

Foreign Policy Consequences of Democratic Backsliding

The case of the Comfort Women Agreement in 2015

Byunghwan Son (bson3@gmu.edu)

Associate Professor, Global Affairs Program

George Mason University (4400 University Dr., Fairfax VA 22030)

Word count: 9921 (excluding the title page)

2024-2-7

Abstract

Recent studies have documented the profound effects that democratic backsliding generates on various realms of governance. However, foreign policies remain an exception in this trend despite the notable emergence of non-traditional foreign policy positions backsliding governments around the world took in recent years. To address this gap, this paper examines South Korea's policy toward Japan during its recent period of democratic backsliding, focusing on the making of the Comfort Women Agreement in 2015. The case study reveals that the Park Geun-hye government (2012-2017) pursued a policy position that defied social and institutional constraints. The paper suggests that this case represents how democratic backsliding can destabilize foreign policies.

Acknowledgement: A previous version of this paper was presented in the Midwest Political Science Association Annual Meeting (virtual), 2022. The author thanks the participants of the panel for constructive feedback.

Keywords: democratic backsliding; foreign policy; comfort women; South Korea

1 Introduction

Extant literature on international conflict reports the stability of democratic foreign policies (e.g., Leeds and Mattes, 2022; Mattes, Leeds, and Carroll 2015). Aware of electoral and legal consequences accruing from international commitments, policymakers in democratic countries are less likely than their counterparts in non-democracies to pursue unconventional and eccentric choices lacking popular and institutional support (Schultz, 2001). A broader literature on veto players also points to the general policy stability these constraints generate (Tsebelis 2002). One corollary of this well-established empirical regularity is that the stable democratic foreign policy equilibrium is in peril when democracy backslides. Precisely because the stability is predicated on functioning democratic norms and institutions, the decay of these foundations should have destabilizing effects on foreign policies.

The present paper demonstrates how this simple, but under-tested, theoretical expectation holds empirically with the case of the South Korea-Japan Agreement on the Comfort Women in 2015 ('the 2015 Agreement,' henceforth). The agreement deviates significantly from the traditional foreign policy position of South Korea. It was built against the dominant and long-standing popular opinions in South Korea, with a questionable procedural legitimacy. I argue that the agreement was nonetheless able to be pushed forward due in large part to the democratic backsliding that took place during the Park Guen-Hye government (2012–2017) of South Korea. The government committed itself to the 'irreversible settlement of the Comfort Women issues' with Japan, a stipulation that would have been prohibitively implausible, had the president not been insulated from vertical and horizontal constraints on her power.

The paper contributes to the literature on democratic backsliding by offering a vivid illustration of how backsliding can have direct and seismic effects on foreign policy stability. The backsliding created cracks in democratic constraints on policymaking, through which the unsustainable—and perhaps procedurally inexecutable (Chun, 2021)—agreement came into existence. By elucidating a) how the democratic accountability weakened in South Korea; b) to what extent the 2015 Agreement was drastically out of the traditional confines of the country's foreign policy; and c) how these two factors co-vary, this paper pushes the empirical boundaries of the burgeoning literature that documents the perverse consequence of democratic backsliding on such domains as

public health (Wigley et al., 2020; Son and Bellinger 2022), economy (Nelson and Witko, 2022), bureaucracy (Bauer and Becker, 2020), and, particularly, foreign policy (Rüland, 2021).

The paper also highlights the importance of understanding the underlying domestic and structural political contexts beyond the narrow focus on state-level interactions in analyzing foreign policy outcomes of South Korea in particular. Discussions on South Korean foreign policies tend to follow punditry and partisan commentaries (Y. Park and Jung, 2020). This makes a stark contrast with systematic studies on comparable cases such as Japan that unveil the domestic political intricacies affecting foreign policies on various levels (e.g., J. Y. Kim et al., 2021; Kobayashi and Katagiri, 2018). By highlighting the institutional shifts shaped by the democratic backsliding leading to the unsustainable agreement, the paper adds to the emerging analytical studies on the domestic political determinants of South Korean foreign policy outcomes (Jo 2022; Ku 2019). As such, the argument presented in the paper is applicable to the foreign policy cases of other Asian countries that have also undergone democratic backsliding in recent years (Son 2023).

Considering the cost of forging the eccentric international commitment—turbulence in the Korea-Japan relations, the case study also provides a practical policy lesson for interstate relations. The 2015 Agreement signaled to Japan that their Korean counterpart was making an unprecedented turn in its position towards the ‘history matters’ which the ‘New Right’ Japanese elites considered indispensable for restoring the normal state status (Deacon, 2021; Harris, 2020; Togo, 2010). After the backsliding was stalled by the presidential impeachment, the new Korean government came to a decision that ran counter to the Agreement by closing the Comfort Women Foundation—a policy vehicle to implement the Agreement (Kyoto News, 2019). The Japanese government found this decision to be an outright renege on the commitment to the Agreement (Pollmann, 2019), leading to a possibly the lowest point of the two countries’ relationship in decades—Japanese government’s decision to impose an export control on South Korea in 2020. Democratic backsliding may destabilize not only the backsliding government’s foreign policy, but also its relationship with a partner. As demonstrated in the South Korean case, a seemingly conciliatory interstate commitment hastily pushed forward, seizing the opportunity opened up by democratic backsliding can backfire.

The paper is comprised of five sections. The two sections following the introduction put forth a conceptualization of democratic backsliding and its relationship with foreign policy

drawing on the literature. Vertical and horizontal democratic accountabilities are proposed as conceptual channels where backsliding's effect on foreign policy is observed. The fourth section exhibits the empirical details of how the weakened accountability in South Korea contributed to the eccentric foreign policy choice of pursuing the 2015 Agreement. The last section briefly revisits the primary argument of the paper and concludes with discussions on its implications.

2 Conceptualizing Democratic Backsliding: A Dahlian Approach

The past decade has witnessed an explosive growth of studies on democratic backsliding. While a significant portion of this emerging research enterprise is dedicated to conceptualization of the phenomenon, its theoretical and empirical boundaries remain fluid. Researchers have come up with various ways through which the phenomenon can be illuminated. For instance, Dresden and Howard (2016) suggest that backsliding is concentration of executive powers at the expense of other politico-societal actors. Kaufman and Haggard (2019) point to, as symptoms of backsliding, an executive's attempts to influence elections. Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) add that backsliding can also be observed when the executive branch of a government attacks democratic norms such as tolerance. Waldner and Lust (2018) take a more deductive and comparative approach, offering concrete domains of politics where declines of democracy can be readily observed: competition, participation, and accountability.

Although the conceptual fluidity stems from the different identification of democracy each approach draws on (Waldner and Lust, 2018), one analytical framework with which these otherwise diverse studies can be synthesized can be derived from Dahl's (1971) pioneering work. The extant studies seem to commonly establish, or implicitly assume, that modern democracy (or 'pol-yarchy' in Dahlian approach) is identifiable with two epistemological dimensions, namely, "contestation" and "inclusiveness." Coppedge et al. (2008) report that these dimensions are the conceptual basis for the great majority of the contemporary democracy indexes, implying that the empirical realms of various backsliding studies might also boil down to these two dimensions. Contestation in democratic politics refers to the situation where citizens have "unimpaired opportunities" (Dahl, 1971, p. 2) to form their preferences and have them reflected in government policies. Inclusiveness, on the other hand, concerns matters related to political participation,

particularly voting. Democratic backsliding in this sense is identified as any downward movement away from contestation and inclusiveness.

As Lührmann et al. (2020, p. 819) suggest, researchers find democratic accountability as a useful empirical domain where these two dimensions of polyarchy are readily observable. Arugay and Slater (2019, p. 33), for example, summarize that ‘vertical accountability’ is a matter of “inclusion of the populace” into politics whereas ‘horizontal accountability’ refers to “constraints against excessive concentrations of executive power.” The two accountabilities map aptly into the Dahlian idea of inclusion and contestation: Inclusion is accomplished through improvement in political participation. Likewise, contestation is realized when executive power is constrained by institutional actors. Polyarchy, hence, exists where both accountabilities are at high levels.

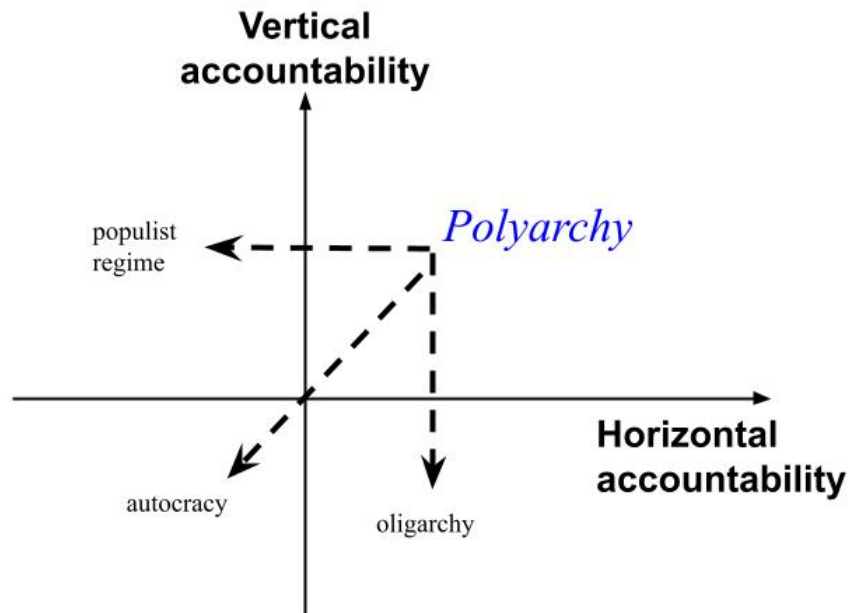


Figure 1. *Democratic Backsliding and Declining Accountability*

Figure 1 illustrates this observability of polyarchy through accountability as well as possible pathways of backsliding (dashed arrow lines). As Arugay and Slater (2019) suggest, polyarchy might decay into an ‘oligarchy’ when the vertical accountability is compromised and the government is concerned only about elites. A mirror image of oligarchy, ‘populist regime,’ emerges when horizontal accountability is curtailed. Democratic accountability in both dimensions can be compromised simultaneously because the two dimensions are not mutually independent in reality. Problems in one dimension can easily spill over to another. When judicial independence

(horizontal) is damaged, for example, limiting political participation (vertical) becomes unequivocally easier (Son and Bellinger, 2022, p. 879).

In line with the burgeoning literature (e.g., Boese, Lindberg, et al., 2021), this paper conceptualizes that any movement away from polyarchy observed through the declining accountability in the two dimensions is considered democratic backsliding, be the result coming close to oligarchy, populism, or autocracy.

3 Backsliding and Foreign Policy

The literature on foreign policy establishes that democratic foreign policies tend to be stable and predictable. Democratic backsliding, thus, implies an increased risk of instability in foreign policies, as empirically observed through (increased probabilities of) drastic and abrupt shifts from traditional policy positions. As conventional democratic peace literature establishes (e.g., Maoz and Russett, 1993), democratic processes impose constraints on political leaders such that they cannot suddenly veer into paths altering the status quo equilibrium. Policy failures are considered costly in democracies and “rash acts and exposed bluffs will lead to their electoral defeat” (Doyle, 2005, p. 464). The decisions that democratic leaders make reflecting this risk premium, therefore, are deemed highly credible and of strong resolve (Schultz, 1998). Due to this political implausibility, a creative policy communication framing is needed when adopting otherwise unacceptable foreign policies (Tobin et al., 2022). In addition, democratic foreign policymakers find their hands tied by institutional constraints. They are often simply unable to promote a policy that would generate legal and procedural obstacles (Anderson, 1981). Through various channels, legislative (Reiter and Tillman, 2002), judicial (Guiraudon and Lahav, 2000), and bureaucratic (Halperin and Clapp, 2007) actors can restrict the variabilities of foreign policy choices within the boundaries set by institutional norms and practices. Foreign policy regimes of democracies therefore tend to be stable. As the empirical evidence presented by Leeds and Mattes (2022) suggests, this democratic foreign policy stability persists even beyond government turnovers.

Because stability is endogenous to democracies, democratic backsliding is likely to induce *instability* in foreign policy. This instability stems from declines in both vertical and horizontal democratic accountability. Backsliding unshakes policymakers from societal (vertical) and

institutional (horizontal) accountability. When political leaders are indifferent to public backlash or procedural challenges, policies that violate traditional norms, such as longstanding alliance relations or established foreign policy stances, may appear less untenable than before. Such policies might be even tempting as they could further the political goals of the backsliding leader. This unraveling accountability on the vertical and horizontal dimensions, however, does not necessarily have to have separate effects. The two dimensions can also interact with each other, further amplifying the effect of backsliding on foreign policy. For instance, weakened opposition parties or monitoring institutions would limit the public's access to the (negative) information about the policy in question as 'making noise' becomes increasingly difficult (Potter and Baum, 2014), which renders eccentric foreign policy positions even more achievable.

The cases of Duterte (the Philippines) and Hun Sen (Cambodia) offer fitting examples. During his populist rule, Duterte sought to undermine the military "oligarchy" and mobilize popular support by canceling the Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA) with the United States (Vartavarian, 2020). On the other hand, during the transition from a competitive to a hegemonic authoritarian regime, Hun Sen made an unusual claim of accusing the United States secretly aiding the opposition party. This unconventional move, which risked the otherwise relatively amicable relationship with the United States, is understood as an attempt to prop up the patronage network amid the great power competition in the region (Loughlin 2021). In both cases, leaders pursued foreign policy positions that would have been considered implausible under constraints from other institutions or society. Tschantret's (2020) cross-national study demonstrates that these "post-democratic" leaders indeed grow prone to foreign policy adventurism, implying that the backsliding-instability nexus is not confined to these two cases.

While this deviation from a long-held position in itself is destabilizing, the often-transitory nature of democratic backsliding (Nord et al., 2024) generates another potential source of instability. The new equilibrium is tenable only so long as the backsliding government's grip on power remains unchallenged. When backsliding is stalled and democracy eventually proves resilient, the return to the previous equilibrium position is highly likely. To the extent that backsliding was the source of a sudden shift away from traditional policies, this 'restoration' would bring back in the previous constraints on foreign policymaking, resulting in yet another sudden shift. Any interstate commitment built on the eccentric circumstances during the backsliding period, then, would prove

to be a myopic one. In the eyes of the foreign policy partners, this restoration can appear to be renegeing on the commitment, a condition that renders the interstate relationship more unpredictable and potentially conflict-prone (Gibler, 2008). In short, by enabling untenable foreign policy positions, backsliding negates the democratic foreign policy advantage of being portrayed as ‘a reliable partner.’

4 South Korea as a Case

4.1 Democratic Backsliding in South Korea

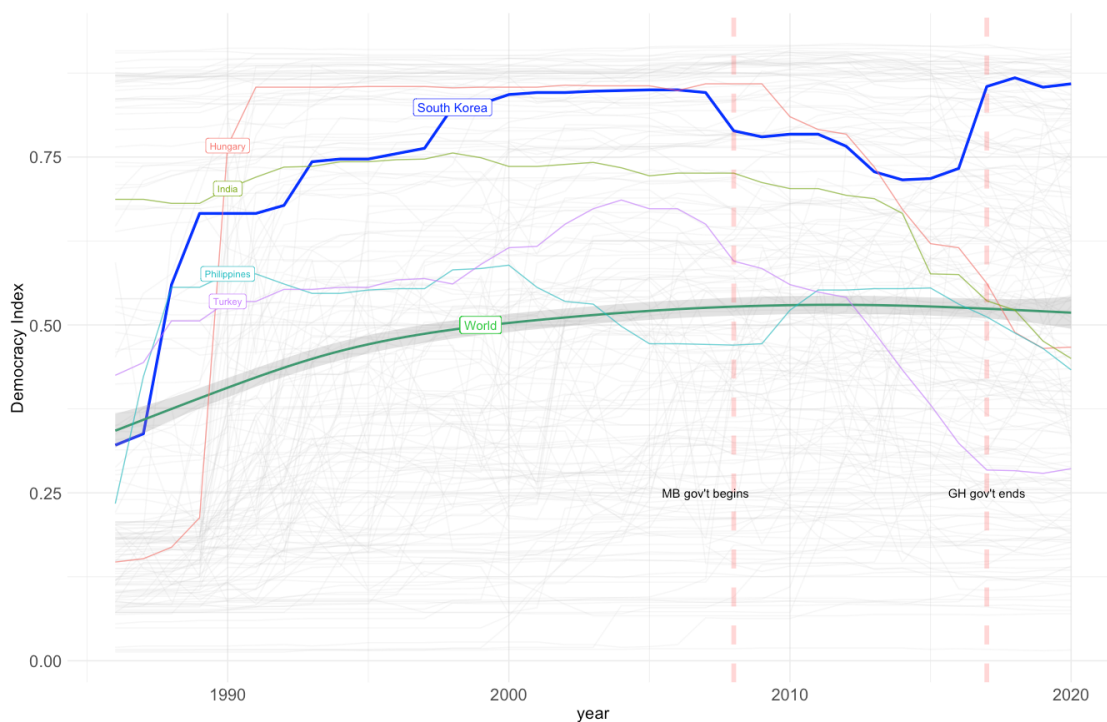


Figure 2. *Democratic Backsliding in South Korea in a Comparative Perspective.* Depicted are the level of democracy (‘Polyarchy Index’) in V-dem data (Pemstein et al., 2021) for each country in the world with several country cases highlighted as examples. The curve labeled ‘World’ indicates the global moving average over time with 95% confidence intervals. The vertical dashed lines indicate the beginning and the end of the backsliding episode in South Korea.

Figure 2 illustrates the democratic backsliding episode in South Korea in a comparative perspective. Since the democratic transition in the late 1980s, South Korean democracy had trended upward, placing it on a substantially high level compared to the rest of the world by the 1990s. The

trend suddenly took a downward turn in 2008 with the election of Lee Myung-bak and made an even deeper dive in the subsequent years with the election of Park Guen-hye. The backsliding episode was concluded and the level of democracy bounced back to the pre-backsliding level only after the impeachment of Park and the election of Moon Jae-in in 2017. The magnitude of the backsliding episode was notably comparable to that of the *initial* period of well-known backsliding cases such as the Edorgan regime in Turkey, the Duterte regime in the Philippines, or the Modi regime in India. Although democracy in South Korea remained overall at a notably higher level than that of the global average, in the mid-2010s, the country was well in the path of democratic backsliding.

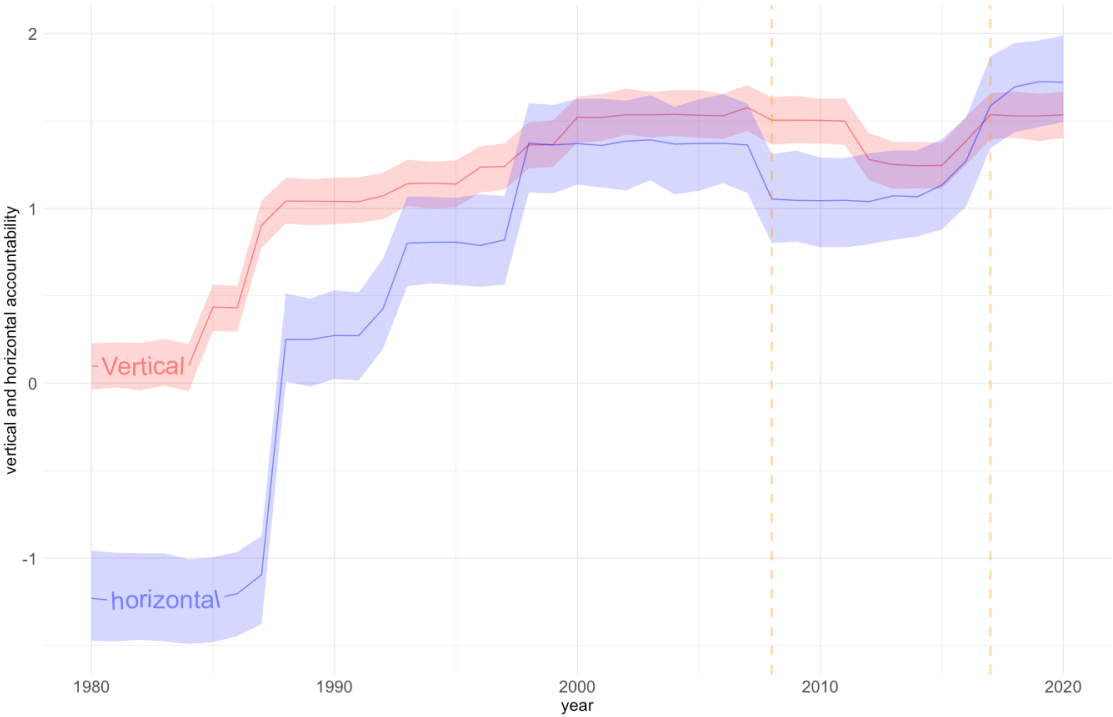


Figure 3. Declines in Vertical and Horizontal Accountability during Democratic Backsliding in South Korea. Depicted are ‘vertical’ and ‘horizontal’ accountability indexes with 95% confidence intervals using V-dem data (Pemstein et al., 2021). The vertical dashed lines indicate the beginning and the end of the backsliding episode in South Korea.

How does this episode map into the two dimensions of backsliding? Figure 3 disaggregates the backsliding episode of South Korea presented in Figure 2 into two dimensions of democratic accountability, namely, vertical (‘v2x_veracc’) and horizontal (‘v2x_horacc’), using the V-dem

data (Lührmann et al., 2020). The figure suggests that the decline of democratic accountability occurred substantially in both dimensions during this period.

These patterns corroborate with a wide array of anecdotal evidence pointing to an illiberal turn of Korean democracy in this period.¹ On the ‘vertical’ front, a systematic abuse of the criminal defamation law to protect government officials (K. S. Park, 2017) and hunt-down of the critics of the government (You, 2015), brazen infringement upon the freedom of assembly shown in the violent suppression of the Candlelight vigils as well as the ‘Yong-san Tragedy’ (J. Y. Lee and Anderson, 2013), and the massive blacklisting of government critics (Ministry of Culture and Tourism, 2019) are some of the notable examples where citizenry participation in political processes was limited.

On the horizontal dimension, the use of the National Intelligence Agency (NIA) for tracking down the activities of government critics (Haggard and You, 2015) and electoral interference through online manipulation (Doucette and Koo, 2016), a questionable dissolution of the United Progressive Party in 2014 (J. Kim, 2017), rampant corruption scandals (Choo, 2017), and direct tampering with judicial independence (Kookmin Ilbo, 2018) are some of the oft-cited cases of the government attempt to shake off institutional constraints on its power. Overall, during the backsliding period, the public’s political participation was significantly curtailed, and government apparatus were used as instruments to solidify the executive power.

4.2 The Historical Exceptionality of the 2015 Agreement

The historical context of the ‘Comfort Women’ issue, or that of the ‘history matters’ in general, in the South Korea-Japan relations helps explain the exceptionality—and, thus, the political infeasibility—of the 2015 agreement. The 2015 Agreement was geared primarily toward re-institutionalizing the South Korea-Japan relationship in accordance with the framework set by the ‘Treaty on Basic Relations between Japan and the Republic of Korea’ (the 1965 Agreement). By declaring to be the ‘last and irreversible solution’ for any problems of the ‘history matters,’ it was also in a way to complete—in the historical revisionist perspective—the 1965 framework, which left the individual Koreans’ rights to claim compensation largely unaddressable (Kwon, 2019). Given how

¹ As early as one year into Lee Myung-bak’s presidency, South Korean newspapers started blowing whistle on the “regressing democratic institutions and values” (Kyeonghyang, 2008).

foreseeable at the time the legal and political challenges stemming from the policy equilibrium were, accomplishing this goal required non-ordinary circumstances.

The traditional understanding of the ‘history matters’ between the two countries has been that they are arduous, if not impossible, to address (Jonsson, 2015). The gap between the two countries is deemed nearly unbridgeable as there is little agreement even on the mere factuality, let alone on how to go about the indemnity and compensation for the victims (Chun, 2015; Henry, 2013). The situation points to a glaring lack of legal and institutional basis for any fundamental resolution.

At the center of this disagreement lies the tension between ‘transitional justice’ perspective to the history matters on one hand and the ‘historical revisionism’ on the other (Rozman and Lee, 2006). Espoused primarily by the South Korean public as well as part of the Japanese civil society, the former posits that the forced labor and the Comfort Women issues are in essence the crime against humanity perpetrated by the Japanese imperial state, in line with the verdicts in the Tokyo Tribunal (Jonsson, 2015; Soh, 2003). This approach posits that the justice remains simply unrealized for the Korean victims (Chun, 2019). The revisionist perspective, on the other hand, is promoted by the “assertive conservatives” (Togo, 2010) or “ultra-rights” (Hayashi, 2008) in Japan, who view the history issues in general as unnecessary obsession holding Japan back from becoming a normal state. Ku (2015) offers a similar conceptual spectrum where the ‘instrumentalist’ approach sitting on one extreme and the ‘transnational activism’ on the other.

The gap between these two perspectives also reflects the deep-rooted mutual public perception that reproduces itself over time: while Koreans view the Japanese government as “unrepentant colonial aggressor,” the Japanese perception of their South Korean counterpart was “emotional and irrational for dwelling on the past” (Deacon, 2021). The perceptual differences established a prohibitively high barrier against any ordinary democratic political means as solutions. Given the deeply entrenched disagreement structured over the chasm between the two contending views, the institutional efforts to address the history matters had not materialized into dramatic policy measures clearly favoring one over the other for decades. Up until the 2015 Agreement, the modal position had been one that focused more on the rhetoric than on actual policy measures (Jonsson, 2015; J. Y. Kim, 2014).

To touch upon some of the notable historical benchmarks in this discourse, the first came in 1965. The Korea-Japan Basic Agreement (the ‘1965 Agreement’) negotiated in secret primarily by the head of the Korean Central Intelligence Agency, Kim Jong-pil and the Japanese foreign minister Ohira Masayoshi, each representing their respective government, normalized the two countries’ diplomatic relationship. As the military government’s primary goal was to secure concessional loans from Japan, the details of the agreement tilted heavily toward Japan’s interests, provoking fierce resistance and protests from the South Korean public. The official agreement was accompanied with another one (“Agreement on the Settlement of Problem concerning Property and Claims and the Economic Cooperation between the Republic of Korea and Japan”) that is widely deemed a part of the 1965 Agreement, not a stand-alone deal. It stipulates that the agreement finalizes the Korean government’s rights to demand for compensations for Japanese colonization of Korea, which leaves it unclear whether this also deters any of the *individual* victims’ claims (The Supreme Court of South Korea, 2018).

Despite numerous events instigating and relaxing the tensions between the two countries in the years after 1965, the first meaningful change in the discourse was made when the then Japanese monarch Hirohito mentioned Japanese colonization of Korea as an “unfortunate event” in 1984. Along with some of the Japanese political elites’ individual remarks of “regrets” in the early 1980s, it was part of the first official recognition from the Japanese state of the history matters specifically with Korea, with an apologetic connotation (Yamazaki, 2006) although what constitutes an ‘apology’ is perhaps one of the most contested topics in the Post-War Japanese politics (Lind, 2009). The changes in the discourse were made only marginally and incrementally, however. It took another decade until Japanese political leaders made statements on the history matters that highlighted the Japanese government’s involvement in the wartime crimes. The ‘Kono Statement’ in 1993, in particular, acknowledged the existence of the comfort women and Japanese’s military’s involvement in it, thereby establishing the discourse on the history matter on a position further away from the revisionist view and relatively closer to the transitional justice view (Henry, 2013).

The narrative set out by Kono Agreement was acknowledged by the South Korean government. This loosely agreed arrangement established a reasonably stable equilibrium foreign policy position for both countries for the coming two decades despite intermittent disruptions such as the ‘history textbook problems’ in Japan (Schneider, 2008). Official diplomatic documents produced

in the later years further cemented the Kono framework. The Kim-Obuchi Declaration of 1998, the first written declaration about the remorseful history matters, is a particularly notable one among these documents. It formalized the languages used to describe how the two countries understood the history matters. The declaration was repeatedly endorsed by the leaders of the two countries for at least several years since. The overall middle-of-the-road approach set by the Kono framework, however, was not significantly altered (Dudden, 2008, 45-47).

South Korean's foreign policy position in the post-democratization era has been largely in line with this stable equilibrium although the social demand for transitional justice grew stronger with the society engaged in the 'memory politics' in South Korea (Jo, 2022). Despite flamboyant gestures² and blunt comments,³ the South Korean policies on the history matters remained well within the Kono Statement framework (Soeya, 2019), only incrementally attempting to address the issues and threading a thin line between pragmatism and nationalism. The focus of the policy was more in line with 'managing' the problems instead of seeking any radical solutions given the risk of provoking public uproars and legal challenges the latter might lead to (Y. Lee, 2005). There were several attempts to initiate more binding, longer-term solutions than the status quo such as instituting "Asian Women's Fund" (Comfort Women Task Force, 2017). These attempts proved ineffective, however, because the propositions put in place still did not satisfy either party, lacking the necessary political momentum. Proposals of significant policy switches considering the backlash emanating from one side usually exacerbated the situation (Soh, 2003).

Then came the 2015 Agreement, rather abruptly. The key points of the Agreement include (Comfort Women Task Force, 2017, pp. 11–24):

- acknowledging that Japan is responsible for the Comfort Women issues with a condition that the responsibility is not necessarily a legal one;

² For instance, then-president of South Korea Lee Myung-bak visited Dokdo allegedly to galvanize electoral support (BBC News, 2012).

³ In 1995, then-president of South Korea Kim Young-sam remarked that he would "correct [Japan's] bad habit" of "refusing to recognize the responsibility for the history matters" (YTN, 2015). The remark was a response to Eto Takami, the head of Japanese Management and Coordination Agency at the time who suggested in public that there were positive sides in Japanese colonization of South Korea (Washington Post, 1995).

- an apology from the Japanese Prime Minister for the Comfort Women, but not the cabinet-level resolution that the South Korean government had traditionally demanded;
- establishment of a foundation for financially supporting victims, which is clarified as *not* an acknowledgement of a legal responsibility of the Japanese government for the victims;
- both parties not making critical public comments about the history matters in the future;
- (both parties) confirming that the Comfort Women issue will be “finally and irreversibly” resolved with the Agreement;
- the Girl Statue (*‘sonyeosang’*) to be removed of the Japanese embassy area in South Korea [*confidential*];
- South Korean government not supporting civil society organizations working on the history matters [*confidential*].

Analysts generally consider the 2015 Agreement to be a) a sharp breakaway from the status quo and b) heralding the return of the 1965 regime in Korea-Japan relations. The Agreement did not articulate the legal responsibility of the Imperial Japanese government’s human rights abuse of the Comfort Women victims, one of the centerpieces of the dispute, traditionally (Hankyoreh, 2015). The agreement’s invocation of ‘finality and irreversibility’ is interpreted as suppressing individual judicial claims for compensation (Chung, 2017), which the Korean Constitutional Court later found unconstitutional (Joongang Ilbo, 2019). In effect, by declaring the ‘finality and irreversibility,’ the Agreement puts the discourse closer to the historical revisionism than even the 1965 Agreement, which the negotiators from both parties understood as a stopgap solution, as recently disclosed documents reveal.⁴

It is worth noting here that, even within the context of Park’s presidency, the 2015 Agreement was a drastic reversal in foreign policy. In the first couple of years into her presidency, Park embraced a hardliner stance on the history matter and refused to have a summit with the Prime Minister Abe Shinzo until there was a ‘sincere apology’ of Japanese government on the Comfort Women issues (W. Shin, 2019).

⁴ Documents recently disclosed reveal that both parties were in fact aware of a) the agreement’s limit in addressing individuals’ claims and b) the eventual need for binding legal solutions, not a mere political one (Munhwa Broadcasting Corporation, 2023).

In summary, the 2015 Agreement marks a sudden and drastic departure from the traditional foreign policy position of South Korea in relations with Japan. The traditional position situates itself in between the transitional justice and historical revisionist perspectives reflecting the significant wedge between the two countries' understanding of the history matters. At least since the 1990s, little substantive change had been made to this stable equilibrium. The 2015 Agreement, by contrast, was an unprecedented attempt to push the needle dramatically towards the historical revisionist perspective.

4.3 How Backsliding Contributed to the Unusual

The previous section demonstrates that the 2015 Agreement represents a drastic and abrupt shift of South Korean policy toward Japan from its traditional equilibrium. This section delves into how such a shift was enabled by democratic backsliding, with a particular emphasis on Park's personalistic regime.

To the extent that foreign policies of a democratic country are affected by public and institutional constraints, pursuing a sudden deviation should be generally implausible. As depicted in Figure 1, democratic backsliding reduces these constraints in two dimensions (vertical and horizontal) and, thus, mitigates this implausibility. Declines in horizontal accountability allow the executive to be less constrained than before by the legislative and judicial checks on its operation. The government therefore would be less concerned about the legal and procedural consequences of foreign policies even when their legal basis is questionable. In the case of the 2015 Agreement, it is plausible to assume that the government would have been deterred from a deal so fraught with legal challenges and institutional constraints if the procedural guardrails set up in the post-democratization era remained intact. That the agreement came through despite the significant barriers against it suggests that the legal and institutional concerns were not important considerations in the Park government's foreign policy decisions.

Instead, nepotism took the place of horizontal accountability in Park's government. Due processes in foreign policymaking were often ignored, be it matters concerning checks-and-balances between different government branches or coordination within the cabinet (Ku, 2019). Even high-ranking officials had little say about policy decisions if they stayed outside of Park's inner circle (Doucette, 2017; Hahm and Heo, 2018). Not surprisingly, the absence of within-cabinet and

inter-branch constraints in the government was also glaringly evident in policies toward Japan. For example, the top negotiation delegate for the Comfort Women issue, Foreign Minister Yoon Byung-se, objected the process of the deal which he believed would render the Agreement politically precarious. Little cabinet-level discussion ensued on this objection, however (Segye Ilbo, 2017). Similarly, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs took a stance against the inclusion of the ‘irreversibility’ in the Agreement. But the resistance was not represented in the discussions of the deal-making process for “unidentifiable” reasons (Donga Ilbo, 2017). Likewise, analysts at the time reported that Park seemed undeterred by the possibility of judicial review reversing the deal afterwards (Hankyoreh, 2016), which was later corroborated by the evidence pointing to Park’s (unsuccessful) attempt to influence the court ruling over the history issues (Seoul Shinmun, 2018).

As Harris (2020, p. 306) points out, the Abe government appeared aware of this decline in horizontal accountability, which it hoped to lead to the Park government blocking the court ruling in favor of the victims. On a more fundamental level, the ‘finality and irreversibility’ element of the Agreement, in itself not legally binding and requiring no legislative ratification (Tamada, 2018), suggests that it was designed to bypass any possible horizontal democratic constraints present at the time or possible in the future.

Similarly, with declining vertical accountability the Park government largely ignored the public opinions on—and thus the citizenry participation in—foreign policy making. The average public attitude towards historical matters, specifically the issue of Comfort Women, has been unambiguously critical in the post-1987 era. Democratization allowed the society to enter the ‘memory politics contestation’ where the state’s conciliatory narrative was challenged (Jo, 2022). The demand for transitional justice was indisputably the dominant voice in the society. It should not be surprising, therefore, to find that the public opinions before and after the Agreement remained overwhelmingly negative about any prospect of rapprochement. The Gallup Korea poll conducted in November 2015, immediately after the Korea-Japan summit and one month before the Agreement reports that an overwhelming majority (76%) answered that “the Japanese government will not change their attitude towards the Comfort Women issue” (Gallup Korea, 2015). This position remained stable over time. In another poll several months later (January 2016), 71% of the public “did not believe that the Japanese government apologized on the Comfort Women issue in the 2015 Agreement” and the majority (54%) determined that the Agreement was “wrong” while only 26% approved of it (Gallup Korea, 2016). Likewise, mere 28% suggested that re-negotiation

of the Agreement was off the table, signaling the public disapproval of the ‘irreversibility’ of the Agreement in particular. Likewise, the presidential approval rating of Park plummeted following the announcement of the Agreement. The worsening popularity of the government was followed by an underwhelming general election result four months later. Japanese observers started positing that the sustainability of the Agreement was in peril (JTBC News, 2016). The backlash to the Agreement from the public was, in other words, easily foreseeable.

However, low levels of vertical accountability implied that this highly predictable and resilient public discontent did not feature prominently in Park’s decision to pursue the Agreement. The signs of withering constraints from below were abound. For starters, the direct interactions between Park and the public were generally scarce. Press conferences were significantly rarer than before and mostly pre-scripted (Son, 2021, p. 772). The fact that politically combustible parts of the Agreement were simply undisclosed until the post-impeachment investigation (Hankyoreh, 2017) suggests that the government considered the public demand for justice a mere hindrance to be buried under a negotiation table. Not only was the Park government insensitive to the societal preferences, it also attempted to manipulate public opinions to their favor. In 2017, an opposition lawmaker revealed a document titled “Directives of the Chief Presidential Secretary.” The document details the plans of tarnishing the public images of outspoken social activists and religious groups critical of the Agreement while propagating the case of a government assistance of one of the Comfort Women victims (CBS NoCut News, 2017). Ku (2019) contends that this pattern of top-down decision making combined with post-hoc ‘request’ to public of acquiescence is a recurring pattern found in other major foreign policies of the Park government.

Park’s personalist politics was powerful in affecting South Korea’s foreign policies because it was the defining characteristics of her political career and thus a dominant element of the democratic backsliding during her presidency. She ascended to political prominence drawing mostly on the (perceived) pedigree of being the daughter of the former dictator Park Chung-hee, whose popularity has not waned much in certain sections of society through decades (Hong et al., 2022). Park, thus, enjoyed “unconditional support” from people nostalgic of her father (Hahm and Heo, 2018, p. 658). Since the popularity rests on her personal identity, Park did not have a strong incentive to be responsive to societal inputs or institutional pressures throughout her political career (Hüstebeck, 2013).

Park's personalist politics also permeated her own conservative party where she formed a loyalist faction through distributing personal ties to her as a symbolic rent. These rents were believed electorally potent in the process of the conservative party realignment in the late 2000s (S. Shin, 2020). The increasing significance of personal ties meant that political elites were that much less incentivized to foster performance-based accountability through institutional channels. Instead, nepotism and cronyism augmented by the personal ties dominated the policymaking processes (Choo, 2017). This policy environment rendered the political elites within the network of Park's cronies insensitive to domestic institutions and public opinions, making abrupt policy changes significantly likely. Such a personalist environment helped the president's personal agenda significantly affect foreign policies. Park, for instance, reportedly expressed a strong preference for the announcement of the deal before the year as it was 50th anniversary of the 1965 Agreement, which was widely considered a legacy of her father (W. Shin, 2019, pp. 165–166).

The political landscape in South Korea leading up to the 2015 Agreement can thus be seen as a case where the effect of personalistic politics manifesting itself through declining democratic accountability. The guardrails set up by institutional and social constraints against pursuing the clandestine foreign policy deal would have been much more robust without democratic backsliding.

4.4 Alternative Explanations

The present research delineates the effect of democratic backsliding on the irregularities of South Korean foreign policy towards Japan. One crucial task to ensure the robustness of this empirical analysis is to juxtapose the primary argument with alternative explanations that might have contributed to the 2015 Agreement. This is not to contend that backsliding alone can explain how the otherwise unlikely agreement was made; rather, it is to demonstrate that even after taking into consideration the alternative contributors, the effect of backsliding remains significant or at least compatible with such alternatives—a critical task in qualitative inference (Fairfield and Charman 2022). Two plausible alternatives warrant consideration, each focusing on other stakeholders of the 2015 Agreement: 'Japanese New Right' and 'American pressure' theses.

First, one could argue that the 2015 Agreement was more a result of the rise of the Japanese New Right than the backsliding of South Korean democracy. According to this argument, the 'pull' factor from the Japanese side was the true causal factor leading to the otherwise unlikely

agreement. In the mid-2010s, the Japanese New Right indeed escalated its promotion of historical revisionism in both domestic and international stages (J. Y. Kim & Sohn 2017). However, such efforts were not unprecedented. Nor did the years leading up to 2015 mark the highest intensity of such efforts. By 2015, the “transnational political activism” of the New Right had exhibited significant ebbs and flows in its intensity over two decades (Ku 2015). If the Japanese pull-factor alone could secure the settlement, arrangements akin to the 2015 Agreement should have occurred in earlier periods where the intensity of the activism was comparably vigorous.

A notable example is the ‘Japanese Society for Composing New Textbook’ (‘Tsukurukai’), which involved many Japanese lawmakers in the late 1990s and early 2000s. While this period marked one of the highest and most potent moments for revisionist activism, this strong pull factor did not elicit any concessions from South Korea. Instead, the movement triggered a fierce backlash from the Korean government and social groups, leading to demands for apologies. In fact, by the late 2000s, such a negative feedback loop became an important piece of a recurring pattern (Hankyoreh 2009), a phenomenon Ku (2015) attributes to changes in geopolitical incentives for the Japanese government.

Second, others suspect that there was immense diplomatic pressure wielded by Washington on South Korea towards the Agreement (Sohn 2018; Kyunghyang2017). This ‘push’ factor highlights longstanding geopolitical concerns of the US in the Northeast Asian region. The argument generally posits that Washington considered the Korea-Japan dispute over historical matters a key impediment to deepening regional cooperation among like-minded allies. Consequently, it compelled both countries to reach a prompt settlement in the context of the ‘Pivot to Asia’ (Liu 2018). The State Department’s criticism of Korean politicians’ ‘opportunistic use’ of historical matters (Sherman 2015) is often cited as a critical piece of evidence supporting this argument (e.g., Tisdall 2015).

While the effect of such pressure toward the settlement is highly plausible, it is challenging to see how this push factor alone could explain the timing and contents of the agreement. The U.S. foreign policy effort to manage historical matters in attempts to improve the trilateral relationship did not suddenly emerge in 2015; some propositions could be traced back to the turn of the millennium (Green 1999), if not earlier. Moreover, 2015 was not the unparalleled pinnacle of such efforts. For instance, the U.S. House of Representatives Resolution in 2007 directly called on the

Japanese government to take full responsibility for the Comfort Women issue, though it eventually led to a backlash from Japan (Kim 2022). If U.S. pressure was the sole driving force, the settlement on historical matters should have been established much earlier, with contents likely substantially different from those in the 2015 Agreement and in line with the 2007 House Resolution.

Instead, it would be more plausible to argue that the U.S. push factor became consequential due to the backsliding in South Korea. As Sohn (2018, 172-173) notes, the “top-down decision-making” imposed by Park increasingly alienated the professional foreign policy wing of the government from negotiations with Japan throughout 2015. The presidential office eventually took the forefront in making everyday decisions, allowing the president to swing between radically different foreign policy positions at whims (Comfort Women Task Force 2017, 28-29). In such circumstances, U.S. influence, particularly the ‘worries’ expressed at the unprecedented diplomatic move of Park next to Chinese and Russian leaders in 2015 China Victory Day Parade (Shin 2019, 160-161), could play a much greater role than usual in leading to unusual foreign policy choices of South Korea by directly affecting the president’s understanding of the situation.

In summary, there are important mechanisms through which factors other than democratic backsliding might have contributed to the making of the 2015 Agreement. These mechanisms, however, are not incompatible with the argument of the present paper. Both the American pressure and Japanese New Right theses were possible underlying conditions aided by the backsliding Park government and contributed to the related parties arriving at the unprecedented ‘irreversible and final solution.’

5 Conclusion

Among academics and practitioners, a consensus seems to emerge regarding the souring relationship between South Korea and Japan in the late 2010s and early 2020s: the disputes over the ‘history matters,’ particularly the 2015 Agreement failing to take effect, led to mounting tensions including military confrontation (Voice of America, 2019) and Japanese government’s imposing export sanctions on South Korea (Deacon, 2021; Y. S. Kim, 2020; Pollmann, 2019). Indeed, Japan’s Diplomatic Blueprint document invokes the Comfort Women issues as one of the primary factors contributing to the worsening relationship between the two countries (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Japan, 2020, p. 18). The significant foreign policy consequences of the 2015 Agreement

suggest that the arrangement was considerably different from numerous previous incidences across the Korea Strait. The extant literature, however, does not effectively explain how such a consequential event came about, particularly from the domestic politics angle.

To fill this lacuna, the present research sheds light on the political circumstances of South Korea that rendered the agreement possible and eventually set the two countries on a collision course—democratic backsliding during the Park Guen-hye government. Due to the weakened democratic accountability in vertical and horizontal dimensions, Park government grew insensitive to institutional checks on, and public discontent with, foreign policies. This insensitivity meant that Park could pursue eccentric foreign policy agendas such as the 2015 Agreement without much trouble despite the fact that the Agreement would mark a drastic deviation from the traditional foreign policy position of the country and would generate negative consequences. Democratic backsliding in this light can be seen as a fundamental driver destabilizing foreign policies.

The paper offers important implications for the international relations literature. While the literature firmly establishes that a democratic country maintains stability in its foreign policy, a logical corollary of the empirical regularity—democratic decay destabilizes its foreign policies—has rarely been subject to a systematic scrutiny. Through a case study on the democratic backsliding episode in South Korea, this paper demonstrates how this extension of the literature can be achieved. Likewise, the paper places democratic backsliding in a more theoretical footing in the foreign policy literature. An extensive array of descriptive studies convincingly documents the empirical details of non-traditional foreign policy turns adopted by the Filipino (Rüland, 2021), Turkish (San and Akca, 2021), and Hungarian and Polish (Holesch and Kyriazi 2022) governments during their backsliding periods. The current paper advances this literature by clearly delineating a particular theoretical mechanism of democratic backsliding—declines in accountability—that is responsible for this emerging empirical regularity.

The paper also aids practical foreign policy analysis by providing a critical frame applicable to similar empirical contexts. An agreement or convention hastily forged by a backsliding government, hailed as ‘historic’ or ‘ground-breaking’ by media highlighting its stark deviation from the tradition, might indeed be a mere ephemeral foray into an unsustainable policy agenda. If foreign policy commitments are rendered tenable only when the government is unshackled from public and institutional constraints, they are likely withdrawn after the restoration of those constraints

in the post-backsliding period. Consider, for example, the recent agreement forged by South Korea and Japan on the colonial-period forced-labor issues (Reuters, 2023). This agreement resembles the 2015 Agreement in numerous ways such that “the parallels are almost too on the nose” (S. N. Park, 2023). It is against this backdrop where numerous signs of the Yoon government’s backsliding (Berger, 2023; Kim 2023; South China Morning Post, 2023) are reported. The argument put forth in this paper sheds light on the domestic political origins of the structural unsustainability of such an agreement.

References

- Anderson, P. A. (1981). Justifications and precedents as constraints in foreign policy decision-making. *American Journal of Political Science*, 25(4), 738–761.
- Arugay, A. A., and Slater, D. (2019). Polarization Without Poles: Machiavellian Conflicts and the Philippines' Lost Decade of Democracy, 2000–2010. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 681(1), 122–136.
- Bauer, M. W., and Becker, S. (2020). Democratic backsliding, populism, and public administration. *Perspectives on Public Management and Governance*, 3(1), 19–31.
- BBC News. (2012). South Korea's Lee Myung-bak visits disputed islands. BBC News. August 10, 2012. Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-19204852>.
- Berger, M. (2023). PPP leadership race thrown into Chaos by Yoon's interference. Hankyoreh. February 7, 2023. https://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/english_editorials/1078693.html.
- Boese, V. A., Lindberg, S. I., and Lührmann, A. (2021). Waves of autocratization and democratization: A rejoinder. *Democratization*, 28(6), 1202–1210.
- CBS NoCut News., (2017). Park government, disinformation operation related to the comfort women issue. CBS NoCut News, October 11, 2017. Available at: <https://www.nocutnews.co.kr/news/4858112>.
- Choo, J. (2017). South Korea in 2016. *East Asian Policy*, 9(1), 114–126.
- Chun, J. (2015). Have Korea and Japan reconciled? A focus on the three stages of reconciliation. *Japanese Journal of Political Science*, 16(3), 315–331.
- Chun, J. (2019). Social divisions and international reconciliation: Domestic backlash against foreign policymaking between Japan and South Korea. *International Studies Perspectives*, 20, 373–389.
- Chun, J. (2021). Enforced reconciliation without justice: The absence of procedural, retributive, and restorative justice in the “comfort women” agreement of 2015. *Asian Journal of Social Science*, 49(2), 84–92.
- Chung, M. (2017). Hanilgan wianbu habeuieui beopjuk jaengjungua gaeseongwaje (legal issues and challenges of the arrangement on the “comfort women” reparation of 2015). *Gyeongchalbub Yeongu (Journal of Police & Law)*, 15(1), 173–206.
- Comfort Women Task Force. (2017). Hanil ilbongunwianbu pihaeja munje habeui gumtoguelgua bogoseo (‘Review of South Korea-Japan agreement on the comfort women victim’). Task Force for the Review of South Korea-Japan Agreement on the Comfort Women Victim. Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Korea.
- Coppedge, M., Alvarez, A., and Maldonado, C. (2008). Two persistent dimensions of democracy: Contestation and inclusiveness. *Journal of Politics*, 70(3), 632–647.
- Dahl, R. A. (1971). *Polyarchy: Participation and opposition*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Deacon, C. (2021). (Re) producing the “history problem”: memory, identity, and the Japan-South Korea trade dispute. *The Pacific Review*, 35(5), 789–820.

- Donga Ilbo. (2017). The MOFA recommended dropping the 'irreversibility,' which park's blue house ignored. Donga Ilbo. December 28, 2017. Available at: <https://www.donga.com/ISSUE/2017president/News?gid=87930027&date=20171228>.
- Doucette, J. (2017). The occult of personality: Korea's candlelight protests and the impeachment of Park Geun-hye. *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 76(4), 851–860.
- Doucette, J., and Koo, S.-W. (2016). Pursuing post-democratisation: The resilience of politics by public security in contemporary South Korea. *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, 46(2), 198–221.
- Doyle, M. W. (2005). Three Pillars of the Liberal Peace. *American Political Science Review*, 99(3), 463–466.
- Dresden, J. R., and Howard, M. M. (2016). Authoritarian backsliding and the concentration of political power. *Democratization*, 23(7), 1122–1143.
- Dudden, A. (2008). *Troubled Apologies among Japan, Korea, and the United States*. Columbia University Press.
- Fairfield, T., & Charman, A. E. (2022). *Social inquiry and Bayesian inference: Rethinking Qualitative Research*. Cambridge University Press.
- Fearon, J. D. (1994). Domestic political audiences and the escalation of international disputes. *American Political Science Review*, 88(3), 577–592.
- Gallup Korea. (2015). *Gallup Korea Daily Opinion*. No. 186. Available at: <https://www.gallup.co.kr/gallupdb/reportContent.asp?seqNo=700>.
- Gallup Korea. (2016). *Gallup Korea Daily Opinion*. No. 193. January, 2016. Available at: <https://www.gallup.co.kr/gallupdb/reportContent.asp?seqNo=720>.
- Gibler, D. M. (2008). The costs of renegeing: Reputation and alliance formation. *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 52(3), 426–454.
- Green, M. J. (1999). Japan-ROK Security Relations: An American Perspective. Shorenstein Asia-Pacific Research Center Paper Series. Available at: https://aparc.fsi.stanford.edu/publications/japanrok_security_relations_an_american_perspective.
- Guiraudon, V., and Lahav, G. (2000). A reappraisal of the state sovereignty debate: The case of migration control. *Comparative Political Studies*, 33(2), 163–195.
- Haggard, S., and You, J.-S. (2015). Freedom of expression in South Korea. *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, 45(1), 167–179.
- Hahm, S. D., and Heo, U. (2018). The first female president in South Korea: Park Geun-Hye's leadership and South Korean democracy. *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, 53(5), 649–665.
- Halperin, M. H., and Clapp, P. (2007). *Bureaucratic politics and foreign policy*. Washington D.C.: Brookings Institution Press.
- Hankyoreh. (2009). Invasion is justified. War is praised. Government appealed. Hankyoreh. April 9, 2009. Available at: <https://www.hani.co.kr/arti/international/japan/349047.html>.

- Hankyoreh. (2015). No ‘final solution’ without legal responsibilities for the comfort women issue. Hankyoreh, December 28, 2015. Available at: <https://www.hani.co.kr/arti/opinion/editorial/723768.html>.
- Hankyoreh. (2016). President Park can be impeached because of the Comfort Women Agreement. Hankyoreh, January 16, 2016. Available at <https://www.hani.co.kr/arti/politics/diplomacy/726183.html>.
- Hankyoreh. (2017). Lee Byung-ki led the behind-the-curtain deal. Hankyoreh, December 27, 2017. <https://www.hani.co.kr/arti/politics/diplomacy/825256.html>.
- Harding, R., and White, E. (2019). *Divided by history: Why Japan-South Korea ties have soured*. Financial Times. October 24, 2019. <https://www.ft.com/content/13a3ff9a-f3ed-11e9-a79c-bc9acae3b654>.
- Harris, T. (2020). *Iconoclast: Shinzo Abe and the new Japan*. New York: Hurst & Company.
- Hayashi, H. (2008). Disputes in Japan over the Japanese military “comfort women” system and its perception in history. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 617(1), 123–132.
- Henry, N. (2013). Memory of an injustice: The “comfort women” and the legacy of the Tokyo Trial. *Asian Studies Review*, 37(3), 362–380.
- Holesch, Adam, and Anna Kyriazi. (2022). Democratic backsliding in the European Union: the role of the Hungarian-Polish coalition. *East European Politics* 38(1): 1-20.
- Hong, J. Y., Park, S., and Yang, H. (2022). In Strongman We Trust: The Political Legacy of the New Village Movement in South Korea. *American Journal of Political Science*, Forthcoming. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/ajps.12716>.
- Hüstebeck, M. (2013). Park Geun-hye: The eternal princess? In C. und M. R. T. Derichs, editor, *Dynasties and female Political Leaders in Asia*, pages 353–380. Zurich: LIT Verlag Munster.
- Jo, E. A. (2022). Memory, Institutions, and the Domestic Politics of South Korean–Japanese Relations. *International Organization*, 76(4), 767–798.
- Jonsson, G. (2015). Can the Japan-Korea dispute on “comfort women” be resolved? *Korea Observer*, 46(3), 489–515.
- Joongang Ilbo. (2019). The comfort women agreement doesn’t have legal force. Joongang Ilbo, December 28, 2019. Available at: <https://www.joongang.co.kr/article/23667635#home>.
- JTBC News. (2016). Japanese media: Park’s electoral defeat spells bad news for the comfort women agreement. JTBC News, April 14, 2016. Available at: https://news.jtbc.joins.com/article/article.aspx?news_id=NB11213785.
- Kaufman, R. R., and Haggard, S. (2019). Democratic decline in the united states: What can we learn from middle-income backsliding? *Perspectives on Politics*, 17(2), 417–432.
- Kim, C. J. (2022). Transnational advocacy, norm regress, and foreign compliance constituencies: The case of the “comfort women” redress movement. *International Studies Quarterly*, 66(3), sqac059.
- Kim, J. (2017). Dissolution of the Unified Progressive Party Case in Korea: A Critical Review with Reference to the European Court of Human Rights Case Law. *Journal of East Asia and International Law*, 10, 139–156.

- Kim, J. Y. (2014). Escaping the vicious cycle: Symbolic politics and history disputes between South Korea and Japan. *Asian Perspective*, 38(1), 31–60.
- Kim, J. Y., Li, W., and Lee, S. (2021). Making Sense of Japan's Export Restrictions against South Korea: Domestic Symbolism, Empowered Premiership, and Anti-Korean Sentiment. *Asian Survey*, 61(4), 683–710.
- Kim, J. Y., & Sohn, J. (2017). Settlement without consensus: International pressure, domestic backlash, and the comfort women issue In Japan. *Pacific Affairs*, 90(1), 77–99.
- Kim, Y. S. (2020). Hanilgan muyeokbunjangeui yeoksajeok kiwongua kukjejungchiyeok hameui (“historical origins and international political implications of Korea-Japan trade conflict”). *Hankukkwa Kukjejungchi (Korea and International Politics)*, 4(1), 91–120.
- Kim, E. T. (2023). The Worrying Democratic Erosions in South Korea. New Yorker. September 30, 2023. <https://www.newyorker.com/news/daily-comment/the-worrying-democratic-erosions-in-south-korea>.
- Kobayashi, T., and Katagiri, A. (2018). The “Rally”round the Flag” Effect in Territorial Disputes: Experimental Evidence from Japan–China Relations. *Journal of East Asian Studies*, 18(3), 299–319.
- Kookmin Ilbo. (2018). Kim Ki-choon: Park directly ordered to make the 'court deal' over the forced labor case. Kookmin Ilbo, August 16, 2018. Available at: <http://m.kmib.co.kr/view.asp?arcid=0923994721>.
- Ku, Y. (2015). National interest or transnational alliances? Japanese policy on the comfort women issues. *Journal of East Asian Studies*, 15(2), 243–269.
- Ku, Y. (2019). Privatized foreign policy? Explaining the Park Geun-hye administration's decision-making process. *Korea Journal*, 59(1), 106–134.
- Kwon, V. S. (2019). The sonyōsang phenomenon: Nationalism and feminism surrounding the " comfort women" statue. *Korean Studies*, 43(1), 6–39.
- Kyeonghyang. (2008). Lee Myung-bak's first year: Democratic institutions and values compromised. Kyeonghyang, December 16, 2008. Available at: <https://www.khan.co.kr/national/national-general/article/200812161802405>.
- Kyoto News. (2019). Japan-funded "comfort women" foundation in south Korea formally closed. Kyodo News. July 5, 2019. Available at: <https://english.kyodonews.net/news/2019/07/372abc34d2fe-japan-funded-comfort-women-foundation-in-s-korea-formally-closed.html>.
- Le, T. P. (2019). Negotiating in good faith: Overcoming legitimacy problems in the Japan-South Korea reconciliation process. *Journal of Asian Studies*, 78(3), 621–644.
- Lee, J. Y., and Anderson, C. (2013). Cultural policy and the state of urban development in the capital of South Korea. In C. Grodach and D. Silver, editors, *The politics of urban cultural policy: Global perspectives*, pages 69–80. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Lee, Y. (2005). Roh Moo Hyun jeongkwon 2nyuneui daeil oigyojeongchaekyeui pyunggawa jeonmang (‘evaluation of the president Roh Moo Hyun’s policy toward Japan focusing on this first two years’ term’). *Kukjejungchinonchong (Korean Journal of International Relations)*, 45(2), 81–101.
- Leeds, B. A., and Mattes, M. (2022). *Domestic interests, democracy, and foreign policy change*. Cambridge University Press.

Levitsky, S., and Ziblatt, D. (2018). *How democracies die*. New York, NY: Crown Publishing Group.

Lind, J. (2009). The perils of apology: what Japan shouldn't learn from Germany. *Foreign Affairs*, 88(3), 132–147.

Loughlin, N. (2021). Chinese linkage, leverage, and Cambodia's transition to hegemonic authoritarianism. *Democratization*, 28(4), 840–857.

Lührmann, A., Marquardt, K. L., and Mechkova, V. (2020). Constraining Governments: New Indices of Vertical, Horizontal, and Diagonal Accountability. *American Political Science Review*, 114(3), 811–820.

Maoz, Z., and Russett, B. (1993). Normative and structural causes of democratic peace, 1946–1986. *American Political Science Review*, 87(3), 624–638.

Mattes, M., Leeds, B. A., & Carroll, R. (2015). Leadership turnover and foreign policy change: Societal interests, domestic institutions, and voting in the United Nations. *International Studies Quarterly*, 59(2), 280–290.

Ministry of Culture, S., and Tourism. (2019). White paper 3: The report of the committee on culture-art blacklist investigation and institutional improvement. Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism, Republic of Korea. Available at: https://www.mcst.go.kr/kor/s_policy/dept/deptView.jsp?pSeq=1232&pDataCD=0417000000&pType=.

Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Japan. (2020). *International situation and Japan's diplomacy in 2019*. Available at: <https://www.mofa.go.jp/policy/other/bluebook/2020/pdf/1.pdf>.

Munhwa Broadcasting Corporation. (2023). Personal Claims Remain: Restricted Document Disclosed. MBC News. April 6, 2023. https://imnews.imbc.com/replay/2023/nwdesk/article/6471569_36199.html.

Nelson, M. J., and Witko, C. (2022). The economic costs of democratic backsliding? Backsliding and state location preferences of US job seekers. *Journal of Politics*, Forthcoming. Doi: <https://doi.org/10.1086/715601>.

Nord, M., Angiolillo, F., Lundstedt, M., Wiebrecht, F., & Lindberg, S. I. (2024). When autocratization is reversed: Episodes of democratic turnarounds since 1900. V-Dem Working Paper. 2024-147.

Park, K. S. (2017). Criminal prosecutions for defamation and insult in south Korea. *Korea University Law Review*, 21, 3–19.

Park, S. N. (2023). The South Korea-Japan Forced Labor Deal Is a Shambles. Foreign Policy. March 27, 2023. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/03/27/south-korea-japan-forced-labor-deal/>.

Park, Y., and Jung, J. (2020). How did the press report the conflict between Korea and Japan?: Focusing on framing and signifying strategies. *The Journal of the Korea Contents Association*, 20(7), 352–367.

Pemstein, D., Marquardt, K. L., Tzelgov, E., Wang, Y., Medzihorsky, J., Krusell, J., ... Römer, J. von. (2021). The v-dem measurement model: Latent variable analysis for cross-national and cross-temporal expert-coded data. V-Dem Working Paper No. 21, 6th edition. University of Gothenberg: Varieties of Democracy Institute.

Pollmann, M. (2019). What's Driving Japan's Trade Restrictions on South Korea? The Diplomat. July 29, 2019. <https://thediplomat.com/2019/07/whats-driving-japans-trade-restrictions-on-south-korea/>.

- Potter, P. B., and Baum, M. A. (2014). Looking for audience costs in all the wrong places: Electoral institutions, media access, and democratic constraint. *The Journal of Politics*, 76(1), 167–181.
- Reiter, D., and Tillman, E. R. (2002). Public, legislative, and executive constraints on the democratic initiation of conflict. *Journal of Politics*, 64(3), 810–826.
- Reuters. (2023). South Korea companies to pay to resolve forced labour dispute with Japan. Reuters. March 6, 2023. Available at <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/south-korea-announce-plans-resolve-forced-labour-dispute-with-japan-2023-03-06/>.
- Rozman, G., and Lee, S. (2006). Unraveling the Japan-south Korea ‘virtual alliance’: Populism and historical revisionism in the face of conflicting regional strategy. *Asian Survey*, 46(5), 761–784.
- Rüland, J. (2021). Democratic backsliding, regional governance and foreign policymaking in Southeast Asia: ASEAN, Indonesia and the Philippines. *Democratization*, 28(1), 237–257.
- San, S., and Akca, D. (2021). How Turkey’s democratic backsliding compromises the international dimension of democratization. *Digest of Middle East Studies*, 30(1), 34–52.
- Schneider, C. (2008). The Japanese history textbook controversy in East Asian perspective. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 617(1), 107–122.
- Schultz, K. A. (1998). Domestic opposition and signaling in international crises. *American Political Science Review*, 92(4), 829–844.
- Schultz, K. A. (2001). *Democracy and Coercive Diplomacy*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Segye Ilbo. (2017). Teukgum, weanbu habeui Choi Soon-sil gaeip susa (special prosecutors investigate Choi Soon-sil’s involvement in the comfort women agreement). Segye Ilbo, January 16, 2017. Available at: <https://m.segye.com/view/20170115002251>.
- Seoul Shinmun. (2018). Park ordered to close the case of the comfort women when Japan sends the money. Seoul Shinmun, November 14, 2018. Available at: <https://www.seoul.co.kr/news/newsView.php?id=20181114500167>.
- Sherman, W. (2015). *Remarks on northeast Asia*. Remarks by Undersecretary of Political Affairs. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. February 27, 2015. <https://2009-2017.state.gov/p/us/rm/2015/238035.htm>.
- Shin, S. (2020). The rise and fall of Park Geun-hye: The perils of South Korea’s weak party system. *The Pacific Review*, 33(1), 153–183.
- Shin, W. (2019). The 2015 comfort women agreement and the Two Level security dilemma of korea-japan relations (“ilbongun wianbupihaeja munje hapeuiwa hanilguangyeeui yangmunanbo dilemma”). *Asia Review*, 9(1), 151–177.
- Soeya, Y. (2019). The silent majorities of Japan and South Korea grow tired of official squabbles. East Asia Forum. March 5, 2019.
- Soh, C. S. (2003). Japan’s National/Asian Women’s Fund for “Comfort Women”. *Pacific Affairs*, 76(2), 209–233.
- Sohn, Y. (2018). International politics of the comfort women agreement (“wianbu hapueieui kukje-jeongchi”). *Korean Journal of International Studies (Kukjejeongchinonchong)*, 58(2), 145–177.

Son, B. (2021). Presidential approval ratings and the foreign exchange market: The Korean won under the Park Guen Hye government. *Asian Survey*, 61(5), 767–796.

Son, B., and Bellinger, N. (2022). The Health Cost of Autocratization. *Journal of Development Studies*, 58(5), 873–890.

Son, B., (2023). Democratic Backsliding as a Threat to Regional Cooperation in East Asia. Korea On Point. October 25, 2023. https://koreaonpoint.org/view.php?page=2&topic_idx=91&idx=265.

South China Morning Post. (2023). South Korea’s cancellation of satirical exhibition featuring President Yoon sparks freedom of expression debate. South China Morning Post January 10, 2023. <https://www.scmp.com/news/asia/east-asia/article/3206280/south-koreas-cancellation-satirical-exhibition-featuring-president-yoon-sparks-freedom-expression>.

Tamada, D. (2018). The Japan-South Korea comfort women agreement: Unfortunate fate of a non-legally binding agreement. *International Community Law Review*, 20(2), 220–251.

The Supreme Court of South Korea. (2018). Daebubwon pangyul. 2013da61381 (supreme court report). Republic of Korea. Available at: https://www.scourt.go.kr/sjudge/1540892085928_183445.pdf.

Tisdall, S. (2015). *Korean comfort women agreement is a triumph for Japan and the US*. The Guardian. December 28, 2015. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/dec/28/korean-comfort-women-agreement-triumph-japan-united-states-second-world-war>.

Tobin, J. L., Schneider, C. J., and Leblang, D. (2022). Framing Unpopular Foreign Policies. *American Journal of Political Science*, 66(3), 947–960.

Togo, K. (2010). The assertive conservative right in Japan: their formation and perspective. *SAIS Review of International Affairs*, 30(1), 77–89.

Tschantret, J. (2020). Democratic breakdown and the hidden perils of the democratic peace. *European Journal of International Relations*, 26(4), 1129–1155.

Tsebelis, George. 2002. *Veto players: How political institutions work*. Princeton University Press.

Vartavarian, M. (2020). Populism Blindsided: America, Duterte, and the Philippine Military. The Diplomat. June 11, 2020. <https://thediplomat.com/2020/06/populism-blindsided-america-duterte-and-the-philippine-military/>.

Voice of America. (2019). S. Korea: Japanese warplane made threatening pass over naval vessel. Voice of America, January 23, 2019. <https://www.voanews.com/a/south-korea-says-japanese-warplane-made-threatening-pass-over-naval-vessel/4755261.html>.

Waldner, D., and Lust, E. (2018). Unwelcome change: Coming to terms with democratic backsliding. *Annual Review of Political Science*, 21(1), 93–113.

Washington Post. (1995). Remark Costs Tokyo Aide his Job. Washington Post, November 14, 1995. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1995/11/14/remark-costs-tokyo-aide-his-job/8f3de345-d555-4397-9fb8-936b18c03609/>.

Wigley, S., Dieleman, J. L., Templin, T., Mumford, J. E., and Bollyky, T. J. (2020). Autocratisation and universal health coverage: Synthetic control study. *BMJ*, 371, m4040.

Yamazaki, J. (2006). *Japanese Apologies for World War II: A rhetorical study*. New York: Routledge.

You, J. (2015). The 'Cheonan' incident and the declining freedom of expression in South Korea. *Asian Perspective*, 39, 195–219.

YTN. (2015). [The YS era] 'teach them some manners': A decisive diplomacy toward Japan. YTN. November 22, 2015. Available at: <https://www.yna.co.kr/view/AKR20151122032500014>.