

Politics of History in East Asia

Session: 3

Date/Time: November 14, 2013 / 16:10-18:00

Moderator: Simon Long, *The Economist*

Speakers: Jia Qingguo, Peking University
Kato Yoichi, *The Asahi Shimbun*
Lee Chung Min, Yonsei University
Jennifer Lind, Dartmouth College

Discussants: Maria Repnikova, The Asan Forum
Nam Jeongho, *The JoongAng Ilbo*
Takagi Seiichiro, The Japan Institute of International Affairs

Session Sketch

Session 3, titled “Politics of History in East Asia,” explored the political dimensions of disputes over interpretations of history between South Korea and Japan and between Japan and China. Moderator Simon Long, the Asia Columnist for *The Economist*, invited speakers to look unflinchingly at the issues concerning this topic despite the range of potentially conflicting perspectives present on the panel and among those present at the Forum.

Jia Qingguo, Professor and Associate Dean in the School of International Studies at Peking University, began his remarks by emphasizing that China-Japan and Japan-Korea historical issues are unique because they are more intense and emotional—compared to historical issues between France and Germany, or Germany and Israel—and because they are persistent and only seem to be becoming worse. Jia discussed the importance that Koreans and Chinese attach to the issue of Japanese apology for occupation and wartime atrocities, observing that whereas China and Korea’s initial desire for a Japanese apology stemmed from fear of Japanese remilitarization, calls for apology in later years stem from how the issue of apology has been internalized in domestic politics and become politically necessary. Jia also explained how the issue of apology has become tied to the rise of China, with Japanese fearing potential unintended consequences of apology, such as demand for reparations, as well as pressure within China to make Japan apologize now that China is stronger than before. He concluded by outlining how potential responses to historical issues between the countries could include isolating these issues and not let them affect broader relations, focusing on more positive aspects of bilateral relations, or changing the way historical issues are approached, such as by judging countries based on their behavior rather than rhetoric of symbolic gestures.

Kato Yoichi, National Security Correspondent at *The Asahi Shimbun*, focused his remarks on the politics of history within Tokyo, beginning with two quotations by Abe Shinzo, in which the Prime Minister states that his cabinet has never denied past Japanese aggression and

* The views summarized herein do not necessarily reflect the views of the Asan Institute for Policy Studies, the Charhar Institute, or the China Institute for International Studies.

colonization as well as support for the Maruyama Statement regarding the damage and pain Japan caused to countries in Asia during its colonial era. Also noting how Abe has made statements that have offended people in China and Korea, Kato explained how Abe is perceived as having “two faces”—one that is Nationalist, yet one that is pragmatic. With regard to historical issues with Korea and China, Abe is a pragmatist out of political expediency, Kato argued, to meet his goal of being the first postwar Japanese Prime Minister to amend the Constitution. While Abe as a private citizen with nationalist inclinations may not want to make conciliatory remarks toward Korea and China, as a prime minister he must in order to maintain his position and political capital. Kato concluded by warning that in 2015, which will mark the 50th anniversary of the basic treaty between Japan and the Republic of Korea, Japanese observers expect Korea-Japan relations to take a sharp turn for the worse, which has led some to conclude that any effort made to make conciliatory gestures toward Korea would be in vein. However, there is more hope in Japan for improvement in relations with China, which is more driven by strategic calculation than “emotion.”

Lee Chung Min began by stating his belief that the issue of history is long-term and not going to be overcome anytime soon, yet overcoming it is necessary for the “rise of Asia to be complete,” meaning Asia showing the world that it is responsible and willing to step up to face its own problems rather than blaming others. Lee outlined how the magnitude of Asia’s rise has made for different public perceptions of country favorability within Asian nations, reflected in recent public opinion polls. While US treaty allies have a favorable view of the United States compared to China, countries such as Malaysia, Indonesia, and Pakistan have a more favorable view toward China than the United States. While perceptions of Japan are largely negative among Koreans and Chinese, countries of Southeast Asia take a much more favorable view of Japan, particularly within Indonesia. Furthermore, Lee argued that the history issue must be overcome because of the magnitude of Asia’s geopolitical problems, citing how defense spending in Asia cumulatively surpassed that of Europe for the first time in 2035, that China is projected by the Economist to surpass the United States in defense spending in 2035, and that Asia faces a “department store of security threats,” including nuclear threats, cybersecurity concerns, terrorism, etc., all necessitating the need to get past historical issues by making hard political choices in order to focus on other pressing regional concerns.

Jennifer Lind, Associate Professor at Dartmouth College, argued that apologies in international politics are “rare, contentious, and usually unproductive,” whereas successful reconciliation has been achieved, not by pressuring another country, but by beginning with “common strategic needs.” Lind believes that acknowledging past atrocities is necessary and important, but Beijing and Seoul are “on the wrong track” by putting pressure on Japan. Citing several examples of instances of Japanese officials apologizing for past atrocities, Lind asked why relations with neighbors are so poor at present and why Asia’s history problem persists. She believes that because anytime efforts are made to offer an apology, conservatives block the move, as calls for apology and self-reflection in other instances have offended publics in the United States, Israel, France, and “just about everywhere.” Furthermore she argued that pressuring Japan to offer apology harms Beijing’s and Seoul’s national interests by creating a backlash effect due to Japanese feeling of apology weariness.

* The views summarized herein do not necessarily reflect the views of the Asan Institute for Policy Studies, the Charhar Institute, or the China Institute for International Studies.

Japanese moderate may lose the urge to make conciliatory gestures and show restraint if no recognition of Japanese efforts are made by Korea or China. Lind stressed the need for the three countries to soften their narratives toward one another and find ways to come together to commemorate their losses together.

Maria Repnikova, Postdoctoral Fellow with *The Asan Forum*, began discussions by observing how each presentation made clear that nationalism and historical memory are thorny, sensitive, and difficult to overcome but also that each speaker emphasized the need to do so. Responding to comments regarding how historical issues are presented in the media, Repnikova stressed that in the case of the media in China it is often more complicated and diverse, less monolithic, and spurred on at the societal level than one might think. She described how China attempts to manage how much nationalism in the public sphere is enough or too much and how to control it. She concluded by observing hot attacks on Japanese nationals could not be predicted and were out of control. To get passed historical issues, she recommended encouraging youth movements, establish communities of the liberally minded, and finding ways to positively engage with the media in respective countries.

Nam Jeongho, Director of the Global Affairs Team and International Correspondent at *The JoongAng Ilbo*, argued that the basic problem is that Japanese, Koreans and Chinese approach the history issue from fundamentally different perspectives. Whereas Koreans strongly stress the harsh suffering, exploitation, and lives lost during the Japanese occupation, some in Japan argue that Japan contributed to Korea's modernization during that period. Nam argued that the best way to solve this kind of problem is to focus on fact-based historical education. He believes that creating shared history texts is vital to mutual understanding. While this was undertaken between France and Britain with some success, similar attempts in Northeast Asia have been met with little success despite the many NGOs that have attempted to carry out such a project. Nam argued the difference is that the French-German projects had the support of both governments. He concluded that this is the time to think of more active government involvement. Concluding with the observation that similar projects have been successfully undertaken by UNESCO in Eastern Europe, the Balkans, and the Middle East, Nam argued that the same should be done for Korea, China, and Japan as well.

Takagi Seiichiro, Senior Adjunct Fellow at the Japan Institute of International Affairs, shared the speakers' and discussants' view that the politicized treatment of history is unproductive and harmful. He recalled Deng Xiaoping's quote, "seeking truth from history" in the context of this discussion and found that the opposite is the case in these instances—facts are collected in the politicization of history to support the version of events of your choosing—thereby leading to an unproductive way of understanding historical development of our societies. Praising and supplementing Jennifer Lind's remarks, Takagi noted that Japan's approach is often quite "legalistic." He explained that Japanese consider Chinese and Korean charges in terms of criminal justice, concluding that there is insufficient evidence to support such charges. He argued that this feeling of being charged without insufficient evidence will not disappear from Japanese society. He supported the view that the history issue be isolated from larger issues in bilateral relations, which is one of the views suggested by Jia Qingguo

* The views summarized herein do not necessarily reflect the views of the Asan Institute for Policy Studies, the Charhar Institute, or the China Institute for International Studies.

at the start of the panel. Takagi concluded with a response to Kato Yoichi's view that Abe's primary goal is constitutional revision, stating that Abe's agenda is in part constitutional revisionist, but also more importantly about making Japan a "normal state" that can "contribute to international society in a normal way."

* The views summarized herein do not necessarily reflect the views of the Asan Institute for Policy Studies, the Charhar Institute, or the China Institute for International Studies.