

The foreign policy of South Korea towards Japan: The colonial past in the contemporary dynamics of the Park Geun-Hye, Moon Jae-In, and Yoon Suk-Yeol administrations

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ABSTRACT

Permeated by traumatic memories and claims for recognition and compensation of the colonial past, the bilateral relationship between South Korea and Japan experienced intense strains during the administrations of Park Geun-hye (2013-2017) and Moon Jae-in (2017-2022). Park stipulated that recognition of the colonial past would be a prerequisite for improving relations

with Tokyo, and the Comfort Women Agreement, unexpectedly signed, had its legitimacy challenged. During his term, Moon invalidated the Comfort Women Agreement and demanded a resolution centered on the demands of the victims, while also advocating for Japanese companies to compensate South Koreans forced to work in its facilities during the colonization. In a different panorama, the conservative government of Yoon Suk-yeol (2022-present)

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adopted a stance of restructuring the South Korea-Japan relations without criticizing the effects of colonization or seeking Japan's acknowledgment of responsibility. This research analyses how the administrations of Park, Moon, and Yoon have handled the colonial agenda in South Korea's foreign policy, resulting in either friction or rapprochement with Japan. It is argued that Park intensified historical grievances, even after the Comfort Women Agreement, due to its unsatisfactory approach. Moon, focused on healing the colonial wounds, faced diplomatic, economic and security friction amid Japan's unwillingness to revisit the past. Lastly, Yoon, in seeking reconciliation with Japan, achieved rapprochement in a tone of submission, undermining the victims' claims for justice.

Keywords: Colonial disputes; Park Geun-hye; Moon Jae-in; Yoon Suk-yeol; Japan.

La política exterior de Corea del Sur hacia Japón: el pasado colonial en la dinámica contemporánea de las administraciones de Park Geun-hye, Moon Jae-in y Yoon Suk-yeol

RESUMEN

Permeada por memorias traumáticas y reclamos de reconocimiento y compensación del pasado colonial, la relación bilateral entre

Corea del Sur y Japón experimentó tensiones intensas durante las administraciones de Park Geun-hye (2013-2017) y Moon Jae-in (2017-2022). Park estipuló que el reconocimiento del pasado colonial sería un requisito para mejorar las relaciones con Tokio, y el Acuerdo de las Mujeres de Confort, firmado inesperadamente, tuvo su legitimidad cuestionada. Durante su mandato, Moon invalidó el Acuerdo de las Mujeres de Confort y exigió una resolución centrada en las demandas de las víctimas, además de abogar para que las empresas japonesas compensaran a los surcoreanos obligados a trabajar en sus instalaciones durante la colonización. En un panorama diferente, el gobierno conservador de Yoon Suk-yeol (2022-presente) adoptó una postura de reestructurar las relaciones entre Corea del Sur y Japón sin criticar los efectos de la colonización o buscar el reconocimiento de la responsabilidad de este país. Esta investigación analiza cómo las administraciones de Park, Moon y Yoon han manejado la agenda colonial en la política exterior surcoreana, resultando en fricciones o acercamientos con Japón. Se argumenta que Park intensificó los agravios históricos, incluso después del Acuerdo de las Mujeres de Confort, debido a su enfoque insatisfactorio. Moon, centrado en sanar las heridas coloniales, enfrentó fricciones diplomáticas, económicas y de seguridad ante la negativa de Japón a visitar el pasado. Por último, Yoon, al buscar la reconciliación con Japón, logró un acercamiento en un tono de sumisión, socavando las reclamaciones de justicia de las víctimas.

Palabras clave: disputas coloniales; Park Geun-hye; Moon Jae-in; Yoon Suk-yeol; Japón.

INTRODUCTION

The colonial past, related to the effects of Japanese colonization of the Korean Peninsula between 1910 and 1945, gained increasing prominence in South Korea-Japan bilateral relations starting in 1989. This shift occurred when Seoul, within the context of national democratization, pressured Tokyo to acknowledge the violence perpetrated against the comfort women.¹ These disputes over the colonial past are multifaceted, encompassing demands for recognition and compensation for national suffering, such as the cases of comfort women and forced labor in Japanese industries from 1939 to 1945,² as well as territorial disagreements over sovereignty of the Dokdo/Takeshima islands and divergent historical narratives amid episodes of Japanese historical revisionism in political stances and textbooks (Glosserman and Snyder, 2015; Ku, 2016; Deacon, 2021).

At times, South Korea's demands for recognition and reparations for colonial effects become more intense, leading to multiple diplomatic, economic, and security impasses, depending on Japan's response. In other periods, these demands take on a more subtle nature, yet the colonial past remains a constant catalyst for weakening South Korea-Japan relations. Japan also plays a crucial role in the different outcomes of these disputes. On one hand, it can adopt a conciliatory stance, as seen in the 1993 Kōno Statement, which acknowledged its involvement in the comfort women issue and expressed apologies to the victims, and the 1995 Murayama Statement, which offered a heartfelt apology for the harmful consequences of colonization; on the other hand, Japan can resist apologizing and re-examining the colonial past (Hughes, 2015; Snyder, 2016; Tamaki, 2019), as observed during the administrations of Prime Ministers Shinzō Abe (2007-2008/2013-2020), Suga Yoshihide (2020-2021), and Fumio Kishida (2021-present), all affiliated with the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP).

In this panorama, with the colonial past as a pillar in South Korea's foreign

¹ "Comfort women" is a euphemism used to refer to women who were brutally victimized by the military sexual slavery system administered by the Empire of Japan in various regions of Asia. Between 1932 and 1945, it is estimated that approximately 200,000 girls and women were victimized, with around 80% of them being Korean (Norma, 2016).

² Amid the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945), the Empire of Japan mobilized the human resources of its conquered territories to strengthen its material resources. From 1939 to 1945, approximately 6 million Koreans were forced to work in factories, coal mines, and construction centers in Japan, under a routine characterized by violence and surveillance (Center for Historical Truth and Justice & Network for Fact Finding on Wartime Militarization and Forced Labor, 2017).

policy approaches, there was a gradual dismantling of Seoul-Tokyo relations during the administrations of Presidents Park Geun-hye (2013-2017) of the Saenuri Party and Moon Jae-in (2017-2022) of the Democratic Party of Korea (DPK). During her tenure, Park Geun-hye made the acknowledgment of colonial atrocities a prerequisite for developing a partnership with Japan (Snyder, 2016). Following United States pressures and South Korea's fear of regional isolation, only a brief period of cooperation was possible, culminating in the contested 2015 Comfort Women Agreement. Moon Jae-in, while striving to resolve historical issues and simultaneously promote future-oriented bilateral cooperation (Jae-in, 2018), faced a scenario requiring a strong stance against Japan due to a public desire to revise the Comfort Women Agreement, the Constitutional Court's decision that forced laborers should be compensated by Japanese companies, and Japan's economic retaliations against South Korea.

In contrast to these confrontations, the administration of Yoon Suk-yeol (2022-present), affiliated with the People Power Party (PPP), is in the process of reconciling South Korea-Japan relations. This period is marked by official meetings between state leaders and ministers, convergence on regional dynamics strategies, and strengthening trilateral cooperation among Seoul, Tokyo, and Washington. Under Yoon's leadership, however, efforts to heal colonial wounds have been constrained by a submissive diplomacy to Japan (Han-joo, 2023). In the name of reconciliation, Yoon's

administration has not provided adequate space for discussing the past, which is at odds with the victims' wishes and segments of the South Korean elite, as well as with the country's judicial framework.

Given the outlined context, with periods of conflict and convergence, the following question arises: how has the colonial past affected the dynamics of South Korea-Japan relations between 2013 and 2024? As an initial hypothesis, it is estimated that the issue of colonial wounds, which was central to South Korean foreign policy, especially during the administrations of Park Geun-hye and Moon Jae-in, created a context of claims, supported by victims and segments of the population, for reparations for the violence inflicted by Japan during the colonial period. This issue generated bilateral shocks ranging from diplomatic to security challenges between Seoul and Tokyo. However, in the recent context marked by the election of Yoon Suk-yeol, characterized by his pragmatism and future-oriented bilateral relationship, it is presumed that, at the expense of the justice sought by the victims and the pursuit of reconciliation with Japan regarding the colonial past, the current South Korean president has been fostering a stable and submissive relationship with the Japanese neighbor. In light of this, the main argument of this paper is that the colonial past has remained a persistent factor in the bilateral relationship due to the absence of a conducive environment for both states to formulate a reconciliation that considers the recognition and reparations for colonial wounds in accordance

with the demands of the victimized individuals and South Korea's traumatic memory.

Thus, the main objective of this article is to analyze how the administrations of Park Geun-hye, Moon Jae-in, and Yoon Suk-yeol have addressed the colonial issue in South Korea's foreign policy towards Japan, resulting in both frictions and rapprochements. Considering the unique mechanisms of each administration, three specific objectives have been formulated: 1) to demonstrate the ways in which the Park Geun-hye administration initially promoted the colonial debate, despite being marked by controversies; 2) to ascertain the manner in which Moon Jae-in's foreign policy fostered clashes with Tokyo by maintaining a victim-oriented rhetoric on colonial reparations; and 3) to examine how Yoon Suk-yeol is fostering a rapprochement with Japan while simultaneously introducing new obstacles to achieving a lasting reconciliation regarding the colonial past.

To achieve this, this qualitative research is based on a bibliographic framework composed of books and articles on the subject, supplemented by news sources that assist in tracking recent bilateral developments and internal political shifts. Additionally, given its capability to interpret diplomatic positions in different geopolitical and domestic contexts (Aron, 1996), document analysis is utilized, including official statements, bilateral agreements, and documents from the Ministries of Foreign Affairs of South Korea and Japan.

Before proceeding, it is important to highlight that the theoretical-conceptual

focus employed here is an articulation of the interaction between foreign policy, memory, the Korean collective sentiment of Han, and the power of recognition. Foreign policy is understood as the interaction wherein domestic groups exert pressure on political leaders to address and represent their interests, while leaders choose whether to meet these internal demands, all while attempting to minimize potential adverse effects of their decisions on the international stage (Putnam, 1988). In a complex interplay between the International System and the domestic state sphere, exogenous factors can also outweigh national influences in shaping foreign policy strategies (Chaudoin *et al.*, 2015).

In contemporary debates about the colonial past, such as in South Korea-Japan relations, memory becomes relevant as it negotiates what should remain in the past and what should find space in the present (Rahman, 2015). This facilitates the understanding of the "self" and "we," both as individuals and as groups, based on what aspects of the past are remembered and what is forgotten (Zehfuss, 2007). South Korean memory has a unique characteristic known as Han. According to Kim (2017), Han encapsulates the sufferings and pains of a collective traumatic past within a communal sentiment of sorrow, grief, resentment, and anger, fostering horizontal connections of empathy and solidarity in the face of a traumatic past that must not be forgotten.

In this aspect, when South Korea demands recognition and claims compensation for the colonial past, it reacts to the

pains and effects of a harmful history on its population's collective memory. Recognition of the past allows the perpetrator state to build conditions for its own national pride (Ahmed, 2014), and it becomes essential for the victimized state to gain the right to exist under its own respected national identity (Greenhill, 2008), ensuring that historical grievances do not perpetuate in political and communal frameworks. This facilitates understanding the mobilizing potential of colonial past demands within South Korea's foreign policy towards Japan and their importance for jointly overcoming a traumatic colonial past.

PARK GEUN-HYE'S APPROACH TO JAPAN: HISTORICAL COLONIAL GRIEVANCES AND CONTROVERSIES

To analyze the conduct of Park Geun-hye's foreign policy towards Japan, it is necessary to understand the domestic and international context she inherited from her predecessor, Lee Myung-bak (2008-2013), a member of the Grand National Party. During Lee's administration, on August 30, 2011, the Constitutional Court of South Korea declared, by a vote of 6 to 3, the inadequacy of Section 1 of Article 2 of the Agreement on the Settlement of Problems Concerning Property and Claims and on

Economic Co-operation,³ signed in 1965, in light of the normalization of relations between Seoul and Tokyo. The Court also declared the South Korean government's inaction in seeking compensation for the damages inflicted on comfort women by Japan to be unconstitutional (Constitutional Court of Korea, 2011).

This decision was highly significant because, at the time of the agreement's signing, the involvement of the Japanese government in comfort stations was not formally acknowledged. This made it problematic to deny contemporary claims of the victimized women. Moreover, there was an unequal power dynamic between Japan and South Korea, which prevented sensitive topics from being negotiated, and the authoritarian government of Park Chung-hee (1961-1979) had prioritized state economic interests over individual claims affected by colonization.

Consequently, the court's action contributed to questioning the international legal framework of bilateral normalization, based on the false overcoming of the colonial past solely for the sake of state interests. Considering Butler's (2004) reflections, in which some lives are more grievable than others, it allowed us to perceive how the former Korean colonial subjects, in a historically and ontologically violent manner,

³ It states that the "problem concerning property, rights and interests of the two Contracting Parties and their nationals (including juridical persons) and concerning claims between the Contracting Parties and their nationals is settled completely and finally" (Agreement on the Settlement of Problems Concerning Property and Claims and on Economic Co-operation, 1965, n. p.).

had their conditions of existence denied, making them ungrievable and even unable to seek reparations due to the lack of recognition of their experiences by both South Korea and Japan for decades.

Following this decision, several significant events illustrated how the colonial past was causing deep contemporary shocks. Domestically, on December 14, 2011, during the thousandth week of protests held every Wednesday since 1992, a bronze statue representing a girl victimized by the Japanese sexual slavery system was placed in front of the Japanese Embassy in Seoul. With its Han and memory symbolism, the statue demonstrated how a segment of the South Korean population harbored colonial resentments and mobilized in favor of the victimized women by the Japanese sex slave system, whose demands needed urgent attention. With the perpetuation of South Korean reparations movements, it is interesting to note how these acts have also acquired a psycho-geopolitical character, driven also by a mobilizing melancholy that engages the population both physically and politically (Lee, 2022).

From the Japanese political sphere, in 2012, Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda (2011-2012) engaged in a revisionism approach by asserting that there was no evidence of Japanese military involvement in promoting sexual slavery during World War II (1939-1945) (Hyun-kyung, 2012). Lee Myung-bak also contributed to the deterioration of bilateral relations by using the colonial past as a nationalist platform to restore his prestige following corruption

controversies in his government. Lee visited the disputed Dokdo/Takeshima islands, whose sovereignty is contested by Seoul and Tokyo, and even declared that the Japanese emperor would not be welcome in South Korea unless he apologized for the comfort women issue (Tatsumi, 2020). This animosity, present among segments of the South Korean population and elite, also led to the cancellation of the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) that could have been signed with Japan.

It was amid this tension that Park Geun-hye, affiliated with the Saenuri Party, participated in and won the 2012 presidential election. Benefiting from the political personality cult surrounding her father, Park Chung-hee, in her campaign, Park advocated for the strengthening of a developmental state and was seen as a solution to issues such as declining economic growth and increasing inequality (Doucette, 2017). The Japanese government under Shinzō Abe, characterized by conservatism, revisionism, and militarization in building a “beautiful Japan” (Carletti and Dias, 2020), was considered by Park as promoting a possible reincarnation of Japanese ultranationalism (Sohn, 2019). Combining her perceptions and the bilateral tensions inflamed during Lee Myung-bak’s administration, Park Geun-hye’s proposed foreign policy for Asia considered Japan’s colonial past as an obstacle to be overcome.

Snyder (2016) analyzed that in an “Asian Paradox” considering South Korea’s geopolitical and economic vulnerabilities, Park Geun-hye aimed to resolve the

following regional impediments: 1) anti-colonialism towards Japan, where the recognition of colonial effects and Japanese reparations were prerequisites for bilateral relations; 2) combating North Korean communism through “trustpolitik”; and 3) seeking alternatives to the “shrimp between whales” paradigm, where South Korea lacked freedom of action against powers like China and the United States.

Still, for the development of relations between Seoul and Tokyo, Park Geun-hye, who initially sought to revisit the past to address its contemporary effects, faced the challenge of Shinzō Abe’s government moving in the opposite direction. Abe represented the nationalist desire to restore Japan’s dignity, supposedly threatened by a history recognizing the brutality of Japan’s imperial past. In a patriotic, conservative, and revisionist spectrum, episodes such as Abe’s official visit to the ultranationalist Yasukuni Shinto shrine on December 26, 2013, and, between 2013 and 2014, Chief Cabinet Secretary Suga Yoshihide arguing that the Kōno and Murayama Statements needed new studies to verify their facts, exemplify this trend (Hughes, 2015).

Given that symbolic state acts related to recognition and respect for the past can influence public opinion and foreign policy trends (Honneth, 2010), Japan’s conduct was interpreted by the South Korean elite as insincere and that it confirmed issues of colonization, which, in turn, infuriated the Japanese elite amid such criticisms (Tamaki, 2019). Therefore, the bilateral panorama was one where Park Geun-hye

highlighted Japanese colonial violences and South Korea reaffirmed Japan’s insincerity; while Shinzō Abe refused to apologize for the past and used these disputes to foster a narrative of Japan being victimized by these accusations (Sohn, 2019).

Amid these clashes and divergent historical-temporal priorities, bilateral meetings and cooperation between Park and Abe were suspended. However, in March 2014, former United States President Barack Obama (2012-2017), concerned about how South Korea-Japan bilateral disputes could negatively affect his country’s interests and involvement in Asia, organized a summit on the sidelines of the Nuclear Security Summit in The Hague, bringing together Park Geun-hye and Shinzō Abe to strengthen their alliances. In this meeting, marking the first official high-level meeting between these South Korean and Japanese leaders, and engineered by a crucial security partner, Seoul and Tokyo agreed to address differences over the comfort women issue through periodic meetings between their foreign ministries (Rozman, 2016).

Beyond American impetus, the rapprochement between South Korea and Japan also became important for Park Geun-hye when Shinzō Abe, who consistently portrayed China as a military threat during his administration, met with Chinese President Xi Jinping (2013-present) in November 2014. Despite territorial disputes, regional rivalry, and the historical legacy of Japanese occupation in China, this act indicated a regional scenario conducive to mending ties and the possibility of

Park being excluded from potential regional cooperation involving Japan and China.

As a result of the fleeting disposition to cooperate, in November 2015, South Korea and Japan celebrated the signing of the GSOMIA. Additionally, unexpectedly, on December 28, they signed the Comfort Women Agreement, which, as stated by Fumio Kishida, the then Foreign Minister of Japan, conveyed an apology from Shinzō Abe to the women affected by the immense pain and suffering caused by the comfort system; acknowledged the involvement of Japanese military authorities in the comfort women issue; mandated the creation of a foundation to support the victimized women with funding from the Japanese government; and declared the irreversibility and official closure of the issue, with both nations agreeing not to criticize each other on this matter in the international community (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2015).

Indeed, when a state acknowledges the suffering inflicted upon a group, particularly with an official apology, it can pave the way for victims to forgive the perpetrator and build fruitful relationships (Lind, 2008). It also allows the recognized pain to create a political space for the healing of deep wounds (Ahmed, 2014), which could, for example, alleviate the Han sentiment and traumatic memory. However, to foster lasting reconciliation and avoid intense questioning, this declaration and its measures should have gone far beyond. The South Korean population's reception of the declaration was negative, highlighting the

following reasons: 1) no woman victimized by the Japanese military sexual slavery system was informed or participated in the negotiations; 2) the Japanese government admitted only moral, not legal, responsibility, while Kishida stated that Japan's investment in the support foundation was not a formal compensation; 3) South Korea refrained from seeking a dignified resolution for the victimized women, while Japan only had to disburse a financial amount without committing to future measures, such as officially remembering the colonial pains periodically and presenting this issue in history classes (Chun, 2019). The perception was that Park Geun-hye was unable to address the pains of the comfort women towards an effective overcoming of the colonial past, and the Comfort Women Agreement was a pragmatic rapprochement measure shaped exclusively by state interests and desires.

Motivated by the mobilization around colonial issues provided by Han's property and the memory of a colonial past that must be repaired, this agreement was harshly retaliated by the South Korean population. On December 30, 2016, a statue representing a girl victimized by the comfort system was erected in front of the Japanese Consulate in Busan. Since Shinzō Abe had already risked losing support from his more conservative political base after the agreement, official responses to colonial matters were stricter. As retaliation, Suga Yoshihide presented this South Korean act as extremely regrettable for the progress of South Korea-Japan relations, and in January 2017, the

consul in Busan and the ambassador in Seoul returned to Japan, as well as high-level bilateral economic dialogues were postponed (Luu, 2017).

Domestically, Park Geun-hye was already facing harsh criticism for neglecting the families of the victims of the Sewol ferry disaster in 2014, which mostly involved students, and for denying public funding to cultural figures who criticized her administration. Nonetheless, the corruption scandal involving the president, her friend Choi Soon-sil, and chaebols like Samsung in October 2016 accelerated her downfall (Doucette, 2017). Between her removal from office on December 9, 2016, and her impeachment in March 2017, little could be done in terms of international affairs amid a national crisis marked by successive popular protests and distrust in South Korea's political and economic system. It would be up to Moon Jae-in, the country's new president and a member of the DPK, to build a foreign policy towards Japan that reflected the demands of the South Korean population.

THE MOON JAE-IN ADMINISTRATION: THE DEEPENING OF THE CRISIS IN SOUTH KOREA-JAPAN RELATIONS

Starting his government on May 10, 2017, Moon Jae-in's political decisions and diplomatic maneuvers were influenced by the civic engagement of South Korea's population. This domestic spirit was encouraged by the Candlelight Movement, which fostered a broad public consensus on the need

for a transparent government responsive to citizen demands, as well as for political and economic redefinition (Delury, 2018). Projecting the image of a leader ready for these challenges in his inaugural address to the nation, Moon emphasized that South Korea's greatness would come from its people, that regardless of who voted for him he would be the president for all, promoting genuine unity and governing at eye level with the people, and that he would eliminate authoritarian presidential practices (Jae-in, 2017).

Regarding this last point, it is important to note that in the realm of foreign policy, despite the continued interest in strengthening South Korea-United States relations, certain reforms in international engagement were proposed by Moon Jae-in in contrast to Park Geun-hye's decisions. In this regard, Moon's international reshape process involved: restoring trust with China after the signing of the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) in 2016; reopening the Kaesong Industrial Complex, shared with North Korea until 2016 and considered an important space for promoting inter-Korean dialogue; and building a neutral but functional relationship with Japan.

Despite that, before any steps could be taken toward building this South Korea-Japan relationship, Moon Jae-in's foreign policy needed to undergo a new analysis of the 2015 Comfort Women Agreement. This process would be not only influenced by the progressive South Korean political wing's tendency to critically address the issues of

the colonial past and consider that Japan never sincerely apologized for its violent acts during this period (Park, 2020), but also by the critical voice of public opinion (Chun, 2019).

Thus, on July 31, 2017, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Korea initiated the Task Force on the Review of the Korea-Japan Agreement on the Issue of “Comfort Women” Victims. Published on December 27, 2017, it concluded that: 1) the victim-centered approach was not sufficiently incorporated in the comfort women consultation process, and the Agreement was treated as if it were a common diplomatic issue; 2) aiming for bilateral summit meetings to have no setbacks on the comfort women issue and facing changes in the international context, Park Geun-hye’s diplomatic conduct exacerbated relations with Japan, in a confusing manner and without considering historical aspects; 3) public opinion was not listened to and incorporated into bilateral talks; 4) and finally, it was not possible to properly implement the system of modifying or adjusting policy directions in changing circumstances due to the lack of communication between Park Geun-hye, the negotiators, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Korea, 2017).

As a counterpoint, on the same day, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan stated that the report criticized the Comfort Women Agreement to the point of putting it in doubt and that the negotiation process could not have its legitimacy questioned or

revised as it was conducted between both governments (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2017). In an opposite direction, understanding the state as a protector of victims’ rights, for Moon Jae-in (2018), despite there being an agreement between South Korea and Japan, it was necessary to untangle a wrong knot towards a path based on truth, justice, and restoring the dignity and honor of the victims. Bohyun Kim (2022) argued that the “victim-centered approach” would be the main orientation advocated by Moon’s government, conceptualizing his administration’s role as protector of the victims, a civil collaborator, and capable of reshaping the diplomatic stance in accordance with civil demands.

In 2018, the colonial past as a driver of clashes between Moon Jae-in’s and Shinzō Abe’s foreign policies intensified following the South Korean decision to dissolve the Reconciliation and Healing Foundation, which in practice represented the rejection of the Comfort Women Agreement, and the Constitutional Court of Korea’s requirement that Japan should compensate four individuals forced to work in Japanese factories during colonization. Regarding this second occurrence, while Japan stated it was regrettable and resolved since bilateral normalization in 1965 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2018), Moon Jae-in supported the legal decision (Phillips *et al.*, 2019). While the effectiveness of forgiveness involves factors such as national interests, international context, authenticity of apologies, and is influenced by the passage of

time (Auerbach, 2004), it was observed that both administrations were undermining any paths that could lead to reconciliation.

On one side, these opposing positions illustrated how South Korea's national identity is constructed in the role of victim, while Japan, depicted as a denier of past recognition, becomes a continuous identity threat; on the other side, the Japanese identity, while seeking to deny the relevance of contemporary debates and claims against past imperialist actions, views the South Korean state as emotional and irrational (Deacon, 2021). Furthermore, South Korean actions confirmed the perception of part of the Japanese political body that South Korea was not ready to overcome the colonial past toward a future-oriented diplomacy (Tamaki, 2019).

Ontologically and geopolitically negative for both, the intensification of these opposing stances can perpetuate traumatic characteristics that solidify deep identity antagonisms (Hutchison and Bleiker, 2015) and, especially for South Korea, transform the colonial wound into an identity (Ahmed, 2014), continuously embedding its traumatic memory and pain in the present, thus complicating reconciliation processes. Additionally, considering Honneth's (1992) reflections on the relationship between integrity, disrespect, and recognition, the lack of acknowledgment and reparations by Japan, regarding the women who were sexually violated and the forced laborers who suffered both physically and psychologically, contributes, as an additional form of violence, to the violation of

their intersubjective expectations of being recognized as subjects with moral accountability, in contrast to the feeling of dishonor—which, within the context of the Han sentiment, will further fuel the mobilization of the South Korean population.

Gradually, maintaining the colonial rhetoric with dissonant positions would stimulate disruptive effects in bilateral relations. In the economic sphere, in June 2019, during the G20 meeting in Osaka, Japan, Moon Jae-in and Shinzō Abe did not hold official talks. Conversely, on that same month, the Japanese state decided to restrict the export of essential chemical materials to South Korea, justifying that national security could be at risk given the growing distrust between Tokyo and Seoul, and the suspicion that the South Korean state allowed these sensitive materials to be sent to Pyongyang (Pollmann, 2019). Although Shinzō Abe officially denied that these reprisals were motivated by maintaining the forced labor lawsuit, messages between reporters and Japanese Foreign Ministry officials suggested that both issues were intertwined (Glosserman, 2020).

Deacon (2021) noted that South Korea interpreted the Japanese action as performing aggressive behavior with colonial remnants, in which, as a victim, the country should resist unitedly, as advocated by Moon Jae-in. In this sequence, disagreeing with the Japanese justification and asserting that this position was motivated by judicial disputes, South Korea appealed to the World Trade Organization. In August 2019, the trade dispute was inflamed by South

Korea's exclusion from Japan's list of special partners, which consequently prompted Moon Jae-in to do the same. In a complex context of politicizing historical issues accompanied by economic and historical-emotional animosity in which Shinzō Abe's attitudes fit, there was intense mobilization of the South Korean population, which, in an anti-Japan patriotic movement, while again illustrating the mobilizing nature of the Han sentiment, promoted deep boycotts of Japanese products, services, and even tourism.

Bilateral security cooperation also suffered instabilities, as Japan's declaration that South Korea was not a reliable state led Moon Jae-in to announce that he would not renew the GSOMIA, in a diplomatic maneuver estimating that the American President Donald Trump (2017-2021) would pressure Abe to lift economic restrictions (Lukin, 2019). Frustrating South Korean expectations, the United States pointed to South Korea as the creator of disputes with Japan. As a result, in November 2019, Moon ended up signing the continuation of the GSOMIA, and Abe decided to lift a third of the trade restrictions.

With diplomatic channels worn out, even the expansion of the COVID-19 pandemic, one of the greatest contemporary challenges that tested the capacity for effective cooperation between states, failed to promote rapprochement between Seoul and Tokyo. After all, their leaders were more concerned with domestic issues, such as the upcoming 2021 South Korean elections, and for Japan, not only rescheduling the

Paralympics and Olympics, but also seeking political stability for the new Prime Minister Suga Yoshihide, who came to power after Shinzō Abe resigned due to health issues.

At the beginning of his tenure as United States President, Joe Biden (2021-present) emphasized that his Indo-Pacific diplomacy would be built with countries that share common values, signaling to South Korea the possible importance of aligning more closely with American and Japanese nations, as well as the importance of avoiding strategic decisions that flirt with Chinese interests (Snyder, 2021). Reflecting this, Moon adopted a flexible stance towards Japan by acknowledging in January 2021 the legality of the still flawed 2015 Comfort Women Agreement and stating that the implementation of 2018 Constitutional Court decision was not in South Korea's national interest (Togo, 2021).

In such a strained bilateral relationship, these gestures were not reciprocated by Japan and only demonstrated how South Korean foreign policy was influenced by United States geopolitical strategies to the extent that the pursuit of reparations was even relegated to a secondary priority. Episodes such as the cancellation of the summit between Moon and Suga after the South Korean president was insulted by a senior Japanese diplomat (Al Jazeera, 2021) and the offering of tributes to the Yasukuni shrine by Fumio Kishida, who began his term as prime minister in September 2021 and took several days longer than his predecessor to have the first phone call

with Moon (Rinna, 2021), announced that bilateral reconciliation, at that moment and negotiated with that South Korean leadership, was not a priority for Tokyo.

**YOON SUK-YEOL AND THE
RECONSTRUCTION OF RELATIONS
BETWEEN SOUTH KOREA AND JAPAN:
AT THE EXPENSE OF THE COLONIAL DEBATE**

On March 9, 2022, South Korea held its tightly contested presidential election, marked by the victory of conservative candidate Yoon Suk-yeol of the PPP over Lee Jae-myung of the DPK, with a narrow margin of about 0.8 percentage points (Hyun-woo, 2022). The key factors that contributed to Yoon Suk-yeol's victory included: 1) Moon Jae-in's difficulty in ensuring social justice amid his limited domestic achievements related to intense house price inflation, which doubled in five years in Seoul, family debt and significant unemployment among young people; 2) the centrist candidate Ahn Cheol-soo's withdrawal, whose electoral projection was 7 percentage points just days before the election, in favor of Yoon, while the progressive vote remained split in support of Justice Party candidate Sim Sang-jung; and 3) the emblematic capitalization of anti-feminist sentiment (Dostal, 2023; Dias, 2022).

Considering the recent bilateral dynamics between South Korea and Japan, with one of the triggers for tensions being the comfort women issue, it is crucial to analyze Yoon Suk-yeol's electoral rhetoric, which ignored the structural gender inequalities

in his country. In his speeches, Yoon, for instance, blamed the feminist movement for the country's low birth rate and did not acknowledge the existence of gender discrimination (Gunia, 2022). Domestically, Yoon also declared his intention to abolish the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family, arguing that this institution only addressed challenges faced by women and deepened inequalities toward men (Delhay, 2022).

However, South Korean society indeed grapples with gender inequality, being ranked 102nd globally in terms of the gender gap in 2021 (World Economic Forum, 2021), and its women earned 31.1% less relative to the median earnings of men (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, n.d.). In such a tight electoral race, these out-of-touch proposals had a strategic target: securing the votes of men in their 20s and 30s. With approximately 58% of men in their twenties and around 52.8% of men in their thirties voting for Yoon Suk-yeol (Suzuki, 2022), it was clear that his electoral strategy was successful.

How was this possible? In her research on the *idaenam*, young men in their twenties who were once drawn to progressive causes but have become conservative and anti-feminist, Mandy Chan (2023) identified that these youths, affected by socio-economic inequalities and a competitive neo-liberal landscape, embraced right-wing populist anti-feminism as a way to counter perceived structural injustices that placed men at a disadvantage or in a situation of

“reverse discrimination”. In this context, Han Jung (2023) noted that beyond anti-feminism, young South Korean men tend to believe in a male-victim ideology, where they see themselves as oppressed by feminism rather than socially privileged due to their gender. Thus, the populist discourse of this candidate was able to co-opt the feeling of marginalization and the perceived need for male empowerment, ensuring his election.

Considered an outsider to traditional politics, having built his career as a prosecutor general and lacking a background in foreign policy, the international insertion paths presented by Yoon Suk-yeol were based on a strong ideological and geopolitical alignment with the United States and a “value diplomacy” rooted in freedom, the rule of law, democracy, and human rights. His foreign policy took a pro-Washington stance in the United States-China rivalry, designating Beijing as a coercive and economically retaliatory state (Han and Lee, 2022), and advocated for peace through harsh measures towards North Korea, including American military cooperation, and reinforced denuclearization through trilateral security cooperation among Seoul, Washington, and Tokyo (Pardo *et al.*, 2022; Choi, 2023).

In this context of alignment with the United States and a focus on regional security and economic cooperation, South Korea, in its approach to embracing closer ties with Japan with a forward-looking orientation, adopted an international approach where historical grievances were less intense

and critical from the executive’s perspective. This stance by Yoon Suk-yeol reminds us that memory, also as a field of contestation, is always alive and continuously (re) constructed, in a process of successive revitalizations, distortions, remembrances, and forgetting (Nora, 1993), with the content that may be reflected in foreign policy being chosen by decision-makers. Furthermore, as highlighted by Rahman (2015), in societies that have faced a violent past, where brutal events were silenced—such as the effects of Japanese colonization on the Korean Peninsula—the conception of collective memory is impacted by the difficulty of merging multiple individual memory fragments into a coherent collective memory narrative, and secondly, by the challenge of deciding how, if necessary, the past will be redressed.

As a reflection of Yoon’s approach and as a symbolic opportunity to improve bilateral relations, Fumio Kishida received an official delegation sent by the South Korean president in Tokyo in April 2022. On this occasion, considering variables such as Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, China’s growing assertiveness, and North Korea’s threats with nuclear and missile capabilities, Kishida stated that strategic cooperation with the South Korean partner, as well as trilaterally between Seoul, Tokyo, and Washington, was more needed than ever (Kyodo News, 2022).

During visits to both countries in May of the same year, the support and pressure from United States President Joe Biden in rebuilding trilateral cooperation were emphasized. As a result of these official

meetings, the summits that the United States held separately with South Korea and Japan resulted in a common agreement that trilateral cooperation, especially in the security realm, should be strengthened. This also led to a meeting of the three foreign ministers and, in June, a meeting of those countries' defense ministers, focusing on North Korea's military developments (Choi, 2023). In an environment conducive to rapprochement between South Korea and Japan, it is noteworthy how American actions, attentive to their regional insertion in Asia through their leading allies, exert intense influence for bilateral and trilateral cooperation to be consummated.

In this direction, March 2023 marked a milestone for rebuilding the functionality of the bilateral relationship between Seoul and Tokyo, as Yoon Suk-yeol, before his trip to Washington, made the first official visit by a South Korean president to Japan since 2011. During his two-day official visit, Yoon met with influential figures from Japan's conservative political scene, such as former Prime Ministers Suga Yoshihide and Taro Aso, as well as reaffirmed the operability of the GSOMIA with Fumio Kishida, embraced a shared security agenda focused on North Korea, and emphasized the importance of trilateral cooperation, including with China (Sneider, 2023).

Amidst the amicable relations between these leaders, the trilateral summit at Camp David, Maryland, United States, in August of the same year, became feasible, in a special effort by Joe Biden to institutionalize cooperation among these countries. In

an official statement from this meeting, aimed at legitimizing unity and coordinated actions among its partners, Yoon Suk-yeol and Fumio Kishida were praised for renewing their bonds of friendship and committing to expanding their cooperation trilaterally and raising new horizons across the Indo-Pacific and beyond, with objectives such as providing a resilient economy, supporting an international order based on the rule of law, and bolstering regional and global peace and security (which involves a keen eye on China, North Korea, Russia and stability in the Taiwan Strait) (The White House, 2023).

Despite notable advances in restructuring diplomacy between South Korea and Japan, an element essential for the solid maintenance and quality of this bilateral relationship beyond the current governments was missing: the pursuit of reparations and reconciliation for colonial wounds. Advocating for a "comprehensive approach" that aims to simultaneously address pending historical, economic, and security issues, Yoon's strategy did not counter the Japanese position on colonial matters (Choi, 2023), prioritizing the restoration of the bilateral relationship and not adopting substantive measures on colonial grievances of public interest.

Regarding the forced labor issue, Yoon presented a plan in 2023 that opposed Moon Jae-in's government's position, which was in line with the South Korean Constitutional Court decision. On one hand, Yoon's proposal suggested creating a foundation funded by South Korean private sources

to compensate those Korean laborers; on the other, for Japan, the financial donation from companies would be voluntary, and no apology or formal compensation would be required. While the Japanese government welcomed this proposal and Biden hailed it as a groundbreaking new chapter for both Asian countries, the measure faced backlash from the public and was considered a disgraceful act by the political opposition (ABC News, 2023).

On the issue of wartime sex abuses, while Yoon Suk-yeol acknowledges the 2015 Comfort Women Agreement, social demands for compensation and reparations on this issue have not ceased. Moreover, in November 2023, the Seoul High Court, contrary to the Japanese state's immunity previously guaranteed by the Seoul Central District Court in 2021, ordered Japan to compensate the women victimized by the comfort system (Cornelssen, 2024). In response, Japanese Foreign Minister Yoko Kamikawa characterized the ruling as contrary to agreements between the two nations and strongly urged South Korea to remedy its breaches of international law (Shin, 2023). No contest was made by the South Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

It is evident that Yoon Suk-yeol's administration is making efforts to adopt a South Korea-Japan relationship where the colonial past is even silenced and not an obstacle, without, however, planning and successfully implementing a reconciliation process. On August 15, 2023, an instance illustrating this argument was Yoon's speech, met with public outrage,

during Korea's National Liberation Day, commemorating Korea's liberation from Japanese colonial rule. At the conclusion of his speech, which omitted the ongoing historical grievances, the President designated Japan as a partner sharing universal values and pursuing common interests that through forward-looking cooperation would contribute to global peace and prosperity (Yeol, 2023).

Instead of seeking to heal South Korea from its colonial wounds, intensely mobilized by the Han sentiment, traumatic memory, and obstacles to achieving reparations and recognition, Yoon chooses not to give due attention to the contemporary traumas that are part of his country's national construction. In this discursive approach, reflected in the contemporary South Korea's foreign policy, it is valuable to highlight Hutchison's (2016) contribution, emphasizing that narratives can: 1) be used as a powerful linguistic and symbolic tool capable of shaping interpretations and legitimizing diplomacy strategies, as well as generating a sense of belonging necessary for the configuration of a community; and also 2) by narrating traumatic experiences, reconnect victims with the social world and allow them to regain their sense of normalcy. However, amid the clash between the future-oriented narrative proposed by Yoon Suk-yeol and the colonial traumas unaddressed by reparative strategies, South Korean victims once again experience a form of violence, this time inflicted by their own state. These further fuels the mobilizing aspect of the Han sentiment, making

reconciliation between South Korea and Japan over colonial wounds increasingly complex and distant.

Domestically, Yoon's handling of his relationship with Japan has been criticized by the public and the opposition, which considers it a "submissive diplomacy" (Han-joo, 2023). Even the "value diplomacy," which led to a greater orientation with the United States and, consequently, Japan, is problematized given that the focus on strengthening trilateral cooperation resulted in economic consequences such as the largest South Korean trade deficit with China in monthly and annual terms and distanced North Korea through its inflexible approach to dialogues (Hyeong-cheol, 2023). In a sign of rejection of his conservative agenda and a possible domestic end, the PPP garnered only 108 seats in the April 2024 National Assembly elections, while the DPK secured 187, almost the number needed to overturn presidential vetoes (200) (Friedhoff, 2024). In this scenario of greater difficulty in passing domestic reforms, it is essential to closely monitor how Yoon will seek benefits from his international policy and whether a constant and growing domestic disapproval will lead him to recalibrate his foreign policy toward Japan.

CONCLUSION

In the early years of her government, Park Geun-hye deepened the antagonism between South Korea and Japan by advocating for the recognition of colonial injustices as a cornerstone for any bilateral

cooperation. However, under American pressure and the fear of regional isolation, in a controversial move against colonial reconciliation, the disputed Comfort Women Agreement was signed with Japan. It was observed that Park's government, instead of fostering a conducive space for bilateral reconciliation on colonial matters, intensified the conflict by failing to create a political space for reconciliation and healing of colonial wounds that included, primarily, the sexually enslaved women. Additionally, the government did not secure Japanese apologies deemed authentic and sincere in accordance with the unaddressed demands of the victims and the mobilized population. Through her approach to the Comfort Women Agreement, which was inadequate to collective memory and South Korean claims, new obstacles were introduced, such as the escalation of Han sentiment and its mobilizations, as well as Japan's skepticism about whether apologizing or addressing the colonial past with South Korea would be advantageous or only lead to further strain.

When Moon Jae-in revisited the Comfort Women Agreement, structuring his foreign policy according to the wishes of a mobilized segment of the population and the victimized women who were excluded from the negotiations, he delegitimized the reconciliation effort, albeit flawed, that had been developed between South Korea and Japan. This decision, combined with Moon's support for the 2018 Constitutional Court ruling that Japanese industries should compensate forced laborers, intensified Japan's

resistance to apologizing for the colonial past. As Tokyo economically retaliated against Seoul, bilateral antagonism introduced new points of strain, including South Korean anti-Japan national movements and economic, diplomatic, and security clashes, creating a profound set of bilateral tensions. From a reconciliation perspective, the promotion of traumatic memory, the pain of unacknowledged colonial wounds, and South Korean victim identity strained an environment of reduced willingness for constructive discussions and heightened South Korean public sentiment of injustice.

With the election of Yoon Suk-yeol, it became clear how the claim and reconciliation of the colonial past depend on the executive's eagerness to address this discussion, even in the face of resistance from the population and intense criticism from the political opposition. In the name of rapprochement between South Korea and Japan, the critical debate on the colonial past found no space, leading to the exacerbation of Han sentiment, which further complicates the achievement of adequate reparations proposals. Instead, Yoon Suk-yeol and Fumio Kishida, supported by President Joe Biden, converged on security issues in response to regional geopolitics and enabled trilateral cooperation between South Korea, Japan, and the United States, in a development unseen in years.

However, by choosing not to address the colonial past in line with the demands and memory of the population and the victimized individuals, South Korea's foreign policy towards Japan harmed its own people

and was redirected from a critical claim to a submissive aspect with intense alignment on security geopolitical matters. It is concluded that such a position makes Seoul build a fragile rapprochement with Japan, which may collapse in the face of future proposals for colonial past reconciliation that minimally and especially engage with the memory, resentments, and demands of the victimized individuals, as well as a segment of the South Korean population and elite.

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