

Response to PacNet #58 – Japan-ROK Relations: Antagonism over Alignment?

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Victor Cha's recent *PacNet* on Japan-Korea antagonisms is very insightful – with one jarring exception. I wonder what momentary lapse possessed him to write: "...ask any European how they really feel about Germany. There is still a deep reservoir of distrust there."

I'm all for academics writing accessibly; Victor and I each try to do that. But there are limits. A throwaway generalization like this belongs in bar talk, not in a *PacNet*. This European has two objections. One: the claim is empirically untrue. Two: it's phrased so loosely as to shut down all the vital nuances and levers which the rest of this otherwise excellent article raises.

Born in 1947, I've seen attitudes to Germany change in my lifetime, and not just in my own country. In 1961 Dutch friends told how they ate bulbs under the Nazi occupation: a memory still recent, and raw. Half a century later, anti-German feeling is not a major political force anywhere in Europe – save Greece, which has its own grievances compounded of both past history and present discontents: see <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v34/n13/richard-clogg/in-athens>.

It's oddly ahistorical, as well as over-general, for Victor to claim that all Europeans deep down mistrust Germany and always will. This ignores how both Germany, and attitudes to it, have changed over time. Anyone can see that denazification was serious in Germany. Israel, for one, accepts this. Germany now is not Germany then, period. Sweeping comments like Victor's make it impossible to raise such issues of comparison and change over time.

The history remains, of course. But one thing – maybe the only thing, these days – which we perhaps do better in Europe than East Asia (and even than the US, dare I say?) is that saving grace of post-modernity: ironic distance. We're all aware of mutual national stereotypes, but by now most of us feel able to have fun with them. They no longer ache, or do fresh damage.

This seems harder in Japan and Korea. Not impossible, as a film like *Once Upon a Time in Corea* (2008) shows. Watching this by chance on a plane, I was amazed. You can actually these days make a comedy in Seoul about the colonial era, sending up Japanese and Koreans with equal gusto. That's progress. But perhaps it's an exception that proves the rule.

Any foreigner rash enough to venture into these choppy waters must brace themselves for a kicking from Koreans who

chide us for ignorance or lack of empathy. That was the reaction to a pair of articles I wrote after the GSOMIA fiasco – but before it all really went downhill with President Lee Myung-bak's visit to Dokdo. Doubtless my exasperation showed at what I view as the real harm South Koreans are doing to their true national interests by a refusal to move on from a (no one denies for a moment) painful pre-1945 history. I won't repeat the arguments here: they can be found at <http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Korea/NG17Dg01.html> and <http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Korea/NG18Dg01.html>. I tried more temperately a decade ago: see http://www.nytimes.com/2002/05/30/opinion/30iht-edfoster_ed3.html.

Incidentally, Victor puts cart before horse in seeming to attribute the GSOMIA debacle to increased friction across the Sea of No Agreed Name. The chronology is in fact the reverse. But his analytical points are invaluable. #3 in particular has wide application. In any such crisis, the key question to ask is who moved: who escalated, changed the status quo, raised the bar. I find this very helpful in analyzing inter-Korean relations, for instance in the Pacific Forum-CSIS online journal *Comparative Connections* (for which Victor also writes). In the Japan-ROK case, surely Lee's Dokdo foray was gratuitous. From what conceivable viewpoint could this have been a good idea that would help build a better future?

Victor's point #4 is also very telling. It's a crying shame that no significant individuals or elites, in either Japan or South Korea, have ever found the courage or skill to put their heads above the parapet – an apt phrase that a former ROK minister once used to me – and wage a sustained campaign to ensure that these two neighbors, which have so much in common, create a new relationship that is future-oriented rather than mired in the past. France and Germany managed it, but for Japan and South Korea I fear it's too late – because to cozy up now would arouse Chinese wrath in a way it wouldn't have if such rapprochement had been achieved back in the Cold War era. That train has left the station, and there won't be another.

I take some comfort from emergent China-Japan-Korea trilateralism in Northeast Asia, which has to be the name of the game henceforth. With any luck, mature awareness of real mutual interests will suffice to stop shots being fired over any stupid rocks. But I'm not betting on it.

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