

## Biden Must Assist Japan and South Korea with the History Issue

By Tom Le

The Biden administration's focus on allies and partners and the inability of democratic U.S. allies Japan and South Korea to move beyond historical pitfalls of apologies and treaties provides President Biden's team the perfect opportunity to show leadership by taking on a mediator role. By taking an active role, the United States can demonstrate that it is not a passive observer to would-be revisionists in the region, shore up its alliances, and signal to the world that the United States is still the leader in the promotion of human rights.

Japan's colonization of Korea from 1910 to 1945 was brutal. The Japanese military coerced between 10,000 and 200,000 women into sexual slavery and many more Koreans were forced to work in the Japanese war machine, the very one that annexed Korea in 1910. Following the abrupt end of Japanese colonization after World War II, brought about by the only direct use of nuclear bombs on a human population in history, Japan quickly signed treaties and paid reparations to former colonies, recovered its economy, and successfully rehabilitated its image with much of the world. However, it was not until 1965 that Japan-South Korea relations were "normalized." The new Japan-South Korea relationship included abandoning reconciliation with North Korea altogether, and Tokyo providing grants to an authoritarian South Korean leader who was later assassinated and remains a divisive figure in contemporary Korean domestic politics.

Although Japan has issued several dozen apologies, created two reparations funds, and signed treaties directly related to the Comfort Women issue, the lack of victim representation at the negotiating table, vague treaty language, and weak treaty enforcement mechanisms allow the history issue to be exploited primarily by South Korean domestic politics and continue to strain bilateral relations. Since August 2019, the countries have been engaged in a bitter dispute over a South Korean court ruling on forced laborers, which led to a boycott of Japanese goods and the threat of nonrenewal of an intelligence sharing agreement. In January 2020, South Korean courts ruled that the Japanese government should again compensate comfort women, leading some Japanese policymakers to consider sending the South Korean envoy home.

This tense and delicate South Korea-Japan relationship and the belief that their issues are best solved bilaterally are two of many reasons why the United States takes a neutral position. But neutrality has devolved to passiveness, or quite possibly disinterest. Public American neutrality allows China to exploit weaknesses within U.S. regional alliances, which makes the coveted multilateral security frameworks in Asia a pipedream. Moreover, official neutrality has not prevented U.S. officials from criticizing its allies over their handling of the history issue, nor has it prevented Japanese and Korean interest groups from pushing their agenda into U.S. domestic affairs. The lack of ambition, or the fear of failure, will lead to the greatest consequence, which is the lack of justice or national reconciliation when the last remaining comfort women pass away. Although some may believe that the passing of the victims may remove one potential obstacle to improving South Korea-Japan relations, few stakeholders, if any, have the moral authority to provide legitimacy to a reconciliation agreement as the comfort women. The frustration with the status quo has led

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Comfort Women, such as Lee Yong-soo, to advocate for reengagement with Japan outside of the current positions of the Korean government and civic groups.

The new Biden administration should recognize that Lee's call for renewed engagement between South Korea and Japan, and a new Japanese administration, is an opportunity for the US to bring its allies to the negotiating table with itself acting as a mediator. By hosting a trilateral summit to craft a lasting agreement over the history issue, the US can still maintain its official neutrality while taking on a more active role in the region. Despite the difficulty in achieving a grand bargain, and possible backlash from interest groups in Japan and South Korea, it would be entirely appropriate for the United States to take the lead. Beyond its political, economic, and security leverage, the United States bears some responsibility for the lack of reconciliation in the region. Following the end of World War II, the United States allowed the Japanese emperor to go unpunished and utilized him to gain support of the public. Moreover, the Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers (SCAP) relied heavily on the former Japanese leadership, some of whom were war criminals, to help govern the post-war nation. The "genuine" contrition that South Koreans ask for today could have initially come from the leftists in Japan immediately after the war – if they had not been silenced by the U.S. government. Thus, although the interests among the United States, Japan, and South Korea may not align precisely, the formation of bilateral alliances between the US and Japan and South Korea—mainly but not only as a consequence of the Korean War—has had the effect of binding the three countries' political and security fates for the long term.

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The United States will face criticism regardless of whether it remains passive or actively mediates. But Washington should take a stance even if controversial; taking a stance does not have to mean taking a side. The Biden administration can signal that even as it shores up the security and defense elements of the two important alliances, it will also address issues of democracy and human rights — even those left over by history.

Biden should work with President Moon Jae-in, Prime Minister Suga Yoshihide, comfort women, and forced laborer representatives in crafting an agreement with specific language and enforcement mechanisms to insure both sides meet their obligations. For example, the 2015 comfort agreement quickly fell apart because the deal was negotiated in secret and vague language made it unclear when South Korea would remove the Comfort Woman statues in front of the Japanese embassy in Seoul, which was a major sticking point. Furthermore, South Korea unilaterally stepping away from the deal without consequences led Japanese policymakers to believe that a permanent deal would never be achieved.

Quite possibly, there is no such thing as a "permanent deal." Any agreement that the United States can assist with should be forward looking. Just as the United States continues to grapple with the legacy of slavery after the passage of the Civil Rights Act, Japan and South Korea may never move past Japanese colonization.

The Biden administration can demonstrate that the United States can again take charge by being the most daring. This requires Washington to take the first step in bringing its allies to the negotiating table. The Comfort Women issue, among other historical disputes, goes beyond appeasing allies stuck in the past. Reconciliation is achieved between people and treaties are agreed upon by governments, and both are needed in order to break out of the vicious cycle that has plagued the region for three-quarters of a century.

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