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Panel: Never Been Worse?: Korea-Japan Relations

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Talking Points for: Alexis Dudden, University of Connecticut

Washington’s long-standing “why can’t they just get along” approach to Tokyo-Seoul relations is frustrating for several reasons. It may be a particular American-ism to view this issue through a shortsighted prism. Notwithstanding, all interested in ameliorating today’s toxic standoff—regardless of nationality—should understand that the history at the heart of the so-called “history problems” cannot be dealt with like background music. Volume up, volume down, this view misses the point that Japan and Korea’s deep engagement during the modern era will continue to inform the region’s present and future if and when “they get along,” which all but a very few want sooner rather than later.

Absent—or avoided—is addressing what history is and how it works as a means of inquiry aimed at understanding the human condition; occasionally, it dares to improve it. Some may deride this as naïve; this is politics after all. Yet, as long as something called “history” is the name of the game, and as long as politicians persist in hurling personally convenient pieces of it around like grenades, failure to confront history’s existential condition ensures retrograde politics and nothing more.

It’s everyone’s fault. That said, as long as the democratically-elected leader of the historical perpetrator state in the mix—in our case, Japan—persists in training myopic attention on the words that he is *not* saying instead of the words he is saying, a dangerous cycle persists that fans nationalistic fires beyond the control of any politician, especially if that politician predicates his or her power on these flames. In this regard, the Japanese novelist Murakami Haruki deserves a medal of honor for his recent remarks: “I think this is all Japan can do—apologize until the countries (Korea and China in particular) say, ‘We don’t necessarily get over it completely, but you have apologized enough. Alright, let’s leave it now.’”

Two things are critical for moving forward. First, we need to make as much space as possible for Japanese voices challenging the current Tokyo party line—such as Murakami’s—and recognize them as equally “Japanese” as Prime Minister Abe Shinzo and his supporters’ words. Today’s history wars lay bare an internal “Japan-Japan” divide as much as anything else insofar as the future narrative of the nation *within* Japan is at stake. Second—and perhaps more easily achieved—, Washington must do more. To be clear, Washington cannot mediate as Deputy Secretary Antony Blinken’s recent remarks underscored. Instead, the United States must recognize and assert the role of American history in the mix, such as in 1905, 1945, 1952, 1965, and, perhaps most importantly, 2015.

* The views expressed herein do not necessarily reflect the views of the Asan Institute for Policy Studies.