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Faculty of Humanities, Social Sciences, and Education

A Process Tracing Study

The 'Comfort Women' Issue's Persistence and Salience in South Korea–Japan Relations

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Abstract

This thesis examines two questions: (1) Why has the ‘comfort women’ issue become so important to South Korean identity? (2) Why do diplomatic tensions between South Korea and Japan over the issue escalate during some periods and not during others? The study develops hypotheses for each question using the Explaining-Outcome process-tracing method. The aim has been to craft minimally sufficient explanations to uncover and analyze the drivers of the conflict.

The study’s findings show the important role ‘comfort women’ activism has played in keeping the issue alive and making it salient in South Korean politics and identity. Furthermore, the study contributes to the literature on political leaders’ influence on the countries’ bilateral relationship by finding that the combination of left-wing nationalist presidents in South Korea and right-wing prime ministers in Japan has led to the most tension in the diplomatic relationship. The study also infers the connection that activism has to the bilateral relationship through the pathway of collective historical memory, and as such, contributes to the literature on activist civil societies’ role in hindering reconciliation.

Key Words: ‘comfort women’ issue, South Korea-Japan relations, conflict salience, hindered reconciliation.

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1. Introduction

1.1 Motivation of the Study

The motivation for undertaking this specific topic stems from an encounter I had when I lived for a semester in South Korea in 2023. There, in a museum in Busan, while reading about the ‘comfort women’ case and the atrocities these women suffered under the Japanese Imperial Army during the Second World War, many of them Koreans, I was approached by an elderly Korean man. He stated, angrily telling me how upset he was with Japan, even saying that he hated Japan because of all the horrible things they had put Korea through. Eventually, he got so upset and heated that another Korean lady came over and asked him to calm down, directing him away from a friend and me. The strong emotional reaction the man exhibited towards past grievances made me curious about the past between these two countries and the unsettled historical disputes I had read about in the museum. This attitude towards Japan was also found among my Korean peers at the university where I studied; as such, this attitude was not limited to the older generation but had been transmitted to the subsequent generations.

Though my curiosity started with these reactions and my overall desire to learn more about the ‘comfort women’, their testimonies, and their fight for justice, I quickly became interested in why several of the historical disputes, specifically the issue of ‘comfort women’, had not been resolved. I became not only interested in the Korean side, but also the Japanese side. This project was born out of these experiences and curiosities. I wanted to dive deeper into the reasons for the ‘comfort women’ issue to be still alive even decades after Japan’s colonial rule ended, and the reasons why it has become so important for South Koreans and in influencing the diplomatic relationship between the two states.

1.2 Problem Statement, Aim, and Objectives of the Study

South Korea and Japan have historically had a strong economic and security cooperation. Despite this, their bilateral relationship has been plagued by unresolved historical disputes, most notably the Dokdo/Takeshima dispute and the ‘comfort women’ issue. The ‘comfort women’ issue has received much attention in legal and moral discourse. However, less is known about why the issue has become so politically salient in South Korea and why the issue periodically has triggered heightened diplomatic tensions between the two states. There have been efforts to resolve the issue, but to no avail. Despite the unresolved nature of the issue, it has not been consistently disruptive to

the bilateral relationship but has instead had varying intensity across different time periods and leadership constellations.

This thesis aims to explain why the ‘comfort women’ issue has become such a politically salient and important topic for South Korea and why it has destabilized relations with Japan more in some periods than in others. It has several objectives to address this aim. First, it investigates the domestic factors that contributed to the salience of the issue within South Korea. I have chosen to do so through the role of activism and identity. Secondly, I want to examine how variations in political leadership, especially ideological differences between South Korean presidents and Japanese prime ministers, have shaped and contributed to the diplomatic tension around the issue. Thirdly, I use a qualitative process tracing approach to test the causal mechanisms that link the domestic pressures, symbolic demands, and bilateral diplomatic responses over time.

1.3 Relevance for Peace and Conflict Studies?

This study is of relevance to the field of Peace and Conflict Studies as it contributes to understanding how unresolved historical grievances, such as the ‘comfort women’ issue, continue to affect interstate relations decades after the original acts of violence occurred without escalating to armed conflict. This study explores the symbolic and identity-based dimensions of conflict, rather than looking at armed conflict or peace agreements. The evidence under study shows how collective memory, activism, and leadership can sustain, escalate, and de-escalate diplomatic tensions. By examining this, I highlight several concerns in Peace and Conflict Studies. I touch on the role of memory and historical trauma in post-conflict society, obstacles to reconciliation in a context without open conflict, the power of non-state actors in the domestic and international sphere, and the way transitional justice is affected by apologies and inclusion of multiple voices in crafting agreements. I further underline the importance of recognition in peacebuilding and diplomacy.

By using the method of process tracing to explain how historical disputes may become diplomatically disruptive, I offer insight into the mechanisms through which latent conflicts may persist and re-emerge. This is particularly relevant to post-colonial contexts with their contested narratives. I try to contribute to the field’s understanding of what conflict and peace can look like beyond war when there is ongoing struggle over memory, justice, and identity.

1.4 Research Questions

To achieve the objectives mentioned above, two research questions will guide the direction of my analysis:

Why has the ‘comfort women’ issue become so important to South Korean identity?

Why do diplomatic tensions between South Korea and Japan over the issue escalate during some periods and not during others?

1.5 Thesis Outline

This thesis comprises eight chapters, including this introduction. Chapter two briefly presents some historical background and a review of relevant literature. Chapter three presents the research design, method, and data used. Chapters four to seven test hypothesized causal mechanisms on data to establish their explanatory power. Chapter eight concludes the research of the thesis, discusses the findings and their explanatory implications, briefly relates the findings to the relevant literature, discusses some limitations of the study, and makes suggestions for further research.

2. Background and Literature

2.1. Historical Background

2.1.1. ‘Comfort Women’ and Military Sexual Slavery

‘Comfort Women’ (*ianfu*) is a euphemism used for the women who were exploited sexually during the Second World War by Japan in military brothels called comfort stations. It is estimated that between 1931 and 1945, 50,000 to 200,000 girls and young women were forced by Japan into sexual slavery. Most of these women were taken from Korea (estimated to be around 80 %), but they were also taken from all around East Asia, such as from China, Taiwan, the Philippines, Indonesia, East Timor, and even the Netherlands.

2.1.2. Influence of the ‘Comfort Women’ Issue on the Bilateral Relationship Between South Korea and Japan

Up until the 1990s, there was silence surrounding the ‘comfort women’ and the war atrocities that the women had been through. 1991 marked the year when the first Korean survivor appeared in public to testify to her experience as a victim of the military brothels run by the Japanese army; her name was Kim Hak-sun. Her testimony broke the silence and became a turning point as more victims came forward, legal action was taken, and international investigations were initiated into Japan’s wartime sexual slavery system. Various organizations, such as the United Nations (Commission of Human Rights, UN Women, General Assembly, to mention some) and the International Commission of Jurists (ICJ), investigated the legal and historical aspects of the ‘comfort women’ system. The report from the ICJ by Dolgopol and Paranjape in 1994 was one of the key investigations that analyzed the violations of international law and breaches of human rights and advocated for justice and reparations for the survivors.

The grievance has remained a hot topic since the 1990s. The investigations into the military comfort system became the pivotal point when Japan issued the Kono Statement in 1993, which acknowledged the military’s role in establishing comfort stations. In his statement, an official apology was also made to the victims, but no reparations were offered. In 1995, the Asian Women’s Fund was established by Japan to provide financial aid to the victims. Still, this fund was criticized for being private rather than a state fund. The ‘comfort women’ issue remained prominent both in the diplomatic circle and in activist circles throughout these years, with more survivors coming forward with testimonies and legal battles being fought.

From the 2000s until the early 2010s, there was a decline in tensions between Japan and South Korea over the issue; however, the issue remained unresolved. The reason for better South Korea-Japan relations was the heightened focus on economic and security cooperation, which was particularly present with shared concerns over North Korea. This trend can, for example, be seen with President Lee Myung-bak (2008-2013), who emphasized strategic cooperation over the historical dispute over ‘comfort women’.

The comfort women dispute was renewed in the 2010s and is still an enduring issue. Some important years will be highlighted to get an overview of when the ‘comfort women’ issue was relevant in the timespan from the 2010s until 2024. First, in 2011, the South Korean Constitutional Court ruled that the government of South Korea had not done enough to seek compensation from the Japanese government through diplomacy. This incident reignited diplomatic tensions. Then, in 2015, the two countries reached an agreement on the ‘comfort women’ issue under President Park Geun-hye and Prime Minister Shinzo Abe. Through this agreement, Japan apologized and provided 8.3 million dollars to the survivors through a foundation. In exchange, South Korea was to count the agreement as “finally and irreversibly resolved” and remove the Statue of Peace from outside the Japanese embassy in Busan. None of these were upheld, with the Moon Jae-in administration escalating the diplomatic tension in 2017 by distancing itself from the 2015 agreement due to it not reflecting the victims’ wishes and voice. Then, from 2018 to 2021, South Korean courts ordered Japan to compensate the former ‘comfort women’. Japan rejected the ruling, which led to renewed tensions and a trade war.

Since 2022, the issue has not been prominent in the bilateral relationship between the two countries. The focus under the South Korean and Japanese administrations has been to improve bilateral relations, especially regarding regional security concerns over China and North Korea. The historical dispute over the ‘comfort women’ remains unresolved.

2.2. Literature Review

The ‘comfort women’ issue has generated much scholarly interest and a rich body of work across multiple disciplines. These disciplines include international relations, historical studies, gender studies, and transitional justice. The early literature focused on the documentation of the victims’ testimonies and uncovering the historical facts surrounding the military comfort women brothel system under the Japanese Empire during the Second World War. Over time, since the 1990s, the issue has evolved into a point of disagreement, not only within South Korea concerning history, but also in the bilateral relationship between Japan and South Korea. This literature review seeks to explore the persistence of the issue by examining how it has become a symbol of unresolved historical grievance within South Korea and a source of tension in the bilateral relationship.

The organization of the review is set into thematic sections as follows. Firstly, there will be a brief presentation of the early literature on the topic, secondly, memory politics and the importance of collective memories will be discussed, thirdly, transitional justice and global human rights. Then, moving on, we will look at the broader international relations and bilateral tensions. We will also touch on the intersection of feminism, nationalism, and civil society. By presenting such diverse perspectives, this review aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of why the ‘comfort women’ issue remains salient in South Korea and why it continues to unsettle its relationship with Japan.

2.2.1. Early Literature on the ‘Comfort Women’

Much of the early literature on the issue, stemming from the late 1990s and early 2000s, is focused on documenting the victims’ testimonies and on the historical developments and facts around the military comfort women brothel system under the Japanese Empire. Dolgopol and Paranjape, two internationally recognised lawyers, contributed to this literature by composing a report on behalf of the International Commission of Jurists (ICJ) in 1993, on the ‘comfort women’, including the Korean women.¹ In this report, they documented the human rights abuses, statements of ex-soldiers and victims, and the different governments’ positions on the issue. The report urges Japan to take the steps necessary for the victims to gain restitution and rehabilitation, as the report finds Japan morally and legally obligated towards the victims. Another contribution to the English body of literature on the issue was made in the book *True Stories of the Korean Comfort Women* (1995), edited by Keith Howard. As Chunghee Sarah Soh points out in a review, the book contributed by

¹ Dolgopol, Ustinia and Paranjape, Snehal. *Comfort Women, an Unfinished Ordeal: Report of a Mission*.

documenting victims' testimonies and by discussing the 'collective amnesia' on the issue of what can be called sexual slavery during the Second World War.² These works helped lay some of the foundation for understanding the issue as a historical injustice. However, as the issue gained prominence, it extended beyond historical documentation, and it became clear that it influenced contemporary politics and international relations.

2.2.2. Memory Politics and Collective Memory

2.2.2.1. Collective Memories Role

A large body of literature examines how collective memory shapes both the domestic and international. Jo Eun A, in 'Memory, Institutions, and the Domestic Politics of South Korean–Japanese Relations', asks how collective memory shapes politics in both the domestic and international spheres.³ The argument fronted in the article is that the increase of anti-Japanism in South Korea has not only to do with the mobilisation of collective colonial memory during South Korea's democratization, but also with Japan's unwillingness to admit total legal and moral responsibility. Jo says that one cannot separate the past of South Korea as post-colonial and post-authoritarian from today's domestic narratives regarding the discussions and contestation around the historical disputes. The salience of conflicts is, therefore, context-dependent.

2.2.2.2. Memorialisation and Narratives

Building on the collective memory scholarship, another branch has examined how memorialisation, such as museums or memorials, tells us about how something is remembered or how certain narratives are created. Kim Jae Kyoung aims to deepen the scholarly understanding of the spatial significance of museums, here concerning the 'comfort women' issue.⁴ Kim uses Gaston Bachelard's idea or interpretation of the image of a house to understand how the collective memory of the victims dwells in the space of the War and Women's Human Rights Museum in Seoul. He also looks at how the visitors become part of this collective memory by visiting and are influenced to speak out for the victims' cause.

2.2.2.3. The Girl Statue Movement, Feminism, Nationalism, and Civil Society

Nationalism and feminism are often concepts used to discuss memory. In the context of 'comfort women' memorialization, the Statue of Peace commemorates the victims' past and fight for justice

² "Review Article." (1998)

³ Jo, "Memory, Institutions, and the Domestic Politics of South Korean–Japanese Relations."

⁴ Kim, "Spatializing Collective Memory: The Idea of Home and the War and Women's Human Rights Museum."

in the present. Vicki Sung-yeon Kwon discusses this intersection of memory, nationalism, and feminism in relation to the statue. She argues that the statue, which serves as a political and cultural phenomenon, intersects with nationalism and feminism in contemporary South Korea. Further, she contends that the statue has a dual way to produce meaning. One is through presenting the victims as frail and in need of protection.⁵

On the other hand, the statue also represents assertive activism and empowerment among the victims and their supporters. This shows the intersection mentioned earlier. In the aftermath of the 2015 Comfort Women Agreement between Japan and South Korea, the Statue of Peace phenomenon, through citizen activism, facilitates an active engagement with the memorial and thus transforms the statue into a symbol of solidarity and empowerment. She argues that this challenges patriarchal narratives and colonial legacies. David Shim builds on this scholarship by examining the material rhetoric of the statues, arguing that by the statue inviting the viewer to sit next to it, they become part of the mnemonic installation. He argues that the statue elicits embodied engagement, engaging the viewer with it, awakening guardianship, and being cared for by activists who clothe and guard it.⁶

On the same topic, but more concerned with the political orientations and goals of those who both participated but also spearheaded the girl statue movement, Lee Jaeyeon aims to address the gap in this literature by exploring how the girl statue movement (the Statue of Peace) evolved into a left-wing nationalist-populist movement and analysing the mechanism of identification with a girl statue, which plays a big role in constructing a collective political identity.⁷ In this article, Lee contends that the girl statue movement has transformed into a left-wing nationalist-populist project under the leadership of the Korean nationalist left since 2016. This left a forge for an equivalent chain of diverse demands and thus enables the ‘people’. By arguing this, the article demonstrates that left-wing populism and nationalism are compatible.

These debates about how South Korea makes sense of its colonial history and how memory is remembered and transformed show how the ‘comfort women’ issue has stuck in South Korea. On the topic of the issues salience in South Korea, Lauren Richardson attributes the ascension and integration of the ‘comfort women’ into South Korea’s national memory of colonialism to ‘comfort

⁵ Kwon, “The Sonyōsang Phenomenon: Nationalism and Feminism Surrounding the ‘Comfort Women’ Statue.”

⁶ Shim, “Memorials’ Politics: Exploring the Material Rhetoric of the Statue of Peace.”

⁷ Lee, “Left-wing Nationalist-populist Movement and Identification: A Psycho-political Analysis of the ‘Comfort Woman’ Statue Movements in South Korea.”

women' advocacy movements within the country and the effective framing of victimhood.⁸ This argument is confirmed and furthered by Easley, who argues that cooperative approaches to reconciliation on the issue are mainly unsuccessful due to activist civil society (the NGOs having to do with Japan) shaping public opinion, and because they managed to capture national political agendas.⁹ This perspective shows a more bottom-up factor that unsettles the bilateral relationship.

2.2.3. Transitional Justice and International Human Rights

The unresolved status of the 'comfort women' issue is often attributed to failures in transitional justice measures. Topics such as failed apologies, reparations, and justice for victims are central to this focus. Byoung Won Min applies transitional justice theory and the concept of *jus cogens* in international law to argue that the issue has transcended traditional diplomatic frameworks.¹⁰ Min asserts that it should be reframed as a global human rights issue, emphasizing the need for true reparations rather than mere settlements. Similarly, Klea Ramaj critiques the 2015 Comfort Women Agreement, questioning the extent to which it addresses the needs and rights of victims. She argues that the lack of acknowledgment, memorialisation, and overall a lack of agreement in terms of victim input maintains a system of oppression and harms the victims.¹¹

Cosgarea examines the broader implications of the unresolved 'comfort women' issue on East Asian political stability. In her study, she argues that repetitive and flawed diplomatic negotiations in combination with the exclusion of key stakeholders, including the victims and civil society, have perpetuated the dispute.¹² The exclusion, which Ramaj also points out, is that the exclusion of victims and civil society undermines efforts to achieve a meaningful resolution and reconciliation.

2.2.4. International Relations and the Bilateral Tensions

2.2.4.1. Realist and Constructivist Perspectives on the Tension

Both Japan and South Korea are important allies for the United States in East Asia. The troubled relationship between the two countries has raised concerns on the US side, as their cooperation is essential for regional stability and countering China. The importance and complexity of the relationship between the countries have sparked the interest of IR scholars.

⁸ Richardson, "The Ascension of 'Comfort Women' in South Korean Colonial Memory."

⁹ Easley, "Korean NGOs and Reconciliation With Japan."

¹⁰ Min, "From Settlements to Reparations: The Case of Comfort Women and *Jus Cogens* in International Relations."

¹¹ Ramaj, "The 2015 South Korean–Japanese Agreement on 'Comfort Women': A Critical Analysis."

¹² Cosgarea, "Beyond Apologies: An Analysis of Korean–Japanese Foreign Relations Through the Lens of the Comfort Women Issue."

Some of the earlier studies on the relationship between Japan and South Korea adopted a realist perspective. Realism could, however, not account for all aspects of the troubled relationship, for instance, in realism, there is no understanding that historical memory will preclude cooperation, which is not rational behaviour. This is apparent in Cooney and Scarborough's article 'Japan and South Korea: Can These Two Nations Work Together?' where they use a realist and democratic peace theoretical perspectives to show that, though these two theories would predict a natural alliance based on shared democratic values, economic interests and common threats (North Korea), the reality is different from theory.¹³ Historical memory and national identity preclude good cooperation despite mutual interests. The study also finds that the ideological leaning of the leaders seems to be important in the relationship between the countries, suggesting that conservative leadership in South Korea and liberal leaning leadership in Japan work the best. The article also suggests that political ideology might even trump the countries' interests unless there is a present and clear danger.¹⁴ Although pragmatic politicians in both countries might ease the tension and mutual needs might bring the countries closer in cooperation, the study still concludes that the historical memory needs to be dealt with in a meaningful way while there are still people alive from the older generation who were both perpetrators and victims.

2.2.4.2. *Political leaders and Dynamics*

Expanding the research on the political leadership, and taking a step away from the structural factors, such as shared democratic values and security concerns, Kim Hosup suggests that the role of the political leaders in shaping Korea-Japan relations is critical to understand why historical disputes sometimes spark diplomatic clashes.¹⁵ Kim argues that the decisions, personalities, and styles of the individual leaders of each state significantly influence whether there is cooperation or conflict in a bilateral relationship. The conclusion here is that the historical problems become diplomatic problems mainly because of how leaders handle them, rather than them being structurally inevitable.

Ku Minseon argues that South Korea's foreign policy is shaped by conflicting national identities, which leads to inconsistencies and fluctuations in bilateral relationships, especially towards Japan.¹⁶ By adopting a constructivist perspective, Ku emphasizes the influence of identity and emotion over

¹³ Cooney and Scarborough, "Japan and South Korea: Can These Two Nations Work Together?"

¹⁴ Cooney and Scarborough, "Japan and South Korea: Can These Two Nations Work Together?" p. 188.

¹⁵ Kim, "The Role of Political Leadership in the Formation of Korea-Japan Relations in the Post-Cold War Era."

¹⁶ Ku, "The Role of Identity in South Korea's Policies towards Japan."

rational state behaviour, and as such, takes a step away from explaining the fluctuations and tensions in the relationship between Japan and Korea from a realist IR approach. The article posits that an identity dilemma appears when South Korea tries to navigate diplomatic tension with Japan and traditional security threats from North Korea. The conflicting, multiple identities result in fluctuations in how South Korea approaches Japan.¹⁷

2.2.5. The ‘Comfort Women’ Issue in Bilateral Relations and Japan’s Apologies

Looking specifically from the stance of the ‘comfort women’ issue, debates turn more to insincere apologies from Japan hindering reconciliation and justice. Yang examined 61 cases of historical disputes, including the ‘comfort women’ case, and conducted a comparative analysis by analysing the contents of major Korean newspapers and conducting an in-depth case study of the remarks given by former Prime Minister Abe in 2007 in relation to the ‘comfort women’ issue.¹⁸ Yang found that the conflicts were heavily politicized, as the empirical studies show that South Korea’s response to the Japanese blunders varies by different factors such as period, case, and figure involved. The findings also suggest that Koreans react more strongly when the issue is nationalistic, like the Dokdo and ‘comfort women’, than to wartime memory issues like the Yasukuni Shrine. It seems that the South Korean government tries to avoid politicizing the historical tension in general, but when the blunders involve current Japanese cabinet members, or when the President responds forcefully, or when media domestically amplify the issue, the government reacts assertively.¹⁹

Hong has approached the apologies given by Japan from the angle of explaining what motivates apologies and backlash in Japan-South Korea relations. Hong moves away from the focus of previous scholarship that stresses the importance of sincere apologies for reconciliation to happen. Instead, the point is that such an argument blurs the comprehensive approach to the apology problem. The central arguments of this article are that apologies are not a matter of sincerity, but rather the result of inter/intra-party competition for political benefits, and political apologies from Japan have lost their significance with the 2015 Comfort Women agreement. At that time, as Hong says, Japan seemed unlikely to express another apology unless the political benefits fit the power-holding parties or factions.²⁰

¹⁷ Ku, “The Role of Identity in South Korea’s Policies towards Japan.” p.76.

¹⁸ Yang, “South Korea and Japan’s Frictions Over History: A Linguistic Constructivist Reading.”

¹⁹ Yang, “South Korea and Japan’s Frictions Over History: A Linguistic Constructivist Reading.” p. 76-77.

²⁰ Hong, “The Effects of ‘Apology-Backlash’ Recurrence on Korea–Japan Relations.”

2.2.6. Research Gap and Conclusion

As the literature shows, the ‘comfort women’ issue remains a contested and multifaceted topic that reflects broader tensions in historical memory, national identity, political leadership, and transitional justice. The early scholarship was more focused on documenting victim experiences and historical facts. The more recent studies have expanded to explore other topics such as the role of memory politics, symbolic representation, identity, apologies, and leadership in perpetuating the issue. Most of the literature highlights the need for inclusive and reparative approaches that include the victims’ voices and civil society. The issue is reframed as a global human rights concern by underscoring this importance. By addressing these dimensions, both scholars and policymakers can contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the issue and perhaps also resolve the enduring historical injustice. It is, however, a complex issue to solve.

While the studies discussed in the literature review provide valuable insight into the persistence of historical issues, including the ‘comfort women’, there is a lack of a systematic inquiry into the underlying causal mechanisms that explain why the issue remains unsolved and why it still unsettles the bilateral relationship of Japan and South Korea. The existing research tends to emphasize descriptive or interpretive approaches. Still, it does not rigorously test competing hypotheses to identify the specific factors or processes that drive the conflict and prevent resolution. Some studies, like Cosgarea, touch on diplomatic negotiation and the exclusion of stakeholders. However, they do not evaluate how these elements interact with broader factors and dynamics to perpetuate conflict over the issue.

This thesis addresses this gap by using an explaining-outcome process-tracing method to test and analyse competing hypotheses about the causes of the unresolved nature of the ‘comfort women’ issue. The hypotheses my thesis builds on are developed from the literature and lean on the theories and concepts in which these authors were situated. This study aims to explain the factors that unsettle the relationship and hinder resolution. It also aims to move beyond a descriptive account by grounding the research in both previous scholarship and empirical data. Another gap, or understudied area that my thesis will contribute to, is the impact of South Korean NGOs (supporting the ‘comfort women’ issue) on the bilateral relationship between South Korea and Japan.

The literature that has been most helpful in tackling the study has been Richardson and Easley’s research on the ‘comfort women’ redress movements and their impact both in South Korea and on the bilateral relationship with Japan. I have built quite a lot on Richardson’s work when explaining

the second hypothesis. Cooney and Scarbrough's article has also been quite constructive in helping to think about how to approach the second research question. The same goes for Kim Hosup's work on the importance of political leaders and their actions towards historical grievances. Others, like Hong, have provided a good explanation and layout of Japan's apologies until 2016.

3. Method

3.1. Philosophical Paradigms

This research has been informed by a constructivist ontology. Under this ontology, the assumption is that social phenomena and the meanings attached to these are socially constructed and under constant renegotiation.²¹ In this research, it means that international relations are understood as socially constructed through norms, identity, and collective meaning-making. It further posits that concepts such as historical justice, national trauma, or victimhood should be understood as something dynamic that actors shape over time rather than something fixed.

The epistemological paradigm this thesis adopts is an interpretivist one. Knowledge is seen as context-specific and interpretive because it is shaped by the historical and normative frameworks that actors operate within. By situating myself within such a paradigm, I acknowledge that I, as a researcher, am part of the research and the interpretation of the data, which means that the research cannot be entirely objective. As the philosophical outlook is more subjective, the research has trouble with generalizability in the more positivist sense.²²

3.2. Research Design

This thesis adopts a qualitative, single-case research design that is theory-informed. It employs a process-tracing method to explore and explain why the ‘comfort women’ issue has become salient and, at times, why it has destabilized South Korea-Japan relations. The research goal is explanatory, as I am interested in uncovering and tracing the causal mechanisms that have contributed to the issue’s salience in South Korea and its unsettling impact on bilateral diplomatic relations with Japan over time.

I selected the case for the intrinsic importance it has, meaning researching the case for the case’s sake. The historical dispute of the ‘comfort women’ issue continues to affect diplomatic relations between the countries today and touches on areas such as identity, justice, and international diplomacy. The case might therefore offer a valuable lens for examining how historical memory and activism can shape foreign policy. Furthermore, the case shows some within-case variations, such as the differing levels of bilateral tensions across different administrations, to which process tracing is well equipped to seek an answer. The method applied to this research allows for an in-

²¹ Bryman, “Social Research Methods.” p. 33.

²² Bryman, “Social Research Methods.” p. 28-31.

depth exploration of ‘how’ and ‘why’ historical disputes influence contemporary relations between the two countries.

The design is informed by theory, meaning it is informed by patterns from previous scholarly research. Much of the literature I have leaned on has been concerned with the role of identity, norms, and non-state actors in international relations. However, at the same time, I had to remain open to competing explanations that might have appeared out of the analysis. The goal has been to build a minimally sufficient explanation, supported by sources, to account for why particular mechanisms, such as activist influence, political leadership, and historical memory and identity, have shaped the outcome. While choosing a single-case design limits generalizability and decreases external validity, it, on the other hand, allows for diving deep into the case.

In the next sections, I will briefly explain the specific type of method and then explain my data collection and analysis.

3.3. Process-Tracing Method: A Qualitative Methodology

This study employs an explaining-outcome process-tracing (PT) method, as Beach and Pedersen call it.²³ The method is used to explain why the ‘comfort women’ dispute has gained salience domestically in South Korea and influenced the Japan-South Korea bilateral relationship in some periods more than others. This is done through the causal mechanisms described in the section above.

So, what is process tracing? Bennett and Checkel define process tracing like this:

[...] define process tracing as the analysis of evidence on processes, sequences, and conjunctures of events within a case for the purposes of either developing or testing hypotheses about causal mechanisms that might causally explain the case. Put another way, the deductive theory-testing side of process tracing examines the observable implications of hypothesized causal mechanisms within a case to test whether a theory on these mechanisms explains the case.²⁴

Explaining-outcome PT is a specific type of process tracing. It is a qualitative methodology that more closely resembles historical scholarship; however, according to Beach and Pedersen, it is still

²³ Beach and Pedersen, *“Process-Tracing Methods: Foundations and Guidelines.”* P. 18-21.

²⁴ Bennett and Checkel. “Process tracing: From philosophical roots to best practices.” p.7-8.

social science research. This is not a theory-centric variant, but one that is concerned with explaining a particular puzzling outcome. Such an approach aims to seek the cause of a specific outcome within a case, and this type of process tracing can therefore be called a single-outcome study. The aim and ambition of such a study is to provide an explanation of a specific outcome that is minimally sufficient. With sufficiency, it is meant that the explanation should account for all the important features of an outcome, where redundant parts should be avoided. It also means that sufficiency does not naturally mean that mechanism X is the only true path to Y, but merely that if it occurs, it is sufficient to produce Y.²⁵

In this variant of process tracing, causal mechanisms are used in a broader sense than in theory-centric variants, which means that mechanisms need to be combined into an eclectic conglomerate mechanism so that it can account for a historical outcome. This implies that a case is too complicated to be explained by one single theory. One must draw on several in hopes of establishing a convincing explanation. The result is therefore a case-specific combination of mechanisms in eclectic conglomerates, where it is necessary to include non-systematic mechanisms. These are the case-specific mechanisms of the explanations.²⁶

Including the non-systematic mechanisms is an advantage as they are depicted as events. This allows us to capture how actors' decisions are shaped by their context and how historical events may unfold in unpredictable and contingent ways.²⁷ Remaining open to competing explanations is also crucial to building a coherent and accurate narrative.

Explaining-outcome process tracing allows for both a deductive and inductive path to be used when studying the phenomenon; most often, a mix of them is used. This mix resembles what can be called abduction. In deductive reasoning, which I have mostly employed in this research, one starts by using existing theory to formulate hypotheses to craft explanations. Deductive reasoning is to make an inference based on widely accepted facts or premises. Inductive reasoning, on the other hand, is more commonly used when examining a little-studied outcome. One starts with specific observations/premises, goes through pattern recognition, and derives a general conclusion.²⁸

²⁵ Mahoney, "The Logic of Process Tracing Tests in the Social Sciences."

Beach and Pedersen, *"Process-Tracing Methods: Foundations and Guidelines."* p. 18-19 and p.93.

²⁶ Beach and Pedersen, *"Process-Tracing Methods: Foundations and Guidelines."* p.33-36.

²⁷ Beach and Pedersen, *"Process-Tracing Methods: Foundations and Guidelines."* p. 19 and p. 33-36.

²⁸ Beach and Pedersen, *"Process-Tracing Methods: Foundations and Guidelines."* Chapter 2

Though I have relied more on a deductive path, I have also remained open to inductive insights as pointed out as important by Bennett and Checkel.²⁹

3.4. Hypotheses and Data Collection

Having explained the methodological approach in brief, I will explain how I went about it in the study. As mentioned in the research design, my goal has been to explain an outcome. To do this, I first did some extensive preliminary reading to gain knowledge on the ‘comfort women’ issue and why it might be impacting the bilateral relationship between South Korea and Japan. I also had some preexisting knowledge, as I had an interest in the topic beforehand and had lived in both countries for a semester each. Therefore, I do have some knowledge of the culture and of the issue under study. From these different points of knowledge, I had made two research questions that I was interested in examining. Here they are to remind the reader:

RQ1: Why has the ‘comfort women’ issue become so important to South Korean identity?

RQ2: Why do diplomatic tensions between South Korea and Japan over the issue escalate during some periods and not during others?

Based on these two questions, I made some assumptions about the causal mechanisms behind the salience and unsettling power of the ‘comfort women’ issues. Secondary sources such as scholarly, peer-reviewed literature and advice from my supervisor were used to hone the hypothesized causal mechanisms. When crafting the explanations, I also remained open to the possibility of alternative explanations that I had not been aware of. I did change the hypotheses quite a bit throughout the process. They started as six, but after a while, some were irrelevant, and others were merged. Here are the hypotheses as they ended up after several drafts, trials, and errors. The first two are used to build a minimally sufficient and plausible explanation for the first research question, and the latter two for the second one.

1. The Korean national identity, which is partially rooted in the collective memory of colonial subjugation, has made the ‘comfort women’ issue politically salient in South Korea.

²⁹ Bennett and Checkel. “Process tracing: From philosophical roots to best practices.” p. 20-21

2. The ‘comfort women’ issue has remained a central topic in South Korean politics and society due to the sustained efforts of activist groups, mainly the Korean Council, that influence public opinion, pressure political leaders, and shape historical narratives.

3. The ‘comfort women’ issue has unsettled the bilateral relationship between Japan and South Korea more in some periods than others because South Korean left-wing nationalist presidents utilize the issue to mobilize domestic support.

4. The ‘comfort women’ issue has unsettled the bilateral relationship between Japan and South Korea in some periods more than in others because Japanese right-wing nationalist prime ministers refuse to acknowledge responsibility fully and instead adopt revisionist historical narratives.

I choose to start the study with the year 1991 as this is a logical vantage point. This is the year that the issue came to light and became public, starting to influence the bilateral relationship between Japan and South Korea. The research ends in 2025 with the last presidents and prime ministers of South Korea and Japan. The timelines and events I have chosen to include in my study are a result of extensive sifting through different sources, much of it secondary sources as scholarly literature. Timelines were based on materials from the Korean Council’s website of events related to the ‘comfort women’ movement, or timelines based on political leaders’ inaugurations and leave of office, and their statements and apologies. I have footnoted all the data sources I have used for my explanations at the end of each page to ensure transparency in the claims I make.

The sources I have chosen to incorporate into my explanations were all gathered through open searches; to explain all the ways I conducted searches will not fit into this method section, but I did have some keywords I implemented. The most important one being ‘comfort women’. The other keywords were in relation to the hypnotized causal mechanisms. Sometimes, the search would not lead to anything, and other times, a search and its modification would lead to unexpected data sources. I also came across helpful data in some scholarly works. The work on finding relevant data was quite iterative and time-consuming. Therefore, explaining the process in detail outside of the explanations does not serve much purpose. I have tried to be as transparent as I can in my research without adding too much detail.

In collecting the data, I am aware that it is not without bias. News outlets, political statements, and statements from the Korean Council all have motives to convince the observer that their narrative is the correct one. I have tried to overcome this by being aware of the issue of bias and by using triangulation. I have, for example, gathered news reports not solely from Korean or Japanese

English news outlets, but included international ones such as Reuters to get a more nuanced picture of the narrative. When applying data from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan (mofa.go.jp), Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet (japan.kantei.go.jp), or the South Korean Government's equivalent KOREA.net, I had to be extra cautious and skeptical of the data because of the motives that are embedded in the sources.

3.5. Potential Bias

Bias can occur at any phase of the research. This includes the design of the study, the data collection, and the data analysis process. For this thesis, three things come to mind when I think of bias in my own research. First, I did not have access to the places I researched, thus not interacting with the real world. Second, I neither speak nor read either of the languages to a point where it could aid my research, but when I encountered a source that could be useful in either language, I asked some friends to confirm the translation for me. Third is the difficulty in remaining neutral to the hypotheses I examine because I did have pre-existing opinions on what I thought was most likely the best explanation of the outcome.

To decrease the risk of biased research, I triangulate with different sources ranging from the President's or Prime Minister's statements released on foreign ministry websites or the Prime Minister's Cabinet speeches. I also used official documents/apologies that were publicly available in English issued by both countries, news reports, and scholarly work. I have also relied on data archives from the Korean Council. To overcome the language barrier, I lean on previous academic work to extend the reach of my explanations. Furthermore, to overcome the fact that I do not have access to the countries, I chose a relatively well-documented topic, and the challenge of access should, therefore, be possible to overcome.

The following chapters seek to explain the causal mechanisms of the outcome. There are two hypotheses for each of the research questions. Chapters 4 and 5 concern hypotheses for the first research question. Chapters 6 and 7 concern hypotheses that go together with the second research question. The next two chapters address the first research question: Why has the 'comfort women' issue gained political significance and salience in South Korea?

4. National Identity and the Salience of the ‘Comfort Women’ Issue in South Korea

This chapter tests the hypothesis that Korean national identity in the Republic of Korea, which is partially rooted in the collective memory of colonial subjugation, has made the ‘comfort women’ issue politically salient. According to this logic, national identity does not merely frame the issue symbolically; it serves as a sufficient causal mechanism that drives political responsiveness, sustains the issue over time, and explains why it continues to matter in domestic and foreign policy. The chapter uses the method presented to evaluate whether this mechanism can account for the observed outcome independently of other potential causes, such as activism.

4.1. Colonial Memory and Construction of Japan as Enemy (1945-1991)

The claim presented is that the Korean national identity has been built around collective trauma from the Japanese colonial times, and so Japan has, in this way, come to be framed as a moral adversary. This allows for the creation of a cultural and political environment where unresolved colonial grievances, including the ‘comfort women’ issue, gain automatic salience.

Testing this claim has proven hard, as few data sources in English go back to pre-democratized South Korea. I have not found excerpts from schoolbooks about the colonial period, nor have I found speeches that commemorate national holidays and liberation days from the early postcolonial period, mentioning atrocities. I have also not found mentions of ‘comfort women’ in government rhetoric prior to the issue becoming public in 1991. However, the issue was already discussed in 1988 by feminist scholars and activists. Even if I have not found these sources, which could have given insight into the framing of Japan, I will approach the claim differently through the changing perceptions of the Japanese Government-General Building (GGB) in post-colonial Korea. The building was left intact until 1995.

The GGB is a good example of how South Koreans' perception of Japan changed during the 1960s to 90s. Han Jung-sun shows that the building, already before it was demolished in 1995, was associated with humiliation and shame as it had become a place of memorialisation of the colonial period. Until the 80s, the building had been governmental, with different offices. Then, in the 80s, the National Museum of Korea was established. The building's preservation and utilization were

controversial and evoked debates until its demolition because it symbolized Japanese imperialism.

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Another problematic fact about the GGB was that it had been built in the place of the last Korean king's palace (Kyōngbok Palace), which had been positioned according to the belief that energy flowed well, the national energy (*pungsu*). When the GGB was erected in its place, this signalled to Koreans that their national energy had been cut off and subjugated to the dominant power. Han shows that throughout the 1960s to 1990s, the attitude of Koreans to this building and what it represented grew more ambivalent, and their view of Japan became more negative. The dismantling of the building began on the 50th anniversary of the Liberation Day from Japan, 15th of August 1995.³¹ It became a way of taking charge in crafting a new history of Korea. One could say from this observation that Japan was cast as Korea's 'significant other'. However, the issue of 'comfort women' was not yet publicly or politically salient, despite debates in the public surrounding colonial memory. The fact that colonial memory became more debated as South Korea was gradually democratized in the 1980s was probably a necessary condition for the issue to emerge, but it was not the trigger.

4.2. From Memory to Mobilization? The 1991 Emergence of the Issue

The second claim to examine is that if national identity drove the political salience of the comfort women issue, it should have entered public discourse as a result of pre-existing nationalist memory, even without external stimuli.

Unfortunately, the claim can be easily refuted because, after investigation, one finds that the issue was invisible in society until survivor testimonies drew political attention to it. The issue was also not raised by political actors based on nationalist grounds, but (as shall be discussed in chapter 2 on activism) raised by feminist scholars and activists who supported the women and their cause, wanting justice and reparations for the victims. It was Kim Hak-sun's public testimony that initiated the issue's visibility, and civil society organisations, especially the *Korean Council for the Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan* (the Korean Council), that mobilized around her

³⁰Seo, "The Japanese Government-General of Korea: A Hermeneutic Understanding of the Effects of Historic Preservation from a Western Perspective."

³¹ Han, Jung-sun. "Japan in the Public Culture of South Korea, 1945–2000s: The Making and Remaking of Colonial Sites and Memories 1945-2000 (年代韓国公共文化における日本 植民地的場と記憶の生産と再生産)" *Asia-Pacific Journal* 12., no.15 (no.2). (April 13, 2014) <https://apjif.org/2014/12/15/jung-sun-han/4107/article> (Accessed: 19.04.2025).

testimony and further initiated weekly protests for the victims, demanding justice for them. The government and media's attention followed from activism, not vice versa. The hypothesis that historical memory as such was a sufficient condition for the 'comfort women' issue to become salient is weakened here, as memory politics alone did not make the issue visible.

4.3. Reframing Through National Identity

As seen above, national identity did not trigger the initial emergence of the 'comfort women' issue. However, it could have shaped how the issue was interpreted, framed, and politicized in the aftermath of survivor testimonies and civil society mobilization. This section explores how the issue was absorbed into Korea's nationalist discourse following Kim Hak-sun's 1991 testimony. The focus is not on how it was absorbed as a gender issue, but rather as a national trauma demanding moral and diplomatic redress.

From 1992 to 2007, the public discourse increasingly framed the issue in moral and historical terms. Sincere apologies and moral restitution were called for from Japan, not just legal settlement or compensation. This reframing allowed the comfort women issue to resonate beyond the women's rights movement, embedding it into a larger narrative of unresolved colonial trauma.

Furthermore, documentaries and television dramas helped shape the way the issue was remembered as part of the colonial past, affecting collective memory. The documentary *The Murmuring* (1995) is the first in a trilogy by Byun Young-joo. She documented the past and present lives of some of the Korean women and girls who were forced to work in the Japanese military brothels during the Japanese War for a Greater Asia. Such filmic efforts helped inform the public and get them to empathize with the women. This documentary was, however, not driven forward by a nationalist agenda, but was made possible because of grassroots merchandise sales and donations of film stock through a feminist film collective called Bariteo. This documentary became the first film to collect testimonies from former comfort women, and the first feature-length documentary that received theatrical distribution in South Korea.³² This example shows, as previously mentioned, that rather than government and nationalist agendas keeping the issue alive in South Korea, activists have actively pushed it to be seen and recognized. Their efforts have helped embed the grievance into the memories of the public and the colonial narrative. Kim Hwal-bin, who analyses the movies *Eyes of Dawn* (1995) and *Snowy Road* (2015), argues that the two television dramas helped shape Korean

³² Han, "Faces in the Crowd: "Comfort Women"" on Film as listed on mubi.com <https://mubi.com/en/notebook/posts/faces-in-the-crowd-comfort-women-on-film> (Accessed: 13.05.2025).

collective memory of Japanese colonial rule in two different time periods.³³ This shows how memory was remembered and framed, changed over time, and helped alter the discourse around the memory. She points out that collective memories do not exist in the abstract. Such memories are rather material as they often need a sort of textual form, as they, to become a collective memory, require a process of symbolization.³⁴ The media play a big part in the remembrance of past events.

Ideally, I should prove this argument by referring to sources of government and political discourse, framed in a nationalistic context, but this proved too difficult since I do not master the Korean language. The same goes for changes in school curriculum. I tried to see if ‘comfort women’ had been included in the historical narrative surrounding the colonial period between 1992 and 2007, but could not find relevant sources or literature in English. Despite this weakness, I would suggest that this section shows that national identity increasingly helped sustain and amplify the political salience of the issue, but only after it had entered the public sphere through activism. National identity remains reactive rather than initiating the visibility of the issue. This point weakens this chapter’s hypothesis by showing that nationalism did not cause political uptake but merely helped shape how the issue was politically framed and justified.

4.4. National Identity as a Constant and Amplifier: The 2015 Agreement Crisis

This section examines how national identity acted as a constraint, rather than an initiator, on political decision-making, particularly during diplomatic attempts to resolve the issue. The 2015 agreement, intended to ‘finally and irreversibly’ deal with the comfort women issue between Japan and South Korea, demonstrated how identity-based memory politics and expectations could amplify backlash and limit policy options.

Although the agreement included an apology from the Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and a compensation fund for surviving victims, it was met with dissatisfaction and protest. Civil rights organisations, the Korean Council, and parts of the public accused the South Korean government of not taking a victim-centred approach to the agreement. The fact that the agreement’s controversy generated and mobilized public support for the victims suggests that at this point, national identity

³³ Kim and Lee, “Collective Memory of Japanese Military ‘Comfort Women’ and South Korean Media: The Case of Television Dramas, *Eyes of Dawn* (1991) and *Snowy Road* (2015).”

³⁴ Kim and Lee, “Collective Memory of Japanese Military ‘Comfort Women’ and South Korean Media: The Case of Television Dramas, *Eyes of Dawn* (1991) and *Snowy Road* (2015).” p. 90.

had become central to the issue's political sustainability.³⁵ It was not only initiated by activists and supporters of the victims. This points to the issue being absorbed into many Koreans' collective consciousness. This point can be said to slightly affirm the hypothesis that national identity drove the issue's salience.

4.5. Ritualization and Symbolic Continuity: From 2016-Present

What followed the failure of the 2015 agreement was that the 'comfort women' issue saw a boom in memorialisation. National identity here could serve as a cultural and symbolic persistence mechanism, rather than active agenda-setting.

A visible manifestation of the issue's persistence is the proliferation of the Statue of Peace memorials. The first one was installed in 2011 in front of the Japanese embassy in Seoul, and similar statues are now found in more than fifty domestic and international locations. The domestic sites are deeply tied to Koreans' self-conception as victims of colonial injustice, and they function as sites for mourning, protest, and symbolic resistance.

The comfort women issue has been institutionalized into school curricula and moral education programs. Teaching materials frame the survivors' experiences as a matter of historical truth and ethical responsibility, ensuring the issue is passed down to future generations. The government of South Korea initiated the distribution of this teaching material in 2015 to middle, elementary, and high school teachers in various schools.³⁶ In a visit to Yonhi Middle School in Seoul on September 22, 2015, the Gender Equality and Family Minister Kim Hee-jung said, "It is important for students like you to know what happened and understand this terrible part of our history."³⁷ She also related the issue to the bigger international human rights discourse, saying that "Sexual slavery is an ongoing issue related to the international human rights of women around the world, and your role will be important in solving it."³⁸ Here, the issue is framed both as something relevant to Korea's

³⁵ South Korean "comfort women" protest against accord with Japan as listed in Reuters <https://www.reuters.com/article/world/south-korean-comfort-women-protest-against-accord-with-japan-idUSKBN0UD014/> (Accessed: 20.04.2025).

³⁶ Students learn about comfort women in new textbooks as listed on Hankyoreh https://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_national/710089.html (Accessed: 20.04.2025).

³⁷ S. Korean students learn about comfort women with new textbooks as listed on The Korea Times <http://www.koreatimesus.com/s-korean-students-learn-about-comfort-women-with-new-textbooks/> (Accessed: 20.04.2025).

³⁸ S. Korean students learn about comfort women with new textbooks as listed on The Korea Times <http://www.koreatimesus.com/s-korean-students-learn-about-comfort-women-with-new-textbooks/> (Accessed: 20.04.2025).

history by using the word ‘our’, and also to the international engagement of the issue, and how the students are instrumental in keeping the issue alive and engaging with it.

Further, the relevance of teaching about the ‘comfort women’s’ lives as history is shown in the study by Jun Hana, who investigates how students’ national identity affects their understanding of history by mediating their use of affective historical empathy. She finds, among other things, that students show strong emotional engagement when learning about the ‘comfort women’, and that this empathy is often filtered through a nationalist lens. This means that the students care more for the Korean victims because they were perceived as part of ‘our’ nation, and identify themselves with the women by saying, the ‘comfort women’ are ‘us’. An implication of the study is, however, also that empathy can break the boundaries set by nationalism, and as such, the issue allows for transnational solidarity.³⁹

Furthermore, the ‘comfort women’ issue has also been embedded into the national identity and collective memory of South Koreans through memorialisation of the victims and the atrocities they suffered. This has happened through recognizing August 14th as the International Memorial Day for Comfort Women in 2012. In 2018, President Moon Jae-in declared it a National Memorial Day, which was marked with a ceremony and a speech by Moon to the public.⁴⁰ The Korean Council also marks this day with remembrance events.

While these ways of remembering keep the issue alive symbolically, they are more reflective of institutionalized identity than dynamic political mobilization. The most recent political developments concerning the issue have been more reactive than proactive, triggered by Japanese statements, international court decisions, or activist initiatives. The national identity does sustain symbolic relevance, but is just a weak driver in new political outcomes. National identity serves as a background condition for symbolic continuity of the issue, ensuring that it remains culturally and morally remembered, even when not politically prioritized.

³⁹ Jun, “I Think the Comfort Women Are Us’: National Identity and Affective Historical Empathy in Students’ Understanding of ‘Comfort Women’ in South Korea.” p.16-18.

⁴⁰ International Memorial Day For "Comfort Women" as listed on Education for Social Justice Foundation <https://www.e4sjf.org/international-memorial-day-for-comfort-women.html> (Accessed: 20.04.2025)

4.6. Does the Hypothesis Find Support?

The findings give very little support to the hypothesis that the issue remains alive in South Korea because it was embedded symbolically in the national identity and mobilized through domestic nationalism. On the other hand, the findings support the activists' desire to keep the issue visible. Through this visibility, the issue has been embedded into the collective memory of the colonial past. When this happens, it becomes part of the national identity, which can, in turn, help create the issue's salience in South Korea.

5. ‘Comfort Women’ Related Protests and Activism

In this chapter, I will discuss and analyze the hypothesis that the ‘comfort women’ issue has remained a central topic in South Korean politics and society due to the sustained efforts of activist groups, mainly the Korean Council, that influence public opinion, pressure political leaders, and shape historical narratives. In other words, the focus is on whether ‘comfort women’ activism and movements are key to maintaining the issue’s relevance in South Korea and, as such, impacting their bilateral diplomatic relations with Japan. To develop this hypothesis, I will briefly explore the emergence of the ‘comfort women’ redress movement following South Korea’s democratization. I will also examine the Wednesday Demonstrations and their impact on domestic and international politics. Lastly, I will examine how ‘comfort women’ activism has affected the bilateral relationship with Japan.

5.1. Activism in South Korea’s Domestic Sphere

5.1.1. *The Emergence of the ‘Comfort Women’ Redress Movement*

The issue of ‘comfort women’ gained traction in the 1990s when the first victim of the comfort women system under Japanese colonial rule came forward with her story. The movement grew out of the democratization movement that South Korea had been experiencing in the 1980s. South Korea’s transition to democracy allowed national feminist movements to grow. As a result of these feminist movements addressing women’s rights and violence towards women, the ‘comfort women’ issue came to light gradually. It was not that the situation of these women had been forgotten or was unknown, but the stigma from society and the shame they and their families felt contributed to the suppression of their stories.⁴¹

The relationship between power and sexual violence toward women in Korean society was highlighted for several reasons. One was sex tourism (*kisaeng*), which rose in popularity in 1973 when a boom in Japanese male tourists was experienced and catered to. This, in part, triggered protests among Christian Koreans and feminists and led to the publication of a survey in 1983 to address sex tourism by a group known as Korea Church Women United. This awakening to women’s rights also led to a court case in 1986 against the Korean government on charges of sexual torture. Two years later, the group Korea Church Women United investigated the case of ‘comfort women’, and Korean feminist intellectuals like Yun Chung-ok started campaigning for ‘comfort

⁴¹ Richardson, “The Ascension of ‘Comfort Women’ in South Korean Colonial Memory.” p. 27

women'. Yun researched the atrocities of the military 'comfort women' brothel system and published it in a Korean newspaper in 1990. In the same year, with the help of other feminist activists, she also helped establish the Korean Council for the Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery (The Korean Council). This was an institutionalization of their support for former 'comfort women'. The article discussing Yun's investigation into the comfort women system created debate, and Japan denied its official involvement of the imperial government in the comfort women system.⁴²

Another reason why the relationship between power and sexual violence was highlighted was because of Kim Hak-soon's testimony, a former 'comfort women'. When she came forward in 1991 with her story at a press conference, the 'comfort women' issue started to gain publicity among Koreans. The outcome of her coming forward with her testimony mobilized the public and awakened public outrage over the colonial period. Once she had come forward, other women who were also victims of the same system did the same. The feminist movements and activist victims merged on the common cause of fighting for redress and for the Japanese government's recognition of 'comfort women'.⁴³ There was also a need to hold the Korean government accountable for its neglect of the women and to hold the perpetrators responsible as well. As a result of the victims coming forward, activism began to frame the comfort women issue not just as a personal tragedy but as a collective national grievance. One of the effects of this collective grievance can be seen in how the victims are addressed as grandmothers (할머니/*halmoni*) by the public and in protests. The title of *halmoni* has become part of the 'comfort women' discourse, and as such, it becomes something personal people can recognize. *Halmonies* have become a national symbol and a reminder of the colonial grievances that South Korea has toward Japan. *Halmonies* are also a term used to show respect to elderly women. The emergence of the issue shows that activism was the instigator behind its visibility, as mentioned in the previous chapter.

5.1.2. *Wednesday Demonstrations and Their Impact*

The Wednesday Demonstrations began in January 1992 in Seoul to protest the Japanese government's denial of the sexual slavery of Korean women during the Second World War. This first demonstration was held outside the Japanese Embassy in Seoul nine days before the visit of

⁴² Richardson, "The Ascension of 'Comfort Women' in South Korean Colonial Memory." p. 29-31.

⁴³ Richardson, "The Ascension of 'Comfort Women' in South Korean Colonial Memory."

the Japanese Prime Minister Kiichi Miyazawa. In the picture below of a poster I found from the demonstration in January 1992 in a news report, it says: “The Japanese government must acknowledge the comfort women fact and make an official apology.”⁴⁴ This has since become one of the main points of the protest: to demand apologies from the Japanese government and ask for state compensation for the victims.



Photos from the first Wednesday protest in 1992 outside the Japanese Embassy in Seoul.

The protests have been going on since that Wednesday in 1992, and in 2022, the protest marked its 30th anniversary. These protests have been arranged by the Korean Council in Seoul, which is the biggest feminist activist organisation at the forefront of ‘comfort women’ activism. Its first demonstration was run by elderly former victims and their supporters, as can also be seen from the photo above.⁴⁵ Today, the demonstrations draw big crowds, especially on the marking of round-numbered demonstration days such as the 1400th and 1500th Wednesday demonstrations, where thousands attended.⁴⁶ When trying to find the gender ratio of these demonstrations, I could not find how many women there were compared to men. From photos browsed through on the web after searching for the demonstrations, there seems to be a slightly higher representation of women in the demonstrations than men. However, this number is not confirmable as I found no data for it.

⁴⁴ KBS News 2019: Comfort Women Dispute / KBS 뉴스(News)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H9oPq_3PT4o&t=28s (Accessed: 01.12.2024).

⁴⁵ Miyazawa Visit To Seoul Begins With Apology as listed on Chicago Tribune.

<https://www.chicagotribune.com/1992/01/17/miyazawa-visit-to-seoul-begins-with-apology/> (Accessed: 03.04.2025).

⁴⁶ Thousands attend 1,400th weekly Seoul protest for comfort women as listed in KOREA.net.

<https://www.korea.net/NewsFocus/Society/view?articleId=174159> (Accessed: 03.04.2025).

Wednesday demonstration for "comfort women" victims hit 1,500 mark as listed on Hankyoreh.

https://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_national/1003715.html (Accessed: 03.04.2025).

Additionally, a report from Armed Conflict Location & Event Data (2018-2020) mentions that these demonstrations have attracted 34% attendance from student groups.⁴⁷ This shows that the issue has gained traction among young adults and youths, speaking of activism's effect on spreading the issue. Evidence for politicians initiating or organizing such demonstrations could not be found. However, the report mentioned above does bring up politicians as a general group, having organized and participated in 'comfort women' demonstrations. This claim will, however, not be helpful as data or sources do not back it. On another note, the report backs the claim that the Korean Council is the primary driver of the movement.⁴⁸

To commemorate the 1000th Wednesday Demonstration, the Korean Council contributed to installing the Statue of Peace (*Sonyeosang*). It was funded by private donations and placed in front of the Japanese Embassy in Seoul. The statue is a representation of the victims. This took place on December 14th, 2011, and from 2011 it became a diplomatic issue between Japan and South Korea. One of the points of the 2015 Comfort Women Agreement, which aimed at settling the issue between the countries, was a demand from Japan to relocate the statue. Since 2011, the statues have multiplied and popped up in other places both domestically and abroad. Various activist organisations and civic groups have commissioned these statues. This wave shows that activists have had considerable influence in increasing support for the issue. However, domestically, the statues have become a contested issue because of differing interpretations and narratives of the colonial past. In Busan, a Statue of Peace was pulled down by the city district office in 2017.⁴⁹ When the media reported the demolition, it sparked national fury, and the statue was re-erected by a civil group in Busan.⁵⁰ This situation indicates that the activists have successfully, through the Statue of Peace, created a monument that is an embodiment of the issue that the public associates with wartime grievances. Therefore, removing the statue signals disagreement with the narrative presented by this statue and sparks a reaction. This evidence gives good cause to believe that 'comfort women' activism keeps the issue alive through monumentalization, increasing the issue's visibility in society and awareness

⁴⁷ Five Insights into the 'Comfort Women' Protest Movement in South Korea: 2018-2020 as listed on ACLED. <https://acleddata.com/2021/03/30/five-insights-into-the-comfort-women-protest-movement-in-south-korea-2018-2020/> (Accessed: 02.04.2025).

⁴⁸ 조직과 사람들 as listed on Woman and War website. <https://womenandwar.net/people> (Accessed: 03.04.2025).

⁴⁹ Yun, "The counter-monument as mnemonic device: The case of the Statues of Peace in South Korea." p. 667.

⁵⁰ After public complaints, statue restored in Busan as listed on Korea JoongAng Daily. <https://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/2016/12/30/politics/After-public-complaints-statue-restored-in-Busan/3028081.html> (Accessed: 03.04.2025).

of the issue. It also shows that politicians are not initiating visibility for the issue; the activists drive the narrative around the issue.

5.1.3. *Activist Demands, Mobilization Against the 2015 Agreement, and Influence in Politics*

The ‘comfort women’ issue has become a significant topic in South Korea. The interplay between activism and politics is especially visible in the aftermath of the 2015 Comfort Women Agreement between South Korea and Japan. The agreement tried to deal with the historical dispute ‘finally and irreversibly’ by Japan issuing an apology and monetary compensation to the victims and South Korea by removing the Statue of Peace outside the embassy of Japan in Seoul that was installed in 2011. The Agreement that was brokered by South Korea's President Park Geun-hye and Japan's Prime Minister Shinzo Abe was met with backlash from the public as it had failed to satisfy the demands of former ‘comfort women’ victims and activists. The criticism centered around the fact that the agreement lacked victim representation during its negotiation and the problem of the monetary compensation coming from a fund rather than directly from the Japanese government. The agreement was met with protests and demonstrations, as seen on the 30th of December 2015, when hundreds of South Korean protesters joined two surviving comfort women on the Wednesday Demonstration to denounce the agreement.⁵¹ Also, later on the 6th of January 2016, some former ‘comfort women’ and citizen groups that supported them joined a demonstration outside the Japanese Embassy in Seoul. These demonstrations show that public opinion over the agreement was divided.⁵²

In a survey from Realmeter, a Korean public opinion polling company, made right after the deal was brokered, one could measure that around 70 % of Koreans between the ages of 20 and 30 opposed the agreement, calling it ‘not good’. Taking all ages that answered the survey, the proportion of people who said the agreement was good was 43.2 %, and the proportion of people saying it was not good was 50.7 %. The results showed a slightly higher opposition when all ages were considered.⁵³ Overall, the younger generations were more displeased with the deal than the

⁵¹ South Korean ‘comfort women’ protest against accord with Japan, as listed in Reuters.
<https://www.reuters.com/article/world/south-korean-comfort-women-protest-against-accord-with-japan-idUSKBN0UD0I4/> (Accessed: 04.12.2024).

⁵² Public divided over ‘comfort women’ agreement as listed on East Asia Forum.
<https://eastasiaforum.org/2016/01/22/public-divided-over-comfort-women-agreement/> (Accessed: 03.12.2024).

⁵³ 慰安婦問題の日韓合意、韓国の20・30代の7割が「よくない」（調査結果） as listed on Huffpost.
https://www.huffingtonpost.jp/2015/12/31/comfort-women-survey-korea_n_8898156.html?utm_hp_ref=japan-world (Accessed: 03.12.2024).

older. Another survey conducted to assess public opinion on the potential relocation of the Statue of Peace in front of the Japanese Embassy in Seoul, as stipulated in the 2015 Agreement, points to public opposition to removing it. Realmeter surveyed to gather public opinion from 535 adults over 19. The survey showed that 66.3% opposed moving the statue.⁵⁴ These surveys tell us that the public opinion seems to be on the activists' side, and the results can be interpreted as meaning that the 'comfort women' cause has effectively taken hold in society, influencing the opinion of the Korean public. These sources give quite solid indicators that activism is a driver in establishing the importance and salience of the issue in South Korea.

When Moon Jae-in became president in 2017, he criticized the 2015 agreement as flawed and effectively nullified it, but was interested in renegotiating it in 2017-18. To do so, however, he asked Japan to give a renewed and sincere apology to the victims. In a press conference in 2018, he said that "Japan should accept the truth, apologize with a sincere heart and take (the comfort women issue) as a lesson and work with the international community in such a way that (such things) could not occur again."⁵⁵ Renegotiation did not take place.

The Moon administration's actions, such as the designation of August 14th as International Memorial Day for Japanese Military 'Comfort Women' and their proposition to open a 'Comfort Women' Museum, demonstrate a more substantial alignment with activist demands than shown by previous administrations.⁵⁶ Under Moon's presidency, South Korea also saw heightened tension with Japan, which was exacerbated by activism. For example, a Statue of Peace, which was installed by a civic group in front of the Japanese consulate in Busan in 2016, became the centre of a diplomatic dispute under Moon. The civic group commented that they had installed it "in order to request an official apology and legal compensation for Japan's colonial rule and war crimes, and

⁵⁴ 국민 66.3% “日대사관 앞 소녀상 이전 반대한다” as listed on Realmeter. <http://www.realmeter.net/국민-66-3-日대사관-앞-소녀상-이전-반대한다/> (Accessed: 03.12.2024).

⁵⁵ New apology from Japan needed over "comfort women": S. Korea's Moon as listed on Koyodo News. <https://english.kyodonews.net/news/2018/01/2c11442fe4bc-s-korea-leader-says-japan-needs-to-apologize-to-comfort-women.html> (Accessed: 03.12.2024).

⁵⁶ Activities as listed on the Woman and War website (the Korean Council). <https://womenandwar.net/activity-eng> (Accessed: 04.12.2024).

S. Korea to build 'comfort women' museum in Seoul as listed on France 24. <https://www.france24.com/en/20170710-korea-build-comfort-women-museum-seoul> (Accessed: 04.12.2024).

Gov't designates Aug. 14 as International Memorial Day for Comfort Women as listed on KOREA.net <https://www.korea.net/NewsFocus/Society/view?articleId=159626> (Accessed: 04.12.2024).

The day was already commemorated from 2012 until it became a national memorial day in 2017.

also to discard the (2015) ‘comfort women’ agreement,”⁵⁷ according to CNN. By doing so, they put the Korean government under pressure from the Japanese government because they had not complied with the 2015 agreement to remove the statue outside the Japanese Embassy in Seoul, installed in 2011. The Korean government had maintained a position of a lack of rights to remove the statue since it had been funded and placed by private citizens voluntarily.⁵⁸ Moon’s critique of the agreement and his administration’s engagement with the issue further intensified the tension, leading to Japan halting talks on a planned currency swap, delaying economic dialogue, and calling two diplomats back to Japan from South Korea.⁵⁹ This shows how activism and political leadership intersect to keep the issue in the public consciousness. That a president engaged this strongly with the ‘comfort women’ activists case strengthens the hypothesis of activism as a lifeline of the issue, as Moon would not have engaged with the issue if it were not already latent in the public.

The ‘comfort women’ movement has also gained recognition and support internationally. One example of this is Amnesty International’s denunciation of the 2015 Agreement for excluding survivor and activist voices and demands in the negotiation of the deal. They commented that

The women were missing from the negotiation table, and they must not be sold short in a deal that is more about political expediency than justice. Until the women get the full and unreserved apology from the Japanese government for the crimes committed against them, the fight for justice goes on.⁶⁰

That an international human rights organisation comments on the 2015 Agreement tells us that activist influence has reached far, the movement has become international, making the demands that activists in South Korea make more potent as they resonate further. The international pressure is also a leverage for the ‘comfort women’ case to reach the goals they have in mind. International solidarity also comes in the form of Statues of Peace, which appeared worldwide.

⁵⁷ Why this statue of a young girl caused a diplomatic incident, as listed on CNN.

<https://edition.cnn.com/2017/02/05/asia/south-korea-comfort-women-statue/index.html> (Accessed:03.04.2025).

⁵⁸ S.Korean president says comfort women issue can't be resolved by 2015 deal with Japan as listed on Xinhuanet. http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-12/28/c_136857713.htm (Accessed:03.04.2025).

⁵⁹ South Korean judge orders Japan to compensate ‘comfort women,’ victims of wartime sexual slavery as listed on CNN World. <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/01/08/asia/japan-comfort-women-damages-intl-hnk/index.html> (Accessed: 04.12.2024).

⁶⁰ “Comfort women” deal must not deny survivors justice as listed on Amnesty International. <https://www.amnestyusa.org/press-releases/comfort-women-deal-must-not-deny-survivors-justice/> (Accessed: 04.12.2024).

Some of the tangible outcomes, such as the establishment of the House of Sharing (a nursing home for former victims) and the designation of a national Memorial Day, illustrate the combined efforts of both activists and the Moon administration in memorializing the issue.⁶¹ One also sees that activists have influenced public opinion, as the opposition towards the 2015 Agreement and support for the memorial statues like the Statues of Peace shows. However, while one can argue that activism has been central to making the ‘comfort women’ issue important for South Korea, Moon’s presidency also demonstrates that political leadership can play a significant role in the elevation of the issue’s importance. The actions of his administration slightly weaken the hypothesis that activists alone drive the prominence of the issue, as Moon’s engagement also suggests that politics can elevate the issue to national and international significance. On the other hand, it is also possible to argue that Moon’s alignment with activist demands reflects his background as a civil rights advocate, which blurs the line between activism and political leadership.

5.2. Activism’s Role in Increasing Diplomatic Tension with Japan

5.2.1. Increasing Tensions in the 90s and Onward

Activism intensified in the 1990s following the democratisation of South Korea in the 1980s. This intensification in activism, along with the emergence of the ‘comfort women’ movement and demands, contributed to heightened diplomatic tensions with Japan. ‘Comfort women’ activism, that was supported both by the public and politically when it came to the surface, not only because of the activist efforts, but also because of the media coverage and the issues linkage to women’s human rights violations, allowed the movement to get a platform where they could demand apologies and reparations on a larger scale.⁶² The claims put forward by victims and their supporters, Japan claimed, were resolved under the 1965 Basic Relations Treaty. The first Wednesday Demonstration in 1992 coincided with the reveal that the Imperial Japanese Army had been involved in the ‘comfort stations’, which were essentially military brothels. The public upheaval and demonstrations prompted Japanese Prime Minister Miyazawa to issue multiple apologies during his visit to Seoul. He said on January 17th, 1992, “Recently, the issue of 'comfort women' in the service of the Imperial Japanese Army has come into light. I cannot help feeling

⁶¹ History of House of Sharing as listed on House of Sharing.
<http://www.nanum.org/eng/sub1/sub2.php> (Accessed: 04.12.2024).

⁶² Seaton, “Reporting the ‘Comfort Women’ Issue, 1991–1992: Japan’s Contested War Memories in the National Press.” p. 101-103.

acutely distressed over this, and I express my sincerest apology,"⁶³ in a speech to South Korea's National Assembly. Despite multiple apologies during his trip to South Korea, activists continued their protests to highlight their demands.

In 1993, the Kono Statement extended Japan's official apology and remorse, acknowledging the coercion of women into military-run brothels under the Second World War, as a result of the conclusion of a government study into the matter.⁶⁴ "The Government of Japan would like to take this opportunity once again to extend its sincere apologies and remorse to all those, irrespective of place of origin, who suffered immeasurable pain and incurable physical and psychological wounds as comfort women."⁶⁵ Activists criticized the apology as insincere due to its ambiguity, but the apology was not given as a reaction to activist demands. Tensions escalated as conservative Japanese leaders, such as Prime Minister Abe, sought to downplay the Japanese government's responsibility in the brothel system. Prime Minister Shinzo Abe even questioned the evidence of forced sexual slavery. Saying that "There is no evidence that the comfort women were forced into sexual slavery."⁶⁶ Activists framed the issue as unresolved, rejecting Japan's apologies as insufficient because of a perceived lack of accountability and responsibility taken by Japan. Victims like Kim Sun-deok emphasized the need for a genuine apology, reflecting the ongoing friction between the two nations as Japan insists the issue is settled. What she says also reflects Japan as a moral adversary, as they, by not taking responsibility, leave room for repetition. She says, "There's no guarantee they (Japan) won't do it again. We, the victims, must make Japan issue an apology,"⁶⁷ from a KBS interview on Comfort Women Art in 2014.

⁶³Policy Speech by Prime Minister Kiichi Miyazawa during His Visit to the Republic of Korea, "Japan-ROK Relations in the Asian and Global Context" as listed on "The World and Japan" Database.

<https://worldjpn.net/documents/texts/exdpm/19920117.S1E.html> (Accessed: 02.04.2025).

⁶⁴ Issues regarding History: Statement by the Chief Cabinet Secretary as listed on Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan. https://www.mofa.go.jp/a_o/rp/page25e_000343.html (Accessed: 04.12.2024).

Issues regarding History: Statement by the Chief Cabinet Secretary as listed on Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan. HYPERLINK "https://www.mofa.go.jp/a_o/rp/page25e_000343.html

"https://www.mofa.go.jp/a_o/rp/page25e_000343.html (Accessed: 04.12.2024).
https://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_international/598379.html (Accessed: 04.12.2024).

⁶⁵ Issues regarding History: Statement by the Chief Cabinet Secretary as listed on Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan. https://www.mofa.go.jp/a_o/rp/page25e_000343.html (Accessed: 03.12.2024).

⁶⁶ Japan's PM denies 'comfort women' coerced as listed in NBC News. <https://www.nbcnews.com/id/wbna10625961> (Accessed: 03.12.2024).

⁶⁷Kono Statement as listed in KBS News. <https://news.kbs.co.kr/news/pc/view/view.do?ncd=2879582> (Accessed: 03.12.2024).

5.2.2. *Trade War, Lawsuits, and Activist Pressures*

In 2019, the attendance at ‘comfort women’ demonstrations increased dramatically, together with a general rise in anti-Japanese sentiment.⁶⁸ These demonstrations were triggered by Japan's removal of South Korea from its ‘whitelist’ of preferential trading partners.⁶⁹ This action could be seen as a retaliatory response to the rulings by South Korean High Courts in 2018 on a lawsuit filed to compensate plaintiffs for forced labor during Japanese colonial rule. The intelligence and trade wars that followed led the public to boycotts of Japanese products and to large-scale anti-Japan rallies. These rallies also called on Japan to take unresolved historical grievances seriously. The protestors called for a sincere apology from Japan for its wartime atrocities, which included the ‘comfort women’ system.⁷⁰

Lawsuits filed by victims, in many cases themselves activists, and their families have also contributed to keeping the issue relevant.⁷¹ In 2021, the Seoul Central District Court ruled in favor of 12 former ‘comfort women’. The court ordered Japan to pay compensation. However, Japan rejected the ruling by citing sovereign immunity. A second case filed by 16 victims in 2021 was initially dismissed by the Seoul Central District Court on the grounds of immunity that Japan had. This case was overturned in 2023 by the Seoul High Court, which demanded that Japan should compensate the victims.⁷² Japan has refused to comply with the demands, which has prompted the Korean Council to address the issue directly with Japanese officials.⁷³ The activist involvement in these lawsuits is hard to fully document. However, the Korean Council’s comments and media coverage do suggest that their influence is keeping the issue prominent in South Korea.

⁶⁸ Seoul Holds 1,400th Weekly Rally To Protest Japan's Sex Slavery as listed on TBSeFM News. http://tbs.seoul.kr/news/bunya.do?method=daum_html&typ_800=N&seq_800=10353959 (Accessed: 03.04.2025).

⁶⁹ Spotlight: Japan remove S. Korea from preferential "whitelist" of trusted trade partners as row intensifies as listed on Xinhuanet. http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-08/28/c_138344549.htm (Accessed: 03.04.2025).

⁷⁰ Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project. (2021). Five Insights into the ‘Comfort Women’ Protest Movement in South Korea: 2018-2020. Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep32032> (Accessed:03.04.2025).

⁷¹ Lawsuits brought against Japan by former Korean "Comfort Women" as listed on Columbia Law School. <https://cls.law.columbia.edu/content/lawsuits-brought-against-japan-former-korean-comfort-women> (Accessed:03.04.2025).

⁷² LEAD) Appellate court orders Japan to compensate 'comfort women' in lawsuit over wartime sexual slavery as listed on Yonhap News. <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20231123006851315> (Accessed: 03.04.2025).

⁷³ [보도자료] 일본 정부는 한국 법원에서 최종 판결한 일본군·위안부 피해자들에 대한 손해배상 책임을 즉각 이행하라! as listed on WomanandWar.net. <https://womenandwar.net/article/?bmode=view&idx=24759023> (Accessed:03.04.2025).

5.3. Does the Hypothesis Find Support?

Through the explanation of this chapter, it seems plausible to say that activism is a central reason for the ‘comfort women’ issues to have gained importance and salience in South Korea. This conclusion is also in line with Richardsons work on the ascension of the issue into South Korean society. She argues that activism for the issue has been instrumental in it gaining prominence. There are also several other factor that support the conclusion that have been highlighted through this explanation of the ‘comfort women’ related activism.

Both this chapter and the previous one show that activists have played a critical role in keeping the issue in the public consciousness through consistent efforts like the Wednesday Demonstrations that have been going on every Wednesday since 1992. These protests have sustained the public awareness by making the issue visible and providing a platform for the survivors and their supporters to demand justice. The surveys I mentioned are also a good indicator that activists have successfully mobilized public opinion. And the widespread opposition to the 2015 Comfort Women Agreement and the following demonstrations suggest the same thing.

To argue that ‘comfort women’ activism has influenced political action was a bit harder to find good evidence for, as the sources I found were ambiguous about activists’ influence in the political sphere. However, tangible outcomes of activist efforts, such as the establishment of the House of Sharing, memorial statues such as the Statue of Peace, and the suggestion from the Moon administration to build a Comfort Women Museum, all suggest that these things have happened because of the sustained activist agendas. Furthermore, as mentioned in the previous chapter, the fact that the ‘comfort women’ have been included in the school curriculum in some South Korean schools on the initiative of the South Korean government points towards the success of activists in sustaining the issue. Such initiatives have institutionalized the memory of the issue and have, as I commented in the previous chapter, embedded the issue into South Korea’s national identity.

I would also argue that ‘comfort women’ activists have framed Japan's apologies as insufficient and in need of sincerity in the form of taking responsibility for past wrongs, a legal accountability. Such a framing has contributed to the issue’s unresolved nature in the eyes of the public. This ensures that the issue remains a point of contention in South Korea-Japan relations. This argument aligns

with that of Easley's that activist civil society is, in large part, the one hindering cooperative approaches, leading to unsuccessful reconciliation efforts between South Korea and Japan.⁷⁴

The next two chapters will explore two competing explanations for the second research question. Why do diplomatic tensions between South Korea and Japan over the issue escalate during some periods and not during others?

⁷⁴ Easley, "Korean NGOs and Reconciliation With Japan."

6. South Korean Politics and the ‘Comfort Women’ Issue

In this chapter, I will examine the hypothesis that the ‘comfort women’ issue has unsettled the bilateral relationship between Japan and South Korea more in some periods than others because South Korean left-wing nationalist presidents utilize the issue to mobilize domestic support, thereby keeping it alive.

This chapter will go through the South Korean political left and right-wings’ positionality towards Japan, the different presidents’ actions and statements on the issue, and political mobilization resulting from the issue. The chapter concludes with a conclusion of whether the hypothesis is supported.

6.1. Positioning of the Left and Right Towards Japan

The left-wing and progressives of politics in South Korea tend to be the ones associated with nationalistic rhetoric rather than the right-wing conservatives. This nationalism is often related to anti-imperialist and anti-Japanese sentiments, and the rhetoric plays out differently depending on the party's positionality. This section will shortly present how the left and right positions themselves towards Japan through these three parties: The Democratic Party of Korea (DPK), the People Power Party (PPP), and the Progressive Party (PP).

The Democratic Party of Korea, a liberal party, more or less holds a nationalistic stand against Japan. It opposes the historical revisionism of Japan and is known for speaking for victims of Japanese war crimes from both a human rights and anti-colonial perspective. Former President Moon Jae-in (2017-2022), affiliated with the DPK, sees the human rights of victims of Japanese colonialism as an essential factor in the relationship between the two countries, he said in 2019.⁷⁵ In 2021, he stated in a speech that a priority was to cleanse South Korea of pro-Japanese (*chinilpa*).⁷⁶ Furthermore, in 2023, party leader Lee Jae-Myung condemned Japan’s historical revisionism and

⁷⁵ 문정인 "일본, 친북·친중 프레임 씌워 文정권 바꾸려는 것" as found in Internet Archive Way Back Machine. <https://web.archive.org/web/20211224074449/https://www.joongang.co.kr/article/23531160#home> (Accessed: 29.09.2024) (Translated from Korean to English using a translator in Safari).

⁷⁶ How Biden Can Navigate a New Era in South Korean Politics as listed in The Diplomat. <https://thediplomat.com/2021/01/how-biden-can-navigate-a-new-era-in-south-korean-politics/> (Accessed: 29.09.2024).

said Korea should engage in an all-out war (전면전을/jeonmyeonjeon-eul) against it.⁷⁷ Statements such as these give an idea of the anti-Japanese rhetoric the left is engaging in.

The Progressive Party, which is generally classified on the far left, takes a slightly different approach in condemning Japanese colonial rule. The second point on its program agenda is: “Establish national sovereignty by liquidating the remnants of Japanese colonial rule and dismantling unequal Korea-US relations.”⁷⁸ Such a statement communicates that the PP party not only wants to distance itself from the colonial past but also communicates that South Korea is still not completely free and independent. It must be mentioned that the left and right are more visible and active in civil society through newspapers and social movements; these are not the focus here.

The conservative right-wing People Power Party takes a more relaxed stance against Japan in its foreign policy.⁷⁹ Compared to DPK and PP, they have a more conciliatory approach as they do not seek a direct apology or compensation from the Japanese government or Japanese companies that were involved in forced labor during colonial times. Instead, PPP expresses a stance where the victims can benefit from voluntary donations from a foundation supported by South Korean companies. Such a compensation plan was not well received, angering the opposition parties and parts of the public.⁸⁰ This relaxed relation to Japan has triggered the reaction of DPK, who argue that the PPP is not acting in the victims’ interest and is simply looking to better relations with Japan, saying that “the victims do not want compensation from Korean companies” and hoping that Japan will apologize and take responsibility for the victims of Japanese colonial atrocities⁸¹.

Considering how the left and right sides of South Korean politics take such different positions towards Japan, one can imagine the turbulence that might occur when a new party and presidential candidate are chosen from a different party than the previous one. This also means that priorities

⁷⁷ 이재명 "日 부당한 역사 침략에 전면전 선포해야 마땅" as found in Internet Archive Way Back Machine.

<https://web.archive.org/web/20231003143908/https://n.news.naver.com/article/003/0011773050>

Accessed: 29.09.2024. (Translated from Korean to English using a translator in Safari).

⁷⁸ <https://jinboparty.com/pages/?p=275> (Accessed: 29.09.2024) No longer accessible.

⁷⁹ Japan's Kishida, South Korea's Yoon call to sustain momentum in improved ties as listed in Reuters.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/japan-pm-kishida-seeks-solidify-south-korea-ties-farewell-visit-2024-09-06/> (Accessed: 29.09.2024).

⁸⁰ South Korea's President Yoon Meets Japanese Prime Minister Kishida One Last Time as listed in The Diplomat.

<https://thediplomat.com/2024/09/south-koreas-president-yoon-meets-japanese-prime-minister-kishida-one-last-time/> (Accessed: 29.09.2024).

⁸¹ 민주당, 강제동원 정부안에 “피해자 짓밟고 일본 기업 이익 대변하나”as listed in 경향신문(The Kyunghyang Shinmun) <https://www.khan.co.kr/politics/politics-general/article/202301121741001> (Accessed: 29.09.2024) (Translated from Korean to English using a translator in Safari).

over historical grievances change accordingly, as is observed. This fluctuation is of interest in this chapter.

6.2. Conservative and Liberal Presidents' Approaches to the 'Comfort Women' Issue

As explained above, the left and right of the political spectrum in South Korea have different priorities in relation to Japan. This section will aim to see if politicians, specifically presidents, trigger disturbance of diplomatic relations with Japan through engaging with and using the 'comfort women' issue for political gain. The focus period will be from 1991, when Kim Young-sam was president, until the presidency of Yoon Suk-Yeol (2022-2025). This period has been chosen as it gives insight into the issue from its exposure until recent years. I will closely examine all the presidents within this period and their interaction with the 'comfort women' issue during their terms as presidents.

When Kim Hak-sun came forward as a victim of the 'comfort women' system in 1991, Roh Tae-woo (1988-1993, conservative) was president of South Korea. The 80s were the years of democratization movements in South Korea, and his government, due to the times and because of Roh's background, initially focused on democratization and economic growth rather than historical disputes. Roh's government pressured Japan to acknowledge its wartime actions, but did not take decisive diplomatic action on the 'comfort women' issue. In 1992, after the exposure of the victim testimonies, an investigation into the 'comfort women' brothel system and coercion accusations was raised against Japan. Roh's administration demanded an official apology and compensation after evidence of military involvement surfaced. His government got what it asked for, and Roh expressed that he appreciated the acknowledgment. He further expressed that Japan should take necessary measures and strive to clarify the facts about the 'comfort women' system.⁸² When Japan issued the Kono statement in 1993 that acknowledged the Japanese Imperial Military's role in the brothel system, the presidency had moved to Kim Young-sam (1993–1998, conservative politics).

Kim's administration supported the Kono Statement that acknowledged Japan's role in the 'comfort women' system. Interestingly, unlike his predecessor, Kim Young-sam declared that South Korea would not seek material compensation from Japan; instead, the South Korean government would

⁸² Details of Exchanges Between Japan and the Republic of Korea (ROK) Regarding the Comfort Women Issue. Ministry of Foreign Affairs Japan. June 20, 2014, Section 3, page. 2. <https://www.mofa.go.jp/files/100136721.pdf> (Accessed: 22.03.2025).

provide monetary support to the victims.⁸³ This was in line with his politics, which promoted national pride and distanced South Korea from reliance on Japan. On the other hand, Roh had asked Japan to compensate the victims. This is an interesting difference as they both came from the Democratic Liberal Party, a conservative party. The support Kim showed for the Kono Statement and the fact that his government would not ask for compensation was seen by Japan as a step closer to resolving historical disputes. However, the nationalist rhetoric in South Korea kept the issue alive domestically. Kim seemed to want to lay the issue to rest.

Kim Dae-jung (1998–2003), although a liberal, was more of a pragmatic politician who focused on economic and cultural cooperation rather than pursuing the ‘comfort women’ issue. His government, for example, managed to improve the bilateral ties with Japan by lifting restrictions on Japanese culture in South Korea. Japanese pop music and TV shows were allowed in South Korea after a 53-year ban.⁸⁴ This lift was part of the Kim-Obuchi Declaration of 1998, where President Kim and Prime Minister Obuchi made a joint declaration to better the bilateral partnership between the countries.⁸⁵ Kim Dae-jung’s government kept the ‘comfort women’ in the background and prioritized improving the bilateral relationship. His actions weaken the hypothesis.

When Roh Moo-hyun (2003–2008, liberal, centre-left) entered office, the relationship with Japan was healthy. Even so, throughout his presidency, the relationship took a negative turn partly due to the ‘comfort women’ issue. His government took a nationalistic stand towards the historical issues by trying to bring them into the light. According to Kim, he aimed to build a new Korean society based on the principles of democracy and the rule of civil rights and freedoms.⁸⁶ This would only be possible by revealing the truth about the historical past. As a result, during the Roh Moo-hyun administration, truth commissions became firmly embedded in South Korea’s political landscape, marked by the legislative creation of several new commissions and sustained support for existing

⁸³ Details of Exchanges Between Japan and the Republic of Korea (ROK) Regarding the Comfort Women Issue. Ministry of Foreign Affairs Japan. June 20, 2014, Section 7, page. 7. <https://www.mofa.go.jp/files/100136721.pdf> (Accessed: 22.03.2025).

Issue became pressing matter again after decision by Constitutional Court of Korea as listed in Asahi <https://www.asahi.com/articles/ASG8L6G74G8LULPT010.html> (Accessed: 23.03.2025).

⁸⁴ S. Korea to lift ban on Japanese culture as listed in Variety. <https://variety.com/1998/music/news/s-korea-to-lift-ban-on-japanese-culture-1117481242/> (Accessed: 18.03.2025).

⁸⁵ Japan-Republic of Korea Joint Declaration
A New Japan-Republic of Korea Partnership towards the Twenty-first Century as listed in Ministry of Foreign of Affairs Japan. Under 2nd point. <https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/korea/joint9810.html> (Accessed: 19.03.2025).

⁸⁶ Kim, “Historical Policy of the Roh Moo-Hyun’s Government in South Korea: Seeking Reconciliation With the Past.”

ones.⁸⁷ One of these was the Truth Commission on Forced Mobilization, to investigate Japanese war crimes, including forced labour and sexual slavery. South Korea's relationship with Japan deteriorated with growing friction arising from the focus on historical disputes, but also because Roh strengthened domestic support from progressive and nationalist groups because of his government's focus on historical policy. Roh's approach to historical grievances, exposing them, strengthens the hypothesis that left-wing presidents create friction with Japan by interacting with the grievances.

When Lee Myung-bak (2008-2013, conservative right-wing leaning) entered the presidency in 2008, he initially maintained a pragmatic approach toward Japan, focusing mainly on regional security because of the growing threat of North Korea and economic cooperation. As Lee's popularity declined in his second term, he adopted a more confrontational stance toward Japan, especially regarding historical issues, including the "comfort women" controversy.⁸⁸ Lee asked Japan to compensate survivors and managed to create a strained bilateral relationship with Japan when he, in 2012, visited the disputed Dokdo/Takeshima islets that both South Korea and Japan claim sovereignty over.⁸⁹ This visit could be seen as a strategic move to increase his popularity domestically by whipping up anti-Japanese sentiments in the population to please the civil society of South Korea. Both Lee and Kim Dea-Jung therefore act differently than expected, where conservative politicians seem to be more pragmatic in their relationship with Japan and the liberal more aggressive. They have acted the opposite. There seems to be a correlation between Lee's popularity declining and him becoming more aggressive with historical grievances, trying to use historical grievances to mobilize public support because of the already existing opinion. As such, the public seems to be influencing the president's choices, weakening the hypothesis slightly. It also shows that not only do left-wing politicians interact with the issue to their advantage, but conservative right-wing politicians do too.

⁸⁷ Wolman, "Looking Back while Moving Forward: The Evolution of Truth Commissions in Korea", p.35.

⁸⁸ Japanese-Korean Relations at a Turning Point: Evolution Transcending Friction as listed in Nippon.com

<https://www.nippon.com/en/in-depth/a01301/> (Accessed: 30.09.2024) .

South Korea's Lee says history 'harming Japan ties' as listed in BBC News. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-19264432> (Accessed: 30.09.2024).

⁸⁹ South Korea's Lee Myung-bak visits disputed islands as listed in BBC News. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-19204852> (Accessed: 30.09.2024).

Park Geun-hye (2013-2017, conservative) took over as the first female president of South Korea. As we have discussed earlier, the conservatives tend to shy away from discussing historical disputes. However, due to the tense relationship between Japan and South Korea after Lee Myung-bak's term, there was a need to address the tension. Park, in her August 15th speech in 2014, did precisely this by calling upon Japan to take responsibility for the wartime sexual slavery victims, the 'comfort women', and that Japan should adjust its view of history.⁹⁰ This appeal did not break new ground but acknowledged the need for future-oriented, friendly cooperation. The following year, leading up to a Japan-ROK summit, Park again highlighted the importance of resolving the dispute to better relations in October 2015. She said, "For that to happen, more than anything, some kind of progress on the important issue of victims of the Japanese military comfort women (system) is essential."⁹¹ Later, in November 2015, during the Japan-ROK Summit Meeting, it was concluded that the 'comfort women' issue was impacting the countries' bilateral relations, and consultations regarding the issue were addressed.⁹² Negotiations were made, and the agreement became known as the 2015 Comfort Women Agreement with Japan. This agreement was, however, controversial in South Korea as it was not only reached without the consultation of victims but also because it was a 'final and irreversible' settlement of the dispute. The agreement triggered protests from victims and civil society, and the masses gathered around the Statue of Peace erected in 2011 to show their dissatisfaction.⁹³ Unfortunately for Park, the fallout from the agreement and the request for her impeachment contributed to her declining popularity, especially among the nationalist and progressive factions. The Candlelight Demonstrations from 2016-17 are one such example. What becomes clear in Park's handling of the 'comfort women' issue is that she does not use the issue and agreement to her advantage. Instead, she wanted to overcome the grievance that time and time again soured South Korea's relationship with Japan so that it would no longer stand in the way of cooperation.

After Park, Hwang Kyo-ahn (conservative right) served as president for 152 days. His focus was more on managing the fallout from Park's impeachment and focused instead on addressing national

⁹⁰Park Geun-hye's "Correct View of History" With Japan as listed in the Council on Foreign Relations. <https://www.cfr.org/blog/park-geun-hyes-correct-view-history-japan> (Accessed: 30.09.2024).

⁹¹ Korea's Park says 'comfort women' central to Japan summit: report as listed in Reuters. <https://www.reuters.com/article/world/korea-s-park-says-comfort-women-central-to-japan-summit-report-idUSKCN0SO063/> (Accessed: 30.09.2024).

⁹²Japan-ROK Summit Meeting as listed in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan. https://www.mofa.go.jp/a_o/na/kr/page3e_000408.html (Accessed: 30.09.2024).

⁹³ South Korean "comfort women" protest against accord with Japan as listed in Reuters. <https://www.reuters.com/article/world/south-korean-comfort-women-protest-against-accord-with-japan-idUSKBN0UD014/> (Accessed: 30.09.2024).

security concerns (North Korea) rather than the ‘comfort women’ issue.⁹⁴ Hwang avoided using historical grievances to stir up the public further. As he said in a statement on January 10th, 2017, during the intensifying dispute between South Korea and Japan over a ‘comfort woman’ statue that was set up in front of the Japanese consulate in Busan:

It’s necessary not only for the governments of South Korea and Japan but indeed for all interested parties to keep working to develop our bilateral relations while respecting the spirit and intent of the agreement (2015 Agreement). In regard to the comfort women issue, it’s advisable to refrain from words or actions that could aggravate the situation if we wish to develop our bilateral relations in a future-oriented manner.⁹⁵

This statement clearly shows that Hwang’s interests did not lie in aggravating Japan but rather in calming the conflict down, refraining from using the historical grievance to gain support for himself. Such actions are in line with what I expect to see from the conservatives.

During Moon Jae-in’s (liberal, left-wing) presidency from 2017 to 2022, relations with Japan became quite strained as Moon, coming from the left wing of Korean politics, took a nationalistic stance in his foreign policy toward Japan.⁹⁶ A study done on South Korea’s diminished cooperation with Japan during the exponential threat of North Korea under Moon’s presidency concluded that it was, in fact, the leadership factor that was the main reason for the worsening of South Korea–Japan’s security cooperation during Moon’s administration.⁹⁷ Bilateral relations aside, Moon was quite popular within Korea, with persistently high approval ratings despite not pursuing major reforms or the ability to solve controversial issues such as the ‘comfort women’ issue.⁹⁸ Though he did not resolve the contentious issue, he strongly criticized the 2015 Japan-South Korea agreement on ‘comfort women’, negotiated by Park Geun-hye. He stated the deal was inadequate and took

⁹⁴[Editorial] Does Hwang Have the Right to Make a Commemorative Speech on March 1 before the Comfort Women Victims as listed in 경향신문 The Kyunghyang Shinmun.

https://english.khan.co.kr/khan_art_view.html?artid=201703021836087&code=790101 (Accessed: 30.09.2024).

⁹⁵ PM and acting president advises not to “aggravate” comfort women situation with Japan as listed in Hankyoreh.

https://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_national/778284.html (Accessed: 30.09.2024).

⁹⁶ PM and acting president advises not to “aggravate” comfort women situation with Japan as listed in East Asia Forum.

<https://eastasiaforum.org/2022/03/01/prospects-for-a-reset-of-seoul-tokyo-relations/> (Accessed: 30.09.2024).

⁹⁷ Park, “What Made South Korea–Japan Security Cooperation Retreat During the Moon Jae-in Administration?”

⁹⁸ The Paradox of South Korea’s Presidential Approval Rating as listed in The Diplomat.

<https://thediplomat.com/2023/11/the-paradox-of-south-koreas-presidential-approval-rating/> (Accessed: 30.09.2024).

measures to dissolve the Reconciliation and Healing Foundation, a significant part of the deal. This, predictably, made the Japanese government react and criticize the Moon administration.⁹⁹

Furthermore, Moon repeatedly mentions the importance of ‘comfort women’ in his speeches. I managed to find Selected Speeches from Moon Jae-in on Korea.net, five collections.¹⁰⁰ ‘Comfort women’ are mentioned in three of his speeches in the 2017-2018 period and three from 2018-2019 speeches. There is zero mention of them in the next volume when the focus shifts to the worsening bilateral tie with Japan and the pandemic from 2019-2020. The ‘comfort women’ were mentioned in one speech from 2020-21, and lastly in the 2021-2022 collection, they were mentioned zero times, but Japan’s colonial occupation was mentioned. Moon’s mention of the victims concerns human rights breaches, the bravery of the women, Japan’s seemingly lack of will to take responsibility, and activism by civil society. By utilizing and emphasizing historical justice and unresolved grievances, Moon reinforced the nationalist agenda in South Korea, appealing to public sentiment and his political base. It seems rather than Moon driving forth an opinion, he used his knowledge of it as a way to keep himself popular. This means that, in some ways, he did utilize the issue to gain support, but it was the already existing opinion in the public that made it possible for him to do what he did. As such, the hypothesis gains and loses support, but is slightly more validated as Moon actively engages with the issue in an active way.

With Yoon Suk Yeol (2022-2025, conservative), Korean politics reverted to the conservative spectrum. After taking office in 2022, Yoon sought to improve South Korea’s relationship with Japan, as seen in his 2022 and 2023 speeches.¹⁰¹ ‘Comfort women’ are not mentioned in his speeches, rather, cooperation concerning security and economy with Japan is an important theme. This is quite a stark contrast from Moon’s rhetoric regarding the grievance. Yoon has, however, also aimed to seek resolutions for issues such as the ‘comfort women’ dispute that worsened under Moon by setting up a foundation founded by the South Korean companies that had benefited from the 1965 Normalisation Treaty with Japan. This approach would deal with the compensation for victims and their families. Japan received it well, resulting in Yoon being the first president in 12 years to be received on an official visit to Japan—a significant move in the direction of full

⁹⁹ The Comfort Women Agreement 5 Years On as listed in KEI.

<https://keia.org/the-peninsula/the-comfort-women-agreement-5-years-on/> (Accessed: 30.09.2024).

¹⁰⁰ Moon Jae-in Selected Speeches, all years (five collections) as listed on KOREA.net.

<https://www.korea.net/Resources/Publications?pageIndex=4> (Accessed: 23.03.2025).

¹⁰¹ Yoon Suk Yeol Selected Speeches (2022-2023) as listed on KOREA.net

<https://www.korea.net/Resources/Publications/view?articleId=10123&searchKey=all&searchValue=Yoon%20Suk%20Yeol&pageIndex=1> (Accessed: 23.03.2025).

normalization.¹⁰² Unlike Moon, Yoon adopted a more cooperative and pragmatic approach to Japan, where the priority was regional security cooperation. Like his conservative predecessors, he wanted to overcome past grievances. His administration emphasized the restoration of diplomatic ties and the importance of trilateral cooperation between South Korea, Japan, and the United States, particularly in countering North Korean threats.¹⁰³ His administration's approach to Japan and the down-prioritization of historical grievances did not, however, do his reputation any good and angered many in the South Korean public, making him very unpopular.¹⁰⁴ On the other hand, his engagement in bettering ties with Japan may have improved South Korean public opinion of Japan, as well as Japanese public opinion of Korea.¹⁰⁵ The hypothesis is weakened during Yoon's presidency.

6.3. Mobilization of Public Opinion in South Korea

For the hypothesis to hold, the different presidents' actions in government must influence public opinion, which in turn will affect diplomatic relations.

President Moon is interesting to examine when it comes to mobilizing the public. As mentioned earlier, the Moon administration took a hardline diplomatic stand towards Japan, considering the 'comfort women' issue. The president annulled the 2015 Agreement, which became popular among the Korean public. From a 2019 Gallup poll made before the March 1st Movement's 100th anniversary, 80% responded that "vestiges of Japanese imperialism have not been eliminated properly." This is mainly due to the belief that high-ranking official politicians and business executives are descendants of collaborators.¹⁰⁶ Under the Moon period, there was also an increase

¹⁰² S.Korea's Yoon to visit Japan for summit, first such trip in 12 years, as listed in Reuters. <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/skoreas-yoon-visit-japan-first-such-trip-12-years-2023-03-09/> (Accessed: 30.09.2024).

¹⁰³ Japan's Kishida, South Korea's Yoon call to sustain momentum in improved ties as listed in Reuters. <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/japan-pm-kishida-seeks-solidify-south-korea-ties-farewell-visit-2024-09-06/> (Accessed: 30.09.2024).

¹⁰⁴ South Korea poll shows Yoon's approval rating at lowest since inauguration as listed in Reuters. <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/south-korea-poll-shows-yoons-approval-rating-lowest-since-inaguration-2024-09-13/> (Accessed: 30.09.2024).

¹⁰⁵ [EAI Issue Briefing] Diverging Perspectives on Improving Bilateral Relations: Analysis of the 2023 Korea-Japan Joint Opinion Poll as listed on East Asia Institute. <https://www.eai.or.kr/new/en/project/view.asp?intSeq=22182&code=104> (Accessed: 30.09.2024).

¹⁰⁶ Navigating Rocky Japan-South Korea Relations as listed in Carnegie. <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2019/06/navigating-rocky-japan-south-korea-relations?lang=en> (Accessed: 23.03.2025).

우리 국민, 3.1 운동 하면 유관순(43.9%), 대한민국임시정부 하면 김구(31.4%)가 떠올라 as listed in Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism. https://www.mcst.go.kr/kor/s_notice/press/pressView.jsp?pSeq=17130 (Accessed: 23.03.2025).

in protest and boycott campaigns against Japanese products such as beer and car production, this even though Moon has been careful to emphasize that he does not intend to ‘instigate divisiveness by reopening old wounds’ now nor to create issues for diplomatic conflicts with a neighbouring country.¹⁰⁷ Neither of these was desirable. Wiping out the vestiges of pro-Japanese collaborators, just as with diplomacy, should be done in a forward-looking manner.¹⁰⁸ As seen from the protests and boycotts of Japanese goods, the public was taking a strong stand against Japan and pressured the Moon administration to take a hardline stand against Japan as well. There seems to be a link between political mobilization and public sentiment, as shown by the example of Moon Jae-in’s presidency and public reactions.

On the other hand, when a conservative and more pragmatic leader like Yoon Suk Yul entered the office and avoided the historical disputes in favour of bettering diplomatic relations with Japan, he lost a lot of popularity, with his approval rating falling to 37,5 % positive approval in 2023 according to a Yonhap News survey.¹⁰⁹ This means that the 60 % dissatisfaction rate might have been due to his foreign relations approach to Japan, among other things. These numbers suggest that public opinion also holds power over politicians and could potentially impact decision-making by pressure. This finding partially weakens the hypothesis that politicians alone drive the survival of the ‘comfort women’ dispute and fluctuations in bilateral relations. Politicians might help shape public opinion; however, they are just as much constrained by it. This means that political mobilisation does play a role. However, it cannot alone drive diplomatic tensions.

6.4. Does the Hypothesis Find Support?

The hypothesis that the ‘comfort women’ issue unsettles the bilateral relationship between Japan and South Korea in some periods more than others because left-wing politicians exploit it to strengthen their political position finds some support based on the explanation and sources I have presented. I have found that left-wing governments have been more actively engaged with the issue

¹⁰⁷ South Koreans hold anti-Abe rally as listed in The Korea Times.
https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2019/08/718_273788.html (Accessed: 23.03.2025).

Koreans' view of Japan falls to record low: poll as listed in The Korea Times.
https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2019/07/120_272185.html (Accessed: 23.03.2025).

South Korean boycott of Japanese goods hits beer and carmakers as listed in The Guardian.
<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/sep/04/south-korea-boycott-japanese-goods-beer-car-sales> (Accessed: 23.03.2025).

¹⁰⁸ Moon, Selected Speeches 2019-2020, p 103. As found on KOREA.net. (Accessed: 13.05.2025).

¹⁰⁹(LEAD) Yoon's approval rating at 37.5 pct ahead of 1st anniversary in office: Yonhap News survey as listed in Yonhap News Agency.
<https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20230508007851315> (Accessed: 23.03.2025).

and, as such, a driver for keeping the issue alive in the diplomatic relationship with Japan. To some extent, left-wing prime ministers can be said to make the issue a point of contention through their politics on historical grievances and willingness to engage actively with historical issues, like the ‘comfort women’ issue. They have contributed to the worsening of diplomatic relations with Japan. This is particularly true under the Moon’s period and Roh Moo-hyun. The pattern that the left-wing politicians are the drivers of the conflict through the ‘comfort women’ issue is, however, slightly dismissed when Lee Myung-bak, as a right-wing conservative, chose to engage with historical grievances and whipped up nationalist, anti-imperialist sentiments towards Japan. Such a finding discredits the hypothesis. While the left-wing presidents, for the most part, have been contributing to the ‘comfort women’ issue remaining a point of contention with Japan, bringing up the grievance, the South Korean civil society has also contributed to keeping the issue alive. Because of their engagement with the issue, politicians engage with it because it is relevant for their popularity and to gain support.

7. Japanese Politics and the ‘Comfort Women’ Issue

This chapter will examine the hypothesis that the ‘comfort women’ issue has unsettled the bilateral relationship between Japan and South Korea more in some periods than others because Japanese right-wing nationalist prime ministers refuse to acknowledge responsibility fully and instead adopt revisionist historical narratives.

The hypothesis is that Japanese right-wing nationalist prime ministers’ historical revisionism has caused the ‘comfort women’ issue to remain a diplomatic conflict between Japan and South Korea. I will test this hypothesis against the evidence, mapping out how Japanese prime ministers have contributed to keeping the conflict alive through rhetoric, actions, and political decisions, and possibly contributed to the fluctuating tension.

The chapter will first give a brief overview of Japan’s nationalism and its connection to conservatism and historical revisionism. Then, I will present, discuss, and analyse how the various Japanese prime ministers interacted with the ‘comfort women’ issue. Lastly, I will try to answer whether the hypothesis finds sufficient support.

7.1. Nationalism and Conservatism in Japan

Since the Second World War, Japan has undergone significant changes, especially in nationalism. This is relevant because nationalism was a big component of Japan’s occupation of Korea and expansion into the rest of East Asia pre-WW2. As Yanaga points out, modern Japanese nationalism was born out of the needs and circumstances of Japan, which had been a secluded feudal society that emerged into the rising nationalism of the mid-nineteenth-century world.¹¹⁰ Japan’s nationalism was shaped and affected by domestic nationalism and international developments; thus, it was a curious mix of modern Western nationalism and Japanese mysticism, as Yanaga points out.

After Japan’s loss in WW2, the Allied forces occupied Japan, and the Japanese Imperial Army was dismantled, with war criminal trials held in Tokyo. A new constitution was made where the emperor’s status was demoted to that of a figurehead, giving political control to the parliament. The right to wage war was renounced, which meant that all non-defensive forces were eliminated. This was later changed to allow for self-defensive action with the onset of the Korean War and communism in the region. Militaristic nationalism decreased heavily as these things were

¹¹⁰ Yanaga, “Japan: Nationalism Succeeds and Fails.” p. 67.

implemented, and a pacifist approach was adopted into politics due to Article 9 in the Constitution of 1947. This article renounced war and forbade the country from maintaining a military for offensive purposes. Therefore, for decades, the Japanese foreign relations policy was grounded in pacifism, which meant that nationalism was much more discreet and had to give way to economic recovery and international cooperation. In the 1980s and 90s, national sentiment started to come to the forefront more forcefully, especially among the conservatives in Japan. The Liberal Democratic Party (LDP, conservative), which dominated Japanese politics for most of the post-war period, contained nationalist factions that advocated for a more robust military, greater independence in foreign policy, and a reassertion of Japan's historical identity. The reassertion of historical identity has meant that historical grievances have resurfaced. In the case of the 'comfort women' issue, nationalistic discourses have downplayed Japan's involvement in the coercion of these women. The rise of leaders like Prime Minister Shinzo Abe brought nationalism more prominently into the political discourse. Abe and other conservatives have pushed for constitutional revisions, particularly changes to Article 9, to allow Japan to engage more assertively in regional security issues, especially in the face of perceived threats from North Korea and China.

Another facet of post-war nationalism is historical revisionism, an effort to reshape the narrative of Japan's wartime past, often in ways that downplay the atrocities committed and reframe its imperial history as a source of national pride. The nationalism or conservative voices in Japan usually drive this revisionist effort, and conservative politicians and scholars have sought to downplay or reinterpret Japan's actions during the war.¹¹¹ Such revisionist efforts were especially evident in the case of junior high school history textbooks of the 90s, where 'comfort women' were mentioned. The revisionists wanted to change Japan's history to something positive that could boost children's confidence in their country and thereby omit the facets of history they viewed as masochistic, like the 'comfort women' issue.¹¹² Efforts to revise school textbooks to portray a more positive view of Japan's wartime history, including minimizing references to atrocities such as the Nanjing Massacre or the issue of 'comfort women', reflect this nationalist trend. Visits by political leaders, such as Prime Minister Koizumi or Abe, to the Yasukuni Shrine, where convicted war criminals are enshrined alongside other war dead, have also sparked nationalist passion but also provoked international criticism, particularly from South Korea and China who feel that Japan forgets their

¹¹¹ Yamaguchi, "The "Japan Is Great!" Boom, Historical Revisionism, And The Government" as listed on Asia-Pacific Journal <https://apjif.org/2017/06/yamaguchi> (Accessed: 29.03.2025).

¹¹² Japan's 'History Problem' Lingers on After Abe as listed on 9Dashline. <https://www.9dashline.com/article/japans-history-problem-lingers-on-after-abe> (Accessed: 29.03.2025).

responsibility for wartime atrocities as the shrine is a symbol of Japan's militarism. In 2013, Abe said his reason for visiting was an anti-war gesture.¹¹³ Others, like Hong, have argued that visiting the Yasukuni shrine is a way to gather support from other conservative, nationalist-leaning supporters.¹¹⁴

7.2. Conservative and Liberal Prime Ministers' Approaches to the 'Comfort Women' Issue

To test the hypothesis presented at the beginning of this chapter, the prime minister's (PM) utilization of the 'comfort women' issue has to be investigated to see if right-wing politics is the reason for the issue to be kept alive, as the hypothesis suggests. The onset of the 'comfort women' dispute, 1991, will be used as the starting point to analyze the hypothesis, and will end with the present Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba (2024-present). Prime ministers are the object of attention, not the emperor, because the emperor in contemporary Japan has more of a symbolic than executive role. The power is held by the parliament, as explained earlier. As one will notice, Japan has frequently replaced its PMs, where prime ministers like Tsutomu Hata were only in office for 64 days and will not be included in this research. A justification for this is that short-term PMs are often excluded from other research literature as they did not have the time to make an impact.¹¹⁵

The Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) has had a strong foothold in Japanese politics and has been the dominant party. It is a conservative party, and nationalist rhetoric is most often found in statements made by prime ministers from this party. However, the LDP has a wide variety, with factions ranging from moderate conservatism to right-wing nationalism. Here, one can see the contrast to South Korea, where the nationalist impulses come mainly from the liberal left.

Kiichi Miyazawa (1991–1993) was installed as prime minister of Japan in November, right after the testimony of Kim Hak-sun surfaced in August of the same year. Miyazawa was from the LDP, which, for the hypothesis to hold, should entail that he would downplay the issue of the 'comfort women' according to the causal mechanisms presented. However, it is natural that this did not occur, as he was the first PM to deal with the 'comfort women' issue. He was the first PM of Japan to publicly acknowledge the 'comfort women' system in diplomatic talks with South Korea, as he

¹¹³Japan PM Shinzo Abe visits Yasukuni WW2 shrine as listed in BBC News. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-25517205> (Accessed: 29.03.2025).

¹¹⁴ Hong, "The Effects of 'Apology-Backlash' Recurrence on Korea–Japan Relations."

¹¹⁵ Hong, "The Effects of 'Apology-Backlash' Recurrence on Korea–Japan Relations."

issued an apology for Japan's wartime actions during a visit to South Korea. Here is an excerpt from the apology to the victims where Miyazawa expresses remorse for those who suffered. Soon after, on January 17th, in a policy speech on a visit to South Korea, the prime minister apologized again (multiple times throughout his visit).

[...]Japan was the assailant and Korea was the victim. Allow me to take this opportunity to express our sincere remorse and apology for Japanese past actions which inflicted unbearable suffering and sorrow on the people of the Korean Peninsula. Recently, the issue of "comfort women" in the service of the Imperial Japanese Army has come into light. I cannot help feeling acutely distressed over this, and I express my sincerest apology.¹¹⁶

Miyazawa's administration not only issued an apology but also laid the groundwork for the 1993 Kono Statement, which officially admitted that the Japanese Imperial Army had been involved in the recruitment and coercion of 'comfort women'. Here is an excerpt:

Undeniably, this was an act, with the involvement of the military authorities of the day, that severely injured the honor and dignity of many women. The Government of Japan would like to take this opportunity once again to extend its sincere apologies and remorse to all those, irrespective of place of origin, who suffered immeasurable pain and incurable physical and psychological wounds as comfort women.¹¹⁷

From his administration's actions, it does not seem likely that Miyazawa wanted to utilize this issue for his benefit; it was more likely a reaction to Kim Hak-sun's testimony and all the attention that was now put on Japan. Though his government apologized, it did not offer the victims compensation. His behavior towards the issue weakens the hypothesis as he tries to minimize the effect of the issue by being cooperative.

Though the Miyazawa administration laid the groundwork for the Kono Statement, it was finished, and the findings from an inquiry into the 'comfort women' system and military involvement were published by Prime Minister Morihiro Hosokawa (1993-94). Hosokawa was more of a liberal-

¹¹⁶Policy Speech by Prime Minister Kiichi Miyazawa during His Visit to the Republic of Korea, "Japan-ROK Relations in the Asian and Global Context" as listed on "The World and Japan" Database.
<https://worldjpn.net/documents/texts/exdpm/19920117.S1E.html> (Accessed: 28.03.2025).

¹¹⁷Statement by the Chief Cabinet Secretary as listed on the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan.
https://www.mofa.go.jp/a_o/rp/page25e_000343.html (Accessed: 28.03.2025).

conservative affiliated with the Japan New Party and was reconciliation-oriented toward South Korea as he addressed Japan's wartime history and extended his condolences.¹¹⁸

His predecessor for 64 days, Tsutomu Hata, did not involve himself in historical grievances as far as I could find.

Tomiichi Murayama (1994-1996, left), who was a part of the Japan Socialist Party, was like his two predecessors, reconciliation-oriented towards the issue, as was evident through the 1995 Statement that was released under his administration. In the statement, he says, "Furthermore, I will continue in all sincerity to do my utmost in efforts being made on the issues arisen from the war, in order to further strengthen the relations of trust between Japan and those countries."¹¹⁹ directly addressing the historical issues, which include the 'comfort women' even if vaguely, acknowledging Japan's wartime responsibility. On July 19th, 1995, the Japanese government launched the Asian Women's Fund (AWF). This fund was created to offer atonement money from the Japanese people to the former wartime 'comfort women' and was a fund to which people could donate. This money would cover atonement money and medical and welfare support projects funded by governmental resources. Prime Minister Murayama made a statement on the establishment of the AWF, where he offered his apology, saying:

Established on this occasion and involving the cooperation of the Government and citizens of Japan, the "Asian Women's Fund" is an expression of atonement on the part of the Japanese people toward these women and supports medical, welfare, and other projects. As articulated in the proponents' Appeal, the Government will do its utmost to ensure that the goals of the Fund are achieved.¹²⁰

In July 1996, the AWF decided that 2 million yen would be paid from the fund to former 'comfort women' in the Philippines, the Republic of Korea, and Taiwan.¹²¹ Despite establishing the fund in

¹¹⁸Stop the Denial, Says Hosokawa : Prime minister wants Japan to face its past as listed in Los Angeles Times. <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1993-08-17-me-24500-story.html> (Accessed: 29.03.2025).

¹¹⁹ Statement by Prime Minister Tomiichi Murayama "On the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the war's end" (15 August 1995) as listed on the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan. <https://www.mofa.go.jp/announce/press/pm/murayama/9508.html> (Accessed: 28.03.2025).

¹²⁰Statement by Prime Minister Tomiichi Murayama on the occasion of the establishment of the "Asian Women's Fund" as listed on the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan. https://www.mofa.go.jp/a_o/rp/page25e_000354.html (Accessed: 28.03.2025).

¹²¹ Recent Policy of the Government of Japan on the Issue Known as "Wartime Comfort Women" as listed on the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan. <https://www.mofa.go.jp/policy/women/fund/policy0011.html> (Accessed: 28.03.2025).

1995, it terminated its projects in South Korea due to backlash. Few of the former victims had accepted the help, much of it due to pressure from the Korean Council not to. As mentioned earlier, the Korean Council is a non-governmental organization advocating for the rights of the surviving ‘comfort women’. The former victims who did not accept the atonement money did so because they believed that only state compensation could recover their dignity, and atonement money is not state compensation.¹²²

Interestingly, in the period after the issue came out, Japanese prime ministers from three different parties with different political leanings had quite a similar conciliatory approach to the issue. The apologetic attitude that arose in periods after the ‘comfort women’ issue was revealed, Hong has called this apology diplomacy.¹²³ Hong argues that this apology diplomacy was formed out of politicizing the ‘comfort women’ issue and that the Korean Council’s demands for apologies were the inception of such a ‘strategy’. He further argues that one of the reasons that Miyazawa (LDP) had to apologize was because of the publication of a document by Yoshiaki Yoshimi, a Japanese modern history professor, that proved that the Japanese military had been involved in systematizing military brothels. The LDP was left with no choice but to apologize. The same was the case with the Kono Statement in 1993, which further proved the military involvement in these brothels.

The apology diplomacy continued under Hosokawa (JNP). Hong argues that Hosokawa apologized not because of heartfelt remorse but because of political calculation. The LDP lost its majority in the 40th Lower House election in 1993. No one party now held the majority, and Hosokawa formed a coalition of non-LDP and non-Communists. The apologies were, therefore, more of a tactical move to promote cooperation with the progressives. Hence, with these arguments in mind, the hypothesis is weakened as we see a conservative right-leaning prime minister apologizing and acknowledging Japan’s involvement in the brothels. While the left-wing PM’s are behaving relatively as expected, there might be reason to think that Hosokawa used the issue to his benefit to gain support. However, concerning Japan’s relationship with South Korea, all the PM’s above tried to calm down the issue by accommodating the requests of South Korea and civil rights groups domestically and in South Korea. So far, the hypothesis has not been confirmed, but it is weakened.

¹²² “Comfort Women” Issue addressed by Former AWF Secretary-General Momoyo Ise and Professors Mizuno and Kumagai (24th July 2015) as listed on Global Peacebuilding Association. <http://www.gpaj.org/2015/07/24/13474> (Accessed: 28.03.2025).

¹²³ Hong, “The Effects of ‘Apology-Backlash’ Recurrence on Korea–Japan Relations.”

In 1996, the relationship with South Korea worsened as Ryutaro Hashimoto (1996-98, LDP, liberal conservative) entered office. Hashimoto's administration issued the first written apology to the former 'comfort women' concerning the Asian Women's Fund atonement payments.¹²⁴ However, during the rest of his term, a backlash to apology diplomacy arose, and anti-apology sentiments rose from within the LDP.¹²⁵ Hashimoto also sparked controversy when he visited the Yasukuni shrine to pay his respects to the war dead in 96 as the first prime minister to do so in 11 years.¹²⁶ He told reporters that this visit should not matter as it should not complicate international relations, possibly downplaying his action and angering South Korea, where strong protests were held against his action.¹²⁷ Hashimoto did not try to utilize the conflict, weakening the hypothesis. His visit did, however, spark controversy, but this can be related to inter-party political competition as Japan's change of electoral system led to the collapse of small parties. Any other political faction did not balance the LDP, and stronger political backlashes were possible, as well as the LDP having a stronger say in foreign policy.¹²⁸ The ascension of an anti-apologetic sentiment, and the visit to Yasukuni shrine indeed provoked South Korea's response, but this seems to be an accident from Japan's side, as I interpret it. This means that the hypothesis does not find viable ground and cannot be confirmed.

Keizō Obuchi (1998-2000, LDP, liberal-conservative) was more reconciliation-oriented toward South Korea, signing the 1998 Japan-South Korea Joint Declaration with Kim Dae-Jung. This joint declaration was to further friendly relations and cooperation between the countries. However, when it came to the 'comfort women' issue, Obuchi did not do much except sign the letter sent to former 'comfort women' that was given by Ryutaro Hashimoto in 1996.¹²⁹ He followed in his predecessor's footsteps and signalled that he would not give further apologies to the women. By not engaging any further with the issue than reiterating an already given apology, he tries to quiet the issue down. His actions cannot give confirmatory evidence, and weaken the hypothesis that the right-wing prime minister kept the issue alive.

¹²⁴Letter from Prime Minister to the Former Comfort Women as listed on "The World and Japan" Database. <https://worldjpn.net/documents/texts/JH/19960000.O1E.html> (Accessed: 28.03.2025).

¹²⁵ Hong, "The Effects of 'Apology-Backlash' Recurrence on Korea-Japan Relations." p. 52-53.

¹²⁶ Japan Premier Visits Shrine to War Dead as listed in The New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/1996/07/30/world/japan-premier-visits-shrine-to-war-dead.html> (Accessed: 28.03.2025).

¹²⁷Japan PM visits shrine to war dead as listed on UPI. <https://www.upi.com/Archives/1996/07/29/Japan-PM-visits-shrine-to-war-dead/1971838612800/> (Accessed: 28.03.2025).

¹²⁸ Hong, "The Effects of 'Apology-Backlash' Recurrence on Korea-Japan Relations." p. 52-53.

¹²⁹Letter from Prime Minister to the Former Comfort Women as listed on "The World and Japan" Database. <https://worldjpn.net/documents/texts/JH/19960000.O1E.html> (Accessed: 28.03.2025).

Yoshiro Mori (2000-01, LDP, liberal-conservative) did not offer any new apologies to the women and did not try to resolve the issue. He was rather seen as downplaying Japan's war responsibility by recalling Japan's wartime emperor worship and militarism by saying things such as "Japan is a country of the gods with the emperor at its centre,"¹³⁰ with clear nationalist intent. I could not find that his behaviour increased the tension in the bilateral relationship with South Korea. However, his actions created a reaction and remembrance of the issue, very subtly affirming the hypothesis.

Junichiro Koizumi (2001-06, LDP, far-right) was more nationalistic with repeated visits, in all six, to Yasukuni Shrine throughout his period as PM. These visits strained the relationship with South Korea, where protests broke out as a reaction to his actions because of Japan's past treatment of South Korea and what this shrine symbolizes for Korea. There has been speculation that Koizumi conducted these visits for domestic purposes, to stir up the domestic public, and to build a new, more assertive role in Japan.¹³¹ His actions and the reactions to them do, therefore, slightly confirm the hypothesis.

When Shinzo Abe (2006-07, LDP, far-right conservative) took over as PM, the relationship with South Korea worsened even further as Abe denied the Japanese government's involvement in the coercion of the 'comfort women'. This reflected a strong nationalist and revisionist faction within the LDP. By denying that the Japanese government and its army had been involved in the 'comfort women' brothel system, Abe's administration backtracked from the 1993 Kono statement that had acknowledged the military's role in coercing the victims into the brothel system.¹³² Abe's actions in this period confirm the hypothesis.

Yasuo Fukuda (2007-2008, LDP, moderate conservative) took a different approach to South Korea and the issue. He emphasized the importance of diplomacy and cooperation but avoided commenting on historical issues and historical revisionism during his term. Fukuda and Abe had very different approaches to the issue. Abe's actions affirmed the hypothesis, but Fukuda tried to brush the issue aside, weakening it. Abe also took a more extreme stance towards the issue during

¹³⁰ Japan divine, claims PM as listed in The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2000/may/17/jonathanwatts> (Accessed: 29.03.2025).

Japanese prime minister resigns as listed in The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2001/apr/06/japan> (Accessed: 28.03.2025).

¹³¹ Japan's Relationship with South Korea as listed on the Council of Foreign Relations. <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/japans-relationship-south-korea> (Accessed: 28.03.2025).

¹³² Japan's PM denies 'comfort women' coerced as listed in NBC News. <https://www.nbcnews.com/id/wbna10625961> (Accessed: 28.03.2025).

his period as prime minister compared to those before him. One could, however, compare his actions to those of Koizumi because they signal the same kind of nationalism.

Taro Aso (2008-09, LDP, far-right), a conservative politician of the Liberal Democratic Party, was affiliated with a major rightist lobby group called Nippon Kaigi. Because of his connection to this group and some statements he has made, he was seen as aligned with nationalist views.¹³³ Under Aso, Japan's relationship with South Korea deteriorated quite badly. One of the reasons was the controversy around Aso and his family's mining businesses' (Aso mining) use of forced labor during colonial rule. A topic Aso chose not to address directly, saying this issue had nothing to do with him as he was just a child when World War 2 ended. South Korea's government saw this act as a lack of responsibility for Japan's crimes and a way of downplaying Japan's role in the atrocities inflicted. During Aso's term, diplomatic engagement was lacking as his administration was more engaged in domestic economic issues because of the 2008 global financial crisis. The crisis left little room for improving bilateral relations with South Korea. When it comes to the 'comfort women' issue, there does not seem to be any mention of it in his term as prime minister. The historical issue was not a priority for the Aso administration, as there were other, more pressing issues like the Dokdo/Takeshima islands. Aso's family's past might also have been a reason for the administration not to bring up the 'comfort women', as this would have led to public apologies that Aso was not interested in. Therefore, his actions do not support the hypothesis as his administration seems to have avoided the issue, wanting to forget it altogether rather than utilizing it to gain popularity.

Yukio Hatoyama's (2009-10, DPJ, middle-conservative) period in office as prime minister marked a brief period of improved relations between Japan and South Korea. South Korean leaders and the public appreciated his apologetic stance on historical issues, personal gestures of reconciliation, and efforts to build a forward-looking relationship.¹³⁴ However, due to his short time in office and the return of more conservative leaders after his resignation, this improvement was temporary, and many underlying tensions between the two countries remained unresolved. His period as PM does not give much support for the hypothesis.

¹³³Controversial hardliner set to replace Japanese PM as listed in The Guardian.
<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2008/sep/02/japan1> (Accessed: 28.03.2025).

Foreign Ministry Spokesman Kong Quan's Comment on Japanese Foreign Minister Taro Aso's Remarks on Whitewashing the History of Aggression as listed on Consulate General of the People's Republic of China in Dubai.
http://dubai.china-consulate.gov.cn/eng/fyrth/200602/t20060206_5110564.htm (Accessed: 28.03.2025).

¹³⁴ Pieroni, "Past-Oriented Foreign Policy: Japanese State-Identity and South Korea Discourse 2009–2012." p.11-13.

Like his predecessor, Naoto Kan (2010-11, middle-left conservative) was part of the DPJ and held an apologetic and progressive stance on Japan's colonial past. One of the most critical moments of his tenure came in 2010, on the 100th anniversary of Japan's annexation of Korea (1910–1945).¹³⁵ Kan issued a formal statement that expressed deep regret and apology for Japan's colonial rule over Korea, acknowledging the profound suffering it had caused. This apology is seen as more direct and sincere than those given by his predecessors, but at the same time, he is careful in mentioning historical grievances directly. The 'comfort women' were not mentioned at all. This was criticized by activists representing former 'comfort women', saying, "He didn't mention the victims once, or pledge any action to heal their hurt or pain."¹³⁶ Kan's government did not make the 'comfort women' issue a central focus in their politics, but by not mentioning the women in the apology over colonial atrocities, he provoked a reaction, and as such, his action indicates a slight strengthening of the hypotheses.

Under Yoshihiko Noda (2011-12, far-right conservative), the relationship with South Korea worsened. Even if Noda was part of the same party as Kan, he held a more conservative stance on historical issues. He was also more interested in the economic aspect of foreign policy. While Kan and Hatoyama had focused on reconciliation and issuing apologies for Japan's colonial past, Noda was not as willing to make similar gestures. He was less apologetic and took a hardline stand on the 'comfort women' issue, commenting that there "exist no documents supporting the fact that so-called 'comfort women' were forced to serve the Japanese military,"¹³⁷ indicating that there was no evidence the Japanese Imperial Military enforced sexual slavery during the 2nd World War.¹³⁸ This behavior is an exception to his predecessors, and his period as PM strengthens the hypothesis. The Ministry of Gender Equality and Family Affairs in Seoul rejected Noda's claim that there had been no coercion.¹³⁹ Noda also saw the issue and other historical disputes resolved by the Basic Relations Treaty of 1965 and the Asia Women's Fund in 1995. Still, he was willing to study ways of settling

¹³⁵Statement by Prime Minister Naoto Kan as listed on Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet. https://japan.kantei.go.jp/kan/statement/201008/10danwa_e.html (Accessed: 28.03.2025).

¹³⁶Japan repeats apology for Korean occupation as ties with Seoul improve, as listed in The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/aug/10/japan-repeats-apology-korean-occupation> (Accessed: 28.03.2025).

¹³⁷ 'Noda's comfort women remarks wrong' as listed in The Korea Times. https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2012/09/113_118384.html (Accessed: 28.03.2025).

¹³⁸ Japanese PM Stirs Up Trouble with 'Comfort Women' Remark as listed in The Chosun Daily. <https://www.chosun.com/english/national-en/2012/03/28/EQS244N7DDGGLSQVVRW53AHK2Y/> (Accessed: 28.03.2025).

¹³⁹ Gender Ministry criticizes Noda's denial of comfort women as listed in The Korean Herald. <http://news.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20120329000907> (Accessed: 28.03.2025).

the issue from a humanitarian perspective.¹⁴⁰ Moreover, Noda's administration's reaction to the installation of the Statue of Peace, a life-size statue of a young woman, a 'comfort woman', in front of the Japanese Embassy in Seoul in 2011, was all but diplomatic. Noda asked the statue to be removed, issuing no apology.¹⁴¹ As said earlier, Noda's period as prime minister strengthens the hypothesis as he denied that any documentation supported the fact that these women were coerced. By taking such a hard stance on the issue, he kept it alive by created a reaction.

After three periods of the DPJ being in office, the LDP entered office again with Shinzo Abe (2012-2020) as prime minister for a second time. Abe has been the longest-serving prime minister in Japan's contemporary history. Shinzo Abe has been described as a very conservative, nationalist politician. He was affiliated with the Nippon Kaigi, a major rightist lobby group in Japan known to be ultra-conservative and revisionist. In his first shorter term, Abe was much more aggressive regarding changing the constitution's Article 9 and taking back Japan's 'glorious history' before World War 2. None of this did he succeed with.

The first controversy sparked by Abe in his second term from 2012 to 2014 was his visit to the Yasukuni Shrine in December 2013. Furthermore, the remarks made by Abe on May 15, 2013, on both the recognition of history and the 'comfort women' issue did not go down well with South Korea, and both his visit and the remarks were criticized. Later, in December of the same year, the Prime Minister issued a letter of apology.¹⁴² This was the same apology letter Hashimoto and Koizumi issued earlier. Abe did not offer any new apology to the former victims between 2013 and 2015. In this sense, he acted similarly to when he was PM in 2006-07, but also resembles Noda in his refusal to offer a new apology. Like Noda, Abe also questions the legitimacy of the coercion claim. Therefore, releasing this apology can be seen as a way of saying that Abe did not want to take further action on the matter.

From 2012 to 2014, there were not many fruitful meetings with Seoul and President Park Geun-Hye. Abe's third term, from 2014 to 2017, marked a period of better relations with Seoul as he held

¹⁴⁰ Noda and Lee differ on comfort women issue as listed on Japan Watch Project. <https://japanwatch.today/en/blog/post/noda-and-lee-differ-on-comfort-women-issue> (Accessed: 28.03.2025). Japanese Prime Minister again insists comfort women issue is "closed" as listed in Hankyoreh. https://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_international/553262.html (Accessed: 28.03.2025).

¹⁴¹ Pieroni, "Past-Oriented Foreign Policy: Japanese State-Identity and South Korea Discourse 2009–2012." p. 16-17.

¹⁴² Letter from Prime Minister to the Former Comfort Women as listed on the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan. https://www.mofa.go.jp/policy/page3e_000120.html (Accessed: 28.03.2025).

a speech on the 14th of August 2015 to commemorate the 70th anniversary of the end of the 2nd World War. In this speech, he issued an apology that had been much anticipated but not necessarily expected by South Korea. He explicitly alluded to the ‘comfort women’:

We will engrave in our hearts the past when the dignity and honour of many women were severely injured during wars in the 20th century. Upon this reflection, Japan wishes to be a country always at the side of such women’s injured hearts. Japan will lead the world in making the 21st century an era in which women’s human rights are not infringed upon.¹⁴³

This apology was very tactical and most likely aimed at improving the diplomatic relations with South Korea and China. Japan’s relations with South Korea improved a bit in the aftermath of the statement, opening the opportunity for Park and Abe to strike the ‘Comfort Women’ Agreement in December 2015 after a bilateral meeting in November where Park had addressed the need to resolve the grievance. The 2015 Comfort Women Agreement was supposed to end the issue.¹⁴⁴

Interestingly, Abe acted very differently throughout this agreement than in his previous terms. He apologized to the women and tried to resolve the dispute. This agreement shows that Abe acted reconciliatorily towards South Korea and did not utilize the issue, but tried to put the grievance to rest, in contrast to Noda, who brought the issue up. Abe’s actions as a far-right nationalist break with the expectation of the hypothesis and therefore slightly weaken it.

Japan-South Korea relations further deteriorated in 2017, under Abe’s fourth term, when Korean president Moon Jae-in started to criticize the 2015 Agreement for not being victim-centered, stating most Koreans could not accept this deal emotionally.¹⁴⁵ There was no renegotiation of the deal, but Moon kept parts of it. However, his administration discontinued the economic side of the agreement. This sparked conflict with Tokyo and Abe, reminding Moon of the deal’s finality and

¹⁴³ Statement by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe August 14, 2015 as listed on Prime Ministers Office of Japan. https://japan.kantei.go.jp/97_abe/statement/201508/0814statement.html#:~:text=And%2C%20seventy%20years%20ago%2C%20Japan,and%20my%20eternal%2C%20sincere%20condolences. (Accessed: 28.03.2025).

¹⁴⁴ Documents relating to the contents of the 2015 Agreement by The Permanent Mission of Japan to the International Organizations in Geneva. <https://www.mofa.go.jp/files/000235398.pdf> (Accessed: 28.03.2025).

¹⁴⁵ Moon decries 2015 Korea-Japan ‘comfort women’ deal as flawed as listed in The Korean Herald. <https://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20171228000905> (Accessed: 28.03.2025).

South Korea’s new president questions Japan ‘comfort women’ deal as listed on CNN World. <https://edition.cnn.com/2017/05/11/asia/south-korea-japan-comfort-women/index.html> (Accessed: 28.03.2025).

irreversibility, as explained in the previous chapter.¹⁴⁶ Further exacerbating tensions was the Supreme Court of Korea ordering several Japanese companies to compensate Korean victims for war-related grievances.¹⁴⁷ Abe stated that Japan's colonial rule of Korea had been resolved in the Treaty of Basic Relations in 1965, saying that they had already put the historical disputes behind them. All these tensions ended in the eruption of the trade dispute in August 2019 that lasted until 2023, which could be seen as a retaliation measure against the ruling of the South Korean Supreme Court.¹⁴⁸ As we can see, Abe's administration tried to ignore the issue, lay it to rest, but they were reactive towards the court's accusation and Moon's actions on the 2015 Agreement. That Abe was reactive and not initiating weakens the hypothesis quite substantially.

Yoshihide Suga (2020-2021, pragmatic conservative) took over briefly as prime minister after Shinzo Abe stepped down due to health reasons. Despite also being a Nippon Kaigi and the LDP member, Suga reached out to President Moon in September 2020, calling for both countries to repair their frayed ties.¹⁴⁹ In June 2021, the Japanese government stated that Prime Minister Suga stood by the apologies made by past administrations. This signaled that Japan's position was unchanged amid the tensions with South Korea over wartime history.¹⁵⁰ Such a statement came after a South Korean court ruling ordering the Japanese government to pay damages to former 'comfort women', with Prime Minister Suga calling the decision 'utterly unacceptable'.¹⁵¹ Suga acts defensively and reactively, without commenting further on the 'comfort women' issue. This weakens the hypothesis.

¹⁴⁶The Japan-South Korea 'Comfort Women' Agreement Survives (Barely) as listed in The Diplomat. <https://thediplomat.com/2018/01/the-japan-south-korea-comfort-women-agreement-survives-barely/> (Accessed: 28.03.2025).

¹⁴⁷South Korea Supreme Court orders Japan companies to compensate former victims of forced labor as listed on Juristnews. <https://www.jurist.org/news/2023/12/south-korea-supreme-court-orders-japan-companies-to-compensate-former-victims-of-forced-labor/#:~:text=During%20WWII%2C%20hundreds%20of%20thousands,employees%20for%20wartime%20forced%20labor>. (Accessed: 28.03.2025).

¹⁴⁸Shinzo Abe as listed on Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shinzo_Abe#Third_term_as_prime_minister_\(2014–2017\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shinzo_Abe#Third_term_as_prime_minister_(2014–2017)) (Accessed: 28.03.2025).

¹⁴⁹ Japan's new PM calls for better ties with South Korea, cooperation on North Korea as listed in Reuters. <https://www.reuters.com/article/world/japans-new-pm-calls-for-better-ties-with-south-korea-cooperation-on-north-korea-idUSKCN26F0A4/> (Accessed: 28.03.2025).

¹⁵⁰ PM Suga upholds Japan's apologies for wartime aggression, comfort women as listed in Kyodo News. <https://english.kyodonews.net/news/2021/06/bec60f317595-suga-upholds-japans-apologies-for-wartime-aggression-comfort-women.html> (Accessed: 28.03.2025).

¹⁵¹Japan lodges protest with S. Korea over "comfort women" ruling as listed in Kyodo News. <https://english.kyodonews.net/news/2021/01/131a29c7f880-breaking-news-japan-lodges-protest-with-s-korea-envoy-over-comfort-women-ruling.html> (Accessed: 28.03.2025).

Fumio Kishida (2021-2024, LDP, moderate conservative) found a ‘like-minded’ in President Yoon Suk-yeol of South Korea. Both have done their best to achieve better bilateral relations. On March 16, 2023, Kishida went on a two-day trip to South Korea, the first by a Japanese leader in twelve years. Kishida expressed sympathy for Koreans who had suffered under Japanese colonial rule, but faced some criticism domestically in South Korea for not offering a direct apology.¹⁵² The meetings were praised by U.S. President Joe Biden, who called the event a "groundbreaking new chapter of cooperation and partnership" between the two nations. Kishida also invited Yoon to the 49th G7 summit in Hiroshima as an invitee. The countries and Biden (U.S.) announced the Camp David Principle, a security pact. While Kishida pioneered Japanese foreign policy, he did not offer any apology to South Korea during his term, as Abe had done during his. Kishida iterated that he would uphold the position of previous cabinets on the issue of historical disputes.¹⁵³ The hypothesis is weakened as Kishida is not interacting with the ‘comfort women’ issue. He is instead reactive to the suggestions of Yoon’s administration but does not want to discuss the historical disputes.

Shigeru Ishiba (LDP, conservative), prime minister of Japan from October 2024, has not made any comments or actions towards resolving the historical grievance of the ‘comfort women’. However, there is good reason to believe he is seeking to continue mending ties and cooperating with South Korea. In his statement on the 4th of October 2024, he highlights the importance of the ROK-Japan relationship and vows to try and make it better for the sake of the ‘current strategic environment’, as he calls it.¹⁵⁴ Ishiba, therefore, seems to be more of a moderate conservative than former Prime Minister Abe. Although he has not tried to resolve the ‘comfort women’ issue as of now, he seems more willing to recognize historical grievances than his predecessors, making him less popular with the more conservative factions of the LDP.¹⁵⁵ He has said to Korean media, according to The Korean Times, that Japan should continue to apologize for the wartime sexual slavery issue until

¹⁵² Japanese PM expresses sympathy with Korean victims of colonial rule as listed in The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/may/07/japanese-pm-arrives-in-south-korea-amid-warming-ties> (Accessed: 29.03.2025).

¹⁵³ Japan to uphold key postwar apology: PM as listed in China Daily. <https://global.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202303/06/WS6405ae09a31057c47ebb28fb.html> (Accessed: 28.03.2025).

¹⁵⁴ Policy Speech by Prime Minister ISHIBA Shigeru to the 214th Session of the Diet as listed in Prime Minister’s Office of Japan. https://japan.kantei.go.jp/102_ishiba/statement/202410/1004shoshinhoyomei.html (Accessed: 28.03.2025).

¹⁵⁵ Why Japan’s new prime minister could pave way for better ties with South Korea as listed on KoreaPro. <https://koreapro.org/2024/09/why-japans-new-prime-minister-could-pave-way-for-better-ties-with-south-korea/> (Accessed: 28.03.2025).

South Korea accepts the apology.¹⁵⁶ The historical issues are unlikely to worsen under Ishiba. However, his focus on building up the Japanese military might raise the alarm in South Korea because of war and colonial memories, and Japan's exemption from having an army under Article 9 of its constitution, except for self-defense.¹⁵⁷ Regarding the issue of 'comfort women' or historical disputes in general, Ishiba has not made it a central theme of his political strategy. Ishiba's term does not give support to the hypothesis. It weakens it because he tries not to spark controversy and acts appeasing towards South Korea.

7.3. Does the Hypothesis Find Support?

The Japanese prime ministers, like the South Korean presidents, are affected by their political standing and affiliation when approaching South Korea and the historical grievances between them. The trend among Japanese prime ministers seems to be to tread carefully around the issue. This is even true for some of the prime ministers affiliated with LDP on the far-right, even the more nationalist and conservative ones, like Abe. There are exceptions with far-right-leaning PMs like Noda, who increased the tension by keeping the issue relevant as he glorified the emperor and the previous militarism. Abe also, to some extent, kept the issue alive through his reactions and statements that angered South Korea. However, not all of the fuss around the 'comfort women' issue can be attributed to him, as Moon was a big reason for the worsening bilateral ties as well.

I do not find much support for the hypothesis that right-wing and far-right wing prime ministers keep the issue alive through engaging with it; they seem rather concerned with resolving it or hushing it up, in the sense of getting rid of it. All the apologies testify to this claim; even Japan's demand to remove the Statue of Peace (also called the girl statue) has been related to its wish to put the 'comfort women' issue to rest. From these observations, it seems Japan has been reacting to the demands of the South Korean government and civil activist groups rather than being an instigator. This speaks about the wish of Japanese politicians to bury this dispute and move on. As we can conclude from such evidence, South Korea seems to have been the one driving and bringing up the issue in most of the cases, as Japan's prime ministers wanted to resolve it or get rid of it. Though one cannot ignore that action, such as visiting the Yasukuni shrine, does trigger a reaction in South

¹⁵⁶ New Japanese PM's progressive historical views raise hope for Seoul-Tokyo relations as listed on The Korean Times. <https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/foreignaffairs/20240929/incoming-japanese-pms-progressive-historical-views-raise-hope-for-smooth-south-korea-japan-relations> (Accessed: 11.05.2025).

¹⁵⁷ Japan's PM Ishiba set to focus on security ties with South Korea to counter Pyongyang as listed on The Asahi Shimbun. <https://www.asahi.com/ajw/articles/15501922> (Accessed: 10.05.2025).

Korea, these actions do not seem intended for that purpose. Instead, these ‘blunders’ seem more related to domestic political power play.

Very interestingly, Abe, who is often described as strongly nationalist and revisionist, has been the most active in trying to resolve the ‘comfort women’ issue, striking an agreement with Park in 2015. His predecessors and the ones after him have not been as engaged in the topic. Instead, they avoid giving it space in their politics. This is especially true for the more conservative revisionist politicians. The focus of Japanese foreign policy directed towards South Korea has instead been on regional security, with the threat of North Korea and economic cooperation.

Although Noda and Abe, in his first period as PM, gave support to the hypothesis, the actions of the other prime ministers, and Abes other terms weaken the hypothesis that the issue remains contentious in the bilateral relationship between Japan and South Korea because Japanese nationalistic right-wing PMs refuse to acknowledge responsibility fully and instead adopted revisionist historical narratives. This hypothesis has obtained little support in most cases. However, the reasons for the bilateral relationship to be worse at times seem more easily attributed to the interplay between the South Korean liberal presidents and Japanese far-right conservatives in the case of Moon and Abe. Here, we see the conflicts have been more driven by the South Korean government’s need to address the issue.

8. Conclusion

8.1. Findings from Empirical Chapters

This thesis has sought to explain why the ‘comfort women’ issue became politically salient in South Korea and why it led to varying levels of diplomatic tension in the bilateral relationship with Japan over time, using the outcome-explaining process tracing method. Through hypotheses developed from existing theory and literature, I aimed to identify the causal mechanisms behind the unsettling of the diplomatic relationship between South Korea and Japan. This was approached through two research questions. The first, ‘Why has the ‘comfort women’ issue become so important to South Korean identity?’, aimed to find out why the issue became central in the collective colonial historical memory of South Koreans. The second research question, ‘Why do diplomatic tensions between South Korea and Japan over the issue escalate during some periods and not during others?’, aimed more at unpacking the political factors at play. In this way, I aimed to find the patterns contributing to the sustained tension and the escalation points.

8.1.1. *Findings for Research Question 1*

Why has the ‘comfort women’ issue become so important for South Korea? Two hypotheses were tested through explanations. The first explanation hypothesised that the ‘comfort women’ issue became salient in South Korea because of its inclusion into the collective memory of colonial subjugation. The second explanation hypothesized that the issue became salient as a result of activist efforts, notably by the Korean Council, and as such, became embedded in identity and memory.

Through providing support for both of the possible causes, the source material I collected points towards activism and civil society organisations playing a major part in making the issue important and relevant in Korea, contributing to its salience and integration into the collective historical memory of colonisation. Feminist activists, especially in the Korean Council, pushed the ‘forgotten’ issue to the forefront, encouraging victims to speak up. As such, activism brought the issue to light and later kept it visible.

When investigating the second hypothesis, that the issue became salient in South Korea because of national identity, I could not find sufficient support for this explanation. However, by giving it a fair chance, I found that the issue seems to have been gradually integrated into the national historical memory of South Koreans through visibility, memorialisation (museums, statues, commemorative day), and discourse. This is especially visible in how younger generations seem to identify with the

victims of the comfort women brothel system and the injustices they suffered. As Jun Hana points out, some of the students she interviewed identify with the women by using the word ‘us’. “The ‘comfort women’ are us”, one of the girls said. The victims are also talked about as grandmothers (*halmoni*), which can be interpreted as people having embraced the victims as someone familial, not as alien or distant. Though we see this evolution of the issue being absorbed into the national colonial memory, it does not change the fact that the findings point towards activism as the catalyst and initiator that has kept the issue relevant, and because of this engagement, the issue eventually became part of the collective memory and national identity. I find that this was an outcome of activism rather than a cause.

8.1.2. Findings for Research Question 2

The second question asked was why the ‘comfort women’ issue has unsettled South Korea’s and Japan’s bilateral relationship more in some periods than others. The two hypotheses reflect the literature on the importance of political leaders’ actions and ideologies for outcomes. They deal with both the South Korean side, expecting left-wing nationalist presidents to contribute to the tension, and the Japanese side, expecting that right-wing nationalist prime ministers disrupt the relationship. The disruption happens through engagement with the ‘comfort women’ issue, causing a variation in the bilateral tension.

The explanations I built of the two hypotheses show that the fluctuating tensions are linked to the political orientation of national leaders, who were the focus of this analysis. This argument proved to be mostly true, but there was some inconsistency in the expected patterns. For example, under President Lee Myung-bak (2008-2013), the relationship between the countries took a turn for the worse, which was not expected, as conservative presidents usually have been more open to cooperation with Japan and have left the historical disputes in the background of their politics. The opposite is often true for liberal presidents who take a firmer stance towards historical issues and Japan’s dealings with them. President Moon Jae-in is a good example as he effectively terminated the 2015 Agreement made by conservative President Park Geun-hye and conservative Prime Minister Abe Shinzo in 2017 when he became president. As a left-wing president, taking a nationalist stance in his foreign policy towards Japan, he took the activists’ side. He utilized the existing public opinion to mobilize support to disengage with the agreement in hopes of a new one that offered justice to the victims. Tension peaked significantly in periods when left-leaning South Korean presidents, often supported by activist movements, emphasized the issue as part of identity and historical justice.

While the issue seems to be unsettling the bilateral relationship in periods, primarily under left-wing South Korean presidents, one must also take the Japanese actions and responses into consideration, as the right-wing in Japan has also contributed to the tension. Highly conservative and revisionist prime ministers in Japan, notably Abe Shinzo, sparked protests and tensions in the bilateral relationship with South Korea because of the denial of coercion of the ‘comfort women’ and because he would not issue a new apology, even when crafting the 2015 Agreement with former President Park Geun-hye. His actions stirred the public in South Korea under Park, but a conservative leadership in South Korea managed to keep the diplomatic relationship more neutral. – As mentioned, under Moon Jae-in’s leftist leadership from 2017 until 2022, the relations took a turn for the worse. The analysis of the Japanese prime ministers, their engagement with the ‘comfort women’ issue, and the apologies issued throughout the time under examination showed that Japan’s prime ministers are more likely to leave the issue in the past. Especially the conservative ones want to brush the issue under the rug. Apologies and such have been answers to demands from South Korea’s government or international pressure, rather than initiated by Japan, except for the 2015 agreement. But Japan also provokes reactions in South Korea with insincere apologies, meaning no new apologies, non-governmental reparations for the victims, and visits to the Yasukuni shrine. The hypothesis that the South Korean left-wing presidents fuel the tensions more in some periods than others provides more support for the hypothesis, but some of the reactions South Korea has had related to the ‘comfort women’ issue were prompted by Japanese ‘blunders’.

A pattern that emerges from the analysis when looking at the two explanations together is that the worsening in relations happened when left-leaning South Korean presidents and right-wing, historical revisionist prime ministers were state leaders simultaneously, as the example of Moon and Abe demonstrates. This indicates that, for the relationship to get better, one should possibly try to deal with the ‘comfort women’ issue and other historical issues under a more pragmatic conservative South Korean leadership and a more liberal Japanese one. However, this can prove challenging as Japan's LDP (conservative) is practically dominating the elections, making it hard for other parties of different political ideologies to gain power. These findings suggest that leadership dynamics and ideology are essential when approaching the issue to understand why reconciliation has been so hard to achieve.

8.1.3. *The Intersection of the Research Questions: What Does it Tell Us?*

I chose to approach this phenomenon with two related research questions, not only because I wanted to look at both domestic and leader/political causes of sustained diplomatic tensions due to

the ‘comfort women’ issue, but also because I wanted to see how domestic politics might interact with bilateral state-to-state relations. When testing the explanations, a pattern that emerged was the influence that activism not only had domestically in South Korea, embedding the issue in Korea’s historical identity, and also affected the bilateral relationship between Japan and South Korea. By making such an inference, one can say that activism for the ‘comfort women’ cause has managed to transcend the domestic domain and join the international one. Interestingly, this argument finds support in a similar pattern to that of Easley, who argues that activist civil society is a large reason for the lack of successful cooperative approaches.¹⁵⁸ This shows that the unsettling of the bilateral relationship through the ‘comfort women’ dispute has been just as much bottom-up as top-down. This finding has implications for potential solutions to the issue. There should be a mix of both a top-down and an inclusive bottom-up approach to reconciling this issue, as activists will continue to fight for the victims’ justice. This means that the demands and voices of the victims and their families should be taken into consideration when crafting an agreement that addresses their needs. The problem with this approach, however, is that the demands of the ‘comfort women’ activists do not resonate well with Japan’s more conservative governments and their demands. This then becomes a question of how one can bridge different demands and historical narratives in hopes of reconciliation.

8.2. How Do the Findings Relate to Previous and Current Scholarly Debates?

This study contributes to the literature on political and collective memory, identity, and leader dynamics in international relations, and the role of non-state actors in expressing grievances. The analysis builds on existing scholarship that examines the interplay between domestic political actors, activist networks, and contested historical issues. For instance, both Easley and Richardson point out that activist and advocacy movements for the victims are key to explaining why the issue arose and became salient in South Korea.¹⁵⁹ It is also largely these movements that have prevented cooperative approaches to reconciliation from being successful. This is consistent with the findings of the first research question, which suggests that activism, in this case, feminist activism driven by the Korean Council, had a profound impact. On the other hand, the finding that suggests that the issue has been embedded into the collective historical memory can be understood as a nationalistic interaction with the issue. Such a framing is interesting in dialogue with Lee’s work, arguing that

¹⁵⁸ Easley, “Korean NGOs and Reconciliation With Japan.” p. 46.

¹⁵⁹ Easley, “Korean NGOs and Reconciliation With Japan.”

Richardson, “The Ascension of ‘Comfort Women’ in South Korean Colonial Memory”.

the girl statue movement, which started off as feminist, has since 2016 merged and evolved into a left-wing nationalist-populist movement. The statue works not only as a memorial but also appeals to the viewer to act on its/her behalf. This is also consistent with other scholarship mentioned in the literature review.¹⁶⁰

As Cooney and Scarborough, and Ku suggested in their works, realist IR does not account for all aspects of this troubled relationship, particularly in relation to how historical memory continues to shape the conflict.¹⁶¹ I therefore suggest an approach that can better accommodate the features of this conflict that are otherwise hard to understand. Memory studies contribute a great deal here. One also needs an approach that is open to examining how non-state actors in this relationship preclude cooperation, as Easley also points out. My findings also suggest that non-state actors are more important than often assumed in this conflict. Only in recent years has there been more research done on this, and it is still an understudied area.

As found through the explanations on political leaders engaging with the issue, they also contribute a significant part in keeping it alive, but by not investigating further, one loses out on potential avenues to reconcile the two countries on the issue of ‘comfort women’. On this note, I do have to address the complex cluster that the historical disputes are, and simply looking at one of them might not give an accurate image of the causes. For example, one of the other major disputes between the countries is the sovereignty dispute over the islets of Dokdo/Takeshima. This dispute and the ‘comfort women’ issue might be affecting one another. However, by narrowing down the focus, one at least has a chance to extract some of the nuances.

8.3. Limitations

Despite the contributions made by this thesis, the study has several limitations that must be mentioned.

First, it relies on publicly available materials in English. The study can, therefore, only capture internal decision-making processes or behind-the-scenes diplomatic exchanges that are reflected in English literature. To reduce this problem, I have relied on insightful literature when needing to

¹⁶⁰ Lee, “Left-wing Nationalist-populist Movement and Identification: A Psycho-political Analysis of the ‘Comfort Woman’ Statue Movements in South Korea.”

¹⁶¹ Cooney and Scarbrough, “Japan and South Korea: Can These Two Nations Work Together?”
Ku, “The Role of Identity in South Korea’s Policies towards Japan.”

gain insight into matters that are not available to a non-Korean speaker. However, by doing this, I must be critical of the other researcher's position and narratives.

Second, as this research is interpretive, it involves subjectivity in tracing the causal mechanisms and interpreting discourse. By using multiple sources to triangulate, I should be able to account for some of the limitations on that point. However, this does not eliminate the possibility of interpretive bias.

Third, the choice of method and the focus on a single case mean that the findings are not generalizable to other cases. However, the findings may still offer relevant analytical insight for similar identity- or norm-driven disputes. This method allows for a deep dive into the events and causes of the phenomenon being explained, which gives rich nuance to the case.

Fourth, because of limitations in available data, the scope of actors, mainly the Korean Council, presidents, and prime ministers, might exclude other potentially important actors and voices contributing to the issue's salience. The focus on these actors and events was chosen because there was evidence for them in the existing literature and source material, thereby adding weight to my findings.

Fifth, as mentioned in the method section, it may be considered a limitation of this study that it does not adopt one unified theoretical framework. While this limits the study's theoretical generalizability, this decision reflects the goal of explaining a specific outcome or phenomenon for the phenomenon's own sake, rather than testing a general theory. The choice of doing so has allowed me to go deeper into the case.

Lastly, the study only addresses one of the historical disputes between South Korea and Japan. While this might remove some of the other complexities around the escalation and fluctuations of the disputes, like the sovereignty dispute over the islets of Dokdo/Takeshima, selecting one specific dispute is necessary to narrow the research focus. Nonetheless, the findings of this study may still offer a broader relevance for understanding how contested history, identity politics, political leadership, and activist narratives can influence bilateral relations.

8.4. Broader Implications and Avenues for Future Research

This thesis contributes to broader debates in international relations and peace and conflict studies by highlighting how and why historical grievances can affect diplomatic tension. As Ku mentions, the realist approach in IR theory does not seem fully able to account for the involvement of non-state

actors or the irrationality in the diplomatic relationship between Japan and South Korea, which can be called a normative dispute. This analysis has shown that activism, identity politics, and leaders' ideological leanings can all play a central role in shaping bilateral relations. The 'comfort women' issue, for example, has not only become and remained salient in both South Korea and in bilateral relations with Japan due to state interests, but rather due to ongoing activist efforts, victim narratives, leader influence, and the symbolic significance of apology and historical responsibility that pertains to justice for past atrocities.

From the perspective of peace and conflict studies, this study's findings show how symbolic disputes, which are highly linked to identity, can sustain conflict dynamics just as much as material disputes in an otherwise nonviolent and stable relationship, such as South Korea-Japan relations. Tensions do not need to escalate into an armed conflict to be consequential, as this case proves through showing that norm-based conflict can be just as detrimental as it hardens diplomatic positions, which again makes reconciliation challenging and obstructs good cooperation. Furthermore, the analysis indicates that the misalignment or alignment of leaders in the countries also significantly impacts diplomatic tension.

Future research could build on the present thesis in several ways. One would be to do comparative studies of other normatively charged historical disputes, for instance between China and Japan, to see if the findings of the Korea-Japan case are applicable or whether similar patterns of leadership dynamics and activist influence occur. Another interesting avenue would be for a study to examine whether the 'comfort women' have had more impact in Japan-South Korea relations than Japan-Taiwan relations, and why that is, as both South Korea and Taiwan were colonies under Japan. Women from both countries were victims of the same system. South Korea was occupied by the Japanese Empire from 1910, and Taiwan from 1895.

Researchers could also further engage with the debates on activist civil societies' role in conflicts such as the one under study. One could contribute by furthering the understanding of the effects of NGOs and activist civil society on the reconciliation efforts of countries in a similar position to South Korea and Japan. A last avenue for future research that could be interesting would be to investigate the younger generations' relationship to the 'comfort women' issue either in South Korea or in several comparable countries that were affected by a military brothel system, to see if the plight of the 'comfort women' is remembered after all the victims have passed away.

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