

Briefing Memo

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A “briefing” provides background information, among others. We hope these columns will help everyone to better understand the complex of issues involved in security affairs. Please note that the views in this column do not represent the official opinion of NIDS.

Conflicting Memories: East Asia’s Search for a Common Perception of History

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Introduction

Today, more than 60 years after the end of World War II, East Asia continues to be engaged in furious debates over historical perception, as symbolized by the Yasukuni Shrine visit issue of former Prime Minister Jun’ichiro Koizumi. While history is ordinarily viewed as fading away with the passage of time, there are historical perception issues that get replayed time and again, and these appear to fall into two patterns.

First is the expression of “memory” suppressed by the state, society, or another grouping. While a typical example is the “revision of history” in a democratized Eastern Europe after the end of the Cold War that was brought about by regime change, other controversies revolve around the recent trend in Germany to depict Germans as victims in World War II because of their expulsions from the East, etc., or the recent debates in Europe regarding the massacre of Armenians in Turkey in the early years of the 20th century.

Second is controversies engendered by historiographic empirical research based on newly released historical archives that challenge long-held dogmas (myths). These include the “Enola Gay controversy” regarding the pros and cons of the dropping of the atomic bomb that arose in the United States 50 years after the end of the World War II, and the recent debate in Germany that has split the country regarding the Holocaust and the involvement of the national army, long believed to have been unsullied by this event.

In other words, since the relationships between individual memory, group memory, and

historiography, which compose historical perception, are mutually independent in democratic societies like those in Europe and North America, they conflict, and controversies between group memory and historiography, in particular, have occasionally broken out. On the other hand, in places where group memory tends to dominate and overshadow the other two types, particularly in formerly socialist countries but also in many other countries, regime change and other changes over time can cause these relationships to change and can lead to revisions in the group memory itself.

Recently, in the United Kingdom, Prime Minister Tony Blair's use of the phrases "deep sadness" and "shameful action" in reference to the slave trade that was abolished 200 years ago, while not admitting guilt, is reported to have attracted both praise and criticism.

So while the phenomenon is not necessarily limited to East Asia, the circumstances intrinsic to East Asia are also inherently more complex, as I will discuss below.

Pronounced Politicalization of History

First, history in Asia tends to be politicalized. This tendency has become particularly more pronounced since the end of the Cold War.

While Japan was able to avoid the division of the state that befell Germany with the arrival of the Cold War after the end of World War II, the heavy influence of Marxism soon led to a "domestic Cold War" in the battle of ideas. Since this conflict mainly took the form of ideological debate, history was not usually at the forefront. On the other hand, despite the existence of such debates as the "Showa history controversy," in areas of history that are inextricably linked to this ideological confrontation there has never really been any thorough, detached investigation by the Japanese themselves and, in particular, there has been no reasoned debate on modern history centering on the war. It cannot be denied that there has been a tendency to avoid looking directly at the war issue, leading to ambiguity. As a result, where many countries have arrived at a virtually unified perception regarding World War II, it is a fact that Japan to this day remains sharply divided, with views ranging all the way from "aggression" to "defense for survival" to "liberation of Asia."

Rather than converging in response to the end of the Cold War and the collapse of Socialism, the "domestic Cold War" in Japan has instead developed in a different direction, with the modern history of Japan becoming the source of dispute in place of ideology. This development was first triggered by the "wartime comfort women" issue, followed by increasingly active debates surrounding the investigation and condemnation of atrocities committed by the Japanese army, and responsibility for the war, as well as by a huge backlash to these trends. Emblematic of this trend was the "No-War Resolution" passed 50 years after the end of the war, and the more recent controversy surrounding history textbooks. As a result, history has moved beyond the realm of historiography to become politicized, so that the debate has become polarized, with extreme opinions coming from both left

and right, which has led to a vicious cycle of provocations and arousals in neighboring countries. This is the reason why the historical perception issue should not be called a diplomatic issue among Japan, China, and South Korea so much as a “Japan-Japan issue” (because it is a domestic problem within Japan).

In China, with the end of the Cold War and a progressively more open economy, the foundations of legitimacy for the Communist government have shifted from the ideology of Marxism to its history of resistance in the war against Japan, and to an emphasis on Japanese army atrocities. Furthermore, while a new nationalism called the “Campaign for Enlightenment in Patriotism” has been evoked to unify the nation, the Han Chinese people that can boast such a rich history in ancient times have had a “dark history” in the century and a half since the start of the modern era, with the Opium War, its attendant fragmentation and chaos, and domination by foreign powers, and even the years after the re-establishment of the nation, with its rapid economic growth in the most recent 10-year period, have been blemished by such events as the Cultural Revolution and the Tiananmen Incident. As a result, nationalism has been focused exclusively on the War against Japan.

This tendency for political priority means that, at the political level, politico-diplomatic demands in the China-Soviet confrontation, or in Japan-China economic cooperation, have dampened these activities that can only be construed as “anti-Japanese.” On the other hand, there is a danger that the general population, once feelings have been whipped up, could go well beyond the government’s intent, as happened during the “anti-Japanese riots” of Spring, 2005.

In South Korea, ever since the assassination of President Park Chung Hee, who had a close relationship with Japan, the tendency for anti-Japanese feeling to be used in domestic politics has been undeniable, as a tool for domestic harmony or for criticism of a rival. The Chun Doo Hwan Administration, which was lacking in legitimacy, was particularly known for bringing up history issues with Japan, but even administrations since that time have had a tendency to play “history” as a political card whenever their popularity was sagging.

These attitudes have played out against a backdrop of 36 years under a Japanese colonial government after the start of the modern era, followed by liberation and immediate division into two states and the experience of the Korean War, and then continuing with dictatorial governments in both North and South, all of which can be said to have hindered the formation of an identity.

In examinations of this kind of historical perception in East Asia, research in the United States has traced the causes to “unclear identity” and “unhealthy nationalism,” and has indicated the importance of “memory,” or in other words, historical awareness, as lying at the center of this issue. According to this analysis, the problem is that memory associated with much pain has been “impeded, blocked, and suppressed.”

In any case, this politicized memory is not the same as individual memory, in that it does not fade

with the passage of time. On the other hand, however, it can be swayed by political decisions.

Lack of a Fulfilling Military Solution

Second is the absence of a “settling (offsetting) of scores” brought about by the end of the war in East Asia. In other words, the war fought in East Asia was brought to an end by an Imperial declaration made by the Showa Emperor, in which Japan laid down its arms. As a result, while the Japanese military had suffered a series of defeats in the Pacific area, the Japanese army still had more than one million men under arms deployed in continental China when the war ended. The liberation (restoration) of the Korean Peninsula occurred through the surrender of Japan, and there has been criticism that responsibility for the country’s division lies in the method and timing of Japan’s ending of the war. In any case, it had not been a military victory won through indigenous efforts. This is surely a big difference from the Fall of Berlin instigated by the Soviet Union in the German-Soviet War, or Vietnam, which won independence after defeating both France and the United States.

The result was that no governments claiming legitimacy based on postwar victory could appear, a situation that invited domestic instability surrounding a scramble for political power. The fight in continental China carried the tinge of a civil war between the Communist Party and the Nationalist Party, and included legitimacy-related arguments over which one was most responsible for fighting and defeating the Japanese army. That China has in recent years given a degree of recognition to the military contribution of the Nationalist Party on the front lines is well-known. In South Korea, as well, respect for Kim Il Sung is now being accorded in some quarters because he actually fought against Japan (of course, there are also arguments over the “reality” of this history).

Furthermore, there was never a sufficient sense of military victory, of occupation of the opposing country, and of a visibly conclusive end to the war with the “victor” on the rise and the “loser” on the decline, or in other words, of a fulfilling military solution. It would probably not be going too far to say that these aspects had a bigger effect on a spiritual reconciliation than an official apology and postwar compensation.

In particular, in terms of examining the meaning of their victory, there was an essential element of superiority of their own countries as “victors” over the “loser” Japan. But where postwar Japan experienced rapid growth to become an economic power, China and South Korea both experienced many years of domestic instability, and suffered through economic stagnation as well.

In an East Asia where a traditional Sino-centric order existed until the modern era, this carries a deeper psychological meaning, and it has been indicated as a major reason for the current historical perception issue. In other words, a Japan that had always been viewed as culturally inferior instead became dominant during the modern era, and even after victory in war there was no return to the original order, further deepening the “pain.”

This lack of a fulfilling military solution and the problem of mutual awareness is not limited to East Asia, extending even to such countries as the United Kingdom and the Netherlands. In other words, these two countries take a much more severe stance toward Japan than the United States does on prisoner atrocities issues, as typified by their harsh reactions to state visits by the Emperor, influenced by their background of defeat by the Asian Japanese, followed by an inability to be major players in the war against Japan and the subsequent occupation, and in their loss of “empire” due to that war.

Even in the United States, the journalist Theodore White posed the question of who really was the victor in that war at a time during the 1980s when the Japan-US economic friction was at its height, instigating a major debate.

Asymmetric History

Finally, we could also point to asymmetric modern history. In other words, for Japan modern history is viewed mainly around its relationship with the West that arose through participation in the Western European international system after the country’s opening, and through modernization, and the relationship with East Asia is viewed merely as one part of that. For China and South Korea, by contrast, it is the history of Japan’s aggression and of their resistance against Japan. Even World War II is multi-faceted for Japan, with the opposing countries (targets) spanning a wide range of countries, from the United States to major European powers in Southeast Asia, the Soviet Union, China, and colonial territories, and the war’s character is also diverse. In particular, the very name “Pacific War” used by Japan carries a strong image of war versus the United States, and brings with it a perception of being victims of the atomic bomb, and of “racial warfare” and “defense for survival.” On the other hand, for China and South Korea the perception is strongly that of Japan as perpetrator and themselves as victims, with themselves playing a major role in a war that they call the “Anti-Fascism War.”

Furthermore, China and South Korea have a tendency to underrate the path of postwar Japan toward becoming a peaceful and democratic state (of course, evaluation of this postwar history tends to divide along the lines of the “domestic Cold War” in Japan, as well). As a result, a gap in viewpoint has opened up, which has hindered mutual understanding.

Conclusion

As can be seen, the historical perception issue in East Asia is not a controversy over purely historical facts, but is a complex interweaving with circumstances intrinsic to East Asia, including mutual awareness of the traditional order and politicization of history in each country. History has been used as a tool both in the political debates in Japan during the “domestic Cold War,” and in the nurturing

of nationalism in China and South Korea as a way to unify the state. As a result, historical perception is a big issue not just between Japan and China, or between Japan and South Korea, but has in recent years also become an issue between China and South Korea, as evidenced by the “Koguryo dispute,” which was even taken up at the China-South Korean summit talks recently held in Cebu (at the ASEAN summit meeting).

The “Japan-China Joint History Research ” project launched near the end of 2006 is an attempt to separate history from this politicized situation in order to have a reasoned discussion. While it will not be an easy task, it goes without saying that this will require an austere attitude to seriously facing up to the facts. But such attitudes that at first glance appear to be common sense will be extremely difficult to achieve in the kind of situation in East Asia described above. As long as the various “easy” stances that have been seen in Japan to date, e.g., to ignore, to be defiant, or to be extremely servile (self-flagellating), no progress can be expected.

In East Asia, including Japan, it is undeniable that the decision on whether or not to formulate history based on “memories” of the previous century that have been recovered in a healthy form, will have a great effect on the peace, stability, and development of the entire East Asian region in the 21st century.

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