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# Korean NGOs and Reconciliation with Japan

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## Abstract

Strained South Korea–Japan ties are frequently attributed to the use and abuse of history by national leaders. This article considers a more bottom-up explanation by examining how Korean civil society is taking three different pathways to exert influence on bilateral relations. First, non-governmental organizations are expanding domestic and international awareness of grievances regarding Japan’s 1910–1945 colonization of the Korean Peninsula. Second, activists are pushing court cases in attempts to change legal interpretations and government policies. Third, certain civic groups demand maximalist positions on history and stigmatize cooperation with Tokyo. While influential over Korean public opinion, these efforts win few hearts and minds in Japan and complicate productive diplomacy. With particular attention to the 2015 Korea–Japan agreement for “comfort women” survivors and the 2018 South Korean Supreme Court decisions on wartime labor, this article unpacks the relationship between activist Korean civil society and historical reconciliation with Japan, offering implications for foreign policy and state-society relations.

**Keywords:** Korea–Japan relations; civil society; nationalism; history textbooks; “comfort women”; reconciliation; democracy and foreign policy; wartime labor; diplomacy in Asia

## Introduction

Under President Moon Jae-in and Prime Minister Abe Shinzo, relations between the Republic of Korea (ROK or South Korea) and Japan were frequently assessed to be at their worst since normalization in 1965 (Sakaki 2019). Following Korean Supreme Court decisions in late 2018 ordering Japanese companies to compensate wartime laborers, diplomatic efforts by the Moon administration stalled and the Abe government announced export restrictions targeting Seoul. Thousands of Koreans flooded the streets on their National Liberation Day in August 2019 chanting “No Abe! No Japan!” and promoting a nationwide boycott of Japanese products and travel to Japan. History issues—including apologies to survivors of wartime factories, mines, and “comfort women” brothels, as well as territorial claims over small islets between the two countries—spilled over to the detriment of economic and security cooperation. The two highly interdependent, high-tech economies removed each other from

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their “whitelists” of trusted trading partners, and the Moon government threatened not to renew an intelligence sharing agreement with Tokyo.

Structural factors examined in the academic literature, including economic interests and democratic institutions, tend to predict South Korea–Japan cooperation. Geopolitical strategists expect the rise of China to push Tokyo and Seoul together from shared threat perception and concerns about possible US disengagement (Cha 1999). Scholars of domestic politics explain departures from structural expectations by studying how national leaders mismanage historical controversies out of personal rather than national interests (Kim 2011). Japanese leaders allegedly disrespect history in the ideological pursuit of more hawkish foreign policies (Fujita and Kusano 2020), while Korean leaders allegedly disregard geopolitics and manipulate history for popular support (You and Kim 2020). News media portrayed Abe and Moon as archetypal cases of such leadership; as a result, Koreans despised Abe, Japanese distrusted Moon, and both countries seemed to “give up” on the other while those two leaders were in office.<sup>1</sup>

However, Abe had tried to improve relations with a reconciliation agreement in December 2015, and Moon had promised to keep history issues separate from security and economics when he became president in 2017 (Easley 2022). This article argues that those cooperative approaches did not succeed in large part because activist civil society shaped public opinion and captured national political agendas. Even after Abe and Moon were replaced in office in September 2020 and May 2022 respectively, it remains difficult to improve relations when civil society is unsupportive. So instead of focusing on structural or leadership factors to account for Korea–Japan tensions, this article considers an under-researched area: the role of Korean NGOs and third-sector interventions.

The democratization of Korea’s historical memory and Japan’s struggles to atone for its past have precluded community building in Asia. Absent reconciliation, policymakers find it a political liability to publicly support Korea–Japan relations, and interest groups use historical controversies for domestic political purposes. As a result, economic and functional cooperation is underappreciated and less developed than mutual interests would predict (Easley 2014). Meanwhile, there is a growing body of research and empirical support for how NGOs affect interactions between states. The next two sections review civil society’s mixed contributions to international reconciliation. Subsequent sections examine the major ways Korean non-state actors have complicated Seoul’s relations with Tokyo: by promoting awareness of historical atrocities associated with Japanese colonialism, pushing court cases that challenge existing diplomatic agreements, and stigmatizing cooperation with Japan as unpatriotic. The article concludes that NGOs can better contribute to reconciliation if governments more productively engage civil society with greater transparency about victims’ wishes and national interests.

### **Civil society productively influencing foreign policy**

NGOs can be free of the historical baggage and official positions of governments, allowing them to engage in independent fact-finding and focus on good governance and public welfare (Fisher 1997; Mayhew 2005). They bring resources to bear on a particular issue in a given community, combining specialized skills with grass-roots enthusiasm. In the process, these organizations foster people–people bonds that

can enhance mutual understanding. As NGOs have grown in number and influence, they have been credited with improving government accountability, increasing political participation, and democratizing foreign policy with citizen diplomacy (Betsill and Corell 2008).

While studies of bilateral relations still tend to focus on interactions between governments, the role of civil society is garnering greater attention from policymakers and scholars (Putnam 1988; Mingst and Muldoon 2015). An emerging “pro-NGOs international norm” prescribes the inclusion of civic organizations in diplomacy (Reimann 2006). NGOs often leverage networked power via institutional ties with other organizations (Ohanyan 2012). Transnational advocacy movements link globalized and localized campaigns to influence policy by mobilizing bystanders, drawing media attention and using social networking and information technologies to coordinate activism beyond borders (Finnemore 1996; Keck and Sikkink 1998). In the context of Korea–Japan relations, civil society efforts have promoted mutual understanding through education and exchange, supported reconciliation via mediation and voluntary atonement, and encouraged uninterrupted cooperation by keeping historical disagreements on a separate track from shared functional interests.

First, regarding education and exchange, civil society efforts on joint history projects gained momentum in the 1990s, alongside post-Cold War political reforms and regional economic integration. Japanese and Korean scholars organized textbook related academic exchanges (Yang and Sin 2013). In 2002–2003, the History Education Conference of Japan and the South Korea National Association of History Teachers convened symposiums on overcoming nationalist biases in education. These and other bilateral collaborations succeeded in publishing joint history books and reports.<sup>2</sup> A Japan–Korea–China joint textbook, *History that Opens the Future*, was published in 2005.<sup>3</sup> Non-governmental dialogues also supported government-backed projects. In the spirit of the 1998 Japan–ROK Joint Declaration signed by Obuchi Keizo and Kim Dae-jung, and based on a 2001 summit agreement between Kim and Koizumi Junichiro, a Joint Historical Research Project published findings in 2006 spanning ancient historical ties to contemporary historical disagreements. Scholars completed follow-up reports in 2009 and 2011.

NGOs have also been instrumental in organizing future-oriented exchanges in culture and business, often in cooperation with government programs. Various sports associations helped South Korea and Japan jointly host the 2002 FIFA World Cup. In education, the Campus Asia Program supports students studying in a neighboring country. The Japan–Korea Cultural Foundation provides academic fellowships while the Korean National Commission for UNESCO organizes a Youth Forum for Historical Reconciliation. The Japan–East Asia Network of Exchange for Students and Youths (JENESYS) and the Japan–Korea Festival are held annually in Tokyo and Seoul (MOFA 2017a).

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, South Korea and Japan enjoyed mutually beneficial tourism—over 9 million combined visitors per year—and billions of dollars in two-way trade in cultural goods, including movies, television, video games, books, and lifestyle and health care products.<sup>4</sup> Pop-culture affinity was on display when the Busan film festival was co-hosted by Korean actress Moon So-ri and Japanese actor Ken Watanabe in 2014. In 2015, Japanese student groups gathered to

commemorate 70 years since a Korean student poet in Japan, Yun Dong-ju (1917–45), gave his life protesting colonialism. Religious exchange can also bring people together, such as when Koreans make Buddhist pilgrimages to Japan's Shikoku.

Other civic efforts have sought to account for, and make accessible to the public, historical artifacts removed from the Korean Peninsula during the colonial period and earlier wars. These are estimated to number 66,800 items, according to the Overseas Korean Cultural Heritage Foundation (OKCHF, [www.overseaschf.or.kr](http://www.overseaschf.or.kr)). Korean and Japanese organizations have cooperated to return or jointly exhibit such cultural assets. For example, Yamaguchi Prefectural University partnered with Kyungnam University to return nearly 2000 artifacts collected by Governor-general Terauchi Masatake. Even on the sensitive issue of locating the remains of Korean wartime laborers in Japan, there have been civic partnerships. The joint Wartime Labor Victims Memorial Committee has respectfully repatriated over one hundred remains from Hokkaido to Korea (Bae 2015).

A second way NGOs have supported Korea–Japan reconciliation is by addressing historical grievances with means other than litigation. Likely the most intractable historical issue for government-level talks is the colonial-era “comfort women” system of coercive wartime sexual servitude (Suzuki 2014; Ku 2015a). Many actors pursuing redress for the women have been Japanese and Korean scholars (Wada 2008; Szczepanska 2014). In early 1990, Professor Yun Chung-ok of Ewha Womans University authored a series of articles bringing public attention to the experience of women coerced to provide sex for Japanese soldiers.<sup>5</sup> Contrary to South Korean media coverage focused on right-wing activism in Japan, Japanese and Korean civil society groups coordinated transnational advocacy for recognizing and compensating survivors (Chun 2015). Japanese government recognition of this painful history was encouraged by Japanese citizens corroborating the women's testimonies (Soh 2008) and culminated in Chief Cabinet Secretary Kono Yohei's statement in 1993:

The [Japanese] Government study has revealed that in many cases [the “comfort women”] were recruited against their own will, through coaxing, coercion, etc., and that, at times, administrative/military personnel directly took part in the recruitments. [The women] lived in misery at comfort stations under a coercive atmosphere ... [this] 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 ... who suffered immeasurable pain and incurable physical and psychological wounds ... We shall face squarely the historical facts as described above instead of evading them, and take them to heart as lessons of history. We hereby reiterate our firm determination never to repeat the same mistake by forever engraving such issues in our memories through the study and teaching of history. (MOFA 1993)

The Asian Women's Fund digital museum (AWF [www.awf.or.jp/](http://www.awf.or.jp/)), a state-backed civic organization, was established in July 1995 to address Japan's moral responsibility toward former “comfort women” (Kumagai 2014a). The AWF offered medical support and attempted to deliver atonement money and a letter of apology signed by the Japanese prime minister to every survivor. The AWF closed in March 2007

without delivering personal apologies and compensation to all the surviving Korean victims (Kumagai 2014b). However, other civic groups continued advocating on the women's behalf. In 2007, the Japanese NGO, Violence Against Women in War Network demanded that Abe recognize Japanese responsibility for the "comfort women" system, eschew hairsplitting remarks regarding Japan's responsibility, and uphold the Kono Statement.<sup>6</sup>

Cooperation among Japanese and Korean civic groups resulted in memorials and commemorations in Japan of the many women (including Japanese, Chinese, and Southeast Asians) who suffered under the wartime brothels system (Japan Times 2008). According to Watanabe Mina, Japanese civic groups have submitted to the government more than 500 historical documents detailing the involvement of Japanese wartime officials in procuring sex for imperial soldiers (Women's Active Museum). Japanese social leaders and journalists visited survivors in Seoul and at the House of Sharing (*Nanumae Jip*) in Gwangju to hear their testimonies.

Often the work of civil society groups takes time to reach fruition because of how long it takes to persuade governments. The Utoro Peace Memorial Museum opened in April 2022 just south of Kyoto. It chronicles the long legal battle of descendants of wartime Korean workers who went to the Japanese Supreme Court in 2000 and garnered attention from the UN and South Korea. Ultimately, through public-private partnerships, the Korean-Japanese residents in Utoro were assisted with turning their postwar squatter community into legal, livable housing.

A third positive role for civil society is facilitating the separation of historical disagreements from intergovernmental cooperation in the national interests. For example, civil society can provide political cover for governments to re-engage. ROK Foreign Minister Yun Byung-se, who had boycotted meetings with Japanese officials, met with Ambassador Bessho Koro on the sidelines of the 2014 Korea-Japan cultural festival. Soon thereafter, the Sixth China-Japan-Korea Trilateral Culture Ministers' Meeting was held in Yokohama to promote East Asian Cultural Cities. Korea-Japan business ties and professional associations can be leading indicators of improving relations. After seven years of cancellations owing to bilateral controversies including the Dokdo/Takeshima islets, the Korea-Japan Business Council resumed meetings between the Federation of Korean Industries (FKI) and the Japan Business Federation (Keidanren) in December 2014. Their joint statement supported a Korea-Japan summit and cooperation in trade, finance, investment, energy, and infrastructure, much of which was realized the following year.

President Moon's strong ties to the NGO community and his promised "dual track approach" suggested his administration may chart a middle way on bilateral relations. Rather than immediately scrapping or seeking to renegotiate the December 2015 agreement for "comfort women" survivors, the South Korean government set up a task force including non-governmental experts to review the process. In December 2017, Foreign Minister Kang Kyung-hwa visited Japan to explain the task force's findings. Kang then released a report faulting the previous South Korean administration for not adequately consulting the victims (ROK MOFA 2017). Kang apologized for the lack of procedural legitimacy of the agreement and asked civil society to be patient while the Moon administration sought to maintain productive relations with Tokyo even while emphasizing the "victims' perspective" on historical matters.

### Potential downsides of NGO efforts

Despite these ways that civil society can support reconciliation, the role of NGOs is more complex than the application of well-intentioned efforts at strengthening connections between people, advancing good causes, and improving government policies. It cannot be assumed that the activities of civic groups are always cooperative or in the public interest. As research on illiberal, extremist, and nationalist collective action has shown, NGOs are not just cosmopolitan watchdogs that do good works (Álvarez, 2020). They often struggle to live up to their ideals in terms of accountability and credibility (Gourevitch, Lake, and Stein 2012). They sometimes misrepresent and even fabricate information. Beneficiaries of NGO programs are often not represented in an organization's decision-making processes, leading to unintended consequences. Some donors have hidden agendas while other NGOs have less than transparent links to governments or companies, raising doubts about independence, motivations, and authenticity (Cooley and Ron 2002). NGOs tout their accomplishments, but social returns on investment are difficult to measure, and third-party accounting of negative effects or opportunity costs are uncommon (Bond 2000). Research on state–society relations in South Korea suggests that many NGOs suffer from institutional weaknesses, poor communication with the public (Oh 2012), state interference (Bidet 2002), mismanagement of financial and human resources, and politicization under funders' influence (Kim 2009).

In light of this complexity, how are Korean NGOs affecting South Korea's relations with Japan? Existing scholarship has well-articulated the problem of incomplete historical reconciliation between the two countries (Glosserman and Snyder 2015), and recent studies have addressed the effects of Japanese civil society groups and conservative backlashes on history issues (Chun 2016; Kim and Sohn 2017). This article examines civil society efforts that have detracted from reconciliation between Seoul and Tokyo by focusing on the role of South Korean NGOs.<sup>7</sup> This approach adds to the existing literature by further unpacking the mechanisms by which civil society affects inter-state relations. A focus on Korean NGOs reveals three major pathways whereby civil society is complicating relations with Japan: (1) a growing number of civic groups are promoting awareness of Japan's 1910–1945 colonization of the Korean Peninsula and demanding international pressure on the Japanese government; (2) NGOs are pushing court decisions that legally challenge existing agreements and policies with Japan; and (3) civil society actors are making cooperative and reconciliatory positions vis-à-vis Tokyo taboo in Korean domestic politics. These activities drove negative public sentiments and strained bilateral ties, especially as the Moon administration struggled with inheriting the 2015 “comfort women agreement” and faced the 2018 Supreme Court rulings on wartime labor.

### Going on offense against Japan regarding history

Since South Korea's democratization in the late 1980s, NGOs have proliferated and engaged more with political history (Shin and Chang 2011, 270). The number of NGOs, their issues of concern, and the intensity of their international activities increased since the 1990s and through the 2000s (Lee and Arrington 2008; Kim and Jeong 2017). Korean media routinely report that these NGOs obtain

international recognition of Japan's colonial atrocities.<sup>8</sup> But whether focused on historical victims or geographic disputes, NGOs looking to mount international pressure on Japan to change its policies have instead elicited more negative pushback from Tokyo.

A number of Korean NGOs respond to what they consider historical revisionism and atrocity denials in Japanese textbooks. From 2001, a Japanese movement for increasing patriotism and reducing "masochism" in textbooks invited criticism from Japan's neighbors (Bukh 2007). The Japanese Society for History Textbook Reform (Tsukurukai) produced, and Fusosha printed, a middle school textbook that underreported Japanese wartime atrocities and partially defended wartime policies. The textbook was controversially approved by Japan's Ministry of Education. In the event, Japanese, Chinese, and Koreans rallied together and the adoption rate in classrooms was extremely low. However, Korean NGOs lacking coordination with Japanese civic groups have not managed to achieve similar results, as when the Japanese Ministry of Education's 2014–15 guidance for textbooks required publishers to account for Tokyo's official positions on history (Asahi Shimbun 2015a). To many Japanese observers, the efforts of Korean NGOs are motivated by nationalist history rather than reconciliation, a view that was reinforced when the Park Geun-hye administration planned to mandate that South Korean students use a single state-sponsored history textbook.

Nonetheless, organizations such as the International Korea Research Institute promote patriotic Korean history abroad. Efforts to glorify Ahn Jung-geun as a freedom fighter and elevate his standing via memorials in Korea and China look to discredit the Japanese narrative that he was a terrorist who assassinated Ito Hirobumi, a former Japanese prime minister who was also the first resident-general in Korea. The Asia Peace and History Education Network protests Japanese history textbooks and politicians' visits to Yasukuni, a Tokyo shrine controversial for its reverence of Japan's war dead including convicted war criminals (APHEN 2014). Such NGOs deliver letters of protest to Japanese offices, stage public demonstrations, and seek media coverage. They also often hold youth camps, recruit undergraduate interns, offer primary school outreach programs to promote their historical views, and encourage participation in public protests. Many civic organizations advocate at inter-governmental organizations and work with overseas Koreans to lobby governments. For example, the Korean American Civic Empowerment (KACE) group took out newspaper advertisements and circulated a petition in 2015 demanding that Abe be denied the honor of speaking at a joint meeting of the US Congress unless he renounced his alleged historical revisionism.

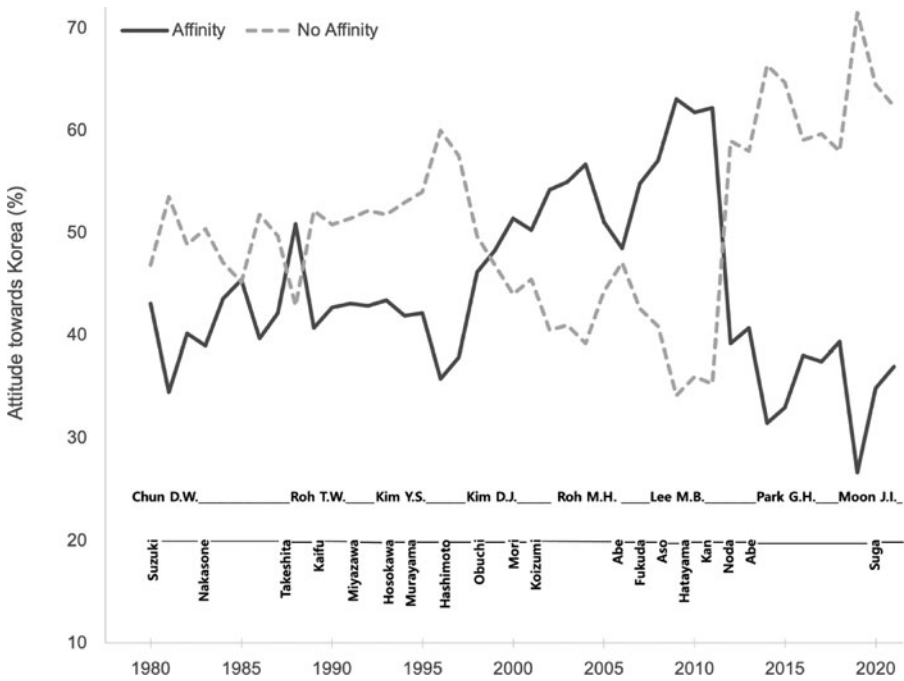
There have also been cases of Korean citizens and religious leaders taking it upon themselves to recover Korean historical artifacts from Japan by force. In October 2012, two statues and a collection of scriptures were stolen from three temples in Tsushima. The statues were later found in South Korea, but the Buddhist community of Seosan formed an anti-return group claiming that the statues were stolen by Japanese in the fourteenth century (Fackler 2013). In February 2013, the Daejeon District Court granted an injunction that the statues not be returned until the Japanese side proves lawful acquisition. One statue was returned to Japan in July 2015, but the other was awarded to Buseok Temple in January 2017, despite official

objections from Tokyo. In another case, Japanese police arrested five Korean men on suspicion of stealing ancient Buddhist artifacts from Bairinji Temple. The men were apprehended in November 2014 with the Buddhist statue and scriptures in their possession as they attempted to return to South Korea by ferry. Such activities draw attention to historical disputes but contradict the efforts of the Korean Cultural Heritage Administration to have cultural artifacts returned through peaceful, legal, and diplomatic means.

Competing narratives around historical sites have also strained relations. Korean NGOs, such as the Center for Historical Truth and Justice, opposed Japanese plans to have Meiji Industrial Revolution sites in Japan added to UNESCO's world heritage list. Their objections stemmed from the wartime use of Korean "slave labor" at the locations. The Japanese government countered that the historical value of the sites predated Japanese colonialism and the UNESCO campaigns originated from municipalities that hoped to promote tourism. In his first visit to Japan as foreign minister (delayed nearly two years), Yun Byung-se met his counterpart Kishida Fumio, and agreed the two countries would cooperate on their respective UNESCO World Heritage bids. The announcement was based on an understanding that relevant Japanese historical sites would recognize the harrowing conditions that Korean workers experienced. However, discrepancies between Korean and Japanese wording referring to wartime laborers persisted up to the summer 2015 UNESCO committee meeting in Bonn, Germany. The mutual understanding on UNESCO sites managed to hold, but at domestic political cost for Japanese policymakers who supported a conciliatory position.<sup>9</sup> Rather than build on the mutual accommodation achieved at Bonn, South Korean NGOs advocated for UNESCO listing of historical documents detailing Japan's wartime oppression. Such civil society pressure elicited suggestions from Tokyo that it might withhold funding from UNESCO and minimize the historical coverage Koreans requested at Meiji sites. The "history wars" continue as NGO efforts to register "comfort women" documents with the UNESCO Memory of the World program were blocked by Japan in 2017 while Japan's nomination of the Sado mine for UNESCO World Heritage inscription in 2022 met with intense criticism from Korean civil society.

Mutual accommodation is also elusive over the Korean-controlled islets of Dokdo that Japan claims as Takeshima. The Dokdo NGO Forum, Dokdo Foundation, and academic bodies such as the Dokdo Institute at Yeonnam University promote public awareness of Korea's claim and mobilize youth with emotional campaigns, insisting that Dokdo was "the first victim of the Japanese invasion in Korea" (NAHF 2012). South Korean activists rally in front of the Japanese Embassy on what Japan's Shimane Prefecture designated as "Takeshima Day," as well as when the Japanese government publishes reports mentioning its territorial claim. Meanwhile, Korean civic groups proclaimed October 25 "Dokdo Day," and the Society for East Sea Research assembled experts in geography and law to advocate for the relabeling of the "Sea of Japan" on international maps as the "East Sea" of Korea. The Voluntary Agency Network of Korea (VANK) also lobbies for the use of "East Sea" and engages in various cyber campaigns against Japan, including a failed campaign against Tokyo's bid to host the 2020 summer Olympics. Such international public relations efforts have received mixed reviews outside Korea. For example, Sunghsin





**Figure 1** Japanese Public Opinion of South Korea

Data source: Cabinet Office of the Japanese Government, *The Public Opinion on Foreign Policy Research*, <http://survey.gov-online.go.jp/index-gai.html>.

visiting professor Seo Kyoung-duk aims to promote Korean culture and spread “the truth” regarding Korea’s disputes with Japan.<sup>10</sup> Seo raises funding for newspaper ads, documentaries and YouTube videos highlighting historical materials supporting Korean claims. The ads in high-profile global media receive domestic news coverage but have been variously described by international observers as “bizarre,” “puzzling,” and “useless.”<sup>11</sup>

Whether appealing to Japanese guilt or building diplomatic pressure, the initiatives of Korean NGOs are winning few hearts and minds in Japan. On the contrary, anti-Korean sentiment has risen. Japanese public opinion of South Korea has long fluctuated according to achievements and cyclical challenges in bilateral relations. But as shown in [Figure 1](#), Japanese opinion of South Korea turned sharply negative since 2011 and reached its worst level on record in 2014 before Abe and Park attempted reconciliation in 2015. It then reached a new low in 2019 after the South Korean Supreme Court rulings of 2018. The “affinity” and “no affinity” lines in [Figure 1](#) do not add to 100 percent because of “do not know” responses. Notably, the “do not know” responses have declined over time, from over 10 percent in the early 1980s to less than 1 percent in the early 2020s, suggesting the Japanese public is increasingly opinionated about South Korea.<sup>12</sup>

In another survey, jointly conducted by Tokyo and Seoul-based nonprofit organizations, 67.8 percent of Japanese respondents and 67.2 percent of South Korean

respondents said their impressions of one another had “worsened” (Genron NPO and East Asia Institute 2015, 7). “Japan’s lack of remorse for the historical invasion of South Korea” and “continuing confrontation over Dokdo” were the main reasons for the South Korean public having unfavorable feelings toward Japan (ibid., 6). However, 74.6 percent of Japanese with unfavorable attitudes toward Korea cited that country’s “criticism of Japan over historical issues” while only 36.5 percent pointed to the disputed status of Takeshima (Dokdo) (ibid., 6). This suggests that Korean criticism of Japan is driving worsening Japanese perceptions of South Korea.

It is thus difficult to say that pressure initiatives by Korean NGOs have been helpful for a process of reconciliation with Japan, or even that they have benefited Korean interests. Korean civic campaigns criticizing Tokyo on historical issues have helped elevate fringe nationalists in Japan such as the Zaitokukai (so-called “Citizens against the Special Privileges of Koreans in Japan”) who espouse nativist policy positions associated with *kenkan* (loathing Korea) (Shibuichi 2015). From 2011 to 2015, such rightist groups staged several hundred anti-Korean protests, motivated by what they say were Korean international smear campaigns against Japan’s reputation and unfair public benefits for Korean residents in Japan.

While generally peaceful and constrained to a predetermined route, the protests appeared intolerant and distasteful at best; at worst, they engaged in hate speech and intimidation. Other Japanese citizens, who objected to the protestors’ distorted facts and apparent racism, encouraged the Japanese government to make hate speech illegal. Counter-protestors often lined the demonstration routes, calling for tolerance and asserting that the anti-Korean NGOs do not represent Japan. Nonetheless, the protests discouraged many ethnic Koreans living in Japan who hope to act as a bridge between the two countries.<sup>13</sup> A cohort of Japanese policymakers and analysts who support deepening strategic cooperation with South Korea (Sahashi 2013; Joint Research Committee 2013, 35–46) faced increasingly unreceptive elite and public opinions.

Pro-reconciliation Japanese voices struggled to gain political traction as actors in South Korea fanned the flames of fringe nationalist movements in Japan with hyperbole. For example, Korean NGOs demanded an ROK government response to anti-Korean protests in Tokyo, and in December 2014, a parliamentary resolution submitted by the main opposition New Politics Alliance for Democracy condemned the protests in Japan as “murderous criminal acts” and “racially discriminatory hate crimes” (Yonhap 2014). Such rhetoric, combined with Japanese “apology fatigue,” added fuel to the revisionist ideas of Nippon Kaigi, Tsukurukai, the Society for the Dissemination of Historical Fact, and extremist politicians such as Tamogami Toshio.<sup>14</sup>

Thus, anti-Japan rhetoric promoted by Korean NGOs marginalized pro-reconciliation groups in Japan, and Japanese civil society responded negatively to Korean efforts to internationalize historical controversies. Worsening public sentiment resulted in Japanese calls to counter with their own public relations campaigns, empowering conservative Japanese NGOs whose activities further damaged reconciliation. Bilateral relations suffered from a negative feedback loop (Kim 2014), not only between Korean and Japanese civil societies, but also involving how the media and the two governments interact with their respective publics.

### Pushing court decisions that challenge established policy

A second pathway by which NGOs are affecting bilateral relations is by driving legal cases, particularly over redress for former “comfort women” and wartime laborers. Ongoing litigation, and especially rulings that overturn precedent, cause the South Korean and Japanese governments to harden their positions on history issues, which further escalates disagreements and worsens bilateral relations. The most prominent NGO in this regard, the “Korean Council,” was established in 1990 to demand an official apology and compensation for “comfort women” survivors.<sup>15</sup> The “Korean Council” filed a lawsuit against the Japanese government in 1991 and called for an investigation of war crimes at the International Commission on Human Rights in 1992 and at the Vienna World Conference on Human Rights in 1993. Civic groups have also taken a rights-based approach via the Women’s International Tribunal on Japanese Military Sexual Slavery (Chinkin 2001), the World Council of Churches, the International Commission of Jurists, International Fellowship of Reconciliation (Hicks 1997, 124, 172), and by promoting women’s rights as human rights in Asia (Chou 2003; Ku 2015b).

Members of the “Korean Council” allegedly pressured former “comfort women” not to accept letters of apology from Japanese prime ministers in the 1990s and told survivors if they accepted atonement money from Japan’s Asian Women’s Fund, they would not be eligible for financial support from the ROK government (MOFA 2014, 25–27). Scholars of Korean civil society have compared “comfort women” testimonies over time and found that activist NGOs pressured survivors “to publicly conform to the dominant narrative of Japanese villains and innocent Koreans” (Yi 2018).

The “Korean Council” has globalized its campaign through memorial statues, public rallies, and international petitions. Since 1992, the organization has helped to organize regular “Wednesday Demonstrations” in front of the Japanese Embassy in Seoul, perhaps the longest running demonstration in the world. The most symbolic escalation occurred in 2011 when the group placed a statue named *Pyeonghwabi* (Peace Monument) in front of the Japanese Embassy, depicting a young Korean “comfort woman” seated in a chair. The statue became a rallying point for the movement, even though it lacked local permits and arguably violated article 22.2 of the Vienna Convention prohibiting harassment of diplomatic missions (M. Kim 2013). The “Korean Council” expanded its efforts to include occasional protests at the UN office in Geneva, the Eiffel Tower in Paris, and the Japanese Embassy and US Capitol Building in Washington, DC. The group has worked with other organizations to place memorial statues in at least eleven regions in the United States and four in Japan, as well as statues in Toronto, Sydney, Shanghai, and Wiesent (Germany).<sup>16</sup> A different statue unveiled in California in September 2017 further internationalized the issue by depicting three “comfort women”—from Korea, China, and the Philippines—and led to Osaka suspending its sister city relationship with San Francisco.

However, the way that “comfort women” associated civic groups have had the largest impact is via the courts. Owing to the judicial advocacy efforts of Korean NGOs, the ROK Constitutional Court ruled in August 2011 that the government must take further efforts to pursue the complaints of former “comfort women” against Japan

(Lee, Nah, and Cho 2013). This ruling led the Lee Myung-bak government to raise the issue with Japanese counterparts. Diplomatic discussions made some progress over the following year, but the Korean side grew frustrated (Sohn 2012), and in August 2012, Lee provocatively visited Dokdo and demanded a historical apology from the Japanese emperor. Korea–Japan relations went into a tailspin.

In April 2013, the “Korean Council” appealed to the UN Commission on Human Rights (UNCHR) for redress for the “comfort women.” Conservative Japanese groups criticized the Korean advocacy efforts and went on the offensive against Japanese progressives who supported reconciliation. Nadesiko Action (“Japanese Women for Justice and Peace”) argued that the “comfort women” were volunteer prostitutes and that military brothels were common and legal at the time.<sup>17</sup> Under public pressure, the progressive Japanese newspaper, *Asahi Shimbun*, retracted numerous articles that reported accounts by Yoshida Seiji, a colonial-era Japanese soldier who claimed to have participated in “human hunting” in line with some testimonies of former “comfort women” (Yoshida 2014). Conservative Japanese NGOs and politicians demanded a public review of the 1993 Kono apology. That investigation found the statement’s wording to have been a product of political compromise between Tokyo and Seoul. Analysts in Japan and abroad argued the controversy severely damaged relations between the two democracies (Togo 2014).

Despite this, the Park and Abe administrations reached an agreement in support of “comfort women” survivors in December 2015. But it was a coordinated statement rather than a signed diplomatic document and suffered bad optics: two male foreign ministers announcing a deal, rather than a press conference including the victims or a reconciliation event with visual and emotional signs of apology. For many Japanese, the purpose of the agreement was to get Seoul to stop its legal offensive against Japan.<sup>18</sup> The agreement unrealistically stated that the issue was “resolved finally and irreversibly,” while suggesting that the controversial statue would be moved, without specifying the details for relocation (MOFA 2015). The agreement was greeted with international endorsement, particularly by the United States. The Reconciliation and Healing Foundation launched in July 2016 and the South Korean Foreign Ministry acknowledged receipt of the promised 1 billion yen from the Japanese government. About half of this money (or US\$4 million) was distributed by 2017 to 34 survivors and family members of deceased “comfort women” (Reconciliation and Healing Foundation).

NGOs such as the “Korean Council” harshly criticized the December 2015 agreement and called for its nullification, alleging that it had failed to acknowledge Japan’s liability for war crimes. They demanded Japan’s money be returned and the foundation be disbanded. Within a year, media coverage of civil society responses resulted in polling where only 25.5 percent of South Koreans supported the agreement while 59 percent said it should be nullified (Realmeter 2016). In Japan, Seoul was seen to not be faithfully implementing the agreement. Not only was there no progress in moving the statue away from the Japanese embassy in Seoul, Korean NGOs placed another statue in front of the Japanese consulate in Busan in December 2016, prompting Tokyo to recall its consul general from Busan and ambassador from Seoul.

Later, in May 2018, civic groups including the “Busan Movement for Social Reform and Elimination of Accumulated Evils” attempted to add a wartime laborer

statue next to the “comfort woman” statue in front of the Japanese consulate in Busan. Local authorities disallowed this as the statue lacked a permit, and after a scuffle between police and activists, moved the statue to a museum. Yet the civil society activists persisted, and through the courts managed to regain control of the statue in spring 2019 and install it down the street from the consulate. They lobbied for and won revision of a local ordinance to permit the two statues to remain on the public sidewalk. Civic groups had already installed similar wartime laborer statues (made by Kim Un-sung and Kim Seo-kyung who also designed several of the “comfort woman” statues) on Jeju Island in December 2015 and at Yongsan Station in Seoul and in Gwangju in August 2017. Jang Duk-hwan, secretary general of the Korean Association for Justice for Forced Laborers said, “I’m aware [the statues] will intensify the diplomatic row with Japan ... that’s exactly what we’ve intended” (Yi 2017).

Despite the legal wrangling over statues, Japan had returned its ambassador and consul general in April 2017, ahead of South Korea’s presidential election. Park’s impeachment and removal from office set the stage for the election of Moon Jae-in in May 2017. Japanese observers were skeptical of Moon because he had helped legally represent wartime laborers in a case against Mitsubishi Heavy Industries in 2000 during his time at a law firm in Busan (Moon 2017, 76; Yonhap 2017). His progressive Minjoo Party had submitted a resolution in the National Assembly calling for the December 2015 agreement to be nullified and incorporated the “comfort women” issue and statue imagery into their political campaigns for the April 2016 legislative elections. In November 2017, they passed a bill designating August 14 a national day for remembering the victim’s suffering. In a move interpreted by Japanese media as South Korea seeking US support, a prominent “comfort woman” survivor was introduced to President Donald Trump during the state dinner hosted by Moon in November 2017.

While the Abe government signaled its willingness to increase economic and security cooperation with Seoul, it showed no interest in revisiting the 2015 agreement. Foreign Minister Kono Taro said any attempt to change the deal “cannot be acceptable” and would make relations “unmanageable” (MOFA 2017b). In early January 2018, Moon met with survivors as well as members of the “Korean Council.” The president apologized for the previous government’s agreement and sought understanding from survivors and NGOs for the approach his government would take. His administration subsequently suggested that the ROK would provide additional funds to support survivors, consult with Tokyo about how to manage its existing financial contribution, and ask Japan to make further efforts to help the victims regain their honor and dignity, and to heal their emotional scars. However, NGO pressure persisted, and the Moon administration decided in November 2018 to dismantle the Reconciliation and Healing Foundation in accordance with the views of the “victims and related organizations” (MOGEF 2018). This led the Japanese government to argue that Seoul was in breach of the 2015 agreement.

The advocacy work of NGOs was influential enough to get Korea–Japan relations in trouble but was not able to secure historical resolution through the courts. This is not only because Tokyo refused to comply with South Korean domestic rulings, but also because Korean courts issued conflicting rulings over time, with some judges continuing to find that Japan has state immunity. In addition, the “Korean Council” faced a corruption scandal involving one of its longtime leaders, Yoon

Mee-hyang, after she won a seat in the National Assembly in 2020. “Comfort women” survivors accused Yoon of misappropriating funds, some donors sued for their money to be returned, and the head caretaker of a rest home for “comfort women” survivors committed suicide (McCurry 2020). Also, Yoon Mee-hyang’s advocacy to scrap the 2015 agreement came to appear disingenuous once the Korean government shared evidence that she had been consulted about it in advance. While the larger movement continued to inspire advocacy for victims of sexual violence, Yoon’s scandals tarnished the legitimacy of the “Korean Council” as a legal crusader against Japan.

Nonetheless, as Slaughter and Bosco (2000) argue, “court cases over compensation for historical war grievances can take up bandwidth of government officials and tie diplomats’ hands in their pursuit of the national interest in diplomacy.” This was also exhibited in Korea–Japan relations regarding wartime labor. Various NGOs advocate for compensation for Koreans who worked in Japanese factories, mines, and fields during the colonial period (Underwood 2006). These include a coalition of labor unionists and NGOs known as Gangjejingyong Nodongjasang Geonlib Chujin Wiwonhoe. Wartime labor survivors and their families brought over 60 cases to Japanese courts, with substantial support from attorney associations focused on Japan’s wartime responsibility (Chun 2014, 265). Japanese courts mostly dismissed the cases pointing to the finalization of claims clause in the 1965 treaty. South Korean courts did the same for many years, but NGOs and activists persisted. After a landmark Supreme Court case in May 2012, a mounting number of court rulings in South Korea found current Japanese companies liable for wartime damages and past wages.

The Moon administration initially emphasized the importance of working with Japan even as the president publicly maintained that the 1965 Korea–Japan treaty does not invalidate legal rights of former laborers to claim compensation from Japanese firms. The Moon government installed judges involved in Minbyun, the main progressive lawyers’ organization, and appointed Supreme Court Chief Justice Kim Myeong-soo, who led Uribeop Yeongoohoe, a progressive judges’ association. Both organizations generally share the view that South Korean citizens can sue Japanese companies for wartime responsibility. Meanwhile, activist lawyers from Haemaru and NGOs under the “Cooperative Action Group” continued to push cases of wartime labor compensation against Japanese corporations.<sup>19</sup> Lee Heeja, co-president of one of the “Cooperative Action Group” NGOs, admitted in an interview that she had “nearly threatened” surviving wartime laborers to continue their case through the appeals process by reminding them of the many “people that are going through trouble for them” and how many of their friends suffered and passed away without recognition (Cho 2018).

In October 2018, the Supreme Court upheld lower court rulings that Nippon Steel & Sumitomo Metal Corporation is liable for 100 million won in compensation for each of four plaintiffs. The following month, the Supreme Court upheld lower court rulings in two different cases by wartime laborers against Mitsubishi Heavy Industries and ordered the company to pay 80–150 million won to plaintiffs. At the same time, South Korean prosecutors pursued anti-corruption cases against former conservative officials and judges who had upheld the 1965 treaty, making the

Supreme Court rulings appear politically driven, even as Moon administration officials stressed the importance of a separation of powers among branches of government.

Japan's Foreign Minister Kono argued that South Korea's credibility for the rule of law and the maintenance of bilateral relations were at stake, calling the court decisions an "extremely regrettable and totally unacceptable ... breach of international law" that, if implemented, would "overthrow the legal foundation of the friendly and cooperative relationship that Japan and the ROK have developed since the normalization of diplomatic relations in 1965" (MOFA 2018). Tokyo warned Seoul if it does not resolve the matter domestically, detrimental effects on bilateral trade and investment would follow any seizure of Japanese corporate assets. When Japan placed trade curbs on South Korea in summer 2019, arguably sending relations to a new low, the measures were widely considered to be in retaliation for Korean court rulings on wartime labor (Kim 2021).

### NGOs vilifying Korean "collaborators" with Japan

A third way Korean civil society is affecting diplomatic relations with Japan is by stigmatizing "pro-Japan" voices in Korea and stonewalling public discussion to preserve influence over bilateral history issues. Certain NGOs normalize political protests at the Japanese embassy and against gatherings of alleged Japan sympathizers. Others engage in online attacks against "pro-Japan" scholars. In interaction with civil society demands, Korean media routinely amplify negative stories about Japan. As a result, Korean politicians find it difficult to publicly defend cooperation with Tokyo.

Demonstrations in front of the Japanese Embassy in Seoul sometimes turn violent, with the burning of Japanese flags and images of Japanese leaders, and occasional scuffles with counter-protestors and police. An elderly man associated with "comfort women" civic groups set himself on fire in front of the Japanese embassy in August 2015 and died of his burns. Some Korean NGOs take their protests beyond the embassy. The Solidarity for Peace and Reunification of Korea (SPRK) pressures local authorities and hotel venues to cancel Japanese ceremonies in Korea, including those that celebrate the Emperor's Birthday or commemorate the establishment of Japan's Self-Defense Forces (SDF). While it is customary for overseas diplomatic missions to host networking parties on their national days, SPRK and its partners express outrage against such events on Korean soil, insisting that they glorify Japan's imperial past and are offensive to the Korean people (Jun 2014). Activists try to photograph Korean participants in Japan-related events to report their national disloyalty on social media. One of the worst accusations in Korean politics is to be labeled *tochak waegu* (homegrown Japanese) or *chinilpa*, the historical term for a traitorous collaborator with Japan. The Center for Historical Truth and Justice maintains a "chinilpa app" allowing smartphone users to check if someone's ancestor appears on the NGO's list of Japanese collaborators.

Public controversies surrounding two "pro-Japan" books in South Korea illustrate civil society efforts to silence authors who depict history in ways counter to mainstream nationalist narratives. In 2013, Park Yu-ha published *Comfort Women of the Empire*, arguing that many young Korean women were coerced, tricked, and

exploited by Korean middlemen, not just by Japanese soldiers, and that some willingly offered their services to the Japanese army. According to Park, Koreans advocating on behalf of the women since the 1990s selected what they wanted to hear from survivors' testimonies (Park 2013, 41). Park maintained that Koreans also owe the "comfort women" a more complete apology, since successive Korean governments did not protect the women from discrimination and were not transparent about the allocation of large sums of money received from Tokyo after the 1965 normalization treaty. Park also accused the "Korean Council" of opposing the Asian Women's Fund "to block reconciliation between Japan and South Korea" (Park 2013, 114).

Park's analysis was criticized by other Korean academics for lacking sensitivity for survivors and for alleged factual and methodological errors (Jeong 2016). But Korean NGOs such as APHEN made ad hominem attacks, netizens demanded she lose her job at Sejong University, and some called for her deportation for being a "pro-Japan" mouthpiece and traitor to the Korean nation (Choe 2015). Legal battles ensued as Park faced criminal and civil suits from "comfort women" survivors, backed by the House of Sharing and other NGOs that demanded courts ban sales of Park's book, force her to pay compensation, and sentence her to time in prison.

A different bestseller espoused a state-centric nationalism to criticize anti-Japan NGOs that allegedly detract from economic development. Lee Young-hoon and his co-authors argued in *Anti-Japan Tribalism* that civil society actors exaggerate and manipulate historical complaints against Tokyo. According to the authors, NGOs organize "endless protests in the name of the comfort women, when all they care about is satisfying their own crooked sense of justice and maintaining their jobs" (Lee et al. 2019, 338). The book suggested that Japan was guilty of systematizing and expanding existing Korean forms of prostitution, so the women were not sex slaves but were paid workers under poor conditions typical at the time (Lee et al. 2019, 301–304).

*Anti-Japan Tribalism* went so far as to suggest that Joseon-era incompetence and infighting led to the Korean dynasty's collapse, and that Japan's occupation allowed Korea to modernize (Lee et al. 2019, 58). Korean civic groups, including the taxpayer-supported Heritage of Korean Independence, criticized the book for discounting the ways that patriarchy and militarism mobilized colonial bodies and for subordinating victims' voices to national economic interests. The organization's head, Kim Won-woong, was particularly outspoken about what he called the enduring problem of Korean collaborators with Japanese imperialism. Lee and his co-authors made themselves the target of such attacks by applying their ultra-conservative political-economic perspective to Korean history while failing to appreciate how NGOs have a legitimate role in advocating victims' rights and reconciliation. Yet, as other scholars have argued, "anti-Japanism, as long as it remains monolithic and directed externally as only a catharsis to over-compensate for colonial wounds, obscures its own internal violence and contradictions in the name of the patriarchal nation" (Ching 2019, 59).

In December, 2020, Harvard law professor Mark Ramseyer ignited another controversy with a largely theoretical article about supposed contracts between Japan's wartime brothels and Korean women. The paper was riddled with empirical and methodological problems, most notably failing to be grounded in primary historical



documents such as actual “comfort women” contracts, yet it was published online by the *International Review of Law and Economics*. Numerous scholars criticized Ramseyer’s writing as unfit to pass peer review, while activists accused him of slandering survivors and suggested his Mitsubishi-endowed chair presented a conflict of interest.<sup>20</sup> The journal solicited well-researched rebuttals, but the controversy also entailed many personal attacks against the professor. Meanwhile, other publications making non-factual claims—such as alleging Japan offered no compensation to colonial victims or never apologized—are rarely subject to such heated debate, academic scrutiny, or attacks on the author’s character and means of employment.

News critical of Japan sells in Korea, whereas coverage favorable to Japan tends to be met with complaints in the comments section and on social media, and even direct criticism from other media outlets.<sup>21</sup> South Korean media often exhibit a zero-sum mentality toward Japan, to the point that international coverage of Japanese perspectives of history or any perceived win for Tokyo’s diplomats is reflexively considered a loss for Seoul’s. Korean media periodically attack Korean officials for failing to outmaneuver Japan; after the successful April 2015 Obama–Abe summit, outlets in Seoul criticized ROK diplomats as “inept,” “silent,” and “cowardly,” with some articles even calling on the foreign minister to resign (Kelly 2015). Research on media coverage of activist civil society in South Korea suggests that grievance groups can “inhibit reasoned political debate and compromise” as they “render decision-making slower and more complicated” (Arrington 2017, 88).

The case of Kato Tatsuya demonstrated how interaction of civil society, media, and governments can damage relations. Kato, who was then Seoul bureau chief of Japan’s conservative *Sankei Shimbun*, speculated that President Park was slow to respond to the April 16, 2014 Sewol ferry disaster because she was away from the Blue House for an undisclosed personal meeting. Korean NGOs including Young’s Liberty Union and *Dokdo Saranghoe* initiated a suit against Kato for allegedly defaming the president. Kato was for months barred from leaving the ROK while under investigation by Korean prosecutors, prompting entreaties from the Japanese government for his release. This and other press freedom cases did not reflect well on Korean democracy (Haggard and You 2015) and motivated the Japanese Foreign Ministry to remove mention of “shared values” with South Korea in the 2015 Diplomatic Bluebook.

The Korean NGO-driven taboo for cooperating with Japan spilled over into policy areas ranging from trade and finance to regional institutional building and defense cooperation (Easley and Park 2018). For example, People’s Solidarity for Participatory Democracy pursued a lawsuit demanding the ROK government disclose intelligence sharing negotiations with Japan. Policymakers in both countries recognized the opportunity costs of unrealized cooperation, and nearly 70 percent of Japanese and Koreans in a joint poll said that strained relations are undesirable and should be improved (Genron NPO and East Asia Institute 2017, 6).

Nonetheless, various NGOs staged public demonstrations against Japan around the 100th anniversary of the March 1st movement in 2019, called for a boycott of the 2020 Tokyo Olympics in protest of fans not being banned from displaying resemblances of the Japanese imperial army flag, and vociferously objected to the possible release of radioactive water from Japan’s damaged nuclear plant in Fukushima. Other civic activists helped to organize a “No Japan!” public boycott campaign against

Japanese products and travel to Japan. A growing number of Korean NGOs equate national loyalty with being tough on Tokyo, and media outlets spread these views in their reporting. Korean policymakers are afraid to stand up to these narratives, even when working with Japan is in the national interest, because being labeled as “pro-Japan” would be “political suicide.”<sup>22</sup> Korean civil society thus pushed political leaders into a dilemma of pursuing NGO demands at the expense of relations with Tokyo. South Korean officials privately expressed concern that the Moon administration was grasping for minor benefits on history while suffering major diplomatic losses.<sup>23</sup>

## Conclusions

NGOs are often considered cosmopolitan watchdogs but may in fact advocate nationalist policies, raising the need to problematize their role in foreign policymaking. Understudied cases of Korean civic groups demonstrate how NGOs are capable of having chilling effects on international affairs. To be clear, there is great diversity among Korean NGOs, most have little to do with Japan, and it would be inaccurate to simply blame Korean civil society for difficult relations with Tokyo. However, this article’s findings highlight the responsibility of NGOs within a dynamic and relational context by focusing on three major pathways by which civil society is complicating interactions between states. A growing number of NGOs are promoting historical narratives with the aim of increasing international pressure against Japan; some activists have pushed for court decisions that challenge existing agreements and affect government policies; and certain groups are making reconciliatory positions toward Japan taboo in Korean domestic politics.

These mechanisms are generalizable beyond the Korea–Japan context so that future research might seek to understand pathways of NGO influence in other bilateral cases and derive comparative insights for reconciliation. The three pathways are not mutually exclusive, indeed there are NGOs that are active in more than one, and activities within the three were mutually reinforcing in straining bilateral relations under Abe and Moon. To realize a virtuous cycle in Korea–Japan relations, the balance of NGO efforts would need to shift.

First, NGOs can regularize post-pandemic exchanges to promote understanding and narrow perception gaps. They can provide fora for addressing historical disputes in ways that do not spill over into areas of functional cooperation. They can support habits of cooperation by accepting existing agreements and trying to build and improve upon them. In recent awareness campaigns, many Korean NGOs adopted maximalist positions, demanding respect for the “correct” version of history, repeated “sincere” apologies, “proper” accounting and “adequate” compensation of past misdeeds, and recognition of “rightful” territorial claims and maritime labels. This has impeded compromise with Tokyo while yielding little benefit for Seoul.

Rather than wage public relations campaigns akin to “history wars,” NGOs are well placed to help young Koreans and Japanese visit each other’s historical sites, not only to learn about past atrocities but also shared economic and political accomplishments. Leaders ought to encourage students to participate with open minds rather than trying to convince their neighbors of a single narrative. Comparisons with

European historical reconciliation are imperfect, but European peace and integration required leaders willing to make symbolic gestures to former adversaries and stand up to domestic nationalists across ideological lines (Berger and Bong 2013). One limitation of past Korea–Japan NGO cooperation was that many of the Japanese groups involved were left-of-center. For reconciliation efforts to be broadly appreciated in both societies, Korean and Japanese civil societies need to engage each other across the political spectrum.<sup>24</sup>

Second, leadership from top political offices is needed to address Korean NGOs using court cases to affect Seoul’s foreign policy. As the “Korean Council” did for “comfort women” and the “Cooperative Action Group” did for wartime labor, NGOs pushed survivors’ cases through the courts, also shaping media coverage and public opinion. ROK courts tend to weigh the will of the people in their jurisprudence to ally with democracy (Hahm 2018), and they are thus susceptible to civil society pressure. Conservative administrations in South Korea are more likely to keep NGOs at arm’s length and encourage courts to consider diplomatic interests, whereas progressive administrations tend to support citizen-driven democracy.

Korean conservatives and progressives still have intense disagreements over the history of collaborators, economic development, and democratization (J. Kim 2013). Civil society can play a productive role in honestly discussing domestic historical controversies. Japanese colonialism was not the only source of exploitation in Korea; an extremely hierarchical society exploited women’s and workers’ bodies and demanded that their memories conform to the national story. The dominant narrative in Korea is not as victim-centered as it is anti-Japan. NGOs have told victims to be pure until violated by Japan and denied them agency to accept Japanese apologies and compensation. Reconciliation is obstructed when concerned parties overly rely on litigation and do not adequately listen to the victims or to each other.

During the 2022 South Korean presidential election, the Yoon Suk-yeol camp suggested a “Kim-Obuchi Declaration 2.0” to put functional cooperation and historical dialogue on positive but separate tracks (Choi 2022). Upon taking office, the Yoon administration launched a government–civil society joint task force for building public understanding for improving relations with Japan. If it can win civil society support, the South Korean government could address domestic court rulings while maintaining the 1965 agreement by setting up a fund—with Korean companies that benefited from Japan’s post-1965 financial contributions—to pay the plaintiffs and other surviving wartime laborers. After Korean law is clarified so Japanese companies can no longer be sued, Japanese firms and civil society can make voluntary contributions into the fund and increase support for people–people exchanges.

Thirdly, civil society has a critical role in ensuring respect and tolerance for diversity of ideas. In South Korea’s domestic politics, many NGOs motivate political elites and even scholars to avoid reconciliatory positions and present a unified position on Japan. But debate is needed to address distortions of history with better methodology and primary sources, and ultimately inform mutual understanding. Reconciliation is not about convincing everyone of one version of the truth, rather it is a process by which people who disagree come to terms with one another.

Blaming and shaming quickly gets out of hand on the internet and social media. Rather than engage in “cancel culture” or shouting down targeted actors, NGOs

should provide platforms for communication, bring in marginalized actors, and amplify voices neglected by the state. Civil society can be more civil by recognizing that its comparative advantage is not to silence but to engage. The current stalemate between Tokyo and Seoul is a function of the ROK government appeasing domestic groups while the Japanese government refuses to go any further in recognizing their complaints. National interests would be better served if the South Korean government made clear that NGOs do not have a veto over Seoul's cooperation with Tokyo, and if the Japanese government made clear that existing agreements are not the endpoint of reconciliation but instead steps to build upon.

While they avoid saying so publicly, many Korean diplomats complain that the more radical NGOs complicate and even subvert ROK diplomacy.<sup>25</sup> But since South Korea is a vibrant democracy, it is not legally possible, morally acceptable, or politically desirable to muzzle civil society for the sake of diplomatic expediency. There will inevitably be undiplomatic and even extremist voices in civil society, such as when some Koreans celebrated the news of former prime minister Abe's assassination in July 2022. But reconciliation can continue if political leaders tap mainstream public opinion to protect progress from the fringe.

One reason why Korea–Japan relations are fraught with historical controversies is that the framework for bilateral relations—the normalization treaty of 1965—was a top-down agreement not adequately supported by bottom-up reconciliation efforts. This is a matter of urgency because by May 2022, there were only 11 registered “comfort women” still alive in South Korea and a dwindling number of wartime laborers. Once the survivors are gone, there will be no one with such public authority to forgive Japan. Instead, there will remain fervent Korean NGOs that have no interest in ever accepting Japanese apologies, because doing so would undermine their *raison d'être*, political influence, and fundraising abilities.

Some Japanese observers suspect that anti-Japan NGOs receive financial support from the South Korean government and then turn around to pressure and constrain Seoul.<sup>26</sup> While it is difficult to substantiate accusations of broad government support, many civil society groups critical of Japan receive tax exemptions and the positive veneer of being NGOs as opposed to lobbyist organizations. Increasing transparency in the NGO landscape—including fundraising, policy positions, and relations with media and public agencies—will help make civil society a responsible stakeholder in diplomatic relations. South Korean NGOs with total asset value under half a billion won or total income and contributed property below 300 million won are not obligated to disclose detailed financial information (ROK Tax Act 2018). Despite efforts by transparency organizations such as GuideStar Korea to make available financial data recorded by the National Tax Service, there remains a need for regulatory reform to improve NGO disclosures and reporting to the public.

Meanwhile, if Japan responds stridently to Korean NGOs, further downward spirals in bilateral relations are likely. History issues cannot be “resolved” any time soon. An ongoing process of reconciliation would involve concerted efforts by both Japanese and Koreans. Some scholars suggest a Korea–Japan “grand bargain” on history issues, but because Korean NGOs allegedly “move the goalposts,” a broader historical compromise does not look diplomatically credible or politically sustainable in Tokyo.<sup>27</sup> It is a matter of national interest that civil societies and media acknowledge

that functional cooperation need not be frozen by disagreements over history. South Korea is a rising middle power attempting to leverage international contributions and relations with its neighbors toward a peaceful East Asia (Easley and Park 2018). Japan is an essential partner, but if relations further decline and Koreans one day seek Tokyo's support for Korean unification, they might be left asking, "who lost Japan?"

After Japan's July 2022 Upper House elections, both Prime Minister Kishida and President Yoon have a window of opportunity before their governments have to face voters again. They could take this opportunity to orchestrate a reconciliation event that provides a photo worthy of inclusion in history textbooks.<sup>28</sup> An ambitious example would be if the highly symbolic peace statue were moved from in front of the Japanese embassy to a place of honor in Seoul, and a delegation of Japanese veterans and politicians met with "comfort women" survivors, former wartime laborers, and their supporters for a ceremony at the new location. For the sake of domestic social cohesion and international diplomatic cooperation, civil society must be involved in historical reconciliation. Governments and publics on both sides need to appreciate that as NGOs have become part of the problem in Korea–Japan relations, they must also be part of overcoming the current diplomatic impasse.

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## Notes

1. In 2019, a record high 74 percent of Japanese surveyed expressed distrust of South Korea under Moon (*Yomiuri Shimbun* 2019), while a record low of 12 percent of Koreans expressed a favorable view of Japan under Abe (Gallup 2019).
2. Publications include joint efforts by the Korean Teachers Union and Hiroshima Teachers Union in 2005; Korea–Japan Women Joint Publication Committee in 2005; Korea and Japan associations of history teachers in 2006; and Association of History Textbook Researchers in 2007.
3. See Saito and Wang (2014). However, bilateral and trilateral efforts encountered government resistance to content not comporting with official positions. Joint history projects still have much to achieve considering how Polish-German and French-German textbook commissions grew out of decades of civil exchanges (Shin and Sneider 2011).
4. In 2017, 7,140,165 Korean tourists visited Japan while 2,311,447 Japanese tourists visited Korea; <http://kto.visitkorea.or.kr>.
5. The articles (in Korean) are compiled at [www.actionforpeace.net/sub.asp?pid=238](http://www.actionforpeace.net/sub.asp?pid=238).
6. Some Japanese conservatives have suggested the "comfort women" were volunteers, discounting evidence of coercion and atrocities. Abe himself said, "my heart aches when I think about those people who were victimized by human trafficking ... subject to immeasurable pain and suffering beyond description," but speaking in the passive voice, without specifying perpetrators (*Asahi Shimbun* 2015b).
7. In May 2015, the author mailed a questionnaire (in Korean) to many NGOs mentioned in this article, regarding their objectives concerning Japan and perspectives on reconciliation. The response rate was only 33 percent, so the analysis below is informed more by dozens of not-for-attribution interviews with policy-makers, analysts and civil society leaders in Tokyo and especially in Seoul, observing protests and demonstrations, and examining NGO online material, as well as coverage over time in media and academic articles.

8. According to surveys conducted by Edelman (2019), the Korean public expresses greater trust in NGOs (56 percent) than in government (48 percent) or the media (42 percent). Korean media often cite NGOs and depict them as having moral authority while making international inroads against Japan; see for example: [https://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english\\_edition/e\\_international/755207.html](https://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_international/755207.html).
9. Author interviews with policymakers in Tokyo, July 2015.
10. Seo Kyoung-duk's campaigns are periodically posted at [www.forthenextgeneration.com](http://www.forthenextgeneration.com).
11. See, for example, Clemens (2014).
12. In the Cabinet Office survey, "affinity" includes "strong affinity" and "some affinity" responses, while "no affinity" comprises responses that were "not much affinity" and "not any affinity."
13. On civil society efforts by ethnic Koreans in Japan, see Tai (2006). Other examples include meetings between the Korea Residents' Union in Japan and the Korea–Japan Friendship Association.
14. See [www.nipponkaigi.org](http://www.nipponkaigi.org); [www.tsukurukai.com/index.html](http://www.tsukurukai.com/index.html); [www.sdh-fact.com](http://www.sdh-fact.com); and [www.tamogami-toshio.jp](http://www.tamogami-toshio.jp).
15. "Korean Council" refers to the Korean Council for the Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan (*Jeongdaehyeop*), which in July 2018 merged with the Foundation for Justice and Remembrance (*Jeongeugieokyeondae*) to become the Korean Council for Justice and Remembrance for the Issues of Military Sexual Slavery by Japan.
16. As of May 25, 2021, there were 144 statues in South Korea according to [www.womenandwar.net](http://www.womenandwar.net).
17. See <http://nadesiko-action.org>.
18. Both sides stated they "will refrain from accusing or criticizing each other regarding this issue in the international community" (MOFA 2015). The Japanese side requested the ROK government not use the term "sexual slaves" and Seoul agreed to formally refer to the women as "victims of comfort stations of the Japanese military."
19. *Gangjedong-won munje haegyolgwae daeil gwageo cheongsan-eul wihan gongdonghaengdong* ("Cooperative action group for resolving forced mobilization of labor and historical issues with Japan") is an umbrella organization that includes the Council for Demanding Compensation for Victims of the Pacific War, *Minbyun*, the Center for Historical Truth and Justice, and the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions.
20. Korean activists attributed nefarious motives to a supposedly growing movement of history deniers in Japan and their allies abroad, pointing to a *Sankei Shimbun*-affiliated website in English that supported Ramseyer: <https://japan-forward.com/tag/j-mark-ramseyer>.
21. See, for example: [www.hani.co.kr/arti/society/society\\_general/958868.html](http://www.hani.co.kr/arti/society/society_general/958868.html).
22. Author interviews with policymakers in Seoul, spring–autumn 2014, autumn 2018, summer 2019.
23. The Korean phrase, "*sotamdaesil*," which roughly corresponds to the idiom, "penny wise, pound foolish," was used by several current and former South Korean diplomats to describe the situation to the author; Seoul, autumn 2018 and spring 2019.
24. Some Japanese conservatives viewed the 1995 "Murayama Statement" apology as a socialist prime minister speaking for progressives but not for all of Japan.
25. Author conversations with ROK MOFA officials in Seoul, May 2015 and January 2017.
26. Author interviews with policymakers in Tokyo, January and July 2015, June and December 2017. According to the ROK Ministry of the Interior and Safety ([www.mois.go.kr](http://www.mois.go.kr)), the government funded three NGOs related to Dokdo advocacy in 2018, two more than in 2017 under the Park administration.
27. For such a proposed grand bargain over history, see Glosserman and Snyder (2015).
28. For example, the *Kniefall von Warschau*—an iconic image of West German Chancellor Willy Brandt kneeling in 1970 at the monument for victims of the 1943 Warsaw Ghetto Uprising—became symbolic of German atonement for World War II and desire to rebuild relations with regional neighbors (Rauer 2006).

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