

Preface

The Crossroad of History and International Relations: Towards Historical Reconciliation in East Asia

Yuichi Hosoya
Professor, Keio University

Introduction

It should be noted that the importance of historical issues in international relations is not new, nor it is indigenous to Asia. After the end of the First World War, the US and European governments began to release their diplomatic documents to show that they were keen on avoiding the outbreak of this catastrophic war. They all wanted to avoid responsibility for beginning the Great War. Thus, the great powers were competing to proclaim the justice of their own causes.

The twentieth century experienced a transformation in the nature of international relations. After the end of the religious wars in the middle of the 17th century, international relations had been occupied by power politics and the pursuit of national interests based upon rationality. However, the twentieth century saw the increasing importance of values, ideas and justice. More than ever, international order needed to be based on particular justice. After the first and second world wars, the victorious powers imposed their values and ideas on the foundations of the postwar orders.

While historical issues and memories have been closely linked to international relations both in Europe and in Asia for many decades, we have seen much more tense situations in the rivalries over historical issues in Asia since the end of the Cold War. Jan-Werner Müller, a leading political theorist of our time, wrote that “the relationship between memories and the present, or so it seems, has been stronger and more immediate than at other times.”¹ He explains that “one reason might be that the past returns with a vengeance during times of political crisis.”² It is particularly important to be aware that “after the collapse of communism, memories of the Second World War were ‘unfrozen’ on both sides of the former Iron Curtain.”³

The Reemergence of Historical Issues after the End of the Cold War

Thus, it is important to link the reemergence of historical issues with the end of the Cold War, as strategic requirements had long prevented the emergence of the historical issues between and

¹ Jan-Werner Müller, “Introduction: the power of memory, the memory of power and the power over memory”, in Jan-Werner Müller (ed.), *Memory & Power in Post-war Europe: Studies in the Presence of the Past* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p.3.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid., p.6.

within the opposing camps. Gilbert Rozman, a professor at Princeton University, also pointed out the importance of the link between the two: “The victimizer and the victims were artificially separated through much of the Cold War era, but now they face each other without intermediaries and with much less inclination on either side of the divide to put aside the issue of history”.⁴

Together with the collapse of the communist regimes, the rise of democracy and popular movements in Asian countries have further ignited the reemergence of historical issues in the last three decades. Governments in Asia, particularly in South Korea, have been facing difficulties in containing historical issues since democratization. Previous authoritarian regimes in South Korea could largely prevent the emergence of historical issues since they needed both economic assistance from Japan and also a stable strategic relationship with the US. In a sense, the emergence of historical issues in South Korea is related to the rise of democracy, feminism and nationalism at the cost of a close partnership with the Japanese government. Cheol-Hee Park, a professor of Japanese politics at Seoul National University, argues that “anti-Japanese sentiment and anticommunism has constituted a core of South Korean nationalism”.⁵ Once communism lost its power in South Korean politics, anti-Japanese sentiment became the center of South Korean nationalism.

In China, the situation is worse than in South Korea. After having abandoned political reforms and the possibility of democratization at the Tiananmen incident of June 1989, the Chinese Communist Party began to rely more upon using an anti-Japanese historical campaign to maintain the legitimacy of its authoritarian regime. Jennifer Lind, an expert on historical issues at Dartmouth, argues that “the Chinese Communist Party, left ideologically adrift after the country’s embrace of capitalism, has been known to stoke anti-Japanese sentiment to bolster its domestic political legitimacy. Many China watchers worry that the party will increasingly appeal to nationalism and xenophobia if the remaining sources of its legitimacy – economic growth and the claim to Taiwan – are jeopardized.”⁶

Thus, since the end of the Cold War, both domestic and international politics in East Asia have been empowering confrontation over historical issues. At the same time, East Asian countries have begun to make more efforts to reconcile their different stances on this issue.

Politics and Diplomacy for Historical Reconciliation

If historical issues have more closely linked with international relations in East Asia, it is now more necessary to settle, or at least to mitigate, historical confrontations among those countries. In the last decade, Japan, South Korea and China have devoted considerable energy to creating better relationships by facing historical issues more squarely.

There were some good reasons for these diplomatic efforts. First, intra-East Asian trade has grown rapidly in the last two decades. This required better inter-governmental and international relations among the countries of East Asia. Second, these countries have basically been rational enough to understand the damage caused by diplomatic antagonism over historical issues.

At the Sino-Japanese summit meeting between Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and President Xi Jinping on November 7, 2014, the two governments agreed that “Both sides shared some recognition that, following the spirit of squarely facing history and advancing toward the future,

⁴ Gilbert Rozman, “East Asian Historical Issues in a Contemporary Light”, in Tsuyoshi Hasegawa and Kazuhiko Togo (eds.), *East Asia’s Haunted Present: Historical Memories and the Resurgence of Nationalism* (London: Praeger, 2008), p.54.

⁵ Cheol Hee Park, “Historical Memory and the Resurgence of Nationalism: A Korean Perspective”, in Hasegawa and Togo (eds.), *East Asia’s Haunted Present*, p.191.

⁶ Jennifer Lind, “The Perils of Apology: Why Japan Shouldn’t Learn from Germany”, *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2009. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/japan/2009-05-01/perils-apology>.

they would overcome political difficulties that affect their bilateral relations”.⁷ This became a positive sign of improvement in the bilateral relationship.

In this spirit, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe decided to issue a new historical statement in 2015. Abe remarked at the beginning of January 2015 that “As we come to this milestone of the 70th anniversary since the end of the war, I intend to consolidate wisdom when considering what the Abe administration can send out as a message to the world concerning Japan’s remorse over World War II, the path we have walked since the war as a peace-loving nation, and how Japan will contribute further to benefit the Asia-Pacific region and the world, and then incorporate that into a new statement”.⁸

Based upon a report submitted by the Advisory Panel, Prime Minister Abe issued his historical statement, the so-called “Abe Statement”, on August 14, 2015, in which the Japanese government clearly linked “20th-century history” with “Japan’s role in the world order in the 21st century”.

Japan should not be the only country endeavoring to promote historical reconciliation. Both China and South Korea should take some responsibility for creating better bilateral relationships. The governments of both countries should not utilize anti-Japanese sentiment in their countries as a “weapon” to enhance their domestic legitimacy and popularity. Orville Schell, the director of the Center on US-China Relations at the Asia Society, criticizes Chinese weaponization of historical issues and writes that “The Central Propaganda Department – which, along with myriad other state organs, is tasked with censoring the media and making sure that all educational materials tow the party’s line – has sealed off entire areas of China’s past”.⁹ China should also “face squarely up to history” as well as its neighboring countries.

Regardless of the remaining difficulties over historical issues, Japan, China and South Korea need to continue their efforts to reconcile differences in their stances on historical issues. By doing this, East Asia can become another good model for how countries overcome difficulties over historical issues and how these countries create close regional cooperation.

⁷ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Regarding Discussions toward Improving Japan-China Relations”, November 7, 2014. http://www.mofa.go.jp/a_o/c_m1/cn/page4e_000150.html.

⁸ The Advisory Panel on the History of the 20th Century and on Japan’s Role and the World Order in the 21st Century, *Toward the Abe Statement on the 70th Anniversary of the End of World War II: Lessons from the 20th Century and a Vision for the 21st Century for Japan* (Tokyo: JPIC, 2017), p.iii.

⁹ Orville Schell, “China’s Cover-Up: When Communists Rewrite History”, *Foreign Affairs*, January/February 2018, p.23.