

THE HILL



Japan and South Korea Resolve an Issue

By Kathy Kemper | The Hill | Posted Jan 24, 2016

When the two strongest Asian allies of the United States disagree, our entire defense posture in that part of the world is harmed. That has been the case in a festering dispute between South Korea and Japan, the two most important democracies of Asia. The United States has been particularly worried because they are the front lines of security against an unpredictable North Korea and its child-like but explosive leader, Kim Jong-un.

Now, however, South Korea and Japan have finally agreed to put behind them the contentious issue that for years reduced their cooperation to a standstill: The question of “comfort women” enlisted to provide sexual services to Japanese troops during World War II.

One should be permitted to think that, 70 years after that war’s end, issues larger and smaller have long ago been resolved, and we see that Japan is the world’s third-largest economy, ally of the U.S., and mainstay of our defense forces in Asia.

Yet the comfort women issue arose with new force in recent years, partly because of the movement to recognize roles of women worldwide, but mainly because a small chorus of voices – academics, self-appointed women’s advocates and others – used the issue to further their own causes and interests. Several of the remaining 50 or so Korean comfort women were transported across the world to demonstrate, statues were erected here and there including several in the United States, books were authored, articles were written, and, almost suddenly, relationships between South Korea and Japan were threatened.

The United States, quietly and at times not so quietly, constantly urged Japan and South Korea to end the dispute, but in both countries, and in the U.S., too, there were small but hardened elements that wanted to prolong the problem.

Finally Japan’s prime minister, Shinzo Abe, after long negotiations, surprised all with his announcement that an agreement had been reached. He issued a renewed apology, and Japan will spend \$8 million on the welfare of the few remaining comfort women. In turn, South Korea promised specifically that it considers the agreement complete in all respects that it cannot be revoked, and that it will cease all criticism including protests at the United Nations.

For the United States and indeed for the world, that agreement affecting a very few elderly women now has a much greater and more far-reaching effect. In the words of our State Department, this is a “new era, in which these two major economies, two major democracies in Northeast Asia, are cooperating fully.”

The immediate benefit of the agreement is to once again permit the three allies, Japan, South Korea and the United States, to work in tandem to meet North Korean threats.

The agreement between Japan and South Korea came on December 28.

A few days later, North Korea announced its test of a nuclear bomb.