



## A target of opportunity for Northeast Asia

by Brad Glosserman and Scott Snyder

The most important outcome of last week's meeting between Japanese Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro and South Korean President Roh Moo-hyun is that it occurred at all. The two men frankly acknowledged deep differences over historical issues and Koizumi's repeated visits to Yasukuni Shrine. By agreeing to disagree, they demonstrated the mutual respect that is the starting point for fixing their damaged relationship.

Neither man flinched in addressing the accumulated grievances of the past few months. A short list includes Japanese Education Ministry approval of a history textbook that is alleged to whitewash Japan's occupation of Korea and other incidents, disputes over ownership of the Takeshima/Tokdo islets, the statement by a Japanese diplomat that the United States does not trust Seoul with its intelligence, and Koizumi's annual visits to Yasukuni Shrine – he has not yet visited in 2005, but has signaled his intention to do so. The result has been a downward spiral in relations between two democratic allies of the United States.

In an effort to break the downward cycle, the two leaders agreed to launch a second round of joint history studies, including an examination of history textbooks, and to double from four to eight the number of roundtrip shuttle flights between Haneda and Kimpo airports starting Aug. 1. Expanded grassroots contacts provide a real basis for improved public attitudes about the relationship in both countries.

Obviously, one summit meeting can't solve the increasingly divergent interpretations of history and the questions that emerge as each country debates its national identity in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Both Japan and South Korea are in the midst of national reassessments, one component of which is a stronger desire in both countries to express positive national patriotism and to make international contributions. These changes are influenced by and reflected in their relationships with neighbors and partners. There will be tension within each society as contesting views of national identity battle for supremacy.

A major influence on ROK-Japan relations over the past two decades has been South Korea's democratization and a flowering of grassroots contacts between the two sides. Former South Korean President Kim Dae-jung's effort to establish a foundation for a future-oriented relationship with Japan in 1998 played an important role, as South Korea lifted restrictions on the influx of Japanese pop culture into South Korea. The joint hosting of the 2002 World Cup soccer final also gave each country a stake in cooperation and opened the doors – literally, through visa-less travel and roundtrip flights – to better understanding between the two countries.

This is in stark contrast to China-Japan relations, where top-level meetings occur rarely and are subject to last-minute cancellations. There is deeply embedded emotionalism in Chinese public responses to recent Japanese actions on the questions of history and territorial disputes. The problems in that bilateral relationship have been compounded by Beijing's attempts to control and channel a Chinese public upset with Japan to serve parochial leadership interests by waving the flag of nationalism.

Several non-governmental dialogues are designed to foster understanding among these three countries. The Pacific Forum CSIS, with which we are affiliated, holds a number of trilateral and multilateral programs each year to encourage frank discussions among the three. But a working relationship at the elite or leadership level is necessary, not sufficient: changes in the public attitudes of the respective publics are required in order to change bilateral relations. Ultimately, the key to overcoming "history" lies in the cultivation of future leaders whose opinions are shaped by their educational and socialization experiences within their societies.

To that end, the Pacific Forum has developed two programs that encourage dialogue among the younger generation. Working with the Mansfield Foundation and the Asia Foundation, we co-sponsored a series of retreats for younger leaders from Japan, South Korea, and China. These individuals are in their late 30s and early 40s and aren't "the usual suspects." Instead, our participants include university professors, media professionals (television announcers and weekly magazine commentators), and executives of nonprofit organizations. These discussions have been fruitful and revealing of the differences that exist in perceptions among the various sides.

The South Korea-Japan dialogues showed that South Korea's younger generation seeks acknowledgement of Japan's negative historical legacy; Japan's younger generation is well aware of this issue but wants to set aside these issues to avoid reviving old conflicts. They'd rather focus on the future. The dialogue yielded tangible cooperation between Korean and Japanese art historians to discuss the return to South Korea of art treasures that had been repatriated to Japan during the colonial period and promoted discussion of potential measures for joint cooperation in the fields of education, media and politics. (A statement endorsed by all participants with specific recommendations is at [www.mansfieldfdn.org/programs/program\\_pdfs/trilat\\_statement.pdf](http://www.mansfieldfdn.org/programs/program_pdfs/trilat_statement.pdf))

A second Pacific Forum program targets Young Leaders from the countries with which we work in an attempt to better understand their perspective on the political and security issues that dominate our discussions. There is a generational transition in most Asian countries and the incoming group has

very different perspectives on issues, their countries, their place in the region, and relations with neighbors. It is vital that we grasp this new perspective. Seniority has traditionally dictated who attends track-two meetings and makes it difficult to get younger voices to the table. The Young Leaders Program provides the opportunity to hear these views and to give up-and-coming professionals (22-35 years old) the opportunity to join discussions and to meet eminent figures in the fields of diplomacy and international relations.

The contrast between South Korean and Chinese reactions to the latest round of textbook and territorial controversies has been reflected in our dialogues. This contrast suggests both progress resulting from expanded South Korea-Japan grassroots exchanges and the challenges ahead for China and Japan, where differing political systems and strategic anxieties – and different levels of development -- are diminishing prospects for management of Sino-Japanese rivalries in East Asia.

Some people ask why the U.S. inserts itself into these squabbles; others imply that the U.S. benefits from them. The United States has a powerful interest in encouraging the management of differences between Japan and its neighbors. Close relations between and among the U.S. and its alliance partners are critical to the realization of our shared goals and interests. The growing controversy over Japan's treatment of history threatens the ability of all countries in East Asia to do just that. While the United States has little interest in forcing itself into the middle of this dispute, it should consider playing a behind-the-scenes role that facilitates a more frank consideration of compromises that will allow Japan to both respect those soldiers who fought and died for Japan and will forthrightly acknowledge Japan's historical excesses. This is going to be a long-term process, and patience and mutual understanding will be critical to success. Our dialogues with the next generation in Japan, China, and the ROK suggest that progress is possible, but will require continued attention over time to bear the fruit necessary to diminish the prospects that Asia's emerging leaders will face another debilitating war.

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