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Tensions between South Korea and Japan reemerge over “comfort women”

A task force under South Korea’s Foreign Ministry released new findings on December 27 regarding a December 2015 agreement between Seoul and Tokyo on the historical issue of “comfort women.” The report calls into question the manner in which the accord was reached and has the potential to destabilize South Korean and Japanese relations.

The task force conducted a five-month investigation and found that certain aspects of the negotiations between Seoul and Tokyo were kept secret from the public. It accused the former South Korean administration of Park Geun-hye, which was in power at the time, of failing to take into account the opinions of former comfort women—a euphemism for sex slaves—who are still alive, as well as related civic groups.

Details reportedly withheld from the public included Tokyo’s demands that Seoul not support any groups that would oppose the agreement, provide detailed plans for dealing with a statue honoring those enslaved in front of the Japanese embassy in Seoul, and pledge that Seoul not use the phrase “sexual slavery.” Park’s government said it would work to persuade civic groups to prevent protests and agreed to use the term “comfort women.”

Moon’s government has not rejected the agreement, which Seoul stated in 2015 was “final and irreversible.” Foreign Minister Kang Kyung-wha said: “Based on the findings, the government will gather opinions of the victims and others involved going forward with a focus to be placed on a victim-centered approach. In addition, action will be taken

carefully in consideration of any impact that it could have on the relations between South Korea and Japan.”

A final decision on the matter is not expected until after the Winter Olympics being hosted by South Korea in February. However, a high-ranking South Korean official quoted by the Yonhap News Agency suggested Seoul could pursue a path of strategic ambiguity to avoid a diplomatic falling out with Tokyo. At the same time, Moon is cautious of moving too close to Japan as he attempts to rebuild economic relations with China.

Following a two-track approach that separates historical disputes from diplomatic and military issues, Moon pledged that despite the task force’s findings, he would “restore normal diplomatic relations for future-oriented cooperation between Korea and Japan.” Seoul is also reportedly making arrangements for a trilateral summit with Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, who proposed the meeting, and Chinese Premier Li Keqiang in Tokyo in April. Beijing has not yet expressed support.

However, Tokyo reacted negatively to the report. Japanese Foreign Minister Taro Kono called on Seoul to “faithfully” carry out the 2015 agreement, while warning any attempt to revise it would make relations between the two countries “unmanageable.”

The 2015 agreement represented a significant thaw in relations between Tokyo and Seoul at the behest of the Obama administration in Washington, which was concerned that animosity between its two major military allies in Northeast Asia was cutting across preparations for war with North Korea and China.

The Abe government offered a limited apology for the women’s enslavement by the Japanese military during the 1930s and 1940s, while pledging to donate 1 billion yen (\$8.9 million) to a fund to be distributed to South Korean victims, 32 of whom are still alive. The deal did not cover women in North Korea, China, the Philippines or other countries where women were also enslaved.

Moon’s approach to this issue is similar to that it had adopted in relation to the THAAD (Terminal High Altitude Area Defense) anti-missile deployment, part of the US military build-up primarily directed against China. In his campaign for the presidency, Moon exploited public opposition to the comfort women agreement and THAAD to win electoral support. In June, Moon called for a full environmental impact assessment before THAAD could be completely deployed. After posturing as a THAAD opponent, he quickly approved its full installation a month later, pointing to a North Korean missile launch as justification.

The ruling Democratic Party of Korea (DPK) and its predecessors have long used anti-Japanese sentiment to distract the public from their anti-working class policies. With worsening social conditions at home and the danger of a second Korean War, Moon hopes to head off the same anger and discontent that led to massive protests a year ago against Park. At the same time, he is trying to make military collaboration with Tokyo easier to sell to a public deeply opposed to war.

However, a dispute in the South Korean ruling class is emerging over this approach, with Moon's opponents demanding closer relations with Tokyo and Washington as the latter accelerate the current war drive against North Korea. Chang Je-won, party spokesman for the main opposition Liberty Korea Party, denounced the task force's report.

"Amid escalating tensions on the Korean Peninsula, a strong alliance with the United States and Japan is crucial to protect the country from the nuclear threats from North Korea," Chang said last week. "The revelation is a poor move that is far removed from resolving the comfort women issue, and can lead to serious security issues."

The comfort women dispute has been ongoing for nearly three decades following growing public anger over war crimes in the early 1990s. Before and during World War II, the Japanese government and military established a system in which an estimated 200,000 women from its colonies and conquered territories were deceived, coerced and in some cases physically forced into becoming nominal prostitutes.

Poor working class and peasant women were primarily affected, with the first "comfort women" coming from Japan. While some women received or were supposed to receive money for their "services," this was only to provide a thin veil of legitimacy to a practice where women endured hellish conditions at "comfort stations," in some cases at the front lines. Many women turned to drug abuse or opted to commit suicide.

The South Korean establishment in the past was undoubtedly well aware of this practice of sexual slavery. Following post-war independence, leading government and military positions were filled with Japanese collaborators who did nothing to address the needs of these women and their families.