

Talking Points
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No other subject is as sensitive, divisive, more difficult but critically relevant than the place of history in East Asia's political space. It is nearly impossible to form a consensus on the role of history in each of East Asia's strategically consequential states but particularly as it relates to the three main actors in Northeast Asia—Korea, China, and Japan. While other regions also confront vortexes of history such as the Middle East and the Indian Subcontinent, the magnitude and impact of Northeast Asia's historical disputes are arguably greater and more dangerous compared to other regions. This is because of the geographic proximity of the world's major powers, the concentration of advanced military capabilities, outstanding security threats such as North Korea's nuclear program, endemic territorial disputes, and intensely nationalistic politics. And as abundantly evident in the context of current Sino-Japanese and Korean-Japanese ties which are probably at their lowest points since the normalization of relations in 1972 and 1965 respectively, historical dissonance matters profoundly in Northeast Asia.

The opportunity costs associated with prolonged volatility especially in the event of very acute political-military crises would be extremely high in Northeast Asia. This is precisely the reason why more somber, reflective, and ultimately path-breaking historical perceptions and equally important narratives should prevail over populist-driven and politically charged exploitations of history. But since domestic politics can never be removed from historical issues, it's becoming increasingly difficult if not politically impossible for the political leadership, policy elites, and the broader security community to make real progress on core historical disputes but the stakes couldn't be higher owing to the convergence of three key developments.

First, as important as the role of history is in the shaping of key national perspectives, the political map of East Asia is being driven by the sheer magnitude and weight of Asia's cumulative rise including the fact that for the first time in Asian history, China, Japan and India, for example, are co-sharing the stage as critical major powers. How each of the major Asian players craft their respective national and foreign policy strategies over the next 10-20 years will significantly alter Asia's geo-political and geo-economic templates including the propensity for more intensive nationalism than at any other point since the end of World War II. As opinion surveys in China and South Korea consistently

illustrate, both countries hold overwhelmingly negative views of Japan particularly as it relates to historical and territorial disputes. This is hardly a new phenomenon and it's difficult to foresee any major improvement in bilateral ties for the time being. From Seoul's perspective, Tokyo's seeming inability to assume full responsibility for the plight of the so-called comfort women, refusal to recognize the heavy use of slave labor prior to and during World War II, coming to terms with the grotesque and inhumane experiments and murders carried out by Unit 731, etc., are endemic of Japan's collective historical amnesia. And as a result, the overwhelming majority of South Koreans believe that security and historical issues cannot really be separated. Recent debate on Japan's right of collective self-defense is seen in South Korea principally through the lens of history.

Nevertheless, it's also important to assess critical undercurrents that also show contrasting perceptions on the rise of China and the current and emerging global balance of power between the United States and China. In addition, Southeast Asian perceptions of Japan differ significantly from Chinese and South Korean views of Japan. Although it is very evident that South Korea and China have entrenched perceptions of Japan on historical disputes (and also vice versa), such views are not uniformly shared by other Asian states. Thus, notwithstanding the powerful legacy of history in the shaping of South Korean and Chinese views vis-à-vis Japan, Asian perceptions are not synonymous with the views from Seoul and Beijing. Indeed, even South Koreans have much more nuanced views on China despite the warming of relations since normalization in 1992.

According to a June 2013 Asan Poll, 85% of South Koreans had negative views of Japan (14% positive), 61% had favorable views of China (30% negative), and 56% had favorable views of the United States (36% negative). But South Koreans responded as follows when asked about future threats: North Korea 61%, China 60%, Japan 56%, and the United States 35%. To be sure, a majority of South Koreans who felt that China was a looming threat believed that it was primarily economic. Nevertheless

In a July 2013 Pew Global Poll, of the eight Asian countries that were included in the survey—Japan, the Philippines, South Korea, Australia, China, Indonesia, Malaysia and Pakistan—treaty allies of the United States viewed the U.S. and China favorably as follows: Japan (US: 69%, China: 5%), Philippines (US: 85%, China: 48%), South Korea (US: 78%, China: 46%), and Australia (US: 66%, China 58%). Malaysia (US: 55%, China 81%), Indonesia (US: 61%, China: 70%), and Pakistan (US: 11%, China: 81%) all had higher positive ratings for China over the United States. On favorability ratings of China, 52% of South Koreans had favorable views of China in 2007 but this number dropped to 46% in 2013. 29% of Japanese had favorable views of China in 2007 but declined to 5% in 2013.

At the same time, another July 2013 Pew Global Poll illustrated a significant gap between Japanese perceptions in China and South Korea compared with key Southeast Asian states. For example, favorable and unfavorable ratings of Japan were as follows:

Malaysia 80% versus 6%, Indonesia 79% versus 12%, Australia 78% versus 16%, Philippines 78% versus 18%, and Pakistan 51% versus 7%. In South Korea it was 22% versus 77% and in China it was 4% versus 90%. Similarly, in a 2012 Lowy Poll, 66% of Indonesians had warm feelings for Japan (the highest among 21 countries) or the highest positive rating outpacing the United States at 64%, Australia at 62%, South Korea at 60%, Great Britain at 59% and China at 58%.

Second, beyond the issue of public perceptions and the heavy weight of history insofar as it continues to shape South Korean and Chinese perceptions of history, one of the most important developments lies in the growing importance of regional security. Indeed, Asian security in more ways than one is becoming increasingly synonymous with global security given the sheer geopolitical weight of Asia. According to the SIPRI's 2012 World Military Expenditure report, North America (overwhelmingly the United States) accounted for 40% of world defense spending followed by Asian and Oceania with 22%, Western and Central Europe with 18% and the Middle East with 8%. Since 2010, Asia's cumulative defense spending has been larger than Europe's. Of the world's 15 states with the highest military expenditures, five were in the broader Asian region: China 9.5%, Japan 3.4%, India 2.6%, South Korea 1.8%, and Australia 1.5%. Although linear projections must always be perceived with caution, all of the region's strategically consequential states are either modernizing, expanding, or building up new military capabilities. Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzo has stated that "Japan is expected to exert leadership...in the field of security in Asia-Pacific" and Japan's SDF has stressed the importance of enhancing maritime capabilities such as ASW and C4ISR platforms, MPAs, and DDH helicopter carriers.

To be sure, perhaps the most important security narrative in Northeast Asia over the past two decades has rested on the PLA's clear-cut geopolitical ambitions to not emerging as the most powerful military force in Asia but to ultimately displace the United States' vital role in maintaining strategic stability. According to projections made by the Economist, if China's current spending trend continues (estimated at some \$160 billion in 2012), it is likely to surpass the United States by 2035. China's intentions to acquire A2/AD (anti-access/area denial) capabilities would have critical repercussions in the Western Pacific and especially for South Korean, Japanese, and U.S. naval assets in the region. According to the July 2013 Pew Global Poll alluded to above, key regional countries' perceptions of China's growing military strength were as follows (positive/negative): Japan 2%/96%, South Korea 6%/91%, Australia 15%/71%, Philippines 25%/68%, Indonesia 36%/39%, Malaysia 49%/20%, and Pakistan 64%/5%.

China's largest strategic advantage over the United States is the fact that China isn't a global military power and can opt to divest the lion's share of its military hardware and matching footprints in Asia. Clearly, China has a vested interest in maintaining an open and stable regional and international order given the criticality of sustaining its economic

interests and linkages. And notwithstanding China's robust military modernization over the past decade, it is also true that China confronts unparalleled domestic security, social, and political challenges that are likely to circumscribe more aggressive military strategies and policies.

Third, and perhaps most importantly, if outstanding historical legacies aren't put to rest or at the very least contained, the chances of prolonged and extremely volatile political-military crises will be heightened in the years and decades ahead. Although it's impossible to predict how inter-Korean dynamics could shift in the near to mid-term, non-linear transitions are entirely possible that would involve more intensive diplomacy, military posturing, and strategic calculations than at any other time since the end of the Korean War in 1953. Similarly, if there is a direct military clash over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands between China and Japan or between the United States and China over Taiwan, it would have severe repercussions for regional stability and security. Understanding the immense costs and consequences of political-military clashes should remind all of the major players in the region that history should not be exploited for aggressive national gains. This is the most important point that has to be understood as East Asia continues to grapple with the heavy politics of history.