



## **Southeast Asians worry about Northeast Asia's feuds**

by Eric Teo Chu Cheow

Southeast Asians have been watching the Sino-Japanese feud with deep interest and concern. Singapore issued a statement April 23 criticizing Japan's history textbooks for approving "this strange interpretation of the Pacific War in Asia"; it also warned that "this is not in the interest of the entire region." Indonesia's Foreign Ministry spokesman, when asked, said (after Japanese Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro's public apologies to Asian nations in Jakarta April 22) that Japan must face up to and settle its past. Southeast Asian nations are aware that the feud between Asia's giants has important implications for them and the future of East Asia in at least four areas.

First, historical irritations run through the whole of Asia, and the bitter memories of World War II have resurfaced in China and South Korea against Japan. Japan's attempts to create a Sphere of Asian Co-Prosperity under the *Dai Nippon* in the 1940s, from Korea to Indonesia, appear to be haunting Japan and Asia again, following attempts by Tokyo to secure a permanent seat in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). The recent textbook crisis is reviving bad memories among older Southeast Asians too.

Japanese occupation was harsh in the Philippines, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, as well as in Myanmar, Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos – virtually all the countries of ASEAN. Although Southeast Asian countries have officially moved on, the recent protests and riots in China and South Korea bring back painful memories for a generation that lived through 3-plus years of Japanese occupation in Southeast Asia. Although officially unsaid, many Southeast Asians still hope for an official and outright apology from Tokyo – even after all the financial and technological assistance, trade, and investments. Only then will this ugly historical chapter be put to rest once and for all!

Second, Southeast Asians also hope that efforts will be made to minimize the current tension in Northeast Asia, so as not to allow "accidents" to happen, which could cause governments to lose control of these explosive situations. Any instability in Northeast Asia could affect Southeast Asia adversely, especially in terms of regional trade and investment climate. Economic growth in ASEAN countries has slowed owing to high oil prices, depressed consumption, and rising inflation and interest rates. Southeast Asian hopes and need for regional stability have increased substantially over the past two years!

Third, Asian nations fear the spillover effects that these feuds could have on the budding East Asian Community, which is to be launched at the East Asian Summit (EAS) this December in Kuala Lumpur. Southeast Asians are concerned that the dream of building East Asia to counter balance a

unified Europe (of 25) and the potential Free Trade Area of the Americas is cooling off, even though the recent ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Retreat in Cebu, Philippines underscored ASEAN's hopes of building a region-wide Asian free trade area, comprising ASEAN, China, Japan, South Korea and eventually India, Australia, and New Zealand.

The growing divide between China and South Korea on one hand and Japan on the other is an unsettling development, although the recent China-India Summit in New Delhi augurs well for a new Asian entente and the future Community. Japan's future in this group may seem less obvious as a result of its disputes with its neighbors. Yet an East Asia without its premier economy makes no sense.

Fourth, Southeast Asia wonders if there is the possibility of a strategic schism in Northeast Asia. The common cause shared by Beijing, Seoul, and Pyongyang in opposing Japan's bid for permanent membership in the UNSC could bring them closer together at a time when Tokyo is moving closer to Washington, as evidenced by the Feb.19 declaration of the Security Consultative Committee. This shift in alignment and alliance could pit China and the two Koreas against the Washington-Tokyo axis in the Asia-Pacific, which could split East Asia right down the middle in strategic, security, and political terms, reminiscent of the Cold War. This shift could provoke a dramatic revision of the existing regional alliances in Northeast Asia and affect East Asian regionalism.

We may be "going back in history." The Korean Kingdom was once the premier tributary state of China for almost 400 years, stretching from the late Ming to the end of the Qing dynasties. Korea, under the Chosun dynasty, paid tribute to the Chinese emperor once a year, more frequently than any of the other tributary states of Annam, Siam, Sulu, Burma or the Lao and Ryukyu kingdoms. Chosun literature always portrayed China in favorable terms; Beijing was widely recognized as the intellectual, architectural, and civilizational (and inspirational) model for Korea.

Ironically, Japan "forced" Korea out of this Chinese tributary system. When the Qing Emperor lost the First Sino-Japanese War in 1895, China was forced to cede Korea and Taiwan, and Japan then annexed the Korean Peninsula 15 years later in 1910 and occupied it "harshly" (according to Korean collective memory) for 35 years, until the end of World War II.

Memories of Japan's violent occupation in South Korea are compared to the more benevolent "tributary memories" of China. This contributes further to a growing "commonality" between the Chinese and the North and South Koreans vis-à-vis the Japanese.

These disputes come as Seoul is softening its approach to Pyongyang, and as Tokyo stiffens its own position against

North Korea. South Korea appears to be approximating China's position as Tokyo moves closer to that of the U.S. Seoul also appears to be moving toward a more "neutral" position in regard to a U.S.-China conflict.

These feuds between Japan and its neighbors may thus drive China and South Korea still closer together, just as Seoul's relations with Washington (and Tokyo) grow more troubled. It could be that a fundamental shift in Northeast Asia's alliances is in the making. Increasing defense cooperation between Seoul and Beijing is an indication of this shift, just as the Six-Party Talks may crystallize around Seoul's progressive "alignment" with Beijing, in opposition to the "Washington-Tokyo axis." Moreover, Seoul has announced that it had rejected the latest version of Op-Plan 5029, which reportedly calls for U.S. and South Korean Armed Forces (presumably under U.S. command) to be prepared to respond militarily if and should the Pyongyang regime collapse.

Pyongyang's recent tough line could be attributed to shifting triangular relations among Beijing, Tokyo and Seoul. It could also be upping its ante, a result of unhappiness with increasingly cozy U.S.-Japan relations, as well as to take advantage of the rift between Washington and Tokyo on one side and Beijing and Seoul (and Moscow) on the other.

East Asia has sought constructive community-building and regionalism to stabilize the region and its economies; a strategic schism would not benefit East Asia.

A key element of this future is East Asia's relationship with Washington, and the U.S. commitment to the region. The EAS was supposed to act as a regional confidence-builder and stabilize East Asia; any strategic schism would be detrimental to East Asian regionalism and the aspirations of the East Asian Community and its peoples. Southeast Asians have thus been watching with growing concern the feuds in Northeast Asia and hope for calm and rationality up north.

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