



Blame Enough to go Around

by Brad Glosserman and Scott Snyder

Deteriorating relations among Japan, South Korea, and China underscore the failure of leadership in all three countries. Recent events have triggered the downward spiral in relations, but this shift hasn't occurred in a vacuum. All three governments share the primary burden to set a strategic vision that promotes cooperation over conflict; the U.S. can contribute by providing reassurance to the three.

The proximate cause of rising tensions in Asia is history: disputes over territory (the Takeshima/Tokdo islands claimed by Japan and South Korea; the Senkaku/Daiyotais claimed by Japan and China) and the natural resource rights that attach to them; visits by Japanese Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro to Yasukuni Shrine; approval of Japanese history textbooks that gloss over ugly and brutal incidents in Asian history.

Dig deeper and it quickly becomes evident that these incidents have triggered deep-rooted emotions. The leadership in each of the three countries is exploiting these situations for short-term political gain rather than demonstrating the leadership they all acknowledge is needed – and demand from their partners. All three are quick to point fingers, but have been reluctant to look in the mirror.

Japan has apologized for the past – by one count 17 times – but each statement has been qualified or subsequently undermined by comments or actions of other officials. Tokyo persists in creating artificial distinctions among issues, arguing most recently that the decision to proceed with drilling in the East China Sea is somehow distinct from its problems with China. The current leadership pleads powerlessness when challenged by foreign critics: the textbook issue is really a domestic issue related to freedom of speech, the territorial claim is merely a prefectural government act, visits to Yasukuni are domestic politics. All are true, but it is disingenuous to ignore the larger context.

In Beijing, the government continues to demand Japanese concessions without providing any of its own. It has been quick to point out Japanese misbehavior, although similar problems exist at home: its textbooks have also been sanitized, it “whitewashes” history, and it has taken unilateral and provocative actions, too: natural resource exploration in the East China Sea, surveying the sea bed, sending research vessels and submarines into disputed waters; it has facilitated demonstrations within China and failed to stop them when they become violent. Chinese counter that the protests are spontaneous, but they come from deep-rooted emotions that have been nurtured by patriotic education and ignorance about Japanese behavior over the last 60 years.

In South Korea, the leadership has been equally short-sighted. ROK President Roh Moh-hyun reversed the position of his predecessor and played to the crowd, launching a “diplomatic war” against Japanese claims to the islands. In an open letter to the South Korean people, entitled “With Regard

to Recent Korea-Japan Relations,” Roh concluded “These moves nullify all the past reflection and apologies made by Japan.” Roh’s domestic political agenda has been cast as a fight with former ruling elites over collaboration with the prewar Japanese imperial government in South Korea. His sudden, over-the-top escalation of rhetoric on Tokdo/Takeshima only makes sense in this context.

In each case, the government has played to domestic constituencies and ignored the international implications of its actions. The Koizumi government is appeasing the right, President Roh is playing to the progressive left, and Beijing is venting the frustrations of the masses.

This focus must change before it is allowed to spin out of control. Each government must take steps to alter the domestic political calculus that emphasizes national identity at the expense of external “enemies,” for instance by emphasizing joint development of resources in disputed territories or promoting the joint examination of history texts that was critical to European reconciliation efforts. It is only a matter of time before the “economics hot, politics cold” characterization of Japan’s relations with its neighbors is attacked and eroded, as demonstrated by the suspension of Japan-ROK FTA negotiations or Chinese riots and physical damage to Japanese economic interests in several Chinese cities. It is impossible to be sure that political tensions can be isolated from economic relations or that they will not lead to unintended military conflict, even between democracies.

All three nations have insecurities. China fears U.S.-led containment; Japan fears abandonment by its ally and isolation within the region if the U.S. reconsiders who its preeminent partner in Asia is; the ROK worries that the recent strengthening of U.S.-Japan alliance will leave it once again at the mercy of great powers. Those fears are compounded by increasing friction between Seoul and Washington and uncertainty about the fate of their alliance. U.S. efforts to contain bilateral tensions are essential to preserving multilateral cooperation on threats to regional stability, including the North Korean nuclear issue.

The United States has a direct interest in the effective management of Northeast Asian tensions. The U.S. military role as stabilizer in Asia is challenged by the further degradation of relations among the three countries. The U.S. should undertake quiet efforts to contain the island disputes, to ameliorate emerging strategic distrust between Japan and South Korea, and to encourage Japan to settle the issue of historical reconciliation in East Asia.

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