the lost childhood of the comfort women. For the Japanese, it is a mockery, an instrument of pressure.<sup>1</sup> For everyone, however, it sparks a memory. Resilience against revisionism, remembrance against avoidance – that is the conflict that arose between the two states. South Korea is seeking acknowledgment by placing the statue in a place of high traffic, Japan is looking to bury this issue. The civil society will not stand for the tragedy to be forgotten. Thus, the web of dynamics grows thicker and larger, and it engulfs both societies in a dispute that sees no finality for the exception of forced apologies and insufficient agreements.

This paper aims to find the effect of the Comfort Women issue as a continuous element of dispute on the relations between Japan and South Korea. In this respect, it will construct a timeline of South Korean-Japanese relations in the 20th century, with a focus on recent 21st-century discussions, particularly concerning the destabilizing impact of the comfort women issue. Exploring how wartime atrocities continue to shape diplomatic pathways, the paper delves into the influence of historical conflicts and reconciliatory practices, examining the evolving roles of South Korea and Japan as key players in East Asia. Factors perpetuating the issue are analysed as limitations to reconciliation, considering the comfort woman rhetoric at the government level and diplomatic developments. This research was conducted under the available methods and was conscious of the linguistic limitations. The main method of research is content analysis used to construct the historical and current political dynamics of the Japanese South Korean relations through

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<sup>1</sup> David Shim, “Memorials’ politics: Exploring the material rhetoric of the Statue of Peace,” in *Memory Studies*, no. 4, 2023, pp. 663-676.

the analysis of written and visual material such as survivors' testimonies, diplomatic statements, academic analysis of the issue, and historical recounts of the colonization period. In terms of historical portrayals, Professor Ku Da-Yeol's work, and Mark E. Caprio's research stand out among plenty of academic articles that enrich the bibliography of the present work. The historical and anthropological discussion are carried on the basis of works authored by anthropologist Chunghee Sarah Soh and historian Brazinsky among others. The analysis of case studies is all the more important as the issue discussed is based on declarations of the very courageous former Comfort Women. In this respect, the review of historical contexts, happenings and effects include the efforts of a rising feminist movement in a newly democratic South Korea for the purpose of commenting societal gender differences, integral to Asian culture. Study cases are relevant also in piecing together the various apologies issued by the Japanese Diet in their efforts of reconciliation. Legal analysis is also used when discussing the effectiveness of bilateral agreements such as the Judgement of the Treaty on the Basic Relations of Japan and South Korea from 1965 or the Comfort Women Agreement in 2015. Policy analysis and evaluation are employed in the same manner to determine the efficiency of the strategies of South Korean administrations in settling the issue surrounding the victims of forced sexual labour during the Pacific War.

### **The historical roots of the Comfort Women issue**

*Naisen ittai*, translated as "Japan and Korea as a single body", had the purpose of persuading the Korean population to join the war efforts alongside the Japanese during the late colonization period. The mirage of collaboration and the subtle methods employed to maintain the divide between the Japanese and the colonized Korean population summarize well the 35 years of occupation the Korean peninsula went through.<sup>2</sup>

The Portsmouth conference in 1905 sealed the fate of the Korean peninsula as a neighbouring state to Japan and its growing influence in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Mediated by American President Roosevelt, the treaty regulated the end of hostilities between Japan, the victor of the conflict, and

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<sup>2</sup> Michael Kim, "The Aesthetics of Total Mobilisation," in *The Visual Culture of Late Colonial Korea. Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions*, no. 3, 2007, pp. 483–502.

Russia. Because Japan was considered the conqueror, the state was granted liberty in imposing its terms. Moreover, the British supported Japan's ambitions in Korea by assessing the inability of the peninsula to reform itself due to its rampant corruption and inefficient government.<sup>3</sup> The agreement, a non-binding opinion of the American Secretary of War Taft and Japanese Prime Minister Katsura, declared the entitlement of "the establishment by Japanese troops of a suzerainty over Korea".<sup>4</sup> Japan was displeased by the limitations the treaty imposed on its expansion, however, the protectorate regime that Korea was under until the official annexation of 1910 was an indicative start of the following policies Japan would implement in the peninsula. Korea's forced acceptance of the Eulsa Treaty or 2<sup>nd</sup> Japan-Korea Agreement gave way to the Japanese Residency. Korea's sovereignty in foreign affairs was overtaken by the Japanese.<sup>5</sup>

Since Korea was weak in terms of military enforcements and financial power, Japan had the upper hand which they used for the signing of the Eulsa Treaty. Koreans completely rejected the Japanese policies and protectorate administration. The objection soon materialized into violent outbursts of the civilians against the Japanese and their sympathizers.<sup>6</sup> However, in 1910, after the Korean question was settled internationally, the peninsula became an extension of the Japanese state, subjected to domestic policies of assimilation. On the international stage, Korea was inexistent, but internally the resistance of the people raged on.<sup>7</sup>

The Japanese pushed a rhetoric of collaboration with Korea while imposing limiting policies in all sectors of life. The most popular discourse described the ease of the process of assimilation of Korean people given the similar cultures and roots of the two nations. Crafted in such a way that it

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<sup>3</sup> Dae-Yeol Ku, *Korea 1905–1945 From Japanese Colonialism to Liberation and Independence*, Folkestone: Renaissance Books, 2021, pp. 39 – 41.

<sup>4</sup> James M. Lindsay and Anna Shortridge, "TWE Remembers: The Taft-Katsura Memorandum", *Council on Foreign Affairs*, 2020, [cfr.org/blog/twe-remembers-taft-katsura-memorandum-0], 10 May 2024.

<sup>5</sup> Tae-Jin Yi, "Treaties Leading to Japan's Annexation of Korea: What Are the Problems?" in *Korea Journal* 56, no. 4, 2016, pp. 5-32.

<sup>6</sup> Stewart Lone, "The Japanese Annexation of Korea 1910: The Failure of East Asian Co-Prosperity," in *Modern Asian Studies* 25, no. 1, 1991, pp. 143-173.

<sup>7</sup> Ku, *op. cit.*, pp. 53-73.

never referred to the Japanese and Koreans as equals, the discourse trusted the ability of the inferior Korean people to adopt the Japanese culture, thought, and lifestyle in a loyal and committed manner. Koreans were not *imperial nationals*, but *imperial subjects*.<sup>8</sup> The Japanese were establishing the intellectual dependence of the Korean people by dismantling their existing educational institutions. Koreans were to become “loyal and good subjects” as the first Educational Ordinance for Korean from 1911 proposed. There were already differences forming between Koreans and Japanese living in Korea, who were to receive a better, more advanced education than their colonized counterparts.<sup>9</sup>

Language suppression, forced Shintoization, economic exploitation, and noncompliance punishments were part of the everyday life of Koreans throughout the 1930s and until the end of the Second World War. By historical recounts, gathered together in Kang’s book on Korean experiences under Japanese occupation, one can get a glimpse of the civilians’ way of living. In 1939, Koreans were urged to adopt Japanese names to foster unity. However, to enrol in schools, secure jobs, use ration cards, or receive mail, one had to have a Japanese name. In silent protest, many incorporated their Korean names or symbols into their Japanese names.<sup>10</sup>

The war mobilization effort ran from 1939 to 1945 in three distinct phases. Voluntary recruitment (*mojip*) took place until 1942, followed by the recruitment under the management of the government (*kwanalsŏn*) until September 1944 and for the last part of the war, the colonial government resorted to forced labour drafting (*chingyong*). Park estimates the total number of Korean men drafted at 7 million between 1939 and 1945, out of which 2 million went overseas, while the rest, including students and female labourers, were deployed throughout Korea. Out of the three major destinations half of the forced labourers worked in coal mines with the rest spread out between construction sites and industrial plants. Historical accounts describe inhumane working conditions where workers lived in

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<sup>8</sup> Mark E. Caprio, *Japanese assimilation policies in colonial Korea, 1910–1945*, Washington: University of Washington Press, 2009, pp. 82–85.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>10</sup> Hildi Kang, *Under the Black Umbrella: Voices from Colonial Korea, 1910–1945*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001, pp. 111–122.

hunger, fear, and cold and were subjected to murder, torture, and cruel punishments. Under heavy surveillance, they were forced to work gruelling hours with little to no compensation.<sup>11</sup>

### **In Focus: The Comfort Women Issue**

As explained by sociologist Min, three components construct the issue of Korean women's victimization under the Japanese military. The incipient phase is the kidnapping of the girls followed by their suffering inside the brothels and lastly, the long-term effects of the victims bearing the label of *comfort women*. The estimated number of victims falls between 80.000 and 280.000 depending on the source.<sup>12</sup> Although the victims were primarily Korean women, women from Taiwan, the Philippines, as well as Japan, were affected. An amalgamation of gender, ethnicity, and social class was crucial in making the abduction of the girls as facile as possible. The gender determined the labour that was to be assigned by the Japanese military. If men were mobilized to be sent to labour, the women became the subjects of sexual slavery for the Imperial Army. The choice of focusing on Korean sexual slaves was meant to help the Japanese bypass international law since Korea was part of the empire during the Pacific War. Lastly, the victims were part of lower-class families with low income and scarce work opportunities. The majority of victims were lured into following the Japanese by being promised a place to work and food. While not all of them made it back to their families, the ones that did were too ashamed to speak out and their families were too poverty-stricken to exert pressure on the government to investigate the war crimes.<sup>13</sup>

After being abducted from their homes, the girls were shipped off to several *comfort stations*. The soldiers were to receive the services of the women in a manner that prevented rape cases and the transmission of sexual diseases. While the Japanese army exploited Korean women, the victims

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<sup>11</sup> Soon-Won Park, "The politics of remembrance: The case of Korean forced laborers in the Second World War" in ed. Gi-Wook Shin, Soon-Won Park, and Daqing Yang, *Rethinking Historical Injustice and Reconciliation in Northeast Asia: The Korean experience*, New York: Routledge, 2007, pp. 86-111.

<sup>12</sup> Gap-Min Pyong, "Korean "Comfort Women": The Intersection of Colonial Power, Gender, and Class" in *Gender and Society* 17, no. 6, 2003, pp. 938-957, [Korean "Comfort Women": The Intersection of Colonial Power, Gender, and Class on JSTOR], 12 May 2024.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibidem*.

were forced to serve a large number of men each day as per the standard deployed by the Kantō Army Department of “one woman per thirty-five soldiers”. As such, they were prone to contracting sexual diseases. Some of the girls that became ill died, due to lack of care. Victims attest to screaming in pain and begging for the soldiers to stop harassing them, which would only infuriate them further.<sup>14</sup> In 2015, Japanese journalist Takashi Ito, spoke to North Korean victims of sexual slavery during the war. All of the testimonies invoke the brutality of the kidnappers and the torture they were subjected to. Recounts of beheadings, water inflation torture, and infliction of pain using nail beds are described in detail to the reporter. As he shares this piece of heartbreaking journalism, it becomes apparent why the issue is not and will not be solved soon enough – no amount of compensation is enough for the lost youth of these women who remained marred their entire lives by the abuses of the Japanese army.<sup>15</sup>

### **Tentative Relations: Post-War Diplomatic Exchanges**

Diplomatic relations were re-established between the two countries in 1965 through the Treaty on Basic Relations<sup>16</sup>. Some provisions of the treaty were derived from the United Nations General Assembly Resolution 195 (III) in 1948, reflecting international support for Korea's pursuit of independence and self-governance. The resolution established the United Nations Temporary Commission on Korea, tasked with documenting the impacts of Japanese rule. It also urged member states to avoid actions that might hinder the Korean population's determination of their democratic future.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, the Treaty on Basic Relations achieved the beginning of beneficial economic cooperation between the two countries as well as security

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<sup>14</sup> Hayashi Yōko. “Issues Surrounding the Wartime ‘Comfort Women’,” *Review of Japanese Culture and Society* 11/12, 1999, pp. 54–65, [<http://www.jstor.org/stable/42800182>], 12 May 2024.

<sup>15</sup> Korea Center for Investigative Journalism, “Sorrowful Homecoming”, uploaded March 2016, video, [[ENG SUB] Sorrowful Homecoming Part 1 - 'comfort women' victims by the japanese army - YouTube], 14 May 2024.

<sup>16</sup> Treaty On Basic Relations Between Japan and The Republic of Korea, No. 8471, Signed At Tokyo, on 22 June 1965, [<https://treaties.un.org/doc/Publication/UNTS/Volume%20583/volume-583-I-8471-English.pdf>], 14 May 2024.

<sup>17</sup> UN General Assembly, Resolution 195 (III), titled “The problem of the independence of Korea”, 1948, [<https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/210026>], 14 May 2024.

cooperation in the face of common threats. The treaty was not well received in either of the countries. The Koreans were harbouring deep anti-Japanese feelings as a result of their colonial past. For the Japanese, rebuilding relations with South Korea simply held no advantage. Whilst economic cooperation was developing at a fast pace, the political collaboration between the two states was alarmingly slow during the 60s and 70s, becoming almost stagnant between 1973 and 1974.<sup>18</sup> Key factors contributing to the absence of diplomatic exchanges were the kidnapping of former president Kim Dae-Jung in Tokyo by agents of the Korean Central Intelligence Agency<sup>19</sup> and the assassination of President Park Chung-Hee's wife during a public event in 1974 by a Japan-born North Korean.<sup>20</sup> In a historic visit after nearly four decades, Japanese Prime Minister Nakasone, who took office in 1983, chose South Korea as his first destination. During the two-day visit, he extended a \$4 million loan to South Korea at low interest rates, emphasizing a desire to move past historical tensions. South Korean President Chun described Nakasone's visit as a "monumental milestone".<sup>21</sup> The initial thread of Japan's apologies emerged during President Chun's 1984 visit, notably when Emperor Hirohito acknowledged the "unfortunate" past between South Korea and Japan at a banquet. However, this apology fell short of what the Korean population desired, as it failed to address Japan's wartime crimes and lacked a genuine expression of remorse.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Evelyn Colbert, "Japan and the Republic of Korea: Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow," *Asian Survey*, 26, no. 3, 1986, pp. 273–91.

<sup>19</sup> Lee Sun-young, "Kim Dae-jung kidnapping: How future Nobel laureate nearly fell victim to junta", *Korean Herald*, 2023, [<https://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20230315000794>], 15 May 2024.

<sup>20</sup> Jae-hee Choi, "When Koreans lost a first lady", *Korean Herald*, 2023, [<https://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20230322000738>], 15 May 2024.

<sup>21</sup> Tracy Dahl, "Nakasone, in Seoul, Seeks to Strengthen Japan, U.S.-Korea Alliance", *The Washington Post*, 1983, [<https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1983/01/12/nakasone-in-seoul-seeks-to-strengthen-japan-us-korea-alliance/38ab40cd-4960-44fc-8d51-fc6b103561cf/>], 15 May 2024.

<sup>22</sup> John Burgess and Young H. Lee, "Hirohito Says Role in Korea Was 'Unfortunate'", *The Washington Post*, 1984, [<https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1984/09/07/hirohito-says-role-in-korea-was-unfortunate/70fa0e14-4656-452a-81a4-37edb095cf10/>], 15 May 2024.



In the late 1980s, civil society initiated feminist political activism to gain recognition for the Comfort Women issue. The International Conference on Women and Tourism provided a platform for researcher Yun Chung-Ok to present her work on South Korea's comfort women, triggering increased feminist activism. In 1989, activists protested South Korea's presence at Emperor Hirohito's funeral and, before President Roh Tae-Woo's Japan visit, issued demands to the Japanese government, including investigating the comfort women issue and issuing an apology. Emperor Akihito expressed deep regrets, but the Japanese Diet claimed private settlements, avoiding formal investigations. In 1991, a courageous victim, Kim Hak-Sun, publicly revealed her wartime torture, marking a turning point in the Comfort Women's pursuit of justice. This was to be the catalyst of a much more vehement fight for the recognition and compensation of former Comfort Women.<sup>23</sup>

What began as fragmented support transformed into an international movement that expressed itself by establishing the Tokyo Women's Tribunal, a people's tribunal meant to respond to the crisis of the comfort women, which has been covered for 50 years. The Tribunal was organized to include representatives of the victims, the offenders, and an Advisory Board comprised of third-party representatives. The objectives of the Tribunal were two-fold – assessing international law through the lenses of feminist theory to reveal gender bias and to conduct political change and address abuses towards women. The Tribunal found Emperor Hirohito guilty of violating the rights of the comfort women, while Japan was accused of committing crimes against humanity in the form of sexual slavery while having its proposition that the women were voluntary prostitutes firmly rejected.<sup>24</sup>

Approaching Japan's spike of revisionist tendencies in the 2010s, the comfort women issue brought about new tensions between Japan and South Korea. In 2015, Prime Minister Abe Shinzō and President Park Geun-Hye reached an agreement that was to end the drawn-out dispute. Through the

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<sup>23</sup> Chunghee Sarah Soh, "The Korean 'Comfort Women': Movement for Redress" in *Asian Survey*, 36, no. 12, 1996, pp. 1226–40.

<sup>24</sup> Rachele Marconi, "Solidarity and Justice for War Crimes Against Women: The 'Comfort Women' Case" in the *LSE Women, Peace and Security Working Paper Series*, 28/2022, [<https://www.lse.ac.uk/women-peace-security/assets/documents/2022/WPS28Marconi.pdf>], 15 May 2024.

agreement, the Foreign Minister of Japan Kishida made a public apology on behalf of the Prime Minister and repaid the South Korean former Comfort Women with roughly \$8 million. In turn, the South Korean government was to address the issue of the Statue of Peace placed right across the street from the Japanese Embassy in Seoul. Whilst it was regarded as a diplomatic victory, the victims were quick to voice their rejection of the agreement, stating that it had been signed without concerning the actual victims and thus failed to convey their needs and wishes.<sup>25</sup> Koreans believed President Park rushed into an agreement that was selling the dignity of the survivors for political gains while the far-right Japanese factions believed the agreement was not necessary seeing there have been already multiple apologies made in the past.<sup>26</sup> Weeks after the agreement, Abe reaffirmed his past statements by saying no documents could prove the forceful kidnapping of the victims. Asked to personally send letters to the former comfort women, he declined, saying he had no intention of apologizing again.<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, during the U.N. Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women which deliberated in Japan in February 2016, the Japanese declared that the term “sex slaves” is misleading as the women who were drafted voluntarily for labour are often confused with comfort women.<sup>28</sup>

During Moon Jae-In’s term, he condemned the agreement as inefficient. With a strategy set on appeasing the victims, President Moon encouraged collaboration between the two states and the issuing of heartfelt apologies to the comfort women.<sup>29</sup> In 2018, the South Korean president decided to

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<sup>25</sup> Klea Ramaj, “The 2015 South Korean–Japanese Agreement on ‘Comfort Women’: A Critical Analysis”, in *International Criminal Law Review* 22, no. 3, 2022, pp. 475-509.

<sup>26</sup> Ankit Panda, “The ‘Final and Irreversible’ 2015 Japan-South Korea Comfort Women Deal Unravels”, *The Diplomat*, 2017, [<https://thediplomat.com/2017/01/the-final-and-irreversible-2015-japan-south-korea-comfort-women-deal-unravels/>], 17 May 2024.

<sup>27</sup> Yuji Hosaka, “Why Did the 2015 Japan-Korea ‘Comfort Women’ Agreement Fall Apart?”, *The Diplomat*, 2021, [<https://thediplomat.com/2021/11/why-did-the-2015-japan-korea-comfort-women-agreement-fall-apart/>], 17 May 2024.

<sup>28</sup> United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women examines reports of Japan, 2016, [<https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2016/02/committee-elimination-discrimination-against-women-examines-reports-japan>], 18 May 2024.

<sup>29</sup> Joyce Lee and Hyonhee Shin, “South Korea says ‘comfort women’ deal flawed, but Japan warns against change”, *Reuters*, 2017, [<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-southkorea-japan-comfortwomen-idUSKBN1EM056/>], 19 May 2024.

disband the Reconciliation and Healing Foundation created through the Comfort Women Agreement back in 2015, thus nullifying the entire accord.<sup>30</sup>

Currently, conservative President Yoon Suk-Yeol aims to address the issue once again during his term. Following the pattern of his predecessors, his strategy involves securing an apology from the Japanese government and providing compensation to the victims. In bilateral discussions, South Korea indicated that a heartfelt apology from Japan would suffice. The proposed compensation system suggests a foundation affiliated with the South Korean Government handling payments on behalf of Japan using funds from private donations. Given South Korea's significant concessions, the proposal was introduced in March 2023 not as a formal plan but as a proposition. Public perception viewed the proposal as a humiliating diplomatic effort.<sup>31</sup>

## Conclusions

In a race against time, what started with one statue across the road from the Japanese Embassy in 2015 has transformed into an estimated number of around 100 all around the world. Latest reports show that only 9 registered victims remain alive in 2023<sup>32</sup>, thus the time to put an end to the issue is drawing close, but the two countries continue to engage in periodic diplomatic disputes instead of reaching a clear-cut solution that would offer the victims the peace they deserve.

In addressing the initial research question, the intricate historical and political fabric explored in this paper underscores the visible impact of the comfort women issue on the foreign relations between Japan and South Korea. The historical baggage between South Korea and Japan persists, and with each new government in both nations, attempts are made to address the issue of former comfort women. Amidst the revisionist stance of Japan

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<sup>30</sup> Hyunmin Michael Kang, "South Korea Decides to Dismantle 'Comfort Women' Reconciliation and Healing Foundation", *The Diplomat*, 2018, [South Korea Decides to Dismantle 'Comfort Women' Reconciliation and Healing Foundation – The Diplomat], 19 May 2024.

<sup>31</sup> The Asahi Shimbun, "Yoon strives to avoid repeat of failed 'comfort women' accord", 2023, [<https://www.asahi.com/ajw/articles/14855612>], 19 May 2024.

<sup>32</sup> Hankyoreh, "Another death leaves only 9 surviving Korean 'comfort women'", 2023, [[https://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english\\_edition/e\\_national/1090418.html](https://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_national/1090418.html)], 19 May 2024.

and South Korea's plea, numerous reports, recommendations, and opinions from international observers have been issued, yet a resolution remains elusive. This research paper, through its analysis, reveals a recurring formula employed by state leaders to forge agreements aimed at compensating former comfort women. The pattern typically involves Japan apologizing and providing funds for the victims. Negotiations unfold, agreements are reached, but civil society often responds with reluctance or outrage. Japan fulfils its commitments, yet the public perceives the apologies as lacking sincerity. Meanwhile, successive South Korean administrations swiftly call for apologies from the Japanese Diet without formal requests. Defining an agenda on the part of the South Korean government should only be completed after thorough consultations with the civil society and most importantly with the victims. Additionally, as American historian Brazinsky suggests the South Korean administration should also take into consideration the opinion of the opposition which may be more critical, but also more objective. He finds it to be one of the main omissions that may have altered the fate of the 2015 "Comfort Women" Agreement closed by President Park for the better.<sup>33</sup>

To conclude, this paper does not wish to nullify the apologies issued by Japan, but only to suggest a more effective solution to an ongoing issue. Acknowledging that each apology from the Japanese Diet represents a significant step toward reconciliation, the paper recognizes the sensitivity and complexity of the matter that cannot be overlooked. Consequently, there remains hope for a future collaborative and sincere approach that prioritizes the well-being of the victims.

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<sup>33</sup> Gregg A. Brazinsky, "Achieving a More Durable Japan-South Korea Rapprochement, United States Institute of Peace", *United States Institute of Peace*, 2022, [<https://www.usip.org/publications/2022/09/achieving-more-durable-japan-south-korea-rapprochement>], 19 May 2024.

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