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Japan, led by less apologetic generation, stays tough in South Korea feud

By Linda Sieg

TOKYO (Reuters) - When Yohei Kono made a landmark 1993 apology to “comfort women”, many of them Koreans, forced to work in wartime military brothels, Japan’s then chief cabinet secretary spoke for a moderate conservative mainstream seeking to reconcile with Asian neighbors.

National flags of South Korea and Japan are displayed during a meeting between Komeito Party members and South Korean lawmakers at Komeito Party's headquarters in Tokyo, Japan, July 31, 2019. (REUTERS/Kim Kyung-Hoon/File Photo)

A quarter century later, Kono’s son, Taro, now foreign minister, is on the front lines of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe’s escalating feud over compensation for South Koreans forced to work in wartime Japanese mines and factories, an unresolved legacy of the two countries’ bitter past.

The contrast between father and son reflects a change in Japan's ruling party symbolized by Abe's own rise to power.

"There has been a generational shift," said Andrew Horvat, a visiting professor at Josai International University.

"Those who saw Korean conscript laborers in their emaciated condition forced to work in Japanese mines and companies have died or are very, very old," he said.

"The failure to reach consensus on a difficult past ... has resulted in a lack of tolerance in a new generation that sees things in a less nuanced manner, devoid of real experience."

Ties between the two countries have seen good and bad times, but never escaped the bitter legacy of Japan's 1910-1945 colonial rule of the Korean peninsula and wartime abuses.

Relations soured last October after South Korea's Supreme Court ordered Japanese firms to compensate Korean wartime workers, a move strongly condemned by Tokyo.

They got worse when Japan tightened export controls on materials vital for South Korean chipmakers and then dropped Seoul from a list of countries eligible for fast-track exports, steps angrily denounced by South Korea.

Those moves, which Japan said were not retaliation over the history row, threaten to disrupt global supply chains and undermine security cooperation in the face of North Korea's nuclear and missile threat, analysts say.

'MATTER OF TRUST'

Japan's government says the South Korean court rulings broke a 1965 treaty normalizing ties and an accompanying agreement that settled compensation "completely and finally".

Japanese critics also accuse Seoul of moving the goal posts with its demands for historical accountability. They point, for example, to President Moon Jae-in's decision to dissolve a fund for "comfort women" set up under an agreement in 2015 by Abe and Moon's predecessor.

"The biggest problem is a matter of trust, and whether promises made between nations are kept," Abe said this week.

Abe, 64, was first elected to parliament in 1993, the same year as the Kono statement.

Two years later, then-premier Tomiichi Murayama, a socialist who led a coalition with the conservative Liberal Democratic Party, made a "heartfelt apology" for suffering caused by Japan's "colonial rule and aggression".

The acts of contrition sparked a backlash in the LDP among a younger generation including Abe, who felt their elders were selling out and adopting a “masochist” view of history.

“On a broad trajectory, the Murayama statement was the high point of Japanese war responsibility and there was a reaction against that,” said **William Underwood**, an independent researcher who has done extensive work on the forced labor issue.

POST-WAR PREMIER

Abe, elected prime minister in 2006 as the first premier born after World War Two, quit abruptly after one troubled year.

He made a rare comeback in 2012, supported by a corps of conservatives sharing his commitment to pride in Japan’s culture and history and a less apologetic view of the war.

Electoral system changes and three years in opposition helped ultra-conservative lawmakers and lobby groups strengthen their clout in the LDP.

“It’s like the NRA (National Rifle Association) in the United States. A very small group ... can leverage the democratic system in a direction the majority do not wish to go,” Horvat said.

Pressure inside the LDP for a tough stance is strong.

In June, Defence Minister Takeshi Iwaya came under fire from party colleagues for smiling before cameras at a meeting with his South Korean counterpart.

Japanese MPs favoring good ties with Seoul met South Korean counterparts in Tokyo last week, but made little progress in easing the conflict.

Abe’s government has embarked on an aggressive public relations campaign.

Trade minister Hiroshige Seko took to Twitter to chastise public broadcaster NHK for using the term “export restraints” for moves against sales to Seoul. He said the proper term was the more neutral “export control” or “export management”.

NHK declined to comment on Seko’s tweet, but told Reuters in a statement that it made independent decisions and constantly revised terms to be more appropriate and easier to understand.

In reporting on the topic on Thursday, NHK used the more neutral expression.

Diplomats have reached out to domestic and foreign media with detailed briefings and handouts on the dispute.”I think there is very strong pressure, especially toward major media such as NHK,” said Kozo Nagata, a former NHK producer and professor of media studies at Musashi University.

COSTS VS BENEFITS

Opinion polls show Japanese are mostly supportive of the government's tough stance.

A survey by the conservative Sankei newspaper and Fuji News Network released on Monday showed two-thirds of respondents backed removing South Korea from the fast-track export list, but nearly 60% also worried about future ties.

"There is 'Korea fatigue'," Underwood said, but he added the general public was not as harsh as many in the ruling party.

"As for the younger generation, they have no knowledge base, but they have a sense the Koreans are intractable," he said.

With Japan and South Korea digging in their heels for now, the prospects for ending the feud appear slim until it starts to hurt their economies or security cooperation, experts said.

"The reality of historical redress settlements is that it boils down to a cost-benefit matrix," Underwood said.

"It is only when the costs of perpetual intransigence are perceived as greater than the costs of settlement that anyone moves," he added.