**Introduction**

The current relationship between Japan and South Korea traces back to over a century, shaped by a series of historic events that has left lasting scars on the Korean Peninsula. The most prominent is Japan's colonization of Korea, which began in 1910 and lasted until the end of World War II in 1945. During this 35-year period, the Koreans endured systematic exploitation and cultural erasure under Japanese rule. The Japanese government enforced assimilation policies that restricted the use of the Korean language in public spaces and banned the teaching of Korean history in schools, replacing it with narratives that glorified Japanese imperial achievements. Alongside these policies, Japanese authorities seized land, resources, and industry, forcing Koreans into labor to fuel Japan's growing empire. This occupation has led to the continuation of grievances in South Korea, where memories of trauma both to selves and loved ones remain deeply in the national consciousness. One of the most controversial moments of Japan's occupation was the exploitation of Korean women, who were coerced or deceived into becoming "comfort women" for the Japanese military. During World War II, tens of thousands of women from Korea, as well as other parts of Asia, were systematically trafficked and forced into sexual slavery for Japanese soldiers. The treatment of these women—who often lived in deplorable conditions and endured severe physical and emotional abuse—has become a symbolic issue in the wider discourse on Japan's historical accountability. Although Japan has made various attempts to address its history through formal apologies, economic aid, and limited compensation funds, critics argue that these efforts lack the consistency and moral weight necessary to achieve true justice.

This inconsistency has created a division between Japan and Korea, where many still feel that their suffering has not been adequately recognized. Consequently, calls for reparations

persist, leading to a polarized debate around the role and nature of reparations in international relations. As a result, there have been many groups involved in this debate, from scholars of history and ethics, human rights organizations, to political figures in Japan and other East Asian nations, public society in both Korea and Japan, and groups representing wartime victims—where each group has approached the issue from a unique perspective. Many of these viewpoints on how Japan can properly give reparations to Korea have been diverse—ranging from demands for formal apologies and monetary compensation to calls for more symbolic actions such as public recognition and education about the atrocities. Some advocate for a broader recognition of the issue on the international stage, aiming to raise awareness about the suffering of these women and the lingering impact on their descendants. Others suggest that reparations should be framed as a means of healing and reconciliation, rather than as a punitive measure.

As a Korean citizen myself, who has always listened to stories about Japan's war crimes growing up, and in some sense, learned to have an "enemy"-like mindset towards Japan, especially their government, has led me to always believe that Japan has not done enough to compensate. However, although always claiming Japan has fallen short to retribute, I have never fully considered what steps the country could take to do so. Through the analysis of multiple scholarly critiques on many past efforts from Japan and Korean to negotiate reconciliations, as well as how they relate to "international standards" and a global consensus on what proper reparations entail, in this paper I argue that the issue of comfort women presents a new political relation and diplomatic concern that cannot be resolved based off of current understandings of reparation techniques and that the bilateral governments must create a new system. While a new mode of amends is being puzzled out—with the possibility of no working solution, the only

possible “resolution” for the two countries is to agree to disagree—Japan first must continue to acknowledge and accept their wrongdoings, and refrain from opposing or undermining the efforts of other countries and international bodies that express support for the comfort women. They must also continue to take steps to at least satisfy the global consensus for reparations, which they have not yet done. On the other hand, Korea must begin to adopt a more proactive political stance geared towards Japan’s government rather than Japan’s society as a whole.

**History, Context, and Definitions**

To understand why the comfort women issue is such an important topic, one must grasp the severity of the atrocities committed during its operation and the broader implications for historical accountability and justice. The “comfort women” system, established by the Japanese Imperial Army, operated from 1932 to 1945 as a state-sponsored form of militarized sexual slavery targeting women from Japan’s occupied territories, primarily Korea, China, Taiwan, and Southeast Asia. An estimated 200,000 women—many of whom were Korean and minors—were forced into “comfort stations,” enduring repeated sexual assaults under appalling conditions. These women were often deceived with false promises of legitimate employment, abducted, or coerced into service, and their lives in these stations were marked by violence, lack of freedom, and severe physical and psychological trauma (United States Institute of Peace). Survivors describe the brutality they faced, with one recounting how her captors treated her as “less than human,” forcing her into acts that caused lifelong emotional and physical scars. Even after the war, survivors faced societal ostracism due to the stigma associated with their experiences, compounding their suffering and leaving them isolated and marginalized.

The origins of the system reveal a calculated effort by the Japanese military to institutionalize sexual violence. Although the exact timing of the first comfort station remains uncertain due to the destruction of many official records after Japan's 1945 surrender, documents suggest that the first station was established in Shanghai in 1932 (Ramaj 479). By 1937, the comfort women system was formalized as a "general policy rule" by Japanese military leadership, who oversaw the establishment and management of these stations across the empire's territories. While the official rationale for this system was to prevent Japanese soldiers from committing mass rapes of local civilians and to reduce the risk of rebellion in occupied areas, the underlying motivations also included protecting soldiers from venereal diseases and providing "entertainment" to maintain morale (Ramaj 479).

The recruitment process, however, was deeply exploitative and brutal. Initially, the Japanese military relied on professional Japanese sex workers, but as the empire expanded, the demand outpaced supply, leading the military to target local populations. Recruitment often involved coercion, deception, and violence, with local civic leaders or recruiting agents, such as brothel owners and labor brokers, tasked with supplying women under the direction of the Japanese Ministry of War. Many women were abducted or forcibly taken from their homes, while others were tricked with false promises of work. Once at the comfort stations, these women were stripped of their autonomy and subjected to dehumanizing treatment, including being referred to as "military supplies," "female ammunition," or "public toilets" (Ramaj 480). The conditions at these stations were horrific—women were forced to sexually service 10 to 40 soldiers daily, depending on combat activity, while being denied adequate food, water, and medical care. Medical attention, when provided, was often limited to treating sexually transmitted infections or performing forced abortions. Resistance was met with violent

punishment or torture, and some women were threatened with harm to their families if they attempted suicide or escape. A survivor recounted, “Life is hard. I have emotionally suffered… I am sad, so I still cry,” reflecting the enduring psychological toll of these experiences (Ramaj 481).

The long-term effects of the comfort women system extended far beyond the war. Survivors endured psychological trauma, often suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, and a sense of inferiority compared to others in their communities. Many felt detached from themselves, their families, and their societies, experiencing intense loneliness and resentment. The stigma attached to their experiences further marginalized them, as patriarchal norms often blamed the victims for their abuse, “branding them as “spoiled goods” and deeming them unworthy of marriage” (Ramaj 483).
https://www.usip.org/publications/2022/09/guide-understanding-history-comfort-women-issue

To address the unresolved tensions surrounding the comfort women issue, it is critical to understand what constitutes "proper reparations." Reparations, particularly in the context of transitional justice, aim to acknowledge past wrongs, repair harm, and restore the dignity of victims. In *Unrepaired Wrongs: The Case Study of the Comfort Women*, May-Ann Castillo Mercurio cites the United Nations’ definition of transitional justice as “the full range of processes and mechanisms associated with a society's attempt to come to terms with a legacy of large-scale past abuses, in order to ensure accountability, serve justice and achieve reconciliation” (Mercurio 4). Within this framework, reparations are seen as both material and symbolic in nature, with material reparations involving monetary compensation or access to services like healthcare and education, and symbolic reparations encompassing public apologies, memorials, and historical education reforms. Building on this, Esther Song in *Just Reparations*

*for Korean "Comfort Women"* emphasizes that reparations must be government-led and victim-centered, treating victims as rights-holders rather than passive recipients of aid (Song 387). Financial compensation alone is insufficient unless paired with official measures such as public apologies, memorials, and guarantees of non-repetition. A government's direct involvement is essential to demonstrate accountability and sincerity.

**The 1965 South Korean-Japanese Agreement**

The 1965 South Korean-Japanese Agreement, which aimed to normalize diplomatic relations between the two countries, demonstrates how reparation solely through compensation is insufficient and doesn't fully satisfy proper reparation. The agreement was a product of Cold War geopolitics, where both South Korea and Japan were seen as indispensable allies in the U.S. military strategy to contain communism in East Asia. In *From Settlements to Reparations: The Case of 'Comfort Women' and Jus Cogens in International Relations*, Byoung Won Min, the author, cites that "both countries were strongly encouraged to talk to each other and to conclude controversies over Japanese imperialist domination through compensation." (Byoung).

The result was an agreement that reopened diplomatic embassies and facilitated Japanese economic assistance to South Korea. However, although it satisfied the materialistic reparative means, the agreement failed to fully address the inadequacy in resolving the lasting emotional and symbolic dimensions of the war crimes. South Korea, in exchange for Japan's economic aid, pledged not to pursue further compensation for the colonial period's damages, including those inflicted on comfort women. This pledge effectively closed the door on any legal redress for the victims. Byoung Won Min claims that motivations of both governments were clear but different—South Korea sought "monetary compensation for economic development and the

consequent legitimacy for the then-current military leadership," while Japan's goal was simply to "normalize its relations with South Korea." (Byoung).

This divergence in motivations led to a settlement that prioritized state interests over the needs of the victims, and although Japan provided $300 million in grants and $200 million in loans, most of the funds were not directly allocated to the victims, clearly violating the requirements for reparations outlined above. It was only until the 1980s when the emergence of social movements reignited the demand for justice. These movements, fueled by global human rights norms and South Korea's growing democratic ideals, brought the issue of comfort women to the forefront of political discourse once again. This became especially evident when the issue resurfaced with increasing force in the 1990s. Even Japan's 1993 apology, issued by then-Prime Minister Miyazawa, could not assuage the demands for genuine moral accountability that the survivors sought.

The 1965 agreement had left many comfort women feeling that Japan was trying to "buy" their silence rather than provide genuine redress (Byoung). This shows that the 1965 agreement, while addressing immediate state-level diplomatic and economic concerns, failed to meet the criteria for just reparations by ignoring the victims' need for acknowledgment and inclusion in the reparative process, in a way backfiring.

**The 2015 South Korean-Japanese Agreement**

The 2015 South Korean-Japanese agreement aimed to settle the long-standing dispute over the comfort women issue, building on the lessons learned from the failures of the 1965 agreement. Both countries presented the deal as a "final and irreversible resolution," hoping to put the issue to rest and promote reconciliation.

A central component of the agreement was the formal apology issued by Japan's Foreign Minister on behalf of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, which acknowledged Japan's responsibility for the suffering caused to the comfort women. However, despite the political optimism surrounding the agreement, many scholars and critics argue that it failed to meet the criteria for just reparations, particularly from the standpoint of symbolic and emotional acknowledgment. Ramaj critiques the apology as inadequate, noting that the language used was vague and did not fully grasp the gravity of the crimes committed. For instance, the terms "involvement" and "honor" were used to describe Japan's actions, but these words did not explicitly recognize the systematic sexual violence and slavery that the comfort women endured. Ramaj argues that this failure to confront the full extent of the atrocity was a critical shortcoming of the agreement. The use of the term "involvement" instead of directly acknowledging Japan's role in establishing and running the comfort stations also downplayed the government's active participation in the creation of this exploitative system. This language, Ramaj claims, reflects a refusal to confront the legal and moral implications of Japan's actions, denying the victims a full recognition of the crime they suffered (Ramaj 384). Esther Song adds to this critique, highlighting that the vague language of the apology, particularly the use of "involvement," did not hold the Japanese government accountable in a meaningful way. According to Song, this half-hearted apology missed the opportunity to offer a full and unequivocal acknowledgment of Japan's responsibility for the creation and perpetuation of the comfort women system. This shows that Japan is still not close to fully acknowledging its legal and moral responsibility, and at the very least must continue to make efforts in making reparations both financially and symbolically.

**The Limits of Conventional Reparation Frameworks in Japan-Korea Relations**

These two agreements lead to a pressing question: Given Japan's previous attempts at reparations, both financial and symbolic, which have ultimately fallen short, would fulfilling global reparation standards properly in the future resolve the comfort women issue?

Jennifer Lind, in *Memory, Apology, and International Reconciliation*, highlights how Japan's gestures—such as the 1993 Kono Statement, which semi-formally acknowledged Japan's role in the comfort women system, and the Asian Women's Fund, which offered financial support to survivors—have consistently fallen short due to contradictions in Japan's actions. For instance, while the Kono Statement expressed remorse, subsequent visits by Japanese leaders to Yasukuni Shrine—a site that honors convicted war criminals alongside war dead—have signaled to many in Korea that Japan lacks genuine accountability. Similarly, the Asian Women's Fund, framed as a private initiative rather than an official government effort, distanced Japan from full responsibility, leaving survivors and the Korean public feeling that these reparations were insufficient. Such actions reinforce the perception in Korea that no matter what reparations Japan tries to make, it will be insincere due to their past record. In the research article *Diagnosing Korea–Japan relations through thick description: revisiting the national identity formation process*, author Jungmin Seo adds that the failure to reconcile is not just about sincere gestures or a lack of consistent follow-through but is more rooted in the national identities of the two countries. He argues that the hostility between Korea and Japan is a structural issue embedded in how both nations define themselves. According to Seo, this hostility is a "core element of their co-constitutive national identities" (Seo 3), meaning that each nation's sense of self is, in part, constructed in opposition to the other. For Korea, its identity as a modern, independent nation is tied to its historical victimhood under Japanese colonial rule, while Japan's postwar identity has been built on the narrative of a peaceful and rehabilitated nation.

Lind in the later parts of her article contrasts Japan-Korea relations with The Élysée Treaty between Germany and France, which is often hailed as a model of postwar amends. Through traditional international relations frameworks, she argues that Germany and France shared a mutual interest in creating a European unity integrating their economies and also shared the same security interests. She claims that this differs from Korea-Japan, in which they lacked as strong of a common external threat and a united economy was not as important. Seo builds onto this concept but takes it a step further utilizing his central argument, claiming that even if you consider the two frameworks to be significant, due to the conflict being driven by identity, economy and security will never be at the forefront of the two countries: Through a liberalist lens, which emphasizes economic interdependence, one would predict Korea-Japan to follow a similar pattern to Germany-France as the two countries are major trading partners and integral to each other's supply chains. However, Japan has shown to set many export restrictions on trade and essential materials for Korea. Through a realist lens, which emphasizes security, one would again predict Korea-Japan to follow a similar pattern as Germany-France as they share security threats posed by North Korea and both rely on the United States.

However, despite their concerns, disputes over their historical memory have continued to escalate. One such example is the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA). The GSOMIA, signed in 2016, was a landmark agreement between South Korea and Japan that allowed for the direct exchange of military intelligence, particularly concerning the North Korean nuclear threat. However, in 2019, South Korea announced its intention to terminate the agreement, mainly in retaliation to Japan's export restrictions and unresolved historical conflicts (Cha). Ultimately, Japan has lost Korea's trust, and due to their unique

identity-driven antagonism, a straightforward resolution through traditional reparations frameworks is impossible.

**Contemporary Issues**

As the comfort women issue continues to evolve, the best interim approach for both Japan and South Korea is to foster constructive dialogue and mutual respect (Kuki 253). However, current developments highlight how both nations have instead pursued antagonistic strategies that deepen their historical divide and hinder reconciliation. Constructive engagement requires both nations to move away from actions that provoke discord and instead focus on building mutual understanding and respect.

Unfortunately, as recent events demonstrate, these principles have been largely absent, with both governments and civil societies escalating tensions. For example, Japan protested the decision by a Berlin district to extend the installation of a comfort women statue, arguing that it unfairly depicted Japan as solely responsible for historical injustices and damaged bilateral relations (Kyodo News). Such protests reveal Japan's reluctance to allow these memorials to stand without challenging their narratives, even when those narratives resonate with global human rights values. This stance has drawn criticism for prioritizing national image over acknowledging the victims' suffering, further straining relations with South Korea. The tension surrounding comfort women memorials is not limited to international spaces. Even within Japan, public exhibitions featuring comfort women statues have faced cancellations and controversies. For instance, exhibitions were frequently shut down or threatened with violence due to accusations that they perpetuate anti-Japanese sentiment (Solomon). This antagonism is also evident in Japan's decision to terminate its sister-city relationship with San Francisco after the

city approved the installation of a comfort women statue. Osaka, Japan, justified the move by claiming the memorial damaged trust and mutual respect between the two cities (Mabanglo). This reaction reflects a pattern where symbolic acts of remembrance are met with punitive responses rather than serving as opportunities for dialogue. These instances highlight a broader problem within the Japan-South Korea relationship: the failure to move beyond zero-sum approaches that frame historical recognition as a loss for one side and a victory for the other. This mentality perpetuates the stalemate over comfort women by preventing either nation from embracing the compromises necessary for resolution. Instead of viewing these memorials and commemorations as opportunities for dialogue and acknowledgment, both countries often frame them within adversarial narratives that reinforce domestic nationalism.

On the other hand, while South Korea has taken significant strides, several societal and social actions have undermined its ability to constructively engage with Japan. One of the most prominent examples of this was in 2019, when two South Korean men set themselves on fire near the Japanese embassy in Seoul as a protest, ultimately dying from their injuries. Alongside these acts, widespread boycotts of Japanese goods have severely impacted industries such as clothing and beer sales, while travel to Japan has plummeted, forcing airlines to cut routes (Kim). The South Korean Supreme Court's 2018 ruling, which allowed individual victims of forced labor during Japan's occupation to seek damages from Japanese companies like Nippon Steel and Mitsubishi Heavy Industries, was seen by Japan as a violation of the 1965 treaty.

The ruling was a turning point that led to retaliatory actions, including Japan imposing export restrictions on materials critical to South Korea's semiconductor industry and removing South Korea from its trusted trade partner list. This led to further backlash from the South Korean public, causing people to boycott Japanese-owned restaurants, cancel trips to Japan, and

avoid purchasing Japanese goods. As someone who lived in Korea during this time, the anti-Japanese sentiment was palpable—many Japanese businesses located in Korea closed down, and any visible signs of Japanese culture were systematically removed. Badminton Olympic gold medalist Yoo Yeon Seong, my former coach, whose wife is Japanese, recounted the difficulty they faced during this period. “2018 and 2019 were one of the toughest years for my wife,” he shared. “She often felt ignored and criticized. She was very scared to show her face in public and would stay at home most days.”

Growing up in a very traditional Korean household, I also grappled with a hostile mindset towards Japan, often learning about Japan’s colonial history with Korea as well as many contemporary issues that put Japan in a bad light from a patriotic Korean perspective. This is one of the reasons why Korea and Japan sports games tend to evoke intense emotions and rivalries, often serving as a proxy for unresolved historical grievances. This cycle of hostility, fueled by societal and governmental actions on both sides, highlights just how important it is for both sides to start working together in a more constructive and collaborative fashion.

**Conclusion**

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