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Panel: Could Be Worse? China-Japan Relations

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Talking Points for: Bonnie Glaser, Center for Strategic and International Studies

Relations between Japan and China certainly could be much worse than they are today. Fortunately, efforts have been made by both sides to begin to mend ties. After more than two years of punishing Tokyo for its purchase of three of the five Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, Beijing agreed to a meeting between Chinese President Xi Jinping and Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe on the sidelines of APEC last November after the two sides signed a four-point agreement. Since then, various dialogue and exchange mechanisms have been restored, though the political relationship remains strained. A second Xi-Abe meeting took place in Jakarta on Wednesday, April 22. Xi was quoted as saying that China-Japan relations have improved somewhat due to joint efforts by the people of both countries. At the same time, however, Xi called for Japan to “take the concerns of its neighboring countries seriously and send out positive information by facing up to its history.”

History and the territorial dispute are only two of the factors affecting the relationship. China’s growing economic and military power coupled with its constant pressure on Japan in recent years have created both hostility and insecurity among the Japanese, which has unavoidably influenced Tokyo’s policies toward China. It is in the interests of both China and Japan to change this negative dynamic and seek ways to peacefully coexist in Asia. As the world commemorates the seventieth anniversary of the end of World War II, it is incumbent upon all nations, including Japan and China, to both reflect on lessons of the past as well as look to the future.

The United States should not mediate between Japan and China; as a treaty ally of Japan, it cannot be neutral. Nevertheless, the United States can and should actively encourage Japan and China to find common ground for cooperation and establish crisis management mechanisms. The United States, Japan, and China should return to their plan to establish a trilateral dialogue mechanism, which came close to being realized in 2009.

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