



Japan-Korea: Textbook Issue Should Not Be Ignored

by Brad Glosserman

Japan ignores the history textbook controversy at its peril. While many Japanese dismiss the tempest - exaggerated attention, they say, given to a small group of nostalgic conservatives or a freedom of speech issue best left to constitutional scholars - Koreans see the new history textbook as a serious obstacle to improved bilateral relations between the two countries. It is difficult to appreciate the depth and intensity of the anger felt by Koreans after the Ministry of Education approved the new textbook; even moderates warn that Japan's failure to address Korean concerns will have long-term repercussions in Northeast Asia.

The Japanese Society for History Textbook Reform has created the problem. The group criticizes Japan's current history textbooks for being biased; it claims the texts place too much attention on Japanese wrongdoing against its Asian neighbors and promote a "masochistic attitude" among young Japanese. The group's "corrected" version, which downplays the scale and significance of the Nanjing Massacre, for instance, and the invasion and annexation of Korea in 1910, has triggered outrage in Korea and China.

At a recent conference on "The Future of United States and Korean Economic and Security Cooperation," sponsored by the New Asia Research Institute and the Pacific Forum CSIS, the textbook controversy dominated discussions of Japan. The Korean participants, current and former government officials as well as think tank and academic researchers, acknowledged the complexities of the issue; they are well aware that the text is only one of eight authorized for use in middle schools, that the government does not require that it be used, and that it reflects the views of a small minority in Japan. They also stressed, however, that the problem could undermine the entire Japan-Korea relationship. "The issue is everywhere in Korea," said one participant, speaking off the record as is customary at the meetings. "It isn't necessarily important, but the sentiment will get in the way."

A former ranking Korean Foreign Ministry official warned that the textbook controversy could undo all the progress that has been made since Korean President Kim Dae-jung made his unprecedented offer of reconciliation in 1998. "There are expansive contacts between the two countries, but the textbook issue overshadows everything else. Without rectifying this situation, we cannot expect genuine support from the public for relations with Japan."

The textbook reformers created this mess, but the real culprit, in Korean eyes, is the Tokyo government. It has failed to demonstrate the leadership required to deal with the problem. The two countries have established consultative committees to try to

agree on a single history, but after nearly two decades of work, Japan has thus far refused to endorse their findings. That rankles. The Koreans point to progress Europeans have made toward creating a shared view of the past. They also note that the historical animosity between France and Germany is no less bitter than the ill will that divides Korea and Japan.

The Korean government is trying to keep the fire storm from poisoning the entire bilateral relationship but the problem is growing, explained one Korean participant who has worked with Japanese scholars on the issue for years. "The textbook per se is not the issue, but it symbolizes all conflicts between our nations. Korea demands recognition of the wrongdoings of past, an apology, and a promise not to repeat them."

"But Japanese won't recognize the past."

To contain the damage, the Korean government has set up committees within the Foreign Ministry to deal with the issue. Still, there is growing fear that emotions are getting out of hand. President Kim's decision to recall his ambassador from Tokyo was a signal to the Korean people that his government was not out of touch with public sentiment. One participant called it an attempt to "pacify" the Korean public.

Japanese leaders need to understand that they are not bystanders in this process. The ill-will that has been created can have serious consequences for Japan. First, and most obviously, it threatens to undo all the progress that has been made in the bilateral relationship with South Korea. As Northeast Asia's two most advanced industrialized democracies, Seoul and Tokyo have a natural affinity for each other; this could form the foundation of a future alliance. The hard feelings created by this dispute will make any partnership difficult, if not impossible. One Korean spoke darkly of a possible rupturing of security ties.

Analysts warn that Korea could be forced to contemplate strategic alternatives. Both China and Russia have reasons to court Seoul. Beijing would see Seoul as a natural ally in attempts to check Japanese influence in the region. Russia needs every friend it can muster as it tries to regain its former status.

Second, Japan's failure to address the issue and the pain it causes its neighbors undermines any hopes the nation might have to play a leading role in Asia. "This makes it very difficult for Japan to assume leadership in region," said one Korean. "Moral leadership is required."

The Koreans have two suggestions to quell the dispute. They propose that the study of history be routinized and systematized, and that "a scientific approach to historical facts" be adopted. It is unclear if social sciences can ever have the same certainty about its "facts" as does natural science, but the process should be

salutary for both countries. Investigative rigor and mutual respect can go along way toward easing tension.

Second, and perhaps more controversial, the Koreans insist that the United States get involved. As Japan's most important ally, they argue Washington has influence over Tokyo. In their eyes, America's encouragement of Japan to assume a broader role in regional security obliges the U.S. to temper any nationalist impulse that might follow in its wake. And the revisionist claim that Japan fought the Pacific War to eliminate Western colonialism in Asia gives the U.S. a pretext to intervene: Washington should try to set the record straight.

Even without the new U.S. preference for a "less-arrogant" approach to foreign affairs, Washington is unlikely to take up the challenge. The U.S. has no desire to take sides in a spat between its two security allies. Bland encouragements to resolve this dispute are probably about as far as it will go in public.

That could be a mistake. While Japan should try to take the lead in helping to develop a shared view of regional history, U.S. involvement would provide some cover, as well as reduce the zero-sum dynamic of Japan-Korea discussion. After all, the U.S. has a strong interest in a solid Japan-Korea relationship, and in seeing that the third leg of Northeast Asia's "virtual alliance" gets stronger still.

Junichiro Koizumi's election as the new president of the Liberal Democratic Party, and hence the prime minister of Japan, opens the door to new possibilities. Mr. Koizumi's first phone call as prime minister was to President Kim, and he promised the South Korean leader that he would work to quiet the textbook controversy. Foreign Minister Makiko Tanaka has also sounded conciliatory. In interviews upon taking office, she expressed surprise at the unwillingness of some in Japan to acknowledge past misdeeds noting that "it is necessary that we recognize the historical facts as facts." She pledged to "seize every opportunity to make things better."

Many in Asia are wary of the new prime minister. His support for constitutional revision, Japan's participation in "collective defense," and official visits to the Yasukuni Shrine are all red button issues. But it is precisely those conservative credentials that could give him cover to move aggressively on the textbook question. Unfortunately, in this matter - as in all the issues on his agenda - the prime minister's good intentions may be checked by opposition within his party and the coalition he manages.

The risks of inaction increase over time. History does not grow dimmer as it recedes further in the past. Indeed, the study of the past very much determines how we view the future. Widening historical perspectives could convince the public in each country that they do not have the foundation for a deep and balanced relationship. In two or three decades, the youths that have been taught this new version of history will be making critical decisions about their country. It could then be too late to undo the damage that is being done.

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