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Amidst an Explosion of Anti-Korean Hate: Thoughts on Overcoming Colonialism and Bringing Peace to the Korean Peninsula

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Colonialism raises its head once more

2019 marks the 100th anniversary of the Korean March 1 independence movement. I never thought that in such an important year Japan would experience such a vicious explosion of hate not only towards the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), but also towards the Republic of Korea (ROK).

Ever since his debut as a politician when elected to the lower house of the Diet in 1993, Prime Minister Abe Shinzo has stood in the vanguard within the Liberal Democratic Party of a faction championing denial of Japan's war of aggression and the history of the Japanese military's sex slavery and the Nanjing Massacre. Since Abe has been prime minister for a total of eight years, first in 2006-2007 and then from the end of 2012 to the present, the current situation may be the inevitable conclusion to his reign. Distortion and denial of the history of Japanese military sex slavery under Abe's administration has spread through the media to general Japanese society. It has now extended to denial of "forced mobilization" as a whole, and as hate speech intensifies on the streets and in public media including the Internet, right-wingers have even begun to propagate historical revisionism overseas in the name of "history wars."

In late 2015, the pro-Japan Park Geun-hye administration governing the ROK at the time and the Abe administration attempted to devise a "final resolution" to the issue of Japanese military sex slavery through a meeting between the foreign ministers of each country with no involvement by the victims and without producing any official document. Then, following the October 30, 2018 ROK Supreme Court ruling that ordered Nippon Steel and Sumitomo Metal to pay compensation to four Koreans who were put to forced labor under colonial rule, any semblance of discretion seemed to collapse. Not only did the Abe administration violate the separation of powers principle by intervening with the court ruling, but a gush of anti-Korean sentiment swept through Japanese society, going beyond the realm of historical issues. Japan's mass media was dominated by narratives calling K-pop stars "anti-Japan," persistently denouncing the ROK on the grounds that an ROK naval ship allegedly aimed radar at a Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force aircraft while engaged in rescue of a distressed DPRK ship, and pointing particular criticism at the ROK alone despite it being only one of many countries that restricted Japanese food imports because of the nuclear power plant accident at Fukushima. In 2019, far from joining in remembrance at the 100th anniversary of the aforementioned March 1 independence movement, Japan's Minister of Foreign Affairs advised caution among Japanese residents in and travelers to Korea, an act highly inappropriate for the perpetrator of colonial rule.

At the end of June, Prime Minister Abe was hosting the G20 summit in Tokyo, having rejected President Moon Jae-in's request for a meeting, and went so far as actually ignoring Moon at the summit, an act of utter disrespect. I can only imagine how much perseverance it

took Moon to withstand this humiliation. Immediately after, however, on June 30, the surprise summit between the leaders of the United States and the two Koreas was held in Panmunjom, and images of the three leaders smiling and embracing at the demarcation line flew around the globe.

On the following day, July 1, the Japanese government announced that it would cease allowing the ROK to receive preferential treatment for exports of three semiconductor materials, effectively an economic sanction against the ROK. Given the wave of a boycott movement against Japanese products sweeping the ROK in response to this measure, I expected that once the upper house election on July 19th was over, Prime Minister Abe, for all his bluster, would end up putting the sword back in its sheath. Contrary to this expectation, on August 2, a Cabinet decision was made to remove the ROK from Japan's "whitelist" (countries receiving preferential treatment for exports), and the decision was enforced starting August 28.

August is a time when people on the Korean peninsula remember the forced annexation of the peninsula by Japan, as August 29, when the "Treaty Regarding Annexation of Korea" (the Japan–Korea Annexation Treaty) was publicly proclaimed, is known there as "National Humiliation Day." Just as in the case of the 100th anniversary of the 3/1 independence movement, described above, here too the former colonial ruler rubbed salt in the wounds of history on a painful anniversary. While ROK citizens, under a slogan of "No Abe," differentiate the Japanese government from Japanese citizens, according to a Kyodo News public opinion survey conducted in mid-August in Japan, 68% of respondents support the ROK's removal from the whitelist. It appears that in addition to the Japanese populace being dragged along by the government administration and the media, colonialism directed against the people of the Korean peninsula, never fully overcome even after Japan lost the war, is raising its head once more. This is today's Japan.

Visiting Busan's National Memorial Museum of Forced Mobilization under Japanese Occupation

"Comfort Woman" Statue on the side street of the Japanese consulate in Busan. (Photo by the author on July 23, 2019)

In late July, when I visited Busan, the boycott against Japanese products was already in full swing and in particular nearly all the young people I spoke with there told me that they were participating. Some might criticize them, but from my perspective as someone living outside of Japan, boycotting of ROK products seems to be an already-established practice in Japan--just consider the fact that ROK automobiles, popular worldwide, cannot be seen on Japanese streets. In recent years, the ROK has always purchased far more Japanese goods than Japan has ROK goods. It appeared that the abolishment of preferential export treatment for three semiconductor materials, critical to semiconductor manufacturing, which is one of the ROK's main industries, lit a fire in

the hearts of ROK citizens.

On July 22, six university students staged a protest at the Japanese consulate in Busan and were arrested, an incident that was widely reported. On a road adjacent to the Japanese consulate in Busan is a statue of a young girl erected to remember Japanese military sex slavery, and she, like the statue of a conscripted wartime laborer in a park near the consulate, faces the consulate, almost as though she is quietly watching over the events that occur there.

"Forced Labor" statue at a park near the Japanese consulate in Busan. (Photo by the author on July 23, 2019)

In Busan is the National Memorial Museum of Forced Mobilization under Japanese Occupation (called "the Museum" below), which was opened in 2015 at a cost of over 50 billion won. The Museum was built in Busan in view of the history wherein "During the Japanese colonial era, 22% of the Koreans who were put to forced mobilization were from Gyeongsang Province, and almost all of them used Busan Port as their point of departure" (from the Museum's pamphlet). At the Museum, "forced mobilization" is defined as "the total control of human, material and financial resources by the Japanese Empire in order to wage a war in the Asia-Pacific," and it is explained that "following the eruption of the Sino-Japanese war in 1937, Japan enacted the National Mobilization Law and implemented forced mobilization of Koreans in earnest." Forced mobilization was carried out everywhere in the Asia-Pacific region that was under Japanese control, ranging from the Korean peninsula (more than 6.5 million people mobilized to work at approximately 8,000 locations including coal mines, other mines, and public engineering works) to Japan (roughly 1 million people were mobilized to work at more than 3,900 locations), the Chinese mainland, Taiwan, Southeast Asia, Western and Central Pacific islands, Sakhalin, and the Kuril Islands.

National Memorial Museum of Forced Mobilization Under Japanese Occupation in Busan (Photo by the author on July 23, 2019)

According to Museum statistics, 7,554,764 people were mobilized as laborers, 63,312 as military workers, and 209,279 as soldiers, making a total of 7,827,355 people, a number that grows even larger if the Japanese military "comfort women" are included. Considering that the population of the Korean peninsula at the time was roughly 20 million, this means that one in three people, or possibly more, were mobilized, and it wouldn't be going too far to say that there is not a single Korean person in Korea or Zainichi Korean in Japan who doesn't have a family member or relative who was forcefully mobilized. Thus, it doesn't surprise me that Prime Minister Abe's act of vengeance through economic sanctions in the face of this human rights issue would be seen by Koreans as an attack on all Koreans.

The museum not only remembers the victims; it points to the perpetrators as well. At the Museum there is a list naming around 300 Japanese companies that utilized forced mobilization to grow and are still thriving today, including many major Japanese corporations such as the Mitsubishi, Mitsui and Sumitomo corporate groups. After its "liberation" following Japan's defeat, Korea was divided in two, and more than 3 million people were killed in the Korean War that followed. The Japanese economy used this war as an opportunity for growth by means of "special procurements" whereby Japanese corporations enjoyed increased demand from the U.S. military and others involved in the war. The list of companies included the company where my father worked. Even though I have no direct responsibility for forced mobilization, I have reaped the benefits of a Japanese economy that achieved growth by trampling on the lives and dignity of the people of the Korean peninsula.

Wall to remember the victims of forced labor (Photo by the author on July 23, 2019)

I asked Moon Hyun-woo, a high school freshman serving as a volunteer at the Museum, if he was participating in the boycott of Japanese products. "Yes," he replied. "There's an explanation of it on my school's website, and I'm participating." He told me, "I think it's wrong that Japan refuses to apologize for the period of Imperial Japanese rule, distorts its own history, shows no remorse, and even goes so far as to engage in economic retaliation."

On my trip, I also visited Hapcheon, a county around two hours from Busan by bus where many victims of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima were from. In Hapcheon, I met two young people who were visiting to take video footage of second-generation atomic bomb victims, and kept in contact with them by "KaKaoTalk" (an SNS service similar to WhatsApp). One of them, Kim Min-hae, who is job-hunting after graduating university, said regarding the current situation, "I think the facts that the Japanese government is imposing unilateral export restrictions and that famous people say disrespectful things about Korea and make historical falsifications in the media are making the boycott grow larger." Kim, who is fond of anime and other aspects of Japanese culture, emphasized that "the boycott is not

anti-Japan; it's anti-Abe administration."

Hapcheon Atomic Bomb Museum (Photo by the author on July 21, 2019)

The other, Hwang Ra-gyeom, a visual artist, told me, "I think that part of the reason emotions towards Japan are high is because we haven't yet broken away from the pro-Japanese faction in Korean history. The actions of the pro-Japanese faction are exactly the same now as they were in the past, and in my observation, negative feelings towards them and towards the Japan that created them together seem to fuel the current sentiment in Korea." The "pro-Japanese faction" on the Korean peninsula refers to people who sacrificed their integrity to curry favor with the Japanese colonial rulers, as well as people who have followed in their footsteps to the present. Japanese people have used those people to justify their colonial rule, both in the past and the present. The wounds caused by the divide and conquer strategy of the colonial period still have not healed.

All of the people I talked to in the ROK shared the view that citizens of Japan and the ROK must share a common view of history in order to achieve a resolution. Whenever I hear Korean people say this, I take it to mean that Japanese people should learn more about the history of Japan's colonial rule over Korea, since they have too little knowledge of it. Japanese people, including myself, know far too little about everything from the invasion of Korea by Toyotomi Hideyoshi in the late 16th century to the colonial rule progressing in stages following Japan's opening to the outside world, the division following Korea's "liberation" in 1945, the Korean war, Japan's colonialism continuing postwar, and the situation in which Zainichi Koreans have been placed.

The people I met in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea

Moreover, Japanese people, even those intending to have a historical conscience, tend to focus their awareness exclusively on the southern part of the peninsula. This summer, when I visited the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) for the first time, I felt that in earnest. In Japan, this country has been separated from history to an even greater extent than has the ROK, as the media decries it as a "dictatorship that causes provocation with nuclear weapons and missiles." Japan has joined the United States in using a massive military advantage to threaten this country, engage in joint military exercises that are a rehearsal for war, and carry out economic sanctions that verge on an act of hostility.

Actually going there, what I saw, though it should come as no surprise, was a country where ordinary people work, go to school, have fun on their days off, celebrate holidays, take care of their families, and try to be good citizens. On the subway, although I'm not elderly, junior high school students leapt up to offer me their seats. I made friends with people in the DPRK, shared meals with them, and talked to them about history.

At a subway station in Pyongyang (Photo by the author on August 15, 2019)

Even now that efforts to end the war and denuclearize the Korean Peninsula have been ongoing since the Pyeongchang Olympics last year, Japan has not budged an inch in its demonization of the DPRK. This includes excluding Korean schools in Japan from the government tuition subsidy program, and even going so far as to take away souvenirs that people with roots in the DPRK bring home from their visits to the DPRK, allegedly as Japan's own unique form of economic sanction, but truly a policy that amounts to no more than harassment. There is not a shred of remorse for Japan's colonial rule, and its role in support of the United States in the Korean War and continued division.

Hundreds of tourists at Panmunjom. About 80% of foreign tourists to DPRK are from China, and most of the rest are from Europe. (Photo by the author on August 16, 2019)

More than anything, I feel the deep-rooted hatred that Japan has for this country in the fact that while calling the southern country by its official name, the Japanese government, media, and vast majority of ordinary citizens call the DPRK not by its official name, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, but by the epithet "Kita Chosen," a name rejected by the DPRK and many Zainichi Koreans.

Corn fields in the countryside of DPRK (Photo by the author on August 14, 2019)

Needless to say, problems rooted in Japan's colonial rule that remain unresolved between Japan and the ROK also remain unresolved between Japan and the DPRK. In the DPRK as well, there are victims of forced mobilization, of Japanese military sex slavery, and of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and there is also the issue of cultural assets stolen from Korea and brought to Japan during the colonial period, with efforts to uncover the truth and secure compensation even more delayed than those in the South. When Prime Minister Abe addresses the issues of "forced laborers" and "comfort women" in the ROK, he must certainly be aware that restoration of diplomatic relations with the DPRK and the "settlement" of colonial rule promised in the 2002 Japan-DPRK Pyongyang Declaration come next, but looking at his continued irresponsible interactions with the ROK, it is not hard to imagine what kind of message he is sending to the DPRK.

Considering the issue of Japanese citizens abducted to the DPRK that has received heavy media coverage in Japan, Prime Minister Abe has treated the "resolution" of this issue as an absolute condition preceding all else, using the issue as a tool to effectively obstruct peace on the Korean peninsula. The abductions are a serious human rights violation, but Japan is not the only victim, as there have also been abductions between the DPRK and the ROK in both directions. The issue ought to be addressed as part of the whole complex of human rights issues between Japan and the Koreas including the issues of forced mobilization and military sex slavery.

Some Japanese people say that acts occurring during wartime should not be addressed in the same way as the abductions that occurred during "peacetime," but on the divided Korean peninsula, there has been not a single moment of "peacetime" in the entire 74 years that Japanese people call the "postwar era." Kim Kwan-guk, a 27-year-old guide who assisted us during our trip to the DPRK, commented on our last day there, "I believe Korea is the only place in the world where one people has been divided like this." His words remain engraved in my mind. Thinking of the 10 million people said to have been separated by the division of the Koreas, if we all had the courage to imagine it was us, I don't think any of us would hesitate to grasp any opportunity for an immediate end to the war and a resolution to the division.

The Abe administration's hostility towards the ROK obstructs peace on the Korean peninsula

What is the true objective of Prime Minister Abe's hostile policies towards the ROK? In my view, it is extreme obstruction of peace on the Korean peninsula. After successfully pulling off the Panmunjom summit on June 30, ROK President Moon Jae-in had to start coping with Japan's unexpected economic retaliation the very next day. The mass media and the populace in both countries focused their attention on the Japan-ROK issue, and Prime Minister Abe's "obstruction" tactic worked brilliantly. Further, the ROK's response to being removed from Japan's whitelist for preferential export treatment was to put an end to its General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) with Japan. What does this mean? Japan's media, which retains a Cold War mindset across the political spectrum, published spiteful critiques saying things like "this will only benefit China, the DPRK, and Russia" and "We can hear Kim Jong-un laughing," but I would like to ask them this:

If this really "benefits" the DPRK, is that so bad? An end to the Korean War and reconciliation between the north and south--in other words, decolonization and independence of the Korean peninsula--are precisely the commitments that President Moon and Chairman Kim made in the Panmunjom Declaration of April 27, and the Pyongyang Joint Declaration of September 19, both in 2018. Put differently, anyone who denies these goals essentially wishes for permanent division of the Korean peninsula and continuation of the war. The impetus for ending the GSOMIA was Japan's economic sanctions against the ROK, but if it ends up contributing to an escape from Cold War constructs in Northeast Asia and to peace, should we not welcome it?

Perhaps ending the GSOMIA was President Moon's explicit "no" to Prime Minister Abe's malicious attempt as leader of a former colonizer nation to ensure that the Koreas remain forever divided and at war. It can also be seen as a strong expression of ethnic self-determination: we will not be divided, we reject colonialism, Koreans will decide the future of the Korean peninsula. The least Japan can do, as the perpetrator of a long and brutal colonial rule, is to listen sincerely and promote, not obstruct, such goals. The other day, Kim Yeong-hwan, director of international cooperation at

the Center for Historical Truth and Justice (Minzoku Mondai Kenkyujo) in Seoul, with whom I am in frequent communication, said in a message to me: "I truly feel that for Japanese people to change their thinking towards both the north and south of Korea is the key to overcoming colonialism." Perhaps the real colonialism that we must overcome is our discrimination between the North and the South in our manner of relating to the Korean peninsula.

This is Satoko Oka Norimatsu's modified English translation of her piece "Fukiareru Kankoku heito no naka de – Shokuminchi shugi kokufuku to, Chosen hanto no heiwa wo kangaeru," in the October 2019 edition of Shakai Minshu*, monthly journal of the Social Democratic Party of Japan. The original Japanese version is available here.*

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