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Lack of trust prevents improvement in relations 'Ianfu' ruling no fix for poor S. Korea ties

Analysis

SATOSHI SUGIYAMA
STAFF WRITER

A South Korean court's decision Wednesday that contradicted a previous "comfort women" ruling may be seen as a win for Japan, but Tokyo is not celebrating the verdict as it does not expect tensions between the two neighboring countries to ease anytime soon.

The Seoul Central District Court tossed out a lawsuit by former comfort women, also known as 'ianfu' — a euphemism for those who suffered under Japan's military brothel system before and during World War II — demanding roughly ¥290 million in damages directly from the Japanese government to compensate for physical and psychological suffering. The dismissal was in direct contradiction to a January ruling delivered by a different group of judges in the same court.

Debilitated by a failure to stabilize soaring housing costs and election losses in key mayoral races, South Korean leader Moon Jae-in is in danger of essentially becoming a lame-duck president with his term expiring in May next year.

Unless he is able to propose solutions on the sensitive issue that will satisfy Tokyo, with any acquiescence risking further damage to his floundering support rate, he could be caught in a bind as U.S. President Joe Biden urges his country's two allies to work together to confront North Korea and China.

Wednesday's court decision reflects Moon's stance on Japan ties but it is too early to be optimistic, said Junya Nishino, a political science professor who studies Japan-South Korea relations at Keio University.

"It's unmistakable that at the very least, the president does not want the relations to get any worse," Nishino said. "At the same time, Moon's stance on historical issues, which is getting support from the victims, hasn't changed."

Shortly after the court ruling in January that awarded compensation for the former comfort women — who were forced or coerced into sexual servitude under various circumstances, including abduction, deception and poverty — Moon said in a news conference he was "perplexed," saying the 2015 deal struck between two countries marking "the final and irreversible resolution" of the comfort women issue was official.

"My impression was that Wednesday's court decision was in line with Moon's remarks at the January news conference," Nishino said.

Moon's remarks marked a reversal on his earlier position that had cast doubt on the legitimacy of the deal, which established a foundation with ¥1 billion contributed by Japan. Still, his administration has been advocating for policies that put victims' interests first, afraid of agitating voters that supported him for nixing the 2015 deal.

The plaintiffs vowed to appeal to a higher court.

The South Korean Foreign Ministry refrained from directly commenting on the dismissal but admonished Tokyo to demonstrate a spirit of remorse and self-examination.

Wednesday's decision called for Seoul to step up its diplomatic efforts to resolve the problem, but the window of opportunity is rapidly closing under Moon's administration.

More than anything else, Moon is struggling domestically. His promise to bring down housing prices in the Seoul metropolitan area has been unsuccessful. His Democratic Party lost crucial mayoral elections in Seoul and Busan earlier this month. A Gallup poll from last week revealed his approval rating hit a record low of 30% since he took office in 2017.

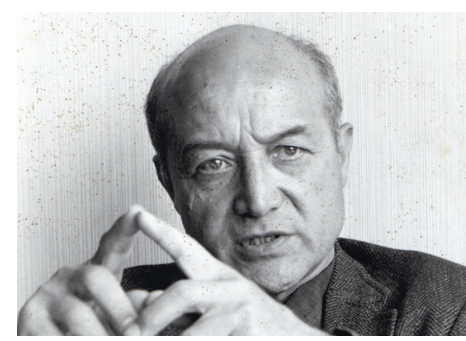
An election to choose Moon's successor will take place in March next year, leaving roughly a year for Moon to work on building his legacy.

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Kyoto Prefecture will be placed under a COVID-19 state of emergency along with Tokyo and the prefectures of Osaka and Hyogo. KYODO

Emergency close to finalization

Several prefectures face tougher measures through Golden Week

KYODO, BLOOMBERG

The government stepped up preparations Thursday to declare a COVID-19 state of emergency in Tokyo as well as Osaka, Kyoto and Hyogo prefectures, with tougher restrictions — such as the closure of department stores and shopping malls — expected to be in place through the Golden Week holidays.

Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga is set to finalize the decision at a task force meeting Friday, as a resurgence of infections puts pressure on the medical system with just three months until the opening of the Tokyo Olympics.

The state of emergency is expected to be in effect for about three weeks through mid-May, with one government official saying it is crucial to stop people from moving around during the upcoming holidays — usually one of the busiest times of the year for travel.

Osaka Gov. Hirofumi Yoshimura called on the government not to waste any time, saying the measure should begin this week-

end. Osaka Prefecture, the current epicenter of COVID-19 cases in the country, reported a record 1,242 new infections on Wednesday.

The government will examine the situation, including the availability of hospital beds for COVID-19 patients, and will make a decision after determining the necessary restrictions as well as the appropriate time period and area, its top spokesman, Chief Cabinet Secretary Katsunobu Kato, told a news conference.

Tokyo and Osaka plan to ask major commercial facilities such as department stores, shopping malls and amusement parks to temporarily close.

Yoshimura has said he will ask restaurants and bars to stop serving alcohol and to close on weekends, a step further than his current request for eateries to close by 8 p.m. He also said sports events would either be canceled or held without spectators.

Tokyo Gov. Yuriko Koike is also seeking to ban alcohol at restaurants and bars regardless of the time of day, metropolitan government sources said.

"We are talking with the central government. We're now narrowing down on details," Koike told reporters Thursday.

Koike said she has asked for the state of emergency, stressing that the capital "cannot miss this timing" amid the rapid spread

of COVID-19 variants.

The government could make exceptions for certain facilities in order to soften the blow to the economy, which is already reeling from COVID-19 restrictions and the loss of foreign tourists due to the pandemic, people familiar with the matter said.

Infections have been back on the rise across the country despite a quasi-state of emergency covering 10 prefectures including Tokyo and Osaka.

Tokyo reported 861 new cases Thursday, the second day in a row that the tally topped 800. On Wednesday, the daily nationwide total topped 5,000 for the first time in three months.

Health experts have warned of the spread of highly contagious variants of the virus, with a Health, Labor and Welfare Ministry panel estimating that they account for about 80% of all cases in Osaka and Hyogo, and a rapidly growing share in Tokyo.

Suga has said the declaration of what will be the country's third state of emergency, following those in April last year and January this year, will not affect the staging of the Tokyo Olympics and Paralympics, reiterating that the government will continue efforts to ensure they are "safe and secure."

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Japan pledges 46% cut to greenhouse gases by 2030

OSAMU TSUKIMORI
STAFF WRITER

Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga announced Thursday that Japan will target a 46% cut in greenhouse gas emissions by 2030 from 2013 levels, a sharp upgrade from the 26% cut that the world's fifth-biggest emitter had pledged in July 2015.

"In line with 2050 goals, we aim for a 46% cut by fiscal 2030 as an ambitious target. We will continue to strive toward the higher goal of 50%," Suga said at a government meeting. In October, he pledged Japan would reach carbon neutrality by 2050.

Suga's announcement came shortly before a key two-day virtual climate summit hosted by U.S. President Joe Biden that kicked off Thursday. Biden was expected to pledge an ambitious 2030 target in hopes of having the leaders of dozens of invited countries, including China's Xi Jinping and Russia's Vladimir Putin, do the same.

Media reports say the U.S., the world's second-biggest polluter, was likely to commit to slashing emissions by at least half by 2030 compared with 2005 levels. The Barack Obama administration had pledged a cut of around 26% to 28% by 2025 from 2005 levels.

The Japan Climate Initiative, with the support of 208 companies, 22 local governments and 60 nongovernmental and other organizations, had called on the government on Monday to declare a more ambitious target of 50% to better represent Japan's position of responsibility as an advanced economy and put it more in line with the goals of Europe and the U.S.

The announcement also comes less than a week after Suga's talks with Biden in Washington led to an agreement to promote multilateral efforts to meet the goals of the 2015 Paris Agreement, which calls on nations to make all efforts to keep the average global temperature rise to 1.5 degrees Celsius.

Japan was initially planning to unveil new 2030 reduction goals ahead of the key U.N. COP26 meeting in Glasgow, Scotland, in November.

Many nations are facing renewed pressure to target more ambitious cuts in emissions for 2030 that scientists say are crucial to keeping the daunting challenge of achieving carbon neutrality by 2050 possible.

Bipartisan focus on China grows in U.S.

DANIEL FLATLEY
BLOOMBERG

The U.S. Congress is moving with increasing urgency on bipartisan legislation to confront China and bolster competitiveness in technology and critical manufacturing, with the Senate poised to act within weeks on a package of bills.

As part of the package, Sen. John Cornyn, a Texas Republican, plans to push for incentives to strengthen domestic semiconductor manufacturing through his CHIPS for America legislation, according to a person familiar with the matter. The bill became law earlier this year but was never funded. President Joe Biden has called for as much as \$50 billion for the initiative.

Cornyn and other lawmakers want what Congress has already passed to be fully funded.

The Senate Foreign Relations Committee, on a 21-1 vote Wednesday, approved a bill aimed at China on a number of fronts, including by more closely scrutinizing foreign donations to U.S. colleges and universities.



The panel's action came shortly after Majority Leader Chuck Schumer and Republican Sen. Todd Young formally introduced their Endless Frontier Act that, among other things, would authorize \$100 billion over five years to strengthen research and development in technology, computing, artificial intelligence, manufacturing and other areas.

"It's a big, bold, bipartisan initiative"

People visit Semicon China, a trade fair for semiconductor technology, in Shanghai on March 17. REUTERS

to propel the U.S. "into the 21st century," Schumer said on the Senate floor.

The Senate Commerce Committee is expected to put together the legislation next week and Schumer has said he expects to combine it with other bills dealing with China and U.S. competitiveness on the Senate floor as soon as next month.

The developments are an indicator of the broad, bipartisan sentiment in Congress to counter China's growing economic and strategic power and to make a statement about the country's treatment of its Uyghur population and pro-democracy activists in Hong Kong.

The Strategic Competition Act approved by the Senate committee Wednesday included an amendment to prohibit the U.S. from sending a government delegation to the Winter Olympics in Beijing next February. American athletes would still be allowed to compete.

Other concerns are also influencing lawmakers. A global shortage of semiconductors has already caused economic pain in the U.S., as auto plants have been forced to shut

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「グローバル人材の採用」なら
ロバート・ウォルターズ
ROBERT WALTERS

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