

Refereed article

South Korea's Partial Withdrawal from the 2015 Korea–Japan Comfort Women Agreement: Changed National Role Conceptions via Increased Social Influence (2015–2018)

Bohyun Kim

Abstract

Why did Moon Jae-in's South Korean government (2017–2022) show highly ambivalent foreign policy behavior around the 2015 comfort women deal with Japan, one of its most important economic and political partners in the East Asian region? This paper pays attention to the possibility of increased social influence on South Korea's foreign policy around the period of the candlelight movement in 2017, investigating whether this social influence affected South Korea's national role conceptions. By doing this, the research delivers an empirical contribution to the academic discussion of domestic influence on Korea-Japan historical conflicts. The analysis identifies how the national role conception of South Korea has changed between Park Geun-hye and Moon Jae-in administrations and analyzes which national roles were vertically addressed during the period after the agreement until its de facto withdrawal. To conclude, it demonstrates that domestic contestation had influence on the change of the Moon government's national role conception as "civil collaborator" and "diplomatic position re-shaper" simultaneously, which eventually led to South Korea's ambiguous diplomatic position.

Keywords: 2015 Korea-Japan comfort women agreement, South Korea, state-society relations, national role conception, vertical role contestation

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Introduction

“Comfort women” is an official term from imperial Japan (1868–1945), referring to young women and girls who were forced to become sexual laborers for Japanese troops during the Asian and Pacific War (1937–1945). The number of comfort women is estimated from as few as 20,000 to as many as 400,000, about 80% of whom were Korean (Soh 1996; 2000; Kim 2014). Being unresolved following the 1965 Treaty on Basic Relations Between Japan and the Republic of Korea (hereafter “Korea”), the comfort women issue finally broke through the long silence and became a serious diplomatic matter for the two countries, driven by their comfort women deal on December 28, 2015 (Glosserman and Snyder 2015; Kim 2015; Deacon 2021; Seo 2021).¹

The comfort women agreement was jointly announced by then Korean President Park Geun-hye and then Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe as “final and irreversible”. According to the agreement, the Japanese government pledged to provide 1 billion Yen (8.3 million USD) for the establishment of the Reconciliation and Healing Foundation by the Korean government to support comfort women victims. In return, the Korean government “would strive to solve this issue in an appropriate manner through taking measures such as consulting with related organizations about possible ways of addressing this issue [the comfort women statue in front of the Japanese embassy in Seoul, South Korea]” (Glosserman, 2019, 126).

Moon Jae-in of the liberal Minju Party in Korea harshly criticized the deal at that time. He vigorously took the issue as one of his major presidential campaigns and eventually won the presidential election in May 2017. “I, as the President of Republic of Korea, together with the Korean citizens, clearly re-confirm that the comfort women issue cannot be resolved with the 2015 agreement” said Moon, formally recognizing that the agreement contained “significant flaws” after the announcement of the official report by the state’s Special Taskforce examination of the 2015 comfort women agreement (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Republic of Korea 2017).

1 While acknowledging the issue of comfort women as a highly relevant topic in history and gender studies, this paper discusses the topic as a diplomatic issue between Korea and Japan in the realm of International Relations, a sub-discipline of political science. The so-called Korea-Japan “history problem” generally describes the two countries’ diplomatic conflicts over the comfort women issue, the forced labor issue and Yasukuni Shrine, the Dokdo/Takeshima territorial dispute and history textbooks from the two countries. It is driven by the two countries’ different perceptions of the history of Japan’s wartime and colonial conduct from 1910-45. While Japan sees the colonial rule over the Korean peninsula in the past as normative and legal, Korea does not agree on this (See Deacon 2021; Kang 2015; Hasegawa and Togo 2008). The number of comfort women victims registered in South Korea is 238, among which only 9 victims are alive as of May 2023 (Ministry of Gender Equality and Family of the Republic of Korea).

Despite this clear and firm stance on the diplomatic conflict over comfort women at the beginning of Moon's presidential term, Korea's further handling of the issue has developed in a highly self-contradictory manner. Moon officially admitted in his 2018 new year's address that the comfort women agreement with Japan was "an official bilateral agreement," and thus the Korean government would not renegotiate it with Japan, which surprised the public in general as well as his supporters (Moon 2018). However, at the Korea–Japan bilateral summit in New York on September 25, 2018, Moon notified Abe of Korea's plan to dissolve the "Reconciliation and Healing Foundation"(RHF), which de facto meant nullifying the bilateral agreement. This discordance between the government's words and actions has not only been strongly criticized by the Korean public, but has also resulted in a deeper chasm between the two countries in their trade relations.² Why did the Korean government come to take such an inconsistent diplomatic strategy over the comfort women agreement?

Previous studies have mainly analyzed Korea–Japan relations at either the international or state levels. These existing approaches can elucidate the continuity of the comfort women agreement despite the different political leadership backgrounds of Park and Moon and the two countries' constant historical conflicts respectively. However, they fail to provide a full explanation for the inconsistency of Moon's diplomatic decisions on the de facto withdrawal from the comfort women deal. Thus, the current paper tries to fill the gap based on the assumption of Korea's changed national role conception via public contestation at the domestic level. Since the end of 2016, Korea has undergone an enormous corruption scandal that generated huge protests, the so-called candlelight protests, and eventually resulted in the impeachment of then President Park (Moon's predecessor) (BBC News 2018). Given that social influence was considerably increased to an unprecedented level due to the candlelight protests, it was significant enough to affect the state's foreign policy decisions, the area of the state's "secret garden" in Korea (Jang 2006; Rhyu 2018; Yi 2020; Shin 2021). Put differently, Moon's self-contradictory position on the comfort women agreement was rooted in the change of national role conceptions addressed at the domestic level, when the role of the state in democratic governance and the rights of comfort women victims was fiercely questioned.

To demonstrate this assumption, this research constructs an analytical framework by employing national role conceptions and vertical role contestation (Cantir and Kaarbo 2012; 2016). The question that the research tries to answer is: *To what extent did vertical role contestation affect the South Korean state's changed national role conceptions in regard of the partial withdrawal from the 2015 comfort women agreement?* While answering the question, the paper aims to 1) identify South Korea's changing role conception between the Park and Moon administrations, and

2 On August 2, 2019, the Japanese government decided to remove South Korea from its "whitelist" of countries entitled to preferential treatment in trade, criticizing the Korean government for "severely damaging mutual trust" (Japan Press Weekly 2019; Kyodonews 2019).

2) demonstrate the significance of social influence on the changed national role conception of the South Korean state through a qualitative content analysis of the collected documents.

The next section reviews the existing literature on Korea–Japan relations and comfort women conflicts. Afterwards, the theoretical foundation of the argument and analytical framework will be introduced, followed by the selected research method and data. The last section provides the main analysis results, discussion, and conclusion.

Existing literature

The existing studies on Korea–Japan relations in the field of political science and regional/Korean studies can be divided roughly into four categories: 1) Studies using International Relations' (IR) realist approaches, 2) studies using IR constructivist/post-structuralist approaches, 3) domestic politics and society's role in Korea–Japan relations, and 4) political elites' preferences and perceptions of history.

Realist IR scholars have attributed the regional security structure surrounding Korea and Japan to their volatile bilateral relations. Cha developed the concept of “quasi-alliances” for Korea–Japan relations based on democratic peace theory and neo-classical realist thinking: remaining unallied but sharing democratic values and systems as well as a third power as a common ally, the United States (Takano 1967; Cha 2000; Kim 2011, 115–121). The “US–Japan–Korea security triangle” as an essential defense order in East Asia during the postwar and post-Cold War eras anticipated more cooperative Korea–Japan relations in the future due to the common threat of a rising China (Takano 1967; Cha 2000; Hinata–Yamaguchi 2016). Although this expectation does not fit into the current conflictual status of the two countries, recent scholarly work in the realist vein has explained the hasty comfort women deal in 2015 in the same vein. For example, after analyzing their diplomatic security policies, Shin contended that the different national interests and views toward China between Park's Korean government and the Abe Cabinet of Japan brought about the two countries' current conflictual situation (Shin 2016). She pointed out the role of the US and North Korea's 4th nuclear missile test as external factors that led Korea and Japan to negotiate the 2015 comfort women agreement and strengthen their military cooperation together with the US. This realist approach indeed accounts for Korea–Japan relations when they were on good terms, like when the two countries made the comfort women agreement. But it is not able to explain why the two countries repeatedly fall into discord, or why they perceive external threats so differently despite their common values and economic interests as liberal democratic partners in the region. In other words, the realist view is ineffective for understanding their conflicting relations driven by “historical problems” (Deacon 2021; Cha 2000; Seo 2021).

To tackle this gap, constructivist IR scholars included the historical perspective of the two countries on the matters, connecting the Korea-Japan conflict to their national identity problems. Deacon traced the producing and re-producing process of the “historical problem” of Korea-Japan diplomatic relations, focusing on the recent trade dispute in 2019. Starting from the classical constructivist assumption that memories and identities shape international politics and foreign policies, he further theorized the role of historical memory as the discursive language spoken in national identity formation processes in foreign policy practices (Deacon 2021, 7–9). He pointed out that the clashing characteristics of the two countries’ national identities in their foreign policy practices are due to the “relational” aspect of the two as defined in opposition to (an) other(s). In a similar vein, Glosserman even described the comfort women issue as an “avatar of South Korean national identity,” because “Japan is ‘the other’ that shapes and influences Korean conceptions of who they are” (Glosserman 2019, 122). The role of domestic politics in South Korean foreign policy toward Japan is thus to be further examined as ideological battles between conservatives and progressives over the country’s foreign relations (Glosserman 2019, 127–128). In sum, the constructivist approach explains why history has such a huge impact on their bilateral relations, linking national identity formation and history as a discursive means of nation-building in foreign policy practices. Nevertheless, the domestic aspect of national identity formation is largely assumed as unitary in this view.

This limited scholarly attention to domestic politics in relation to the Korea-Japan comfort women conflict, despite its significance in each country’s foreign policy practices, has been already addressed. It is only recently that domestic political aspects have been considered as crucial factors in determining Korea-Japan diplomatic relations (Glosserman 2019; Shin 2019; Kim and Sohn 2017; Cho 2014). Shin argues that the dissolution of the RHF by the South Korean government in 2018 clearly shows how “intergovernmental negotiation without reflecting [the nation’s] ideology and domestic politics failed and caused a deterioration in bilateral relations” (Shin 2019, 151). Kim and Sohn similarly pointed out in their research that “the 2015 Japan-South Korea settlement abundantly shows that intergovernmental agreements without domestic consensus are no more than a house of cards” (Kim and Sohn 2017, 98). Cho also implied that this pattern of dissonance between civil society and the state around the comfort women issue is not new (Cho 2014). In his analysis on both the Korean and the Japanese governments’ countermeasures on the comfort women issue from 1990–2000, he concluded that any bilateral consensus becomes meaningless in Korea-Japan relations without consensus between the state and civil society at the domestic level, as South Korea’s foreign policy toward Japan is an extension of domestic politics (Cho 2014, 73). Moreover, he argued that the role of the Korean government in resolving the comfort women conflict with Japan has become even bigger since 2011 due to the 2011 Korean constitutional decision (Constitutional Court of Korea 2011). The verdict set

the legal ground to criticize the South Korean state's passive diplomatic attitude in dealing with the comfort women issue as "unconstitutional" (Cho 2014, 71).

Despite the acknowledgement of the importance of domestic politics in South Korea's comfort women policy toward Japan, the related empirical studies have been conducted in a separate manner, which is not necessarily linked to the discussion of Korea-Japan relations. With regard to societal impact on Korea-Japan relations, the globality of the comfort women issue and the role of civil society as "global civil society" have been the main focus. For example, Jung examined the role of civil society in Korea-Japan relations using the concept of new governance (Jung 2011). Yang analyzed the spreading of the comfort women issue from a bilateral conflict to an international issue (Yang 2015), whereas Shin, Ki-Young divided different levels of "comfort women" politics, namely "civil society," "state," "Asian," and "global" (Shin 2016). Lee studied the comfort women movement as a women's rights movement from the broader perspective of global governance (Lee 2017). Ku employed the concept of "transnational advocacy networks" to examine the influence of civil society networks over the Korea-Japan comfort women conflict (Ku 2015).

Foreign policy negotiators' individual perceptions of national interests or personal preferences in Korea-Japan relations has been another main analytical interest in previous studies (Kim 2011; Ku 2015; Lee 2016; Cho 2019). Kim paid attention to the role of political leadership in the formation of Korea-Japan relations. He followed the scholarly tradition of foreign policy analysis, considering political leaders' charisma as the most crucial factor in determining foreign policy content. After examining both Korean and Japanese political leaders from 2000–2005, he found that political leadership is influential in the short term, that political leaders are not always rational, and that they make decisions against national interests when it comes to historical issues (Kim 2011, 130). Meanwhile, Lee studied and assessed the historical perception of the former Japanese foreign policy elites Kono, Murayama, and Abe, on the comfort women issue and concluded that Korea-Japan conflicts have been dependent on the political orientations of Japanese prime ministers (Lee 2016). Cho (2019), on the other hand, examined the special Task Force report published by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in December 2017 to identify the Moon Jae-in government's comfort women foreign policy and its positioning toward Japan. In both studies, the South Korean government's "victim-centered approach" was assumed to be supported by both the state and the public.

Through the literature review, it becomes clear that the domestic level of foreign policy must be more widely investigated to understand conflictual Korea-Japan relations. Scholarly attempts to examine Korea-Japan conflicts have so far, however, lacked both empirical attention to Korean domestic politics and a conceptual link to combine both the domestic- and international levels of international relations. To fill this gap, the next section therefore presents relevant theoretical concepts and

suggests an alternative angle to focus on the domestic level of international politics and foreign policy.

Theoretical foundation of the argument

As observed in the previous literature review, the scholarly custom in researching Korea-Japan relations largely comes from the “rational” tradition of international studies which considers national politics as “unitary,” encapsulating different actors and happenings on the domestic level in one box (Lumsdaine 1996; Risse-Kappen 1991, Putnam 1988). To tackle this limitation in previous studies, the current paper differentiates two levels of international negotiations, the domestic and international levels, from the IR liberalist account.

Increased social influence: domestic politics of international relations

In the early discussion of the “two-level game” (Putnam 1988; Moravcsik 1993), the differentiation between “self” (internal) and “others” (external) is key to studying the foreign policy behavior of states. Being exposed to both “domestic” and “international” levels, state negotiators make a compromise between the domestic conflict about national interest while simultaneously interacting with other negotiators to make international agreements. With this assumption, the approach analytically separates the domestic and international spheres, which allows for the identification of “structural constraint and autonomy surrounding the statesmen.” (Moravcsik 1993, 17). Unlike the strongly state-centered thinking in IR realism, this liberalist thinking admits the possible assumptions of non-state actors, including domestic groups as strategic players in the negotiation game at the international level.

In line with this, Risse paid attention to the significance of “various combinations of state-society relations” in liberal democracies on different foreign policy outcomes (Risse-Kappen 1991, 479–484; Risse 2017). In his view, “domestic structures” and “coalition-building processes” are the missing link between societal demand and elite decisions in foreign policy (Risse-Kappen 1991). Domestic structure approaches are interested in the institutional arrangements linking the state and society and how political institutions respond to societal demands within a political system. On the other hand, focusing on the coalition-building processes leads to analyzing “policy networks, as the coalition mechanism and processes of interest representation by political parties and interest groups links the societal environment to the political systems.” (Risse 2017). Risse argued that a combined approach encompassing both institutional structures and coalition-building processes could supplement each approach’s limitations. That is, only examining state institutions and structures does not offer detailed explanations of the specific content or direction of policies, whereas one should at the same time consider that “coalition building takes place in the framework of political and societal institutions” (Risse 2017, 28–29).

So, what makes the unique patterns of state-society relations in different countries? According to Risse's assumption, the nature of the coalition-building processes in the policy networks linking state and society depends on the societal characteristics of a country, which was initially suggested by Gourevitch (1986) and Katzenstein (1978). This line of argument is developed from the definition of the capacity of the state, for which the dynamic of "relative" force between the state and society is crucial in defining which state is strong or weak (Risse 2017; Migdal 1988; Acemoglu and Robinson 2017). Likewise, whether societal influence can play a role in a state's foreign policy is also determined by this relational force dynamic in the policy network.

The core assumption of this paper is aligned with the theoretical thought on state-society relations. It argues that the relational state-society dynamic was different between the Park and Moon governments, which eventually brought about the sudden change of South Korea's diplomatic position over the comfort women agreement. In addition to Moon's liberal leadership style with a progressive political orientation, Moon and his government owed their victory in the presidential election in May 2017 to the citizens' candlelight protests that occurred from October 2016–March 2017, and had ousted Park from the government (Rhyu 2018; Yi, 2020, 253). Accordingly, a high degree of societal mobilization coincided with the period of contestation over the comfort women agreement.

Furthermore, resentment among the public regarding Park's administration, as well as the ambivalent political situation during the impeachment process from December 3, 2016 to March 10, 2017, put the South Korean government's democratic legitimacy into question. This paper argues that this societal instability undermined the state's relational power regarding Korean society. That is, the state was temporarily weaker than usual at the time, although some scholars might argue that the Korean state is generally considered a "strong state" (Shin 2020, 242; Jang 2009; Koo 1993). Based on this assumption of the weakened state during the time of the impeachment process and the early period of Moon's administration, social influence was able to play a major role in the state's foreign policy behavior, which includes comfort women-related foreign policies.

Vertically contested national role conceptions

The formation of an issue-based policy network or possible channels for societal actors to exert their influence over foreign policy decisions is considered as given in the current paper. This is because the main objective of the research is to confirm the presence of social influence on the foreign policy behavior of the Korean state. To achieve this simplification of the state-society relations approach, the concept of "national role conception" and "vertical role contestation" will be used as the analytical means.

Paying attention to "national role" rather than "national identity" guides us to systematically approach the societal dynamic of the domestic politics of

international relations (Thies and Breuning 2012; Barnett 1993). Aggestam suggested using “national role conception” as an operationalizing tool to bridge national identity and foreign policy behavior in the appearance of role conflict (Aggestam 1999; 2006). According to Aggestam, conflict appears “when dominant role conceptions in the set of many roles are incompatible with one another,” caused by different domestic and international institutional contexts, or “when the conditions and context within which they were originally formulated change” (Aggestam 2006, 23).

Role, as a set of norms, makes the role performer develop his/her orientations before taking actions to fulfill the expected behaviors in a specific situation. There can be more than one role depending on the situation. It is made by the role performer’s own role conception and others’ prescriptions of the role (Holsti 1970, 238). Considering the different aspects of the state’s role behavior in international politics, Holsti defined four concepts to analyze foreign policy: (1) role performance (attitudes, decisions, and actions), (2) their self-defined national role conceptions, (3) role prescriptions, and (4) a position, a system of role prescriptions (Holsti 1970, 240). This paper focuses on domestic role contestation as a process of self-defining national role conception in South Korea.

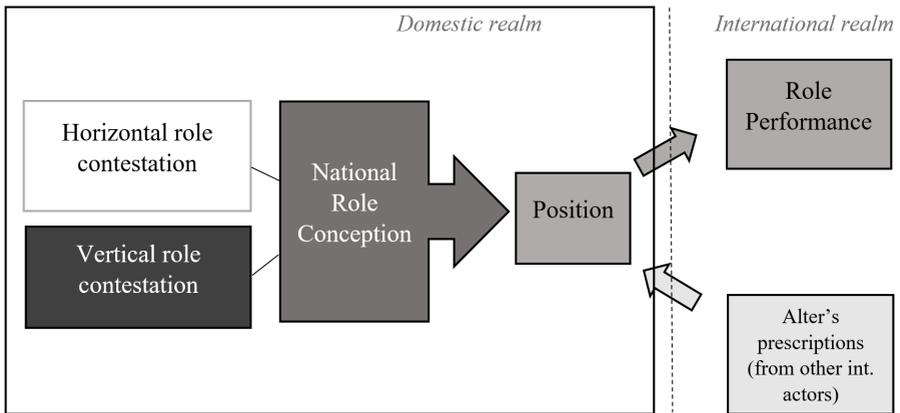
When a new government self-defines its national roles, domestic contestation around the national roles as a set of norms in a certain domestic context presents by default in political practice, because norms mean “different things to different people” (Niemann and Schillinger 2017, 33, 39). Even though “how much of an impact public opinion has on foreign policy” is still unclear in IR, the vertical role contestation scholarship asks whether elites are constrained by the public and whether the public has a different foreign policy orientation or attitude from those of the elites (Cantir and Kaarbo 2012, 11–12). In this regard, the concept of vertical role contestation encompasses societal actors’ influence and contesting public opinion, whereas horizontal role contestation concentrates on disagreement among foreign policy elites.

With this vertical role contestation, it can also be assumed that the strong public discontent regarding the comfort women deal and the comfort women advocacy movement in Korea, extended to Korea’s comfort women foreign policy behavior via vertical role contestation (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2015; Jang and Kim 2018). With this, one can concentrate on the vertical role contestation addressed by social influence on Korea’s national role conception “instead of focusing on explaining individual diplomatic decisions” (Holsti 1970, 234–5).

Cantir and Kaarbo developed a framework to analyze “domestic role contestation” to examine the process by which domestic actors with various role conceptions interact in foreign policymaking (Cantir and Kaarbo 2016, 6). They divided the level of domestic role contestation into: 1) vertical role contestation indicating a contested role conception between the public and political elites (elite-masses nexus), and 2) horizontal role contestation (intra-elite disagreements), which means role

contestation between governing elites and political opposition (Cantir and Kaarbo 2016, 8–12). This research particularly concentrates on vertical role contestation around the comfort women agreement to empirically observe social influence over foreign policy decisions. An analytical framework for the research was created as per *Figure 1*. Due to the limited scope of the paper, the current analysis will only deal with the relation between vertical role contestation and national role conception. The parts like horizontal role contestation and others' prescriptions will be addressed in the discussion and conclusion for future research.

Figure 1: Domestic role contestation and national role conception



Source: Constructed by author, combining Cantir and Kaarbo's (2016) and Holsti's frameworks (1970, 240).

Research scope, data collection and method

With the framework in *Figure 1* above as a conceptual tool for systematic document analysis, this research defines the scope of social influence in Korea as “vertical national role contestation driven by civil contestation.” The scope covers the period following the comfort women agreement (December 28, 2015) until Moon notified Abe of the plan to dissolve the RHF (September 25, 2018). Within the scope, the research aims to investigate: 1) The changed national role conceptions from the Park administration to that of Moon, given that social influence became significant in the presidency transition period, and 2) the extent of the social influence that vertically contested Korea's national roles in dealing with the comfort women agreement conflict.

Regarding societal disagreement with the comfort women agreement during this period, the “Korean Council for the Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan” (the Korean Council) was a highly visible actor, based on its long history of

activities and advocacy for the rights of the survivors.³ In the Report on the Review of the Korea-Japan Agreement on “Comfort Women” Victims by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Korea, the Korean Council was mentioned as one of the “concerned organizations” to be persuaded to support the implementation of the agreement. This means that the organization was clearly acknowledged as important for the Korean government, especially in implementing the “non-disclosed part” of the comfort women agreement, together with the removal of the “comfort women” memorial statue and the term “sexual slavery” as issues of concern for Japan (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Korea 2015).

The national role conceptions of each side, –the state’s and that of society– will be identified and compared with each other to analyze differences in their perceptions of the Korean state’s national roles. For this, 12 public releases published by the Korean Council criticizing the National Assembly bills, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA), the Ministry of Gender and Family (MoGF), and legal court rulings were used, collected with the search keywords “the Korean Council,” “civil organizations,” and “comfort women” within the scope of December 28, 2015–September 25, 2018. In addition to this, 40 news articles from Hangyoreh were collected with the same search keywords within the same timeframe. Due to the limited time and scope of the research, only Hangyoreh’s news coverage was analyzed, as a center-left liberal daily newspaper in South Korea. Nevertheless, the paper believes that data collected from the Korean Council and Hangyoreh are sufficient for the sake of the research aim to confirm the presence of social influence in the making of national role conceptions. This is because the Korean state’s diplomatic standpoint regarding the comfort women agreement was mostly contested by the organization and the newspaper at the domestic level (Gil et al. 2015; Kim 2015). That is, if the analysis demonstrates that most disagreeing societal actors’ perceptions influenced the state’s changed national role conception, the hypothesis of this research will be proved.

For the analysis of the state’s national role conceptions, presidential speeches, which mentioned “comfort women,” including the New Year addresses, but also press releases, documents and the ministerial speeches of the MoFA during the full period of Park’s and Moon’s incumbencies (Park: 2013–2017, Moon: 2017–present) were collected: 41 and 22 documents, respectively.

I chose qualitative content analysis to examine different national role conceptions with MAXQDA 2020 software assistance. As there is no unified database of keywords that would identify roles in the process of content analysis, as Cantir and Kaarbo also noticed in their book (2016, 19), I identified roles inductively based on close readings of the collected textual data. Consequently, 7 codes are defined and named as follows: “civil collaborator,” “victim’s rights protector,” “diplomatic

3 The official full name of the organization changed to the “Korean Council for Justice and Remembrance for the Issues of Military Sexual Slavery by Japan” on July 11, 2018. (<https://womenandwar.net/kr/?ckattempt=1>)

position re-shaper,” “Korea-Japan friendly relation keeper,” “international norm keeper,” “negotiator,” and “historical truth keeper.” In total, 319 codes including sub-codes were identified from all collected documents.

Analysis

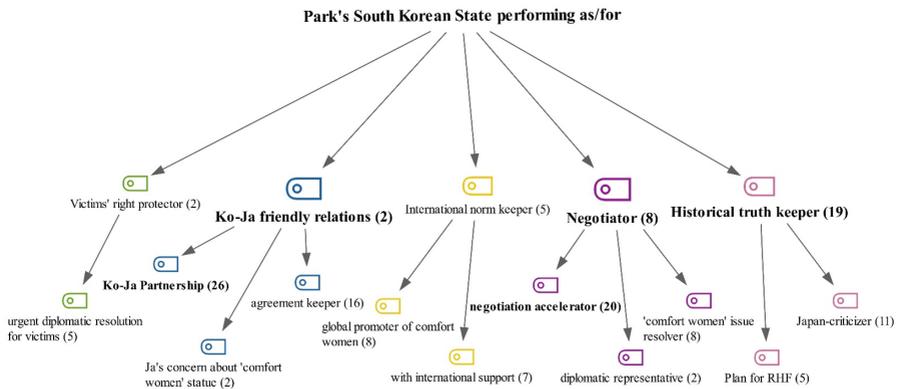
Considering the event sequence of the domestic contestation—the comfort women agreement (2015); civil contestation and candlelight protest against Park’s government (2016–2017); the new government and its decision to dissolve RHF (2017–2018)—the national role conception of Park’s administration will be examined first. In the second part of the analysis, national roles suggested during the civil contestation will be identified and compared with the national role conception of Moon’s administration.

National role conceptions of Park’s administration

After analyzing the collected 41 documents of presidential and ministerial speeches and official documents searched for with the keyword “comfort women,” 149 entries were coded and categorized into different national roles. The result is visualized as *Figure 2* below. Among the five most frequent national roles as seen in *Figure 2*, the state’s national role as “friendly bilateral relations keeper,” “negotiator” and “historical truth keeper” were the most prevalent codes under Park’s administration.

Figure 2: National roles emphasized during Park's administration

National roles addressed with the 'comfort women' issue by Park's Administration (2013-2017)



Source: MAXQDA MAXmap: Single-case model (code hierarchy).

“Korea-Japan friendly relations” was highly emphasized during Park’s presidential period: 46 codes found, including the relevant sub-codes. Amongst all, Korea-Japan partnership was frequently mentioned together with historical conflict as a hurdle to overcome for a new partnership: “Next year, Korea and Japan will welcome the 50th

anniversary of the Basic Relations Treaty [...] Now, both countries must look ahead to the next 50 years of the future and establish a forward-looking cooperative partnership. For this, Korea and Japan must put forth the necessary effort to heal [overcome] the wound between the two from the past” (Presidential Speech 2014).

Given the perceived diplomatic task of commemorating the year of 2015, Park’s administration keenly pushed forward the resolution of the “comfort women” issue to with Japan, which brought about the quick diplomatic action of the bilateral agreement with Japan in 2015. As MoFA put it, it “accelerated” the negotiation processes of 11 Korea-Japan ministerial meetings to settle the controversial issues around comfort women victims with Japan (Ministerial Speech 2016). In this regard, the role of “agreement negotiator” was stressed: “[...] the Korean government made a meaningful diplomatic outcome coming down on a common resolution of the comfort women issue with the current Japanese counterpart led by Prime Minister Abe, who is much more conservative than his predecessors when dealing with historical conflicts” (Ministerial Speech 2015a). The necessity of the swift negotiation with Japan was explained and justified regarding the state’s role as the protector of the victims’ rights. “Considering the old age of the comfort women victims,” Park’s administration considered that an urgent diplomatic resolution was essential to bring substantial results for them, namely “compensation and an apology from the Japanese government” (Presidential Speech 2015b).

Meanwhile, from the early-middle part of Park’s incumbency, the national roles of “historical truth keeper” and “international norm keeper” were conspicuously emphasized, too. While stating that the comfort women issue was a “crime against humanity” a conclusion reached “by the UN human rights mechanism and the international community,” the Ministry of Foreign Affairs officially and strongly stressed the “necessity of accurate historical education,” “apology and accountable measures at Japanese governmental level” (Ministerial Speech 2014).

In relation to this role of international norm keeper, the Korean government harshly and constantly criticized the Japanese government for denying the existence of comfort stations during World War II. For instance, Park criticized Japan, stating that “[...] history does not mean cherry-picking what to remember as a country wishes [...] admitting [wrongdoings in] history is the only way to progress” (Presidential Speech 2015a).

This firm diplomatic position as a “Japan-criticizer,” however, faded from the national roles set by Park’s administration after completion of the comfort women agreement with Japan. In the joint announcement on the comfort women agreement, the South Korean government still perceived itself as a historical truth keeper who thus set a plan together with Japan to “establish the RHF to support the recovery of the victims and their rehabilitation with the 1 billion Yen of Japanese government funding” (Ministerial Speech 2015b). Moreover, while perceiving the president as the diplomatic representative of Korean citizens, including the victims, it later announced that Park had received an apology from Abe over the phone, but only

after the growth of strong public sentiment against the agreement (Ministerial Speech 2015a).

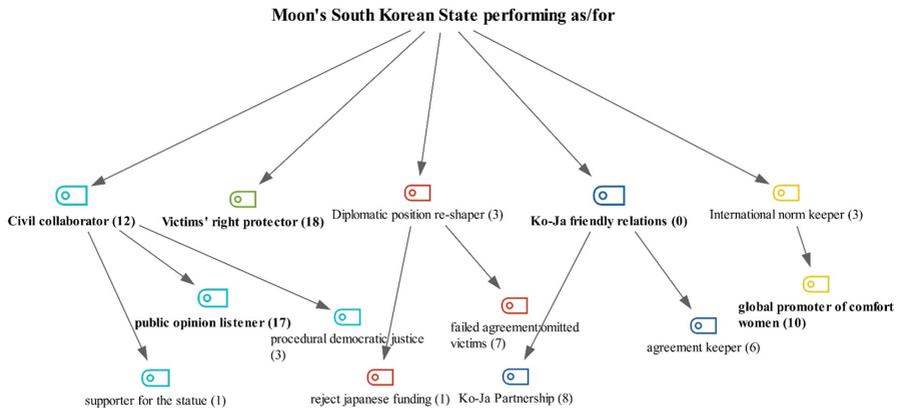
In sum, Park and her administration presented themselves mostly as history problem-solvers and diplomatic negotiators who must resolve the historical conflict with Japan by the year 2015. However, by changing their national role from Japan critic to the highest diplomatic representative, especially in the negotiation phase, they negotiated an agreement with the Japanese counterpart that led to domestic backlash.

National role conceptions of Moon's administration

To analyze the Moon administration's national role conception, 95 entries from 22 documents were coded and categorized using the same standard applied to the previous analysis. Unlike his predecessor, Moon's administration defined the state's role mostly as a "civil collaborator" and "victims' rights protector." The detailed picture of the frequency of national roles is illustrated in *Figure 3* below.

Figure 3: National roles emphasized during Moon's administration

National roles addressed with the 'comfort women' issue by Moon's Administration (2017-2021)



Source: MAXQDA MAXmap: Single-case model (code hierarchy)

“Civil collaborator” and “diplomatic position re-shaper” are two new roles found in the national roles set by the Moon administration, compared to the Park administration's national roles. In describing its diplomatic style as “diplomacy with Korean citizens,” Moon and his administration put emphasis on working together and communicating with the public in handling the comfort women agreement conflict (Presidential Speech 2017). In line with this, the state role of “civil collaborator” was highly emphasized and displayed amongst other national roles. For example, it stated that “the government would collect extensive opinion from the victims, related civil organizations and public opinion to search for a relevant

solution with a victim-centered approach as well as the management of RHF” (Ministerial Speech 2017).

By positioning itself as a re-shaper of the diplomatic position at the same time, MoFA organized different meetings with the victims, the related civil organizations, and experts to listen to their opinions (Press release, Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2017a; 2017b; Ministerial Speech 2017). Moreover, it repeated at both the domestic and international levels that “the comfort women issue had not been resolved with the 2015 agreement and that the government position must be re-set because the comfort women agreement was not a real solution” (Ministerial Speech 2017; 2018; Presidential Speech 2017).

The official government position of Moon’s administration, however, also set clear that “it will not ask Japan for re-negotiation or annulment of the agreement” (Ministerial Speech 2017). Instead, it would make no use of the Japanese funding of 1 billion Yen apportioned to the management and operation of RHF and would consult with Japan on the future use of the money (Ministerial Speech 2017). This tells us that the state role for Korea-Japan friendly relations also remained important for the Moon administration’s national role conception, which was the role that conflicted with the role of civil collaborator, especially in the context of the opposing civil influence against the comfort women agreement as well as the state’s legitimacy in general.

In terms of the role of “victims’ rights protector,” Moon mentioned and implied that the state exists to protect the victims as its citizens (Presidential Speech 2018). Moreover, the “victim-centered approach” has been strongly stressed under Moon’s administration, much more than the previous government. This approach has been repeatedly suggested and chosen in different documents as the core guideline in dealing with the comfort women agreement conflict and also as a core international principle to follow (Ministerial Speech 2019).

Consequently, Moon’s administration conceptualized its national role conception as a facilitator between its citizens, including the victims, and the Japanese counterpart, considering its role as a civil collaborator, diplomatic position re-shaper, and protector of the victims and their rights. According to its role conception, the state must engage the citizens and the victims in the new resolution process, while not withdrawing from the comfort women agreement to keep its diplomatic promise to Japan. In other words, the contradictory diplomatic position of the state in dealing with the comfort women conflict was born from these different national roles.

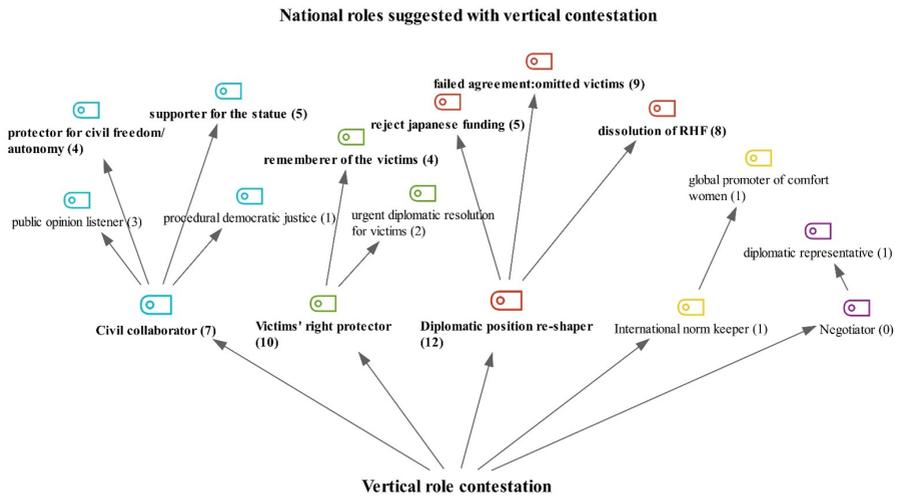
To sum up, the Moon administration’s national roles except—for civil collaborator and diplomatic re-shaper—were mostly taken from the previous Park administration. They seem to share similar diplomatic orientation in terms of the importance of historical conflicts and the partnership with Japan as well as protection of victims’ rights as an international norm. Nevertheless, how they perceived the domestic actors, citizens and victims, as well as the role of the state in taking diplomatic action was considerably different. This actually confirms one of the paper’s assumptions

that Moon’s and Park’s different political backgrounds influenced state-civil society relations and their influence on the foreign policy arena. Clearly, Moon’s administration was more active in engaging with social influence in the arena of its foreign policy than Park’s administration.

National role contestation after the comfort women agreement

In this sub-section, the analysis will show the differences in the national role conceptions suggested during the civil contestation from December 28, 2015–September 25, 2018, and those of Moon’s administration. There were 75 codes found of national roles that appeared during the civil contestation regarding the comfort women agreement. How they are distributed across different national roles and frequencies is visualized in *Figure 4* below.

Figure 4: National roles via vertical contestation by Hankyoreh and the Korea Council



Source: MAXQDA MAXmap: Single-case model (code hierarchy)

The national roles of “civil collaborator,” “victims’ rights protector” and “diplomatic position re-shaper” were addressed in the discourse of the civil contestation, which coincided with the new national roles of Moon’s administration.

The role of “diplomatic position re-shaper” has been suggested for the civil contestation as demanding the “complete withdrawal of the comfort women agreement,” “immediate dissolution of RHF” and the “rejection of the Japanese funding” (Kim et al. 2015; Yonhap News 2016; Kim, 2017). The agreement was regarded by the public, including civil organizations, comfort women victims and National Assembly members of the Democratic Party as a “total diplomatic failure since the comfort women victims’ wishes were omitted during the agreement

negotiations” (Kim 2018; Kim 2016). Park’s government was strongly criticized because “it did not communicate with the victims in the negotiation phase” (Kim 2016).

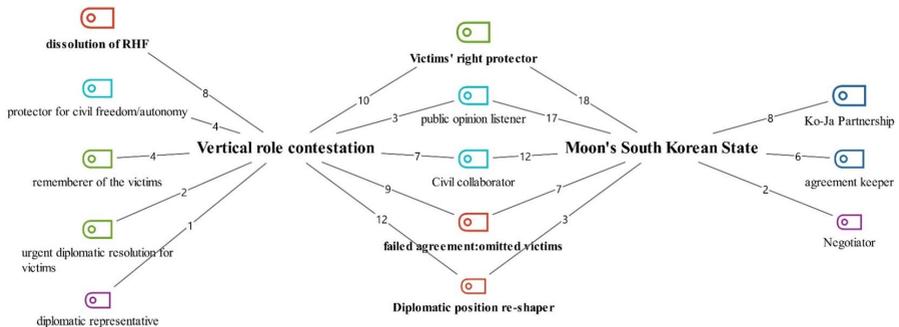
The state as the victims’ rights protector was also often suggested in the civil contestation discourse. The public and civil organizations pointed out that the negotiation procedure did not include any “democratic process” to put the victims’ demands and decisions at the center of the negotiations (Goh et al. 2017). Moreover, the victims’ recovery of their damaged reputations was more important than being compensated with money (Park 2016). This can be interpreted as the Korean state being urged to concentrate on what the victims really want and to do this, it would be unavoidable to re-negotiate the agreement, which had already been agreed as the final and irreversible bilateral agreement. The imperativeness of the “urgent diplomatic action considering the victims’ old age” was utilized as an argument to urge the Korean government to play a role as the protector of the victims’ rights (the Korean Council 2018; Goh et al. 2017).

Regarding the state role of “civil collaborator,” any governmental intervention against the installation of the comfort women memorial statues was criticized, considering the role of the state as a civil collaborator who must support civil rights (Kim 2017; 2018; Goh 2018). The argument went that the role of a democratic state is to protect its citizens’ rights and freedom of assembly and to install the memorial statues including the comfort women victims’ statue and act to promote the issue in the international community as the Korean citizens’ state (Goh 2016).

To confirm the influence of civil contestation on the national role conceptions of Moon’s administration and its extent, the overlapping codes of national roles found across what Moon’s administration displayed and what the civil contestation addressed are visualized in *Figure 5*.

Figure 5: Commonly suggested national roles by vertical role contestation and Moon's administration

Compared frequencies of national roles: Vertical contestation and Moon's Administration



Source: MAXQDA MAXmap: Two-case model

Figure 5 shows that the three categories, namely “victims’ rights protector,” “civil collaborator” and “diplomatic position re-shaper” mostly appeared in both state national role conceptions and at the civil contestation level. All three of these national roles were completely absent (civil collaborator and diplomatic position re-shaper) or less visible (victims’ rights protector) in the previous national role conception of Park’s administration. Hence it can be argued that vertical influence contested the national roles and consequently brought up new roles that the public expected the state to fulfill in dealing with the comfort women conflict.

However, when observing the different frequencies of the suggested national roles between the state and civil actors, it is clear that the state did not reflect every public opinion espoused during the contestation. For example, national roles like “public opinion listener,” “victims’ rights protector” and “civil collaborator” have been relatively more accepted in the Moon administration compared to the role of diplomatic position re-shaper. The extent of re-negotiation appears to have been different from both sides as well. Whereas complete withdrawal from the comfort women agreement was demanded by non-state domestic actors, the state’s position reflected this demand only to the extent that it dissolved the RHF, not destroying the bilateral agreement with Japan.

The findings thus suggest that Moon’s administration has been under social influence and pressure to the extent that it dissolved the RHF. This can explain why Moon eventually notified Abe of the dissolution of the RHF in September 2018, instead of requesting a complete re-negotiation of the comfort women agreement. In other words, Moon’s administration chose the degree of diplomatic measures based on national role conceptions that were already self-conflicting. Consequently, it presented itself as a diplomatic position re-shaper in relation to the comfort women agreement in that it accepted the agreement as failed and defective, but officially kept the agreement as valid.

Discussion

As conceptualized in *Figure 1* in this paper, a country’s diplomatic position is affected not only by its national role conception, but also by “others’ prescriptions” (Holsti 1970). This means that the view of other countries and international actors regarding the state’s international role must be examined, too. In the context of South Korean foreign policy toward Japan, other international actors including the US must be further studied to provide a full picture of Moon’s foreign policy decision on maintaining the bilateral agreement status of the comfort women agreement with Japan (Sohn 2020; Lynn 2021).

While acknowledging the limitations, the current analysis focused on the relation of social contestation and the changed national role conception of South Korea around the comfort women agreement conflict. The result indicates a high probability that social influence led to the state’s decision on the partial withdrawal from the comfort women agreement, particularly to the extent of the dissolution of the RHF. With this,

the paper has empirically demonstrated that non-state domestic actors could influence the conceptualization of national roles that ultimately decide the state's foreign policy behavior, the area usually considered as a "secret garden of the state" in South Korea's political context, where citizens have little access to the policymaking process (Jang 2006). In addition, the result sheds light on the necessity of further examination of the domestic aspect of international relations, by showing the possible path of national role contestation where domestic-societal actors take part in the formulation of the state's diplomatic orientation.

The result also confirms the relevance of domestic structure and policy networks in foreign policy, such as in explaining different patterns of foreign policy outcomes (Risse-Kappen 1991; Risse 2017). Even though the current research only borrowed the core assumption of the domestic politics of international relations, it could explore different societal and state actors engaging in the phase of national role conception. To provide a more in-depth analysis and deliver a concrete result, further studies on policy networks among different societal and state actors at the domestic level regarding comfort women politics would be the next step.

Lastly, the research has demonstrated the different level of public engagement in foreign policy between the Park and Moon administrations. In relation to this, the increased social influence during the period can be confirmed because the public was more actively engaged in foreign policymaking under Moon's liberal government than the previous conservative one. In the analysis, Moon's government was shown as more open to engaging with related civil organizations and actively displayed its national role as a civil collaborator. This can also explain South Korea's foreign relations as "the ideological battles between conservatives and progressives," as Glosserman recently suggested (Glosserman 2019, 127–128). Moon and his government seem to utilize the comfort women agreement issue to consolidate the state's legitimacy as a democratic state. It provided more room for civil organizations and the public to participate in foreign policy to differentiate itself from Park's administration, which had been impeached following the public candlelight protest. However, how exactly the candlelight movement and enhanced civil influence affect South Korea's comfort women foreign policy also requires further studies to prove the assumption.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to explore social influence on Korea's partial withdrawal from the Korea-Japan comfort women agreement. First, it analyzed the change of national role conception between the Park and Moon administrations in handling the comfort women issue. As for the second part of the analysis, the paper examined national role contestation as vertically addressed by the Korean public against the comfort women agreement. It then compared the result with the national role conception of Moon's administration to observe how social influence was reflected in the state's national role conception.

The main contribution of the current research is to provide an empirical analysis of domestic politics and social influence on foreign policy in the case of the Korea–Japan comfort women agreement conflict. After spotting the research gap relating to domestic influence in foreign policymaking in the context of Korea–Japan historical conflicts, the paper suggested a conceptual framework to analyze domestic role contestation and conducted a qualitative content analysis of the collected data. It also defined and compared different national roles in the Park and Moon administrations, as well as the vertically addressed national roles for dealing with the comfort women agreement conflict.

Moreover, it suggested an analytical framework by combining national role conception and vertical role contestation to observe the formation of national role conceptions and societal actors' influence on the role contestation stage. By doing this, light has been shed on the domestic level of international relations that is unusual for Korea–Japan bilateral relations studies. The paper clearly confirms the usefulness of the framework instead of a national identity approach which is one of the usual practices in Korea–Japan relations research.

The research, however, contains several constraints. Despite the above-mentioned research contributions, it did not identify the exact extent of domestic influence due to the limited scope. The constrained data collection in terms of public opinion could be further extended to diversified sources combining other newspapers, other civil organizations, and media sources to secure more plausibility and objectivity. Moreover, the research was designed to concentrate on vertical role contestation, not including the impact of horizontal role contestation that would happen among state elites. However, one should keep in mind that there are different types and competences of state authorities and institutions involved in handling the comfort women issue in South Korea, namely the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family, the National Assembly, court rulings, and the comfort women research institute and remembrance museum founded by the government. Thus, contestation and discourses among state elites as well as vertical contestation by citizens and civil organizations addressing/lobbying those state organizations must be combined for an in-depth analysis.

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