



## **Building a Foundation for Japan-China Relations**

by Brad Glosserman

The accidental discovery of buried canisters of mustard gas, abandoned by Japanese troops in China over a half century ago, is only the most recent tangible reminder of the unfinished legacy of World War II. Forty Chinese workers were injured when the barrels of nerve gas were cut open and one has died - one more incident to add to the register of historical grievances that China holds against Japan.

That bitter past has not prevented the two countries from working out a functional and progressive relationship. Economics is a powerful driving force. China is the biggest exporter to Japan: Beijing forecasts bilateral trade will top \$130 billion by 2005. In the first half of this year, trade jumped 36 percent, with imports totaling \$33.8 billion and exports rising to \$27 billion. The two governments have apparently decided that pragmatism should prevail over the physical and psychological scars of war.

It is unclear how long that can continue. Japan and China are changing, as is the world around them. Failure to acknowledge and work through the past could prevent them from establishing the peaceful and stable relationship that is essential to security and prosperity in East Asia. To help that process along, my think tank, Pacific Forum CSIS, along with the Maureen and Mike Mansfield Foundation and the Asia Foundation, has co-hosted a series of retreats for young opinion leaders from the two countries. We met last month in Montana to discuss the issues that divide Japan and China and see if we could come up with ways to bridge them.

Participants from both sides acknowledged that the two countries were of vital importance to each other and the region as a whole; there was agreement that good relations were a must. Unfortunately, they also agreed that diplomacy had failed to create a genuine atmosphere of reconciliation and friendship. Organizers of this type of get-together like to say that the discussions were 'frank,' but our probing of the roots of this distrust really deserves that label. Japanese participants blamed an education system that failed to look squarely at the past. The Chinese argued that grievances were real, but they were also manipulated by politicians who played the history card for domestic political reasons.

Our Chinese participants feared that tendency would only get worse. Several noted that China was becoming increasingly pluralistic, and more opinions were being heard, particularly on the Internet, where there is little regard for truth or civility

in discourse. They expressed concern over a rising sense of nationalism in China at the grassroots level, borne from the country's economic success and the confidence it created. This nationalism is often targeted Japan and the Chinese politicians who seem reluctant to hold Tokyo accountable for its past. In other words, Sino-Japanese relations was increasingly sucked into domestic political debate in China and used as a club against moderates.

Changes in China are part of a more comprehensive transformation. Both Chinese and Japanese spoke of 'identity crises' as their societies grappled with a changing international environment and increasing strains at home. In a sense, it is only natural that the two countries would look closely at the other during this process as they are neighbors, share cultural roots and have deeply intertwined relations.

Our meeting highlighted the perception gaps that magnify divisions between the two countries. We compiled a list of the chief obstacles to good Sino-Japanese relations and then had each person identify the three most important ones. The Chinese put Taiwan at the top of their list, yet that was a topic that no Japanese identified. Japanese pointed to the military threat posed by China, an issue our Chinese representatives hadn't considered.

Ironically, this perception gap was made worse by what one participant, a Chinese, labeled 'the burden of double expectations.' Because Chinese and Japanese are similar in so many ways, they expect the other to be like them, to react like them, and even to over compensate for the differences that emerge. When that doesn't happen, the anger and sense of betrayal is even sharper.

Those differences underscore a critical point: While Japan and China have similar objectives and interests, their relationship - unlike Tokyo's relations with the U.S. and South Korea - does not rest on a foundation of shared values. The two governments talk about security and mutual prosperity: they don't discuss the promotion of democracy, human rights, or economic models. When the subjects come up, it quickly becomes clear that they are talking about very different things. Even when they use the same words, the meaning is different.

This conceptual gulf puts even more stress on the trust that the two countries have in each other. Yet that trust is in short supply. Our Chinese participants voiced concern about the prospect of Japanese remilitarization, which virtually all

Japanese dismiss. In the next breath, the Japanese worried about China's military modernization, something the Chinese thought was unfounded.

Understanding this situation is relatively easy; fixing it is another matter. Virtually all our participants agreed that the two countries should not rely on governments to do all the work. Our discussions endorsed many of the traditional remedies: increasing grassroots exchanges and other forms of face-to-face contact. One Japanese participant, from the NGO world, noted that the number of Japan-China exchanges is relatively small compared to other countries. She argued that "We assume we know each other but we don't know each other very well. We have to get to know each other better and then proceed."

Others echoed that sentiment; another speaker suggested that the Japanese mobilize Chinese who had studied in Japan. They could provide a different and more informed perspective on Japan, correcting many of the myths that dominate thinking about Japan in China.

The absence of shared values suggests another strategy. While calling for more grassroots contact, one Chinese participant argued at the same time for depersonalizing Japan-China relations. If the relationship is plagued by 'double expectations,' then moving it to a more pragmatic level might purge some of these attitudes. A more 'business-like' relationship, based on the pursuit of common interests and shorn of unrealistic expectations - in particular, that their 'common heritage' will smooth any difficulties - will prove more productive and healthy over the long run.

A more depersonalized or business-like relationship will not heal the wounds of the past - nor should it. But it could provide a framework that allows the two countries to confront those legacies more directly and completely.

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