

Commentary

SINO-JAPANESE DISCORD AND KOREA

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Sino-Japanese relations and the dynamics of the friction between the two countries have long been a popular subject of research for academic and policy communities around the globe. While new developments in this bumpy bilateral relationship are constantly updated, it nevertheless makes one wonder what more there is to say beyond the usual clichés. Is there really a new bottle out there to hold the old wine? Any conceivable answer to the question seems to reside in the negative. The only reasonable alternative appears to be pouring the same old wine in several different glasses of one's own selection so that they may look and smell more palatable.

This commentary provides reflections on Sino-Japanese frictions and their relevance to the Republic of Korea (ROK and hereafter Korea) by first examining five main traits of the Sino-Japanese discord (and exploring its outer boundary), and then by identifying the relevance of the Sino-Japanese rivalry to Korea's strategic and diplomatic positioning. The main argument is that Sino-Japanese discord, rooted deeply in history and memory, is here to stay, and due to the vagaries of domestic politics in both Japan and China, frictions will continue. In addition, Korea, still harboring the scars inflicted by Japanese imperialism, will not be able to assume the role of a neutral broker. Instead the role of the United States will be crucial in conditioning the future positioning of Korea vis-à-vis China and Japan.

Traits of Sino-Japanese Frictions

While Japan-China relations have undergone ebbs and flows typical of any bilateral relationship between two great powers, they are nevertheless characterized by extreme fragility and vulnerability. The following five traits epitomize the longstanding rivalry between the two countries.

Old Wounds and Salt-rubbing

Rights and wrongs in history are often very difficult to discern. However, that does not mean that history matters any less. In the case of Japanese imperialism in Asia, using history to pinpoint its victims is not a daunting task. Yet, unlike the “German issue” that is no longer considered a problem in Europe, the “Japan question” still remains a serious issue of contention in Asia. Whether the origin of the whole problem is attributed to the San Francisco system established in 1951, through which America “exonerated” Japan, or to the intergenerational transmission of enmity in Asia at large, painful memories still live on and old wounds never seem to heal.

More serious is the salt occasionally rubbed on these old wounds. For various reasons, Japanese politicians intermittently offer comments designed specifically to deny the wartime atrocities of Japanese imperialism. Historical facts ranging from the Nanjing Massacre to wartime sex slaves were whitewashed over and over again, infuriating the neighboring countries, most notably China and Korea. Healing takes time, but if salt is constantly rubbed on old wounds they may never heal. In fact, Japanese whitewashing has cultivated strong forces of anti-Japan nationalism within China and elsewhere, which in turn provides fertile ground for reactive anti-Chinese sentiments in Japan. This cycle of reproducing enmity, which appears to have been almost institutionalized, makes it impossible to believe that Sino-Japanese discord will go away in the foreseeable future.

Vagaries of Domestic Politics

It is a cliché that foreign policy is an extension of domestic politics. In Japan, as in other countries, politicians exploit certain

public sentiments for the purpose of vote-maximization. According to annual surveys by Japan’s Cabinet Office, the Japanese public’s favorable view of China consistently declined from 69 percent in 1988 to 32 percent in 2005. This provides ample room for a wide range of frictions in Japan’s relations with China. According to a recent NHK (Japan Broadcasting Corporation) survey, 73 percent of the respondents considered China a “rival” whereas 27 percent considered it a “partner.”¹ Japanese politicians, therefore, have abundant political fodder to play with.

The more serious problem is that emotions are mutually reinforcing. While Chinese government officials do not play the same sort of political game, manipulation and utilization of the public’s anti-Japanese sentiments do occur. The extent to which anti-Japan mass protests are permitted by the Chinese government, which is nevertheless most effective in banning other types of street demonstrations, is an example in point. In any case, ordinary Chinese, too, view Japan as the main source of key problems in the region. The susceptibility of Sino-Japanese relations to the vagaries of domestic politics and public sentiments will remain unchanged in the foreseeable future.

Democratic Peace versus Chinese Reasoning

Do regime differences matter? Japan strongly believes that they do: Democracy, free trade, and human rights are the ultimate forces that bind Japan and the United States and other free nations. By extension, Japan does not believe that China has much to share with Japan, let alone with the United States. The lack of shared values and norms—an antithesis to democratic peace—may bring about conflict and confrontation with the rising China, thereby leading to Japan’s further strengthening of its alliance with the United States.² Some go so far as to suggest that a democratic China may become even more dangerous, since its

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1. NHK Survey, “Japan and the Future of China,” conducted on August 15, 2006.
 2. Mike Mochizuki, “China-Japan Relations: Downward Spiral or a New Equilibrium?” in David Shambaugh, ed., *Power Shift: China and Asia’s New Dynamics* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2005), pp. 144-45.

government may not be able to rein in the growing nationalistic sentiments against Japan.

Chinese reasoning seems starkly different. China thinks that it is not necessarily norms but interests—the institutionalization of interdependence—that are likely to constrain the likelihood of inter-state conflicts. That is, China can sustain good relations with the United States even without sharing regime similarities. Furthermore, the Chinese believe that Japan's close ties with the United States are rooted in its interests and that Washington also considers the U.S.-Japan alliance a means to constrain Japan's aggressive traits. In recent years, however, China's view of the latter—the function of the U.S.-Japan alliance in constraining Japan—is changing, thus increasing Beijing's alarm over Tokyo's strategic motives and moves under Washington's auspices.³

The Missing Liberalist Brake

For a long time, at least on the Japanese side, liberalist logic prospered. The mainstream view was that increased levels of cooperative interdependence were crucial to Japan's interests, and therefore, economics rather than security was given top priority in Japan's diplomacy. Even with regard to relations with China, such liberalist logic was fully at work. Since the emergence of Koizumi Junichiro as prime minister of Japan, however, a certain conservative logic has overshadowed the liberalist one. Security and pride have become more prominent than ever before. The liberalist brake on Japan's diplomacy has certainly weakened in the last several years and will perhaps continue to do so.⁴

Liberalist logic is a rare—and dangerous—commodity in China as far as relations with Japan are concerned. Demonstrating a “soft” stance toward Japan carries the risk of being labeled as a “traitor” (*hanjian*). It became even more risky after China's

“smile diplomacy” toward Japan failed in the late 1990s. While a few figures—such as Ma Licheng and Shi Yinhong—dared to call for the need to initiate a new era in Sino-Japanese relations, they failed to change the mainstream view. Conventional images and fixed ideas still dominate the minds of the Chinese elites and public alike.

Maritime versus Continental Forces?

The demise of the cold war has precipitated a strategic reconfiguration in East Asia. America's initial effort to disengage from Asia—demonstrated by the East Asia Strategic Initiative—was short-lived and the “rise of China” provided a new source of binding between Japan and the United States. Japan made its position clear by listing China as a potential security threat in its Defense Guidelines announced in December 2004. The U.S.-Japan alliance has further strengthened partly because few Asian states have chosen to balance against China in any explicit manner.⁵ Increasingly, the United States, Japan, and Australia are cooperating very closely as if to form a maritime coalition against the rise of China.

During much of its history, China was dominant over Japan; only for a brief period of time did Japan overpower China. Now, perhaps for the first time, both China and Japan are strong and rising simultaneously. As it did with Great Britain in the early twentieth century, Japan is currently growing in close cooperation with the United States. As far as the strategic matrix in Asia is reset as a confrontation between the maritime versus continental coalitions, there is going to be little room—if any—for reconciliation. Given that Japan is seen as an exceptional—democratic—Asian country in America's eyes and that, eventually, China is likely to challenge the United States, China and Japan are bound to become rivals, if not enemies, but never friends or partners in any genuine sense.

In short, considering these five principal traits, it is rather natural that Sino-Japanese relations are bumpy and confrontational, hopeful slogans and wishful thinking notwithstanding.

3. See Wu Xinbo, “The End of the Silver Lining: A Chinese View of the U.S.-Japanese Alliance,” *The Washington Quarterly*, vol. 29, No. 1 (Winter, 2005-6), pp. 119-30.

4. According to an Asahi survey, large Japanese corporations preferred Fukuda to Abe Shinzo as the next prime minister. Yet, public opinion showed otherwise and Fukuda stood no chance of succeeding Koizumi. For the survey, see *Asahi Shimbun*, June 23, 2006.

5. See Barry Buzan, “How and To Whom Does China Matter?” in Barry Buzan and Rosemary Foot, eds., *Does China Matter? A Reassessment* (London: Routledge, 2004), pp. 152-54.

Also, there appears to be no panacea for the symptoms, Japanese prime minister Shinzo Abe's recent overtures notwithstanding. In the long run, future uncertainties are more likely to exacerbate, rather than improve, the situation.

Where Does Korea Stand?

Ideally speaking, Korea might be better off playing the role of honest broker in mediating conflicts between China and Japan, thereby enhancing its influence and prestige in East Asia. Unlike the United States, which seems unwilling to get involved in the complex politics of history and memory, Korea is often portrayed as a suitable candidate. In a sense, the now-defunct concept of "strategic balancer of Northeast Asia" had some element akin to that since it emphasized the fact that the ROK was the only player in the region that had never initiated war on another nation.

Reality is never perfect, and Korea may never become neutral, at least as it stands now. Korea still considers itself a victim of Japanese imperialism and the painful memories of the past linger on. For its part, Japan is unlikely to accept Korea as a neutral go-between since most surveys in Korea show that Koreans have a more favorable opinion of China than Japan.⁶ Although an explicit anti-Japan coalition was a non-starter due to Washington's wariness of such a possibility, under the surface, much cooperation has been contemplated between Seoul and Beijing on various historical issues.⁷

Is China likely to consider Korea a neutral broker? Out of considerations for its own status as a great power and for Pyongyang, it is not clear whether Beijing is eager to view Seoul as the right mediator for mending its relations with Japan. More important—perhaps even crucial—may be the mid- to long-term impact of the history controversy currently underway between

Korea and China. China's "Northeast Project" (*dongbei gongcheng*)—efforts to incorporate Korea's ancient history (Kokuryo) into China's "local government history" (*difang zhengquanshi*)—poured cold water on Korea's "China fever" and even generated Sinophobia among Seoul's policy and academic circles. Whether this will eventually lead to Korea's detachment from China remains uncertain. However, one thing is clear: Korea may now have to fight a war on two fronts to protect its history.

These new environments, not so favorable to Korea, appear to create some room for a role that can be played by the United States. In the last few years, both internally and externally, Seoul's diplomatic fatigue has increased since its policies toward North Korea, China, and Japan have not been able to generate the high dividends expected of them. While Washington is not necessarily expected to take sides in the ROK-Japan territorial dispute over the Dokdo/Takeshima islets, it is nevertheless expected to take a stand on Japan's anachronistic view of the past.⁸ In that respect, the recent congressional moves in this direction are duly appreciated. On the other hand, the United States has little to do with the Korea-China history controversy. Yet the longer the controversy lasts, the more likely public sentiments in Korea will tilt toward the United States as an ally in case China becomes a more aggressive and revisionist neighbor.

Conclusion

Sino-Japanese rivalry is here to stay and very little can actually be done to resolve the conundrum. The further rise of China may perhaps increase the level of frictions. Korea, warily watching the development, will most likely pursue a two-track policy of internal balancing (increasing self-help capabilities) and external balancing (renewing interests in consolidating its alliance

6. See Jae Ho Chung, *Between Ally and Partner: Korea-China Relations and the United States* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), ch. 8.

7. See, for instance, Gilbert Rozman, *Northeast Asia's Stunted Regionalism: Bilateral Distrust in the Shadow of Globalization* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 170.

8. The United States recently pressured Japan to change the wording displayed at the Yasukuni Shrine, which read "the American economic embargo forced Japan into World War II," but refrained from doing so concerning distortions related to China and Korea. In that respect, the U.S. House of Representatives' recent attention to Japan-related history issues merit attention.

with the United States). Of course, the North Korean variable will often get in the way, but the general direction—particularly considering the fact that Pyongyang has used up all of its cards—is unlikely to differ in any significant way.