



Korea-Japan: Defusing the Textbook Controversy

by Ralph A. Cossa and Brad Glosserman

The Japanese government just doesn't seem to get it! Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro has cautioned Seoul to "not be so emotional" in response to the history textbook controversy. He was responding to a resolution passed by the South Korean legislature that calls upon the Seoul government to annul the historic 1998 joint declaration between the two countries and to conduct a comprehensive review of bilateral relations. This comes on top of Seoul's announcement last month that it was canceling military exchanges and the introduction of Japanese cultural products in retaliation for Tokyo's failure to meet Korean concerns and halt distribution of a middle school textbook that glossed over, if not outright ignored, Japanese offensive behavior prior to and during World War II.

True, one can argue that the Koizumi government's response thus far has been technically correct - the government cannot halt production of the book without violating its Constitution - and the South Koreans are allowing emotion to overrule logic and common sense in crafting their response. It is in neither Seoul's nor Tokyo's interest to see unravel all the progress made in ROK-Japan relations since the historic (and politically courageous) 1998 agreement between South Korean President Kim Dae-jung and Japan's then-Prime Minister Obuchi Keizo to relegate historic divisions to the past. Japan needs to recognize the damage that is being done to its relations with a critical partner in Northeast Asia.

Informed Koreans - and there are many - understand the constraints that the Japanese face. The Koreans know the facts and procedures behind textbook approval, but that does not diminish their anger and hurt. Quite simply, they feel betrayed. South Korea took the initiative in 1998 and President Kim has no political capital left to lead with. Indeed, throughout this dispute, Kim has been on the defensive: He was forced to recall the South Korean ambassador to Japan or look out of touch with the Korean electorate. Japan has to help him - and help itself.

What could be done to defuse the controversy? Japan needs to find a middle ground between throwing up its hands and censoring texts. The first isn't working and the latter isn't possible.

The most ambitious proposal would be a joint committee to develop an approved history for both countries, perhaps similar to the approach taken by Germany with Poland and several other of its neighbors. This could be problematic, however, since the two countries have different textbook policies; South Korea has a national textbook, Japan does not. It is therefore likely that this would have to be an unofficial effort, which would enjoy official support, but would only promulgate guidelines for teaching

history. While that will not satisfy some critics of Japan, it would go a long way toward creating common ground.

One variation on this theme would be a joint effort, perhaps with American assistance, to develop a short, succinct, jointly agreed upon accounting of South Korea-Japan relations in the 20th century in booklet format, in both Japanese and Korean, for distribution to schoolchildren in both nations as supplemental reading. Ideally, this would be accomplished at the governmental level, but it could be produced independently by a panel of scholars and then subjected to each nation's normal textbook review process. (The Pacific Forum stands ready to help spearhead such an effort if a non-governmental approach is deemed most appropriate.)

Another option is a joint ceremony to honor war victims of both countries. State visits often include visits to war memorials. This could be especially difficult given Japan's more expansive definition of "victims." Any ceremony that paid homage to individuals that invaded Korea would be unacceptable to Koreans. Still, a brave Japanese prime minister could take the initiative and make a dramatic gesture.

A fund for middle school students that would promote exchanges between the two countries is another option, similar to an earlier effort, dubbed the "K-J Shuttle," which brought together up and coming academics from both countries for dialogue on areas of mutual concern. This would be less controversial and would pay dividends over the long term.

Funds to aid the victims of war are another possibility. Japan has set up one such fund for the comfort women, but that has caused yet more controversy. It is probably unrealistic to expect Tokyo to go further, but it would also be a mistake to think that this issue has been solved or that Japan cannot do more.

Mustering the political will to act will not be easy. The textbook itself is a product of the thinking that Japan has gone too far to accommodate the views of its neighbors and its own left wing and sacrificed its own national interests in the process. But Japan's national interests are suffering now. Japan needs good relations with its neighbors to achieve its goals in the years ahead. The government in Seoul will be a critical partner in those endeavors and this will indeed require a less emotional approach. That is a history lesson both governments need to learn - quickly.

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