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Asia

# Japan and South Korea's latest row could have deeper consequences

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**Japan and South Korea have reopened an old spat over wartime sexual slavery, or so-called [Comfort Women](#).** The latest flare-up began when a bronze statue of a girl representing former comfort women was installed in front of the Japanese consulate in the South Korean city of Busan. It's triggered an unnecessary, unwanted fiasco that shows no sign of going away.

Ever since a corruption scandal brought down South Korea's now-suspended president, [Park Geun-hye](#), South Korean politics has been [thrown into turmoil](#), and the government currently has very little practical political power. It was therefore in no position to focus on repairing Japan-Korea relations, particularly given the widespread anti-Japanese sentiments among the population at large.

Instead, confronted with the decision of whether or not to remove the figure, the government passed the buck to Busan's local authorities. Tokyo, however, saw this as a tacit endorsement of the statue, which was created by activists hostile towards Japan.

By making a "final and irreversible" agreement to end this dispute in 2015, Japan's government doubtless hoped that the spectre of sexual slavery had finally been put to rest. But neither government made a concerted effort to gain full acceptance for the agreement from the Korean people – including former victims. So it is hardly surprising that following (then in power) Park's collapse, public anger and resentment has resurfaced.

The causes of the dispute run deeper, though, than Korea's internal political situation.

## Tough times

Since Japan-Korea relations were normalised in 1965 under [Park's father \(Chung-hee\)](#), the comfort women issue has haunted all sides. Depending on each government's agenda, it has either been inflamed or subdued, but has been used repeatedly for political leverage. Korea's people, meanwhile, have remained largely consistent in their outlook, often trying to frame Japan as the wrongdoer and extract an acknowledgment of responsibility from Tokyo.

In addition to genuine anger and outrage, however, there are at least two other forces at work. The first is a deep-rooted Korean nationalism: South Korea is, after all, a relatively small nation sandwiched between the two great powers of China and Japan. As such, a national inferiority complex has been intensified by suffering sexual enslavement, which embodies [physical domination](#). The second is the behaviour of Koreans during wartime.

In Korea itself, for example, soldiers of both nationalities visited "comfort stations", and sexual slavery was reportedly widespread during the Korean War. In this sense, an attempt may have been made to divert the eyes of the world away from disturbing episodes of Korean men and their allies systematically abusing Korean women. This is achieved by placing the blame entirely upon Japan's notorious wartime military.

Either way, this grisly affair could have all sorts of implications. For a Japanese government seeking to diversify its international security role under the banner of "proactive peace", the timing of the new row is particularly bad – not least for Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, who surely wants to avoid attention on Japanese forces' previous misdeeds as he tries to steadily modernise his military.

Nevertheless, if Japan had blinked on an issue it officially considers resolved, other historical disputes might also have resurfaced as a result. In light of this, Tokyo took the decisive action to temporarily recall its ambassador and consulate general from Korea.

# A balance upset

Regardless of the legality of the bronze statue, Japan faces a potentially serious political backlash. South Korea's economy is increasingly integrated with China's; if this latest spat acts as a further catalyst for Seoul to move away from Tokyo towards Beijing, Japan could find itself more isolated in East Asia than ever.

That would mean Seoul and Tokyo only being close partners in the security arena. Their militaries operate together largely thanks to the influence and brokerage of the US – and if the ill-feeling of the comfort women affair boils over, for example into Korea's and Japan's separate plans for deployment of the US-backed Terminal High-Altitude Air Defence missile defence system, parts of the security framework that hold the region in balance could be put at risk.

This is all bad for both sides. International coverage of the row will expose the Abe administration's hawkish approach to its neighbours and its clear lack of genuine sympathy for former comfort women; it may also confirm other countries' concerns about a [resurgent Japanese militarism](#). On the other side, large sections of Korea's population do indeed harbour nationalist sentiments that feed into the anti-Japanese rhetoric over sexual slavery. But the idea that if this bias could be overcome the issue would or should disappear is wrongheaded.

Whether committed by Japan or any other state, systematic sexual abuse during wartime needs to be more comprehensively dealt with. The timely appearance of the bronze statue in Busan is a chance for the Japanese government to openly and honestly readdress its wartime history, to start moving on from the worst of its recent past. Abe could then seize the opportunity to take the lead in tackling a regionally divisive issue. Instead, the endless row goes on.

*January 18, 2017*

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