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Response to *PacNet* #14 "Power and Identity in Japan-South Korea Relations"

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In "Power and Identity in Japan-South Korea Relations," Brad Glosserman and Scott Snyder argue that clashing conceptions of national identity are at the heart of ongoing tensions between Japan and South Korea. While most commentators attribute those tensions to territorial disputes, differences over history, and domestic political drivers, Glosserman and Snyder contend that a 'historical identity complex' – meaning a tendency for the two countries to define themselves against one another and their troubled past – is at the root of their differences. If only Tokyo and Seoul could reset their relationship and eliminate this tendency, mutually beneficial cooperation would follow.

Contradictory conceptions of national identity have been a feature of Japan-South Korea relations for decades as, indeed, have territorial disputes, historical animosities, and fractious domestic politics. What Glosserman and Snyder's argument fails to explain, therefore, are previous instances where Tokyo and Seoul have been able to circumvent their historical identity complex to cooperate quite effectively.

During the early 1990s, for instance, Japan and South Korea resumed high-level defense exchanges after an 11-year hiatus and formally initiated trilateral policy planning talks with the US. By the late 1990s, they were, along with their US ally, aligning their policies toward North Korea through the Trilateral Coordination and Oversight Group (TCOG). Even as recently as a couple of years ago, a new bilateral intelligence-sharing agreement was in the cards and some commentators were even talking up the prospects for a new Japan-South Korea strategic alliance.

What has changed to account for the current impasse in Japan-South Korea relations? One possibility is that much deeper, more structural factors relating to East Asia's shifting power relativities are responsible.

First and foremost among these factors is the rise of an increasingly assertive China. This development has evoked quite different responses from Japan and South Korea, deepening the divergence between them. Japan is clearly threatened by China's rise, as evidenced by the decidedly edgy tone adopted in its July 2013 Defense White Paper. It has responded by embracing a balancing strategy, raising its own military capabilities (what alliance theorists call internal balancing), and cultivating new strategic ties (what they refer to as external balancing) with like-minded countries such as India, the Philippines, and Vietnam. Seoul, by contrast, does not openly regard rising China as a rival and is seeking instead to cultivate a middle position – Korea's classic "shrimp among whales" strategy – between Asia's major players.

These differences between South Korean and Japanese approaches to China were highlighted at the end of 2013 after Beijing announced its new Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) over the East China Sea. While Tokyo joined the US and its Australian ally in strongly condemning this move, Seoul reacted less abrasively and initially sought to cut a side agreement with Beijing aimed at removing any overlap between the new zone and South Korea's own ADIZ.

Second, and somewhat ironically, the US rebalancing strategy has arguably also served to drive Tokyo and Seoul further part. In his classic study *Alignment despite Antagonism*, Victor Cha showed that relations between Japan and South Korea have been best when they have feared US abandonment. At a time when some commentators are questioning the sustainability of the Obama administration's rebalancing strategy, however, Japan and South Korea have less reason than most to fear US abandonment.

In recent years, for instance, senior figures in the Obama administration (including the president) have taken to referring to South Korea as a "lynchpin" of the US presence in Asia – a characterization traditionally reserved for a Japan. US support for its South Korean ally was unequivocal in 2010 following the sinking of the *Cheonan* and the bombardment of Yeonpyeong Island, notwithstanding vociferous opposition to that support from Beijing. Likewise, Tokyo has just this month received public reaffirmation from Secretary of State John Kerry that US alliance commitments to Japan will apply in the case of an East China Sea contingency.

Third, power is also shifting between Japan and South Korea – a factor that further explains the deepening divergence between them. Once one of Asia's poorest countries, South Korea is now just outside the ranks of the world's top 10 economies. Militarily, its modernizing navy has recently been described as "one of the most important new players in the Northeast Asian maritime scene."

Japan, by contrast, is in gradual decline. Economically and militarily powerful at present, it faces a series of deep-seated fiscal and demographic challenges that point toward long-term crisis. With a population set to decline by 20 million over the next 25 years, Japan's capacity to wrest itself out of debt and to fund dramatically escalating healthcare for its rapidly aging population is in doubt.

To be sure, it will be a long time yet (if at all) before South Korean economic and military power begins to approximate that of Japan. Yet this has not stopped serious South Korean strategic thinkers from contemplating this possibility and its implications. In the meantime, as South Korea's regional and global influence continues to grow, so

too does Seoul's confidence in dealing with Tokyo over points of difference such as the disputed Dokdo/Takeshima islands.

None of this is intended to suggest that issues of identity – or history, territory, and domestic politics for that matter – are irrelevant to the strained state of Japan-South Korea relations. What it does suggest, however, is that these are *symptoms* rather than *causes* of power shifts driving a deepening divergence in Japan-South Korea relations. As China's reemergence continues, as the US further intensifies its Asian engagement in response, as South Korea rises and as Japan gradually declines, the prospects for breaking the impasse between America's Northeast Asian allies appear bleak.

Ed Hawkins (ehawkins@jashawaii.org) is president of the Japan-America Society of Hawaii.

The points in "Power and Identity in Japan-South Korea Relations" are well taken, especially about the Japanese government supporting South Korea, the Republic of Korea, as THE legitimate voice for the Korean people. Japan has hedged by supporting both the North and the South. That is likely seen as a slight to people in the South because Japan officially recognized South Korea as the only legitimate government in 1965.

Lawmakers and policymakers, and most of the public, are swayed by voices of a small group that harbor hatred, quite understandably, from the dark days of Japanese colonialism). Glosserman and Snyder mention statesmanship. That is important, but another answer is growing and promoting grassroots relationships which are done quite well by non-profit and fraternal organizations. The most active and influential in the Japan-Korea arena, regrettably, is the pro-North Chongryon (Chosen Soren) though its numbers are fewer than the Mindan, the pro-South Korean association. The key in my mind is to promote the Mindan and similar groups, and through them, reach out to cities and provinces in South Korea to create closer ties.

As an example of the US-Japan relationship (it's quite different from Japan-Korea, but historic enmities can cloud this relationship as well), societies such as our Japan-America Society of Hawaii have promoted reconciliation by helping establish sister state/city relationship, focusing on cultural and educational exchanges. One example is the city of Nagaoka in Niigata Prefecture. Nagaoka is the home of Adm. Yamamoto Isoroku, planner of the attack on Pearl Harbor, and was firebombed by US *B-29*s toward the end of the war. The city was devastated with large loss of life. Instead of harboring eternal hatred toward Americans, the mayor and the people of Nagaoka reached out to Honolulu, eventually becoming its sister city. The Japan America Society of Hawaii helped with this process through educational exchanges, which we continue today. Now we are helping to gift 100 dogwood trees to Nagaoka to cement these friendly ties (this is part of the 3,000 dogwood trees gifted by the US to Japan in 2012 to mark the gifting of cherry trees to the US in 1912).

It takes leadership from the grassroots level to build these relationships one person, one school, one city at a time. It takes years, and maybe several generations. Then it takes constant nurturing, just like a marriage. But three generations after the end of WWII and the end of the Japanese occupation in Korea, and very little progress in growing friendly relations between peoples. There's a lesson here for Japan and Korea.

To be Free from the Past

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In Korea, the current tension between Korea and Japan is taken very seriously both at the government level and among the general public. The Korean government and public are not unwilling to propose solutions for these issues. Koreans want to move forward, but that they also know that certain kinds of solutions will not work.

While Koreans truly appreciate the recommendations and suggestions from stakeholders and observers, including the piece by Glosserman and Snyder, there are several issues that must be addressed.

First, it is important to identify the victim in the history issue in Northeast Asia. In this case, the key point is Japan's colonization of Korea (the victim) and its wartime acts of aggression – a fact that should leave no room for diverging interpretations. In other words, it is not a matter of interpreting history, but facing the truth. The existence of a victim leads to there being an aggressor, which in this case is identified as Japan. In this context, it is difficult to view both Korea and Japan as victims of history in the early 20th century.

Typically, an aggressor attempts to avoid any connections to the incident, denies all charges, discounts past actions, and ultimately, tries to forget. When a victim is not able to pursue justice, action is needed by the government and the public. If a third-party arbitrator treats the incident as a case of only victims and no aggressor, the real victim will consider the third party to be unfair.

Japan has continued to make controversial political statements that receive widespread criticism in the international community. Recently, there has been harsh criticism of Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzo's view that Japan's wartime actions should not be defined as aggression. The international community should recognize that this is not a matter of a different interpretation of history.

In addition, as important as receiving an official apology and acknowledgment from Japan on its past aggressions is upholding this apology in the present and future. ROK President Park Geun-hye last month urged Japan's leaders to adopt and uphold the Murayama and Kono statements, which provide a correct understanding of history, and to adhere to these apologies for its past acts of aggression. Despite gestures of apology by Japan's former leaders, Koreans don't consider these valid because the current Japanese leadership no longer adheres to these statements.

Second, the international community should not regard current tensions between Korea and Japan as stemming from bilateral relations. Bilateral relations may play a role, but the issues are more importantly related to universal values. If the

international community can require that Japan admit to its wartime aggression and apologize for violating universal values, including basic human rights, then this will be the starting point of reconciliation in Northeast Asia. Denying past actions is a major obstacle to forward-looking Korea-Japan relations, not the establishment of memorials in Harbin, Nanjing, and elsewhere. Last month, the US signed off on new legislation that calls on Japan to acknowledge its responsibility for the comfort women issue and to officially apologize for its past wartime acts. This is a positive step.

Third, observers have sometimes argued that Japan has apologized enough and that Korea should respond or take the next step forward. In other words, they have said, "enough is enough." However, visits to Yasukuni Shrine by Japanese leaders, the yearly routine of the history textbook issue, government officials' denial of Japan's wartime responsibility (including the comfort women issue), are the primary reasons why Koreans are not able to accept previous apologies from Japan. Those acts recur every few months. When Prime Minister Abe did not visit Yasukuni last August, some experts were ready to blame Korea for the lack of progress in the relationship – and then Abe went to the shrine in December.

Aggressors have to understand that the only way to be free from the past is to acknowledge past actions and to seek forgiveness from the victim. Only the courageous can face forward and make an apology that is acceptable to the victim. If aggressors cannot do this by themselves, the international community should help or oblige them to realize this reality.

Response to Taylor, Hawkins, Woo, and Block

by Brad Glosserman and Scott Snyder

While Brendan Taylor insists that powerful structural factors have more influence over the Japan-ROK relationship, we believe that identity issues shape the way each country assesses those influences – in other words, how a country defines its identity and the role it envisions for itself determine its response to such phenomena as the rise of China. This is especially important when it comes to his third factor, the shifting balance of power between Japan and Korea. Moreover, the structural factors Brendan elucidates should be sufficient to overcome Japan-ROK tensions, yet this has proven not to be the case. We appreciate the factors he identifies, but find them insufficient to explain Japan-ROK tensions or for coming up with ways to overcome them.

Ed Hawkins is correct to emphasize the value of grassroots exchanges and the need to nurture relations over the long term. That said, exposure can cut both ways – eroding prejudices or re-enforcing them. We believe that efforts are needed at the top and bottom of each society, and it is incumbent on leaders to lead their countries toward mutually beneficial relationships that look forward, not back.

Finally, Woo Jung-yeop and Eileen Block make clear the ROK position and in important ways underscore our basic points. The legacy of victimization is powerful, but we believe it should not define any country's identity. This is not to say that the past is not important; only that South Korea's achievements show that the country has overcome these legacies and can no longer be defined by them.

The Japanese government (and Prime Minister Abe) continues to adhere to the Murayama and Kono statements; neither has been repudiated and the current government has indicated that it will honor them both. Japan insists that it seeks a forward-looking relationship with South Korea that is built on a foundation of mutual respect. It is incumbent on both sides to agree on a shared definition of mutual respect.

PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed.