Opinions

The Role of Historical Memory in Japan - South Korea Relations

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Abstract
The present paper investigates the latest developments in the Japan-South Korea economic and political relationship, reviewing the recent (2019) far-reaching consequences of the conflict over the compensation for forced labour. The paper argues that the issue of wartime forced labour has been intensely politicized by both governments, and their inability to find consensus on this particular historical issue has severely corroded economic and diplomatic ties. Ultimately, the analysis of bilateral relations shows that both governments have been acquiring political capital from positioning themselves one against the other.

Keywords: South Korea–Japan relations; international conflicts in East Asia; history wars; forced labour; compensation; trade conflict;

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1. Introduction

On July 4th, 2015, the World Heritage Committee was scheduled to vote whether to inscribe Japan's Meiji period (1868-1912) industrial sites on the UNESCO World Heritage List. The representatives of the Republic of Korea (hereafter, South Korea) had been long voicing their objections to the inscription, and several bilateral meetings in the summer of 2015 had not produced any fruitful solution. South Korean opposition was caused by Japan's reluctance to mention in the nomination file that some of the sites had belonged to Japanese companies which had made use of Korean and Chinese forced labour in the 1930s and 1940s. The description of the nominated sites made no reference to the severe, life-threatening conditions in which laborers forcefully brought from the colonies (Korea, Manchuria) worked. Instead, Japan was presenting its industrial heritage as "the first successful transfer of Western industrialization to a non-Western nation" (UNESCO n.d.). Since South Korea was threatening to veto the inscription on the World Heritage List, Japan publicly pledged to acknowledge in its future interpretation of the sites that Koreans "were brought against their will and were forced to work under severe conditions" (Yoshida, 2015). The vote, delayed for July 5th to allow for these negotiations, was eventually positive, but the very following day, Japan's Foreign Minister Fumio Kishida retracted this concession, declaring that the ambiguous expression "forced to work" (Jap. hatarakasareta) does not mean "forced labour" (Jap. kyōsei renkō) (Yoshida, 2015). In its subsequent treatment of the inscribed "Sites of Japan's Meiji Industrial Revolution: Iron and Steel, Shipbuilding and Coal Mining," Japan has refused to mention and acknowledge the exploitation of forced laborers brought from the colonies, fuelling tensions with South Korea (Palmer, 2018).

This example is just one of the many sources of conflict over historical issues between Japan and South Korea. In recent years, the issue of colonial era (1910-1945) forced labour

has been resurfacing very often in diplomatic feuds between the two governments. The present article investigates the latest developments in the Japan-South Korea economic and political relationship, reviewing the recent (2019), far-reaching consequences of the conflict over the compensation for forced labour. The paper argues that the issue of wartime forced labour has been intensely politicized by both governments, and their inability to find consensus on this particular historical issue has severely corroded economic and diplomatic ties. Ultimately, the analysis of bilateral relations shows that both governments have been acquiring political capital from positioning themselves one against the other.

2. History Wars

Forced labour is just one of the divisive issues troubling Korean - Japanese relations. Most of the sources of conflict stem from the inability to find international consensus on how to view the past, particularly the period of colonial occupation of Korea by Japan and Japan's role in the Asia-Pacific War (1941-1945). Inter-state relations are still constantly affected by issues of historical responsibility, official apology, compensation for victims, and restitution of cultural properties and artefacts. Agreement on historical facts and acknowledgement of historical wrongs get overly complicated because a vast array of actors contributes to the conversation on the past: state governments, political groups which have their own agenda, civic groups, educators, the media, popular culture (fiction, movies, comics etc.). These political and academic conflicts engulfing Japan, the two Koreas, and China, coined "history wars," have been the focus of a growing body of academic literature, mainly in the last two decades. Studies have emphasized the significance of social memory (Gong, 2001; Kim and Schwartz, 2010), the meaningful role of mediation and reconciliation (Morris-Suzuki, 2008; Suh, 2010, Morris-Suzuki *et al.*, 2013), historical revisionism (Richter, 2008), complicated issues of commemoration (Morris-Suzuki, 2013a), and the role of "competing nationalisms" in Northeast Asia (Ahn, 2006; Hasegawa and Togo, 2008).

Most history wars straining relations between Japan and South Korea have been well documented in the academic literature. The conflict concerning Japanese stations of sexual slavery (the so-called "comfort women"), installed in military camps in the Japanese-occupied territories between 1932-1945 is an ongoing dispute, despite attempts at settling compensation for surviving victims or victims' families. Scholars have documented archival material (Hicks, 1995), victims' confessions (Yang, 1998; Choi, 2001), and the politicization of the issue of comfort women (Togo, 2008). Efforts toward the recognition of former forced laborers (Morris-Suzuki, 2013b) have clashed with the attempt to erase their memory (Takazane, 2015). Japan's revisionist history textbooks (Kim, 2008; Mitani, 2008) and the visits of Japanese politicians to the controversial Yasukuni Shrine, where war heroes are celebrated together with war criminals (Takahashi, 2006), have been interpreted in Korea as outright denials of past wrongs. Therefore, South Korea has been asking its neighbour for atonement for a long time, demanding proper recognition of historical issues in textbooks, memorials, museums, and the media.

In particular, responsibility for Korean forced laborers has been a difficult issue of contention between South Korea and Japan, stemming from debates over the degree of coercion involved in colonial labour. During the colonial period, the Japanese authorities employed several recruitment schemes to secure workforce for Japanese private companies, particularly in the coalmining industry, military facilities and industrial yards. It is

estimated that around 700,000 Koreans worked in Japan during 1939-1945 (Morris-Suzuki 2013b, p. 88), when the young, male population of Japan was conscripted into the army. An increasing surge in nationalism in Japan, fostered by the political right-wing, has led to challenging the idea that Korean workers were brought to Japan forcibly. The resulting view is that Koreans participated voluntarily in the colonial mobilization programs and were subjected to the same working conditions as Japanese citizens. On the opposite side, South Korea and China have pressed for a more nuanced understanding of the degree of coercion involved in colonial recruitment schemes, and a proper recognition of the suffering of the victims who have worked in perilous, often life-threatening conditions. This view prompts Japan to accept its responsibility for the deportation of hundreds of thousands of workers, who were lured or forced to work in Japanese private companies with varying degrees of violence, intimidation and constraint. During 2005-2012, the South Korean government financed a "Truth Commission on Forced Mobilization under Japanese Imperialism" (Kor. *Ilche Kangjŏmha Kangje Tongwŏn P'ihae Chinsang Kyumyŏng Wiwŏnhoe*), which collected over 220,000 testimonies from former laborers or their family members (Underwood, 2008). The efforts to document the past have revealed the complex power relations involved in conscripted labour during colonial regimes and have questioned the notion of voluntary participation during occupation regimes.

3. A Trade Conflict Generated by Historical Issues

On October 30th, 2018, the South Korean Supreme Court ordered Japanese company Nippon Steel & Sumitomo Metal Corporation to pay one hundred million wŏn (approximate value at the time 89,000 USD) compensation to each of the four plaintiffs who had been wartime forced laborers. The case had begun in 2005 in a lower district court and had moved through the Korean legal system, claiming the Japanese company was responsible for unpaid work between 1941 and 1943. By October 2018, three of the four plaintiffs who had initiated the legal case had already died (Kim, 2018) and were being represented by their descendants. Nippon Steel had argued in its defence that the two countries had already settled the issue of compensation for forced labour through a treaty concluded in 1965[1], abolishing the need for individual reparations. Therefore, the Japanese company declared the Supreme Court ruling "extremely disappointing," while the Japanese Foreign Affairs Minister Tarō Kōno labelled it "unacceptable," hinting at the prospective deterioration of bilateral ties (Kim, 2018).

Perhaps the most consequential thing related to the historical ruling was that it created a legal precedent for similar cases that are ongoing in lower (local) courts in South Korea. It is estimated that, in 1944, towards the end of the colonial period, approximately 380,000 Korean forced laborers were working in Japan in extreme conditions (Palmer, 2016, p.175). Hundreds of survivors and their families have been suing Japanese companies for

[1] Commonly known as the "Treaty on Basic Relations between Japan and the Republic of Korea", the agreement stipulated that Japan must pay 300 million USD in grants and extend loans up to 200 million USD (Article I) in 1965. However, the money was used by the Korean government for economic development and has never reached the victims of the colonial period, such as comfort women or forced laborers. Japan has been using this treaty to deny its responsibility to the victims. In May 2012, the South Korean Supreme Court made a historical ruling, arguing that the treaty settled the issue of compensation only at state-level, but did not deal with individual claims and, therefore, the Court upheld individual rights to claim reparation.
A translation of the agreement can be found here:
https://treaties.un.org/doc/Publication/UNTS/Volume%20583/volume-583-I-8473-English.pdf

compensation in the last two decades, supported by South Korean civic associations. Many lawsuits were filed initially in Japan, but were either lost or dismissed, on the grounds that the 1965 Treaty had already dealt with the issue of compensation. Currently, seventy Japanese companies,[2] including Nissan, Mitsubishi Heavy Industries, Toshiba, and Panasonic, are the target of lawsuits in local South Korean courts (Choe and Motoko, 2019). Within South Korea, the plaintiffs receive support not only from citizens' groups and NGO's, but also from the highest echelons of the administration. From the very beginning of his mandate, President Moon Jae-in has encouraged former forced laborers to seek claims against Japanese companies ("South Korea's Moon Speaks out," 2017). At the same time, representatives of the Japanese government have been instructing Japanese companies to refuse any payments of compensation, even in the aftermath of the 2018 Supreme Court ruling. Japanese Prime-Minister Abe Shinzō suggested that the laborers were legally recruited under colonial recruitment and conscription laws and referred to the plaintiffs as "former workers from the Korean Peninsula," avoiding the incriminating term "forced laborers" (Cho, 2018).

When Nippon Steel & Sumitomo Metal Corporation refused to pay compensation to the four plaintiffs who had won in October 2018, they applied to the court for the seizure of company assets located in South Korea (the Japanese company has a joint venture with South Korean steel maker Posco, called PNR). This ensued in a trade conflict with wide consequences that has dominated bilateral relations in 2019. On July 4th, 2019, Japan announced the removal of South Korea from its list of favourite trading partners–the so-called "whitelist" of Japan's export partners which benefit from minimum export controls, customs documentation, and minimum restrictions on trade. Increased trade control took effect on August 28th. Most affected was the export to South Korea of three key high-tech chemicals essential for the production of memory chips, display panels and flat screens. Japan has a 90% market share in these high-tech materials (Obe and Kim, 2019). Although Japan did not ban exports to South Korea, the removal from the list of preferred partners meant that exporters had to apply for a license for every shipment of materials to South Korea, with longer periods of examination causing delays and potential disruptions of production. President Moon Jae-in immediately warned companies such as Samsung and Hyundai to accumulate stocks of materials and "prepare for a prolonged fight" (Kim, 2019). Therefore, Japan's decision impacted the South Korean electronics industry (smartphones, TVs), with possible reverberations in the worldwide electronics market, for which South Korea is a key exporter of semiconductors.

When South Korea blamed Japan for making this move in retaliation for the forced labour Supreme Court ruling, Japan denied everything. Instead, it claimed that the newly imposed trade control is a measure for national security, as South Korea was allegedly not handling properly the import of the Japanese high technology, which is sensitive and has applicability for military use. When pressed to provide evidence, Japan failed to do so, and analysts on both sides have undoubtedly connected the trade war to the forced labour issue.

Moreover, July 4, the day when Japan announced its decision, coincided with the launch of the campaign for the Japanese Upper House election. In the campaign, Prime-Minister Abe Shinzō pledged to lead his Liberal Democratic Party to victory again, to continue to hold the majority of Upper House seats. Bold moves in international relations with South Korea

[2] These companies have historic roots in the companies using forced labor during the Asia-Pacific War.

have been a trademark of the Abe administration[3], echoing the position of the political conservative wing in Japan.

President Moon Jae-in has responded with his own political move on August 22, by announcing to withdraw from GSOMIA (General Security of Military Information Agreement), concluded with Japan and the United States of America in November 2016. The objective of this trilateral alliance is to share military intelligence, particularly in the often-volatile context of North Korean missile and nuclear tests. South Korea's participation in the GSOMIA agreement on security issues expires on November 22, 2019, and diplomatic pressure coming from the United States to continue the agreement has had no effect on Korea's decision.

President Moon Jae-in also gains political support by reactivating anti-Japanese nationalism, and there is wide public support for anti-Japanese diplomatic and political moves. For instance, when South Korea reciprocated and removed Japan from its own list of preferred trade partners, a general survey conducted by the Ministry of Trade, Industry and Energy showed that 91% of respondents supported the government move (Choi, 2019), despite the fact that any economic dispute with Japan affects export businesses.

Just as the author is making the last corrections to this article, the situation of bilateral ties seems to have made little improvements. Campaigns boycotting Japanese products in South Korea– from cars, to fashion brands such as Uniqlo, beer, or cosmetics–have had a negative impact on businesses on both sides. Korean tourism to Japan has dwindled to the point that local airlines have had to cancel some flights to Japanese destinations. As the date for Korea's withdrawal from the GSOMIA security agreement draws nearer, there is a climate of uncertainty and anguish that currently affects not only diplomatic relations, but also the Korean currency and the stock market.

4. Conclusions

The deterioration of South Korea-Japan's relation in 2019 has stemmed from the inability to find common grounds on historical issues–in particular, wartime forced labour–but has had serious repercussions on trade and security matters. It is obvious that the problem of wartime forced labour has been appropriated by the two governments and has been fiercely politicized by both sides. Both President Moon Jae-in and Prime-Minister Abe Shinzō have acquired political capital and support in their own countries by adopting uncompromising stances regarding the issue. Historians often argue for more balanced, evidence-based views of colonial and wartime topics, hoping academic consensus on the past will eventually lead to reconciliation. However, it seems that government representatives in both countries have more to gain from appropriating the past for their own political agendas and from capitalizing on representations of the past that do not reconcile. Political actors on both sides use history as a weapon against an imaginary enemy. This is most evident in Korea, where anti-Japanese nationalism has been a strong component of national identity ever since the beginning of the colonial period (Park 2008, 193). The recent conflict over the compensation for forced labour is simply resurfacing and exacerbating resentments that have negatively influenced the relationship between the two governments for more than three decades. Although suggestions for improvement in diplomatic relations exceed the

[3] See, for example, Abe Shinzō's denial of governmental responsibility for the exploitation of comfort women (Dudden and Mizoguchi, 2007).

scope of this paper, efforts to de-politicize historical debates in both South Korea and Japan could possibly lead to reconciliation and compromise.

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