

COMFORT WOMEN: IMPACTS ON JAPAN'S RELATIONS WITH SOUTH KOREA AND THE PHILIPPINES

Sigit^a and Farin Almira Anantasya^b

ABSTRACT

The objective of this paper is to analyse how the issue of “comfort women” affects Japan’s relations with its neighboring countries, namely South Korea and the Philippines, using qualitative methods, and constructivism as the conceptual framework. “Comfort women” or “jugun ianfu” in Japanese, and “wianbu” in romanized Korean, is an euphemism used to describe young women from all across Asia who were forced to please the Japanese troops sexually during World War II. These young women were deceived, lured, or kidnapped and then confined in “comfort stations.” Initially, the Japanese government denied that they had systematically confined these so-called “comfort women” and distributed them to comfort stations to be sex slaves, and rejected demands for a formal apology and war reparations to the victims. This had outraged South Korea and the comfort women survivors. This paper suggests that Japan finally admitted its role in the establishment of comfort stations in 1993, and has been trying to make amends with these countries. The process of making amends remains a persistent controversy, with Japan seeking to turn over a new leaf and many South Koreans and Filipinos striving to not let the tragic history be forgotten.

Keywords: Comfort women, Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, Constructivism

INTRODUCTION

It is well known that the comfort women issue has been a critical component of Japan’s relation with South Korea, among other countries. Various points of disagreement persist and misunderstanding between the two nations deepens the divide which ultimately leads to deterioration of relations. It cannot be easily dismissed that in the pursuit of a viable Japan-South Korea partnership, efforts to correct the injustice endured by those former comfort women are a critical precedent for necessary regional cooperation (Kumagai, 2020). The comfort women issue was neglected for decades and left the victims with shame, guilt, pain, and scar for life. In a world where patriarchy was prominent and women had to be chastised, they had to hide their wartime experiences, even though what had happened to them was none of their faults, so as not to embarrass their families. After decades of silence, finally, Korean women raised the issue around 1990, and a former South Korean comfort woman - Kim Hak Soon, came out in 1991 (Jonsson, 2015), which immediately became a point of dispute. After years of denial, only in 1993 the Japanese

^a Sigit (sigitcandrawiranatakusuma89@gmail.com) is a Senior Researcher at the Center for Japanese Studies, University of Indonesia, Indonesia.

^b Farin Almira Anantasya (itsohsokidrauhl@gmail.com) is a Research Assistant at the Department of International Relations, Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, Moestopo University, Indonesia.

state admitted its role in the management and supervision of the “comfort stations” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs [MOFA], 2014). These comfort stations were conceived, planned, and supervised by the Supreme Headquarters of the Japanese Imperial forces and the government in Tokyo to meet the Japanese soldiers’ sexual needs.

“Comfort women” is a linguistically warped categorisation of the tens of thousands of women and girls, many from poor rural areas, who were forced to serve as sex slaves for the Japanese soldiers (McCarthy, 2020). These comfort women were locked up in what were called “comfort stations” – which existed in Japan and abroad, wherever the Japanese troops were stationed – where they received violent treatments be it in the form of mental, emotional, or physical torture. The Korea Times labels the comfort women (translated as *wianbu* in romanization of Korean) issue as the “biggest diplomatic dispute” between Japan and South Korea. In late March 2014, only 55 Korean comfort women survivors were alive (Jonsson, 2015). Estimations of the number of comfort women – mostly young unmarried women – range from 70,000 to 200,000; and about 80 percent of those numbers were Koreans (Molnar, 2018). However, eventually, women from Japan (mainly former professional prostitutes), China, Taiwan, the Philippines, Indonesia, Burma, Thailand, Malaysia, Vietnam, East Timor, India, Guam, and the Netherlands also became victims and were distributed around comfort stations (Molnar, 2018). One of the reasons why the majority of the *wianbu* were Korean women was that they physically resemble Japanese women.

The purpose of this paper is to deepen the understanding of the complex issues about comfort women and how it affects the Japanese state’s relations with its neighboring country South Korea and the Philippines. In the first section of this paper, the relationship between Japan and South Korea will be discussed. The second section will explain about Japan’s relationship with the Philippines. Third, an explanation about what a comfort woman is and its history will be given. The next section will explain about South Korea and the Philippines’ responses regarding the issue, and the last section will be discussing impacts of the comfort women issue on Japan’s relations with South Korea and the Philippines. Based on this background, this paper will analyse how the issue of comfort women affects the relationship between Japan and South Korea, and the Philippines.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The constructivism theory is useful to help explain how the comfort women issue is affecting the Japanese state’s relations with South Korea and the Philippines. The basis of this theory is that constructivism sees the world as socially constructed. Alexander Wendt (1995) gives an example of the social construction of reality by explaining that 500 British nuclear weapons are not as threatening to the United States as five North Korean nuclear weapons. These identifications are caused by the meaning given to the nuclear weapons (ideational structure) rather than the nuclear weapons themselves (material structure), and it shows that the nuclear weapons by themselves do not have any meaning unless we understand the social context. This also implies that reality is always under

construction and opens the prospect for change. In other words, meanings are not fixed, but can change over time depending on the ideas and beliefs that actors hold.

A similar phenomenon between Japan, South Korea, and the Philippines can be seen as well. The comfort women issue is causing social distrust between the countries, and it informs negotiations over current issues because of the distrust that still exists. However, as noted before, reality is always under construction and opens the prospect for a change, and thus social relationships are subject to change depending on the ideas, beliefs, and actions of Japan, South Korea, and the Philippines. An agreement on the comfort women issue between the involved parties has the possibility to change how they perceive each other, which then might lead to the establishment of relations that are friendlier in nature.

JAPAN AND SOUTH KOREA RELATIONSHIP

Japan and South Korea share a complex history. The two nations have fought on and off since the 7th century, and Japan has annexed South Korea in 1910 and turned it into one of its colonies. As Japan was beginning to prepare itself for war in the late 1930s, it forced people who were deemed old enough to enlist as soldiers and confined thousands of women from all over Asia to military brothels to become Japanese soldiers' sexual slaves to service these soldiers on the battlefield, who are then known as the "comfort women". In 1945, Japan's rule of South Korea ended after it was defeated in World War II. However, it took another 20 years for South Korea to normalise its relations with Japan. Under the leadership of South Korean President Park Chung-hee, South Korea agreed to restore diplomatic relations with Japan, which was materialised through the Treaty on Basic Relations between Japan and South Korea, along with the Agreement on the Settlement of Problems Concerning Property and Claims and on Economic Co-operation in 1965.

The Agreement on the Settlement of Problems Concerning Property and Claims and on Economic Co-operation in 1965 specifies that Japan shall "supply the products of Japan and the services of the Japanese people, the total value of which will be so much in yen as shall be equivalent to three hundred million United States dollars (USD\$300,000,000) at present computed at one hundred and eight billion yen (¥108,000,000,000), in grants (on a non-repayable basis) within the period of ten years from the date of the entry into force of the present Agreement" (Tanaka, n.d.). In exchange, South Korea had to renounce all its rights to request war reparations from Japan (Ishikida, 2005). Tokyo insisted that the 1965 treaty that restored diplomatic ties had settled the matter. However, that cannot be farther from the truth. Yoo Euy-sang, a diplomat and the author of the book *Diplomatic Propriety and Our Interests with Japan*, stated in his book that there are two reasons why the dispute is still going: First, the treaty "did not settle all the problems related to our colonial past," and second, is that it "took away citizens' rights to ask for reparations" (1965 Korea-Japan Agreement, 2016).

The situation is worsened by misunderstandings that occur between Japan and South Korea. Japan's failure in recognising that an agreement between the two governments is not the end of it all when it is changing public perception that is the hardest;

dealing with South Korea only accounts for about 30 percent out of 100, while the rest is dealing with domestic public sentiment (1965 Korea-Japan Agreement, 2016). South Korea is also reluctant to reconcile. For example, South Korea still has not relocated the comfort woman statue that is placed in front of the Japanese embassy, despite contributions and aid that Japan has given them. To ensure that all of the victims' needs are met and their dignity restored, especially when it comes to war compensation issues that are outside existing legal regimes, continued attention is needed. Meanwhile, South Korea feels as though Japan still has not truly apologised. It also "misuses the victims' moral high ground, where comfort women's support groups replace the victims' voices with dogmatic demands for state compensation and the condemnation of Japan" (South Korea and Japan's Feud Explained, 2019). The support group also "exaggerates the victimhood and suppresses those victims and researchers who might offer a different perspective" (South Korea and Japan's Feud Explained, 2019).

In 2015, Japan and South Korea reached a new agreement regarding the comfort women issue. Where attempt at making amends with former comfort women – particularly from South Korea – through a non-governmental organisation called the Asian Women Fund had failed, mostly because of criticism that the fund was not official so it could not be considered as an "official" reparation, this new agreement could provide a long-awaited breakthrough in Japan-South Korea ties (Tatsumi, 2015). Japan could stay consistent with its past position that all matters regarding its wrongdoings during wartime had been resolved with the signing of the Japan-South Korea Basic Relations Treaty and thus does not have to compensate individuals. Meanwhile, South Korea finally received a clear formula of where the fund is coming from, which is Japan's national budget, where it will be directed to a foundation that is established by South Korea. Regardless, Korean people still doubt Japan's sincerity, thinking that the deal was only beneficial to the then-president Park Geun-hye by trading the survivors' dignities with short-term geopolitical and diplomatic gain, and especially after Japan's then Prime Minister Shinzo Abe expressed that he had no intention of writing a letter to former comfort women (Panda, 2017). In the meantime, many right-wing Japanese are annoyed with this deal as they think the deal is unnecessary and Japan has apologised and given reparations to South Korea. This ongoing issue is affecting several sectors for both countries, such as cultural, security, and economic sectors.

JAPAN AND THE PHILIPPINES RELATIONSHIP

Imperial Japan signed the Tripartite Pact with Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy on September 27, 1940, where the three – also known as the Axis powers – agreed on mutual protection and technological and economic cooperation. Some time later, Imperial Japan faced an oil embargo by the United States, and also began experiencing resource shortages domestically, so it decided to seize the Southeast Asia region to mine its resources. The Japanese government also decided to attack Pearl Harbor which is located on the island of Oahu, Hawaii, which led to significant losses for the United States navy and air forces, where the goal of the attack was to give Japan some time to build an empire in Southeast Asia and defensible neutral areas serving to separate hostile forces or also known as buffer zones (Lumen, n.d.). By the end of the Pacific War, Japan had conquered much of the Far

East, including Hong Kong, Vietnam, Cambodia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Indonesia, part of New Guinea, and some islands of the Pacific Ocean. The full-scale Pacific War brought three and a half years of the Japanese occupation to Southeast Asia which equaled great suffering for the region from the end of 1941 until Japan surrendered unconditionally on August 15th, 1945.

The Japanese Empire had three objectives in invading the then-Commonwealth of the Philippines, i.e., (i) to prevent the use of the Philippines as an advance base of operations by American forces; (ii) to acquire staging areas and supply bases to enhance operations against the Netherlands East Indies; and (iii) to secure the lines of communications between occupied areas in the south and the Japanese Home Islands. To achieve these, Japan established a ruthless regime in the then colony. Forced labor, deprivation, terror by the military police, and rape and violence against women and children were the norm back then. For more than three bitter years and right to the day of Japan's surrender, the Philippines was suffering grievously under the depredations of military occupation. Torture, rape, pillages, and massacres, sometimes of entire villages, took place all over the country, and more than one million civilians died, and all these had fueled anti-Japanese sentiment in the Philippines (Gaerlan, 2020). Just like anywhere else where Japanese troops were stationed at, the young women of the Philippines were deceived or kidnapped to be put into military brothels to serve as comfort women. They had to serve the lust of four to five men a day and were not given a break even when they were menstruating. If they did not submit to the soldiers, they would be beaten and tortured until they learned to do so (Dresvina, 2021). Part of the reasons why the Japanese soldiers were very brutal was because they had been preparing for many years for the inevitable war with China, which made them possess inherent brutality that came into effect in their treatment of civilians and prisoners of war (Webb, 2011). The war had impacted the Southeast Asia region immensely: gross domestic product (GDP) rate in most Southeast Asian countries fell by half, 4.4 million civilians died prematurely, severe shortages of food and goods affected almost all Southeast Asians, and many lived in fear of draconian military rule (Huff, 2020).

Things took a turn for the better for Japan and the Philippines as war reparation was concluded in 1956, and by the end of the 1950s, Japanese investors and individuals had begun coming back to the Philippines. Soon enough, under the Philippines President Ferdinand Marcos' authoritarian administration, Japan replaced the United States as the main source of investment in the country. Today, the Philippines has a peaceful relation with Japan, and most Filipinos are not as offended as South Koreans over the World War II atrocities, and according to a 2011 poll held by BBC World Service, 12% of Filipinos view Japan's influence negatively while 84% view it positively, making the Philippines one of the most pro-Japan countries not only in Asia, but also in the world (Positive Views of Brazil on the Rise in 2011 BBC Country Rating Poll, 2011). These positive feelings came about after Japan gave huge donations to the country in the 1960s and 1970s.

AN EXPLANATION AND HISTORY OF COMFORT WOMEN

According to Oxford Dictionary, a comfort woman refers to a woman or girl who was forced to engage in sexual activity with Japanese soldiers as part of a system of brothels operated by the Imperial Japanese Army in its occupied territories between 1937 and 1945 (Comfort Woman, n.d.). The Japanese word for it is *jugun ianfu*, an euphemism for women who provided sexual services to Japanese troops who generally lived under conditions of sexual slavery (Chizuko, 2001). Estimations of the number of comfort women – mostly young unmarried women – range from 70,000 to 200,000; and about 80 percent of those numbers were Korean women (Molnar, 2018).

Military brothels had existed in the Japanese military long before World War II, but they grew rapidly after an incident where Imperial Japan had attempted to take over China: The Rape of Nanking. The horrific incident began on December 13th, 1937, when Japanese troops started a six-week-long massacre, and raped about 20,000 to 80,000 Chinese women, which petrified the international community and caused a major outcry from the international press, and damaged Japan's image (Blakemore, 2018). Japan's Emperor Hirohito was concerned with how the incident could impact Japan's image, so he decided to order the military to expand its "comfort station" to prevent further problems, reduce sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), and ensure a steady and isolated group of prostitutes to satisfy Japanese soldiers (Blakemore, 2018). Some other rationales behind choosing to institutionalise comfort stations for the soldiers included to spark their fighting spirit and provide an outlet for the rigidity of hierarchical military life, which led to increased demand, and prostitution on a voluntary basis became insufficient (Kuki, 2013).

After the war, official documents on the comfort station system were destroyed by Japanese officials, so the numbers are based on estimates by historians that rely on a variety of undestroyed documents left. The United Nations Global Tribunal on Violations of Women's Human Rights estimated that by the end of World War II, 90% of the comfort women had died (Blakemore, 2018). As Japan rebuilt itself after World War II, the story of its enslavement of thousands of women all over Asia was downplayed as a mere distasteful past. Meanwhile, the former comfort women had to hide their shame and pain because they did not want to embarrass their family even though what had happened to them was none of their faults, and became societal outcasts. Many died of STDs or complications from their violent treatment at the hands of Japanese soldiers, or committed suicide.

In August 1991, three South Korean former comfort women – one using her real name, Kim Hak Soon – went public with their wartime experiences and accused the wartime government of Japan of systemically confining women from across Asia, and from South Korea in particular, in military brothels during the World War II (Indonesian Comfort Women, 2014). Later that year, they filed civil charges against the Japanese state for the abuses they had to endure as comfort women, which triggered an international movement and encouraged other survivors to speak up about the injustice they suffered. As they stepped forward, transnational support groups formed in South Korea, Japan, and elsewhere to assist them in the lawsuits they initiated in Japanese courts. A team of lawyers,

researchers, and human rights activists helped compile survivor testimonies in Korean, Chinese, Filipino and English, and translated them into Japanese, while scholars scoured Japan's national archives for historical documents on comfort women.

Initially, Japan denied allegations that they had been involved in the making of comfort stations, and also denied demands for reparation and apologies. South Korea stated on their Ministry of Foreign Affairs' website that only on August 4th, 1993, the then Japan's Chief Cabinet Secretary - Kono Yohei, announced the government's conclusions, admitting that the Imperial Japanese Army had been involved in the establishment and management of the comfort stations, the transfer of comfort women, and that at times the military took part in the recruitment of women against their own will through coaxing, coercion, et cetera (MOFA, 2014). Kono Yohei noted that the women lived in misery at comfort stations under a violent atmosphere. The statement ended with a clear expression of apology on behalf of the nation to all those who suffered immeasurable pain and incurable physical and psychological wounds as comfort women, and pledged to face the historical facts squarely.

In 1995, Prime Minister Murayama Tomiichi arranged for privately subscribed atonement payments to selected survivors in South Korea, Taiwan, and the Philippines and issued individual apologies signed by four prime ministers through a non-governmental organisation, known as the Asian Women's Fund (AWF) (Documents of the Japanese Government and the AWF, 2005). State officials praised the AWF as proof that Japan was working to resolve the comfort women issue, using the fund to deflect criticisms from foreign governments and international human rights organisations. The AWF operated until March 2007 after it finished its last mission which took place in Indonesia (Closing of the Asian Women Fund, 2007). The Fund was established as a means of expressing the Japanese government's awareness and apologies regarding the comfort women issue as expressed in the 1993's Kono Yohei statement. Japan insisted that the fund was a strictly humanitarian measure, denied that its payouts constituted official state redress, and presented the fund to the public as subscribed only from private donations, although in reality considerable state funding was also involved. Thus, the state dodged its obligations under international law to issue a formal apology and provide surviving victims with legal compensations. On January 11th, 1997, at a hotel in Seoul, payments were secretly made from the fund to seven victims who accepted the money because they lived under difficult circumstances, and they were criticised by Korean media and Non-governmental Organisations (NGOs) for having sold their souls for money (Lee, n.d.). To most survivors, the attempts to make amends through the semi-private AWF seemed inconsistent and insincere. AWF's former managing director, Wada Haruki, concluded that the attempt at reconciling with South Korea through the 12-year endeavor had failed (Onozawa, 2018).

CURRENT SITUATION OF COMFORT WOMEN ISSUE

On November 13th, 2019, a South Korean Court, the Seoul Central District Court, held its first hearing regarding a lawsuit filed by South Korean former comfort women who were demanding compensation from the Japanese government, deciding not to immediately

make a judgment on the validity of the case (South Korean Court Holds 1st Hearing, 2019). The case was originally filed in December 2016, but no trial had been held until then as Japan kept dismissing a petition sent by the plaintiffs on grounds of “state immunity”. Under customary international law, a country cannot be sued in the courts of another country without its consent (Malanczuk & Akehurst, 1997). Therefore, the district court publicly announced the case so that it could have the same effect as delivering a petition, enabling the trial to be held.

Japan sought dismissal of the case, claiming sovereign immunity, however, the plaintiffs argued that it could not be applied to crimes against humanity as in this particular case. In reaction, the Japanese Foreign Ministry spokesman Masato Otaka told reporters in Tokyo that under the principle of state immunity, the Japanese government was not under the jurisdiction of any South Korean court and that such a claim must be rejected (South Korean Court Holds 1st Hearing, 2019). Masato Otaka also stated that the comfort women issue along with all claims between Japan and South Korea were settled completely by the 1965 bilateral agreement, which was an agreement on the settlement of problems concerning property and claims and economic cooperation between Japan and the Republic of Korea (United Nations Publications, 1965). Relations between South Korea and Japan have sunk to the lowest level in decades after the South Korean Supreme Court in October 2019 ordered that Japanese companies should compensate South Korean plaintiffs over wartime labor. Although the points of the dispute are different, the case is expected to prompt another round of feuding.

However, on April 21st, 2021, the South Korea Central District Court dismissed a case filed by 20 former South Korean comfort women and their relatives, upholding Japan’s state immunity from overseas lawsuits. Judge Min Seong-cheol stated that, “If an exception on state immunity is acknowledged, a diplomatic clash would be inevitable during the process of forcing the ruling’s implementation” (News Wires, 2021). Min Seong-cheol also stated that the issue should be resolved via diplomatic consultations and that the 2015 Agreement could serve as the groundwork for a solution, though there were several flaws in the negotiations. Meanwhile, Lee Yong-soo, a former comfort woman and one of the plaintiffs, called the ruling absurd and nonsensical, and said she would seek international litigation over the case.

SOUTH KOREA’S RESPONSE TOWARDS COMFORT WOMEN ISSUE

The comfort women issue was largely ignored by the South Korean government for decades. The reasons were because the Japanese had destroyed most of the official documentation on the comfort women and comfort stations, so there was a lack of proof for South Korea to press charges against Japan, and the reluctance of the comfort women survivors to come forward with their stories also played a big role (Soh, 1996). They did not want to embarrass their families, so they kept their stories secret for decades. Besides, the 1965 Treaty that normalised the two nations’ relations – which did not cover the comfort women issue – prevented South Korea from making any further demands. However, things changed significantly after three former South Korean comfort women –

one using their real name, Kim Hak Soon – decided to speak up in 1991 and filed civil charges against the Japanese government for their wartime atrocities. South Korean society was enraged by Japan's initial denial about its involvement in the establishment of comfort stations and confinement of comfort women. Transnational groups started forming in South Korea to encourage other former comfort women to open up about their wartime experiences and to help them get the formal apology and compensation that they deserved.

After admitting its involvement in systematically and coercively taking women from all across Asia to military brothels to please the Japanese troops' lust, the Japanese government created the Asian Women Fund (AWF) as a realisation of its formal apology and to compensate the victims. Many South Koreans deemed the effort as insincere and inconsistent because the fund did not come from the state's budget, thus it did not count as an official apology. Thus in 2015, the two nations reached a new agreement where Japan had to pay 1 billion Yen to South Korea (Panda, 2017). As part of the 2015's controversial agreement between South Korea and Japan, the Reconciliation and Healing Foundation was established and was meant to help former comfort women. The funding was to be received from Japan's national budget, and the South Korean government would direct it to the foundation. At a glance, it seemed like it could be the answer to Japan and South Korea's decades of resentment and distrust. Japan would be able to stay with its position in the past where it thinks that all wartime-related issues had been resolved with the 1965 Agreement, and South Korea could help its people get compensation for the harsh treatments that they had to experience back then.

Unfortunately, the 2015 Agreement could not please everyone. Most South Koreans think that the agreement was a betrayal by the then-president Park Geun-hye and only beneficial to her, and many right-wing Japanese think that the agreement was so unnecessary because Japan had apologised and compensated the former comfort women in the past. As much as 4.4 billion Won from the foundation had been claimed by dozens of victims or their families from the foundation since 2016 (Ungku, 2018), and in early 2018, Park's successor, Moon Jae-in, condemned the agreement and his administration vowed to return Japan's money. They took legal steps and formally dissolved the Reconciliation and Healing Foundation in November 2018, and they did so without the Japanese government's consent. The South Korean government has since covered the expense with its own funding (Ungku, 2018).

In March 2021, a 92-year old former comfort woman named Lee Yong-soo met Foreign Minister Chung Eui-yong and asked the Korean government to raise the sexual slavery issue at the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in The Hague (Kim, 2021). This was to hold Japan accountable under international law for its wartime crimes during World War II and to find a permanent solution to the issue, which was then replied by Chung that he would need to seriously review the matter first as it is a complex issue. Chung also said that he would continue to reach out to other comfort women survivors to find a resolution to this violation of human rights.

As the number of remaining former comfort women keeps shrinking, Lee Yong-soo has the intention to ask President Moon to convince Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihide

Suga to receive a ruling on the comfort women issue at the ICJ, as she does not want Japan to “continue to act the way it has without lawfulness, through lies” (Kim, 2021). If the Korean government were to decide to actually bring the matter to the ICJ, the court would still need the consent of both countries – which is something that Japan has denied in the past when the South Korean court decided it should reimburse people who were forced to overwork as labors – to settle the international dispute. Lee Won-deog, a professor of Japanese studies at Kookmin University in South Korea stated that the South Korean government is changing its Japanese policy from historical issues to cooperation, along with the United States, to tackle the North Korean issue. Therefore, the two governments should discuss the matter with each other before raising the issue at the ICJ (Kim, 2021). Lee Yong-soo has submitted to the ministry a draft agreement drafted by a committee calling for the Korean and Japanese governments to resolve the issue at the ICJ, but it is still unclear whether Japan would accept all the terms requested by Lee Yong-soo.

Meanwhile, the South Korean Central District Court dismissed the lawsuit filed by 20 plaintiffs – Lee Yong-soo was one of them – and upheld Japan’s state immunity against overseas lawsuits. The reasoning behind that verdict was because an exception on state immunity could cause a diplomatic clash and that the issue should be resolved via diplomatic consultations. Displeased with the result, Lee Yong-soo called the ruling absurd and nonsensical, saying she would seek international litigation over the case.

THE PHILIPPINES’ RESPONSE TOWARDS COMFORT WOMEN ISSUE

In 1951, Japan re-established peaceful relations with the Allied nations on behalf of the United Nations with the ratification of the San Francisco Treaty. This treaty ended Japan’s role as an imperial power, and required Japan to compensate the Allied nations, civilians, and former prisoners of war who had suffered during World War II (Treaty of Peace with Japan, 1951). Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, the Philippines, and Vietnam were present at the signatory of the treaty, while Myanmar was invited but did not attend. All these countries signed and ratified the treaty, except for Indonesia, which signed a separate bilateral reparations agreement and peace treaty with Japan and concluded it in 1958.

The Philippines signed the 1951 San Francisco Peace Treaty which legally resolved the issues between Japan and the Philippines concerning reparations, material restitution, and the right to claim for war damage. Japan and the Philippines also reached a separate Reparations Agreement in 1956 where under that Agreement, Japan had to provide the Philippines with services and goods valued at the equivalent of USD\$550 million (Valdepenas, 1970). Later, on March 25th, 1997, as a form of materialisation of Japan’s deep apology and the best solution for handling the comfort women issue, a memorandum of agreement was also signed between the Philippines Social Affairs Ministry and Japan’s government, represented by the Asian Women’s Fund (AWF), where supports were given for projects to develop social welfare facilities for the elderly people over a period of approximately 10 years. The AWF implied that through the fund, the Japanese government had met its promise to compensate for the damages and crimes done by the Japanese soldiers during the Japanese occupation for more than three years.

However, no negotiations were made regarding the victims of the military sexual slavery system and, as such, no compensation was provided. About 60 women from Mapanique, the Philippines who were victims of rape by the Japanese soldiers formed a group called *Maya Lolos* which means Liberated Grandmother. They were inspired to do so after witnessing South Korean women who stepped forward and revealed publicly about the abuse they had to endure as comfort women. Despite being an organisation focusing on survivors who were raped by the Japanese soldiers during the Mapanique siege, it also includes in its roster women whose husbands, sons, and other male loved ones became victims of Japanese war atrocities (Roque, 2013).

For decades, the issue of comfort women was suppressed in the Philippines, until in 1992, a former comfort woman named Maria Rosa Luna Herson, better known as Lola Rosa, who at 65 years old became the first woman from the Philippines to recount her ordeal as a Japanese sex slave by writing a book titled “Comfort Woman: Slave of Destiny,” where she encouraged other former comfort women to come forward with their stories (Esguerra, 2021). In 2015, a week prior to Japan’s then Prime Minister Shinzo Abe visit to the country, members of LILA Pilipina – which means League of Filipino Grandmothers – staged a rally in front of the Japan’s embassy, criticising the Philippines’ president at the time - Benigno Aquino’s continued disregard of the survivors’ plights and cries for justice, and for tightening military partnerships with Japan because they were worried about a possible repeat of abuses like the ones that they had to endure during wartime (Kyodo, 2015). Narcisa Claveria, one of the organisation’s early members, stated that the group asked for a fair compensation considering they were so young when they had to lose so much – their youth, dignity, and they were not able to go to school just like normal girls would. They also sought for the inclusion of the comfort women issue in the Philippines’ and Japan’s school textbooks and education.

In January 2016, the Filipinos wartime military sexual enslavement victims came out on the streets to protest during Japanese Emperor Akihito’s visit to the Philippines. They complained how in 2015, the former comfort women in South Korea were given “sincere apologies” by the Japanese government and received USD\$8.5 million in damages after an agreement between Seoul and Tokyo, which was criticised for not seeking the opinion of the victims. They expressed jealousy as, in the Philippines, they did not even have such a thing because their government “had completely turned their back on them” according to Judith Villanueva, the daughter of Lola Virginia, who died in 2015 at the age of 85 without ever getting the justice she fought for. Instead of giving the same kind of reparation to the Philippines, Emperor Akihito did not even make an official apology for Japan’s wartime crime or mention the comfort women issue at all.

IMPACTS OF COMFORT WOMEN ISSUE ON JAPAN’S RELATIONS WITH SOUTH KOREA AND THE PHILIPPINES

The anger felt by many South Koreans towards Japan runs deep. This was further fueled by the Japanese’s then prime minister Shinzo Abe’s controversial statement where he said that there was no evidence that the Japanese government or army had forced and

systematically confined these so-called comfort women (Joyce, 2007). The resentment periodically spills over into the social, political, and economic relations between the two East Asian neighbors. Many South Koreans remain bitter about Japan's wartime enslavement of comfort women and their resentment has turned into a broader dispute with implications towards national security issues and trade protectionism which has also threatened to disrupt South Korea's crucially important chip-making industry, and the global supply of semiconductors and products like smartphones (Doyle, 2019).

The dispute has swiftly turned into a complex diplomatic standoff, with trade and commercial interests being used as potent weapons. In 2018, South Korea's highest court ordered Mitsubishi Heavy Industries to compensate 10 people who were victims of forced labor during the Japanese occupation (Lee, 2019). Japan believes that the matter had been settled under the 1965 treaty and it has denied that the restriction on chemical sales to South Korea was a response to the South Korean court order. Instead, Japan cited what it described as the "inadequate management" of sensitive items shipped to South Korea and removed South Korea's fast-track export status.

The implementation of the restriction means that exporters will now need to seek permission every time they want to ship these chemicals to South Korea - a process which can take up to 90 days. The chemicals include fluorinated polyimides which are used in smartphone displays; photoresists, which are used to transfer circuit patterns onto semiconductor wafers; and hydrogen fluoride, which is used as an etching gas for making chips. However, Japanese broadcaster NHK made a claim that some of these chemicals, especially hydrogen fluoride, were being shipped by South Korea to other countries including North Korea, potentially for use in chemical weapons (Doyle, 2019). South Korea has denied making any such violations of its trade agreement with Japan, and Japanese officials have also steered clear of directly accusing Seoul of breaching sanctions against North Korea. The World Trade Organisation (WTO) has agreed to hear the dispute and the United States National Security Advisor John Bolton has also stepped in to try and resolve the differences between the two Washington allies (Doyle, 2019).

The use of national security concerns as a way to influence trade is something that has never been seen before in the two nations' decades of disputes, which is something that Rhyu Sang-young, a professor of political economy at Yonsei University in Seoul, said can be seen as echoing the United States' then-president Donald Trump's playbook (Doyle, 2019). And just like the United States-China trade war, a quarrel between the two tech-heavy economies could pose global consequences. If Japan continues to hold back supplies and South Korea is forced to halt its shipments, it will bring a huge disaster for Information and Technology (IT) manufacturers all around the globe.

South Korea said that "it will not be defeated again" by Japan, and is now looking for ways to strike back. During a rare live television broadcast of his cabinet meeting in 2019, President Moon Jae-in said he hoped for a diplomatic solution to the problem, but was prepared to take countermeasures if Japan forced his hand (Yamazaki & Park, 2019). If Moon Jae-in were to fire back at Japan diplomatically or economically, he would likely find many South Koreans supporting him because of public sentiment in South Korea

swinging towards some form of retaliatory measures. There is a danger that the trade frictions could escalate into a protracted trade war unless some negotiated compromise can be found.

If South Korea has been pressuring Japan to compensate and issue a formal apology for the wartime sexual slavery victims relentlessly, the same thing cannot be said about the Philippine government. Japan has enjoyed a close relationship with the Philippines for a long time, especially because it is the Philippines' major aid donor. So when a two-meter-tall bronze statue of a Filipino comfort woman was suddenly erected near the Japanese embassy in Manila, capital of the Philippines, the Japanese government was quick to express its disapproval. The bronze sculpture depicts a blindfolded woman dressed in traditional Maria Clara dress and wearing a headscarf, which is an honor of about 1,000 Filipino victims who were forced to work as sex slaves for the Japanese soldiers. Manila city administrator Ericson Alcovendaz explained that "the Japanese officials said that the issue of comfort women is a very big and serious issue in their country, China, and South Korea. They said they regret that despite the strong ties between the Philippines and Japan, a comfort woman statue has been suddenly erected in Manila". Further, the Japanese embassy also told Alcovendaz that the sisterhood ties between San Francisco in the United States and Osaka were severed because a comfort woman statue was erected on a private island (Esmaque II, 2017). The Philippines President Duterte noted that while it is painful to reminisce how the comfort women were treated by Japanese soldiers in World War II, Japan has apologized long ago to the Filipinos and has done much more than reparation (Colcol, 2018). The secretary to Manila mayor Edward Serapio said that the statue was erected without permit, so an inter-agency group was formed in January 2018 to look into the controversial comfort women monument and determine "who put it up, why did they put it up, where do they put it up, and who got the permits" (Esmaque II, 2017).

The decision to remove the statue was condemned by many, including Gabriela Women's Party Representative Arlene Brosas, who said that the Philippines should not be the one to adjust just so it does not offend Japan, and that it should not be moved to a private property, as its exact purpose is to remind the future generations and the public of what the Filipinos comfort women had to go through under Japanese occupation. Brosas pointed out that reparations are just one aspect to meet the demands of Filipino comfort women, that it is just as crucial to address the historical injustice against them and counter Japan's revisionist take on World War II history. The Philippines may have to deal with its friends and neighbors cordially and diplomatically, but that does not mean that it should be subservient to unreasonable demands because the Japanese occupation and its war crimes are facts and cannot and should not be denied.

DIFFERENCE IN RESPONSES AND IMPACTS BETWEEN SOUTH KOREA AND THE PHILIPPINES

Just like anywhere else in Asia, the comfort women issue was largely ignored for decades in South Korea. Most of the victims stayed silent because they felt like if their stories got leaked, it would bring embarrassment to their families. After a former comfort woman

stepped forward with her story in 1991, South Korea has been persistent about fighting for a just compensation and formal apology from the Japanese state and would not let the tragic history of South Korean comfort women be forgotten; transnational support groups were formed to assist the victims in the lawsuits they initiated in Japanese courts, a team of lawyers, researchers, and human rights activists helped compile survivor testimonies in Korean, Chinese, Filipino, and English and translated them into Japanese, and dissolved the 2015's funding agreement because it was deemed as insincere - just to name a few efforts that have been done.

On the other hand, while the comfort women issue might not have impacted the relation between Japan and the Philippines as badly as it has affected Japan-South Korea relations, it sure has left some damage on the good relations between the two. A Lila Pilipina worker named Sharon Cabusao-Silva stated that it is time for the Japanese government to "atone to their sins," and that she hopes that Japan will "finally respect South Korean court's decision and will come to the negotiating table with the South Korean people and government and, finally, accept its responsibility." (Esguerra, 2021). According to Cabusao-Silva, the Filipinos Lolos are not getting any younger and they are dying, and they are just trying to survive the Coronavirus Disease 2019 or COVID-19 pandemic and when it is over, Lila Pilipina will come out and fight again (Esguerra, 2021). When the Japanese embassy was requested for comments, they did not immediately reply, but previous attempts to press cases were thrown out by Japanese courts. Thus, plaintiffs are studying legal options to try again, despite the ongoing pandemic that hinders their efforts and adds more fears that the Lolos will not live long enough to see justice done.

Many Filipinos have expressed their envy and jealousy of South Korean comfort women because in South Korea the issue is a source of national importance and South Korean people and government fight hard to protect their "halmoni" (Korean for grandmother). The comfort women issue has not garnered the same level of attention in the Philippines, which has mostly avoided damaging ties with Japan, who is a major development donor. Instead of fighting for the victims' rights, the Filipinos Comfort Woman statue was removed and returned to its sculptor by the Department of Public Works and Highways (DPWH) on April 27th, 2018, just four months after its installation, for a drainage improvement along the Baywalk. The Philippine President Duterte defended the removal, saying that the statue has created a bad impression on Japan and that the removed statue could be placed somewhere else privately, as he does not want to "antagonise" other countries or, specifically, insult Japan. He also said that as far as he was concerned, the comfort women issue is over and it only hurts because "you keep repeating it" and imagining how the comfort women were treated (Colcol, 2018). Another similar statue donated by South Korean officials and placed in a town just outside Manila was also removed. Cabusao-Silva of Lila Pilipina said that this is the sad reality for Filipinos, that the kind of government that they have is one that does not even respect the right of the people to remember history. Critics say Japan's failure to fully atone for wartime sex slavery is a recurring source of diplomatic tensions between South Korea, the Philippines, China and countries like the United States and Germany that support the cause of comfort women. Tokyo has also been accused of deflecting any criticism on the issue through a steady flow of development funds to governments.

CONCLUSION

The comfort women issue was neglected for decades until three former South Korean comfort women came out in 1991 and later filed civil charges against Japan. Initially denying its involvement in the establishment and management of the comfort stations, in 1993 Japan finally admitted its role and apologised to all those who endured immeasurable pain as comfort women. Japan has attempted a couple of ways to make amends with South Korea and Southeast Asian nations, and one of them is by arranging for privately subscribed payments and issued individual apologies through an NGO called the Asian Women's Fund (AWF). However, it was deemed an insincere effort to dodge Japan's obligations to legislate a formal apology and compensate the victims.

In November 2019, Seoul Central District Court held its first hearing regarding a lawsuit filed by South Korean former comfort women who demanded compensation from the Japanese government. The case was originally filed in December 2016, but no trial had been held as Japan kept dismissing a petition sent by the plaintiffs on grounds of "sovereign immunity". Therefore, the district court publicly announced the case so that it would have the same effect as delivering a petition, enabling the trial to be held. However, in April 2021, the court dismissed a lawsuit filed by the 20 South Korean former comfort women to avoid a diplomatic clash between South Korea and Japan if a state immunity exception had been acknowledged, especially since South Korea has shifted its Japanese policy from historical issues to cooperation to resolve the North Korean issue.

Relations between South Korea and Japan have sunk to the lowest level in decades, and the resentment felt by many South Koreans periodically spills over into the social, political, and economic relations, and has morphed into a broader dispute with overtones of national security issues and trade protectionism, which now threatens to disrupt South Korea's crucially important chip-making industry. Japan has denied that the restriction on chemical sales is a response to the South Korean court order. Instead, Japan cited what it describes as the "inadequate management" of sensitive items shipped to South Korea. Japan's restrictions mean that exporters now need to seek permission each time they want to ship these chemicals to South Korea. Japanese broadcaster NHK said some of the chemicals were being shipped to other countries including North Korea, potentially for use in chemical weapons. South Korea however, has denied making any such violations of its trade agreement with Japan.

South Korea is now looking for ways to hit back at Japan. President Moon Jae-in said that he hopes for a diplomatic solution to the problem but is prepared to take countermeasures if Japan forces his hand. If Moon Jae-in were to strike at Japan diplomatically or economically, he would likely find many South Koreans supporting him, since public sentiment is leaning towards some form of retaliatory measures. There is a danger that the trade frictions could escalate into a trade war unless some negotiated compromise can be found.

As for the Philippines, the people feel like their government has turned their back against them and ignored their plights for justice. They are also envious that Filipino

former comfort women never received the same amount of support and attention like South Korean comfort women, who in 2015 were given “sincere apologies” by the Japanese government and received USD\$8.5 million in damages. When they attempted to bring more attention to the issue by installing a Filipino comfort woman statue, it was quickly removed by the government after Japanese officials made complaints about it to avoid insulting Japan - a move that is criticised by many Filipinos because they think it is Japan that should be adjusting by giving former comfort women the compensation that they deserve, as well as the inclusion of correct history in Japan’s education system.

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