Japan and the Republic of Korea (ROK) share an acute awareness of an unstable regional security environment, marked by a threatening North Korean regime and a progressively more assertive China. Aiming to strengthen security cooperation in particular, both countries therefore seek to address differences over wartime history.

On 28 December 2015 Tokyo and Seoul reached an agreement on the lingering issue of institutionalized military-related prostitution before and during the Second World War. Although exact numbers are unknown, tens of thousands of Korean women, but also women from China, Taiwan, and other countries, were forced to work in Japanese military brothels.

The end-of-the-year deal supposedly settled the so-called “comfort women” issue once and for all, in a “final and irreversible” way. According to the agreement, Japan would provide funding, directly from the national budget, to the tune of 1 billion yen (approximately 7.8 million euros) for a new foundation to provide humanitarian support for the victims. Prime Minister Shinzō Abe would apologize and express remorse to the 46 remaining former comfort women.

Multiple factors drove the agreement forward. Most importantly, the issue has obstructed security cooperation between the two countries. In 2012, for example, South Korea cancelled the signing of an agreement to share military intelligence. The external threat of the ongoing North Korean nuclear programme and missile technology development was an important catalyst for both countries to seek rapprochement.

Second, historical issues including but not limited to that of the comfort women impinged on trade relations, as Japanese exports to and imports from South Korea have been declining for the past few years. Other thorny issues include the depiction of wartime history in Japanese school textbooks, the territorial dispute between both countries over the Dokdo/Takeshima islets controlled by South Korea, and the role of controversial sites strongly associated with Japan’s militaristic past such as the Yasukuni Shrine.

Third, the timing of the agreement was highly symbolic, as 2015 marked the 70th anniversary of the end of World War II, and the 50th anniversary of the normalization of relations between Japan and the ROK.

Fourth, domestic politics played a role. It was one of PM Abe’s personal goals to improve relations, particularly with the upcoming Upper House elections of next summer in mind. Exactly three years in office, Abe was crucially aware that poor relations with close neighbours can adversely affect electoral outcomes. South Korean President Park Geun-hye also faces elections in April this year.

Fifth, the US certainly exerted pressure on both governments to reach a deal, as troubled relations between two of the US’s key allies in the region would have a negative impact on US ambitions to remain the most important security provider in East Asia. Finally, the agreement should also be seen in the context of Tokyo’s efforts to forge strategic relations with other countries in order to counter China’s growing regional clout.

The road towards an ultimate resolution of the issue remains rocky, not least because of domestic resistance. Public opposition in the ROK remains strong: according to a public opinion poll conducted immediately after the agreement, only 19.3% of the South Korean public support the deal, whereas 66.3% are against.

In Japan, conservative forces oppose the use of public funds to assist the comfort women. The most delicate problem is a statue symbolizing comfort women, erected in 2011.

Cause for cautious optimism > Japan and South Korea reach significant yet fragile agreement over comfort women issue

Bart Gaens
Senior Research Fellow
The Finnish Institute of International Affairs
by the Korean Council for Women
Drafted for Sexual Slavery by Japan,
right in front of the Japanese em-
bassy in Seoul, where Korean activist
groups have been holding weekly
demonstrations. The Japanese have
asked for its removal, separate from
the formal agreement, whereas the
South Korean government promised
to “strive to solve this issue in an
appropriate manner through taking
measures such as consulting with
related organizations about possible
ways of addressing this issue”.
Furthermore, disagreements
continue on how the comfort women
system is addressed in Japanese
history textbooks, particularly as
to the number of women exploited
and the degree to which the military
were directly involved in their forced
recruitment.
Finally, lingering disagreement
over legal responsibility, a key
reason why the issue has remained
an impediment for such a long
time, can prevent the dispute from
being settled permanently. The
Japanese side maintains that the
issue was resolved in 1965, when
relations between both countries
were normalized, even if Tokyo now
accepts moral responsibility. Korean
civic groups continue to insist that
the Japanese government needs to
formally acknowledge legal respon-
sibility as part of the agreement,
impacting the stance of Korean
political leaders.
In short, numerous concerns
remain that could critically lessen
the impact of the December agree-
ment, or even nullify it. Yet both
governments have pledged that the
agreement settles the issue finally
and irreversibly, and both sides have
agreed they will stop criticizing each
other over the issue in international
institutions such as the UN.
Fully aware of the need to co-
operate in defence, security, as well
as the economy, both Park and Abe
reached a highly significant com-
promise. Caution remains warranted,
but if both sides remain true to their
commitment and can resist domestic
pressures, the deal marks an im-
portant step forward in rebuilding
relations of trust between the two
countries.