


Comfort women and the costs of denial

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I want to explain why Japan as the northern hinge of the United States' pivot strategy against China is simply not viable, politically or any other way.

In early March 2007 I found myself on the stage of a forum in Tokyo, together with Koike Yuriko, at the time Prime Minister Abe's National Security Advisor, and soon after, Minister of Defence. Koike, an Arabic speaking former journalist, gave a short anodyne talk to the 800 or so assembled suits. I raised Abe's comments on US Congressional testimony by two Korean and one Australian, woman about their experiences as sexual slaves for the Japanese Army in WW2. Abe had [said](#) that while the events were regrettable, "in the legal definition", this was not a matter of coercion.

Addressing Ms Koike, I said these remarks were disastrous for Japan. Soft power - the capacity to generate a desire for imitation or admiration - is an important part of a country's strategic posture. For Japan this issue--and the inability of the country's leaders to rise above it--was the repellent - and repelling - inverse of soft power. Moreover, I said, I had a small personal connection to the issue which would not permit me to let the matter pass without comment.

One of the three women who testified so courageously in Washington, was a woman named Jan Ruff O'Herne, who happened to be the mother of a close friend, the Australian painter Carol Ruff.

I told a little of Jan's story. I said to Ms Koike that I hoped that for both strategic policy reasons and because of the simple truth of what these women had been saying about their own lives in a committee room in Congress, the Abe administration would change course, and choose a path of historical reconciliation.

Backstage after the session, I apologised to Ms Koike for ambushing her, but she was unflustered, and brushed any unpleasantness aside. That's politics she said, smiling. I was about to say to her that Jan Ruff O'Herne was a deeply religious and decent person, outside the world of politics, and except for this issue, which marked her so deeply, she was an "ordinary" person who I felt sure Ms Koike would be able to talk with.

Before I was able to say any of these well-meaning, but, as it turned out, naive things, Ms. Koike leaned towards me and said,

"But you know, all this is the work of Korean leftists. There's nothing to it."

- [Richard Tanter](#), NAPSNet contributor

For an extended analysis of this issue linked to the current moves by the Abe government to revisit history, please see [The Sick Man of Asia, the costs of denial](#), Richard Tanter's policy forum.

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