

EAST ASIA INSIGHTS

TOWARD COMMUNITY BUILDING

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Bolstering East Asian Cooperation 70 Years On

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THIS YEAR MARKS the 70th anniversary of the end of World War II. Such milestones offer an opportunity to reflect on the progress made and the steps needed to ensure that such tragic events are never repeated. For the major Asian powers, it is a milestone that would be best commemorated by committing themselves to making real advancements in cooperative regional relations. The recent track record of the region has made it clear that parochial approaches to history and the promotion of exclusivist nationalism for short-term domestic political gains must be eschewed for the sake of long-term regional progress. Japan, China, South Korea, and the United States must take full advantage of the opportunity this anniversary represents by instituting more regular and intensive communications, moving the region away from confrontational posturing, and emphasizing—to both domestic and foreign audiences—their shared interest in regional peace and prosperity. Among the concrete actions they can take to achieve this objective are to revamp Japan's security policy to respond to modern threats while remaining true to its pacifist ideals, shift to more cooperative

relations between China and other regional powers, renew the commitment by Japan and South Korea to bilateral dialogue, and strengthen the US-Japan relationship to meet the challenges of the 21st century.

Revitalizing Japan's Security Policy: Between Pacifism and the Modern World

As the 70th anniversary of the end of World War II approaches, it is unfortunate that debates surrounding Japan's wartime history are still stirring controversy in the region. While Japan has issued a number of apologies, the most significant came on the 50th anniversary of the end of the war, when then Prime Minister Tomiichi Murayama made the now famous Murayama Statement. That statement offers a straight-forward apology and squarely acknowledges that Japan followed "a mistaken national policy... and, through its colonial rule and aggression, caused tremendous damage and suffering to the people of many countries, particularly to those of Asian nations." It has been maintained as the official position of all successive Japanese

governments under both the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and the Democratic Party of Japan. The basic nature of the statement leaves no room for equivocation, and it is critical that Japan adhere to this statement if it is to maintain its standing in the international community.

Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has indicated that he will make a commemorative statement on August 15, the anniversary of Japan's surrender. Following the recent controversy in Japan over the references to comfort women in American history textbooks, there has also been speculation that Abe may seek to undercut the Murayama Statement. But any move to contradict Murayama's words seems unlikely since doing so would undermine the Abe administration's national security agenda as well as Japan's hard-earned reputation as a nation committed to peace.

In fact, the path that Japan has followed over the last 70 years is nothing short of extraordinary. After the war, Japan reinvented itself as a peaceful nation by going through a remarkable democratization and by promulgating a new constitution that included the famous Article 9 "peace clause." Japan built an egalitarian society, achieved rapid economic recovery to become the second largest economy in the world in less than 25 years, utilized its wealth to establish itself as a leader in technological innovation, and became one of the world's leading providers of official development assistance—all the while never firing a single bullet. Japan's peaceful identity and its contributions to global public goods have been recognized around the world, as evinced by its positive image in global opinion polls.

Looking forward, Japan must make clear to the world that it is continuing to face up to its wartime conduct; that it recognizes the pivotal role of US support, which enabled Japan to reinvent itself; and that, based on its proud record over the past 70 years, it will continue to work for the peace and prosperity of the region in the future.

To best position itself for future regional cooperation, the Japanese government must pay more attention to how its foreign policy is perceived among its neighbors. Most critically, it must clarify where it is

moving with the reinterpretation of Article 9 of the constitution, which it is undertaking in order to allow the Japan Self-Defense Forces (SDF) to engage in collective self-defense. While the contemporary security environment makes it important to move forward with a common-sense reinterpretation of Article 9 that will allow limited forms of collective self-defense, more rigorous explanation is required to demonstrate that the reinterpretation set out in the cabinet's July 2014 decision will maintain the constitution's original spirit.

The Abe cabinet's reinterpretation names three new conditions for the use of force beyond cases where the Japanese homeland is under attack: "When an armed attack against a foreign country that is in a close relationship with Japan... threatens Japan's survival and poses a clear danger to fundamentally overturn the [Japanese] people's right to life, liberty and pursuit of happiness"; when there are "no other means to repel the attack"; and when the use of force is limited "to the minimum extent necessary."

These conditions appear restrictive, but since they do not come with any geographical limits, there is significant potential to push the envelope toward a more expansive interpretation. For instance, the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) could theoretically be interpreted as posing a threat to the Japanese people's constitutional right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Some may argue that this would open the door for the SDF to participate in coalition air strikes against ISIL in Syria and Iraq, a scenario that goes well beyond the spirit of the constitution.

As the Abe government seeks to pass the legislation needed to implement collective self-defense, the debate is bound to be influenced by ISIL's recent killing of two Japanese hostages. Abe has hinted at the possibility of new legislation to permit the SDF to engage in rescue operations for Japanese nationals abroad with the consent of host nations. This debate goes to the very heart of Japan's post-war identity. On the one hand, liberals argue that Japan plays a unique role as a pacifist nation and that, as a country not directly party to any conflicts,

its Middle East policy and humanitarian assistance significantly contribute to regional stability. On the other hand, conservatives argue that Japan cannot isolate itself from the global phenomenon of terrorism and must be prepared to use the SDF to safeguard Japanese interests. While there are merits to both arguments, Japan's national security policy must be determined in a calm and rational manner. The danger now is that Japan's security policy and postwar identity may be shifted by a wave of emotional nationalism following these tragic deaths. In shaping new policy, a careful balance must be maintained between clarifying the legitimate roles of the SDF and maintaining Japan's identity as a pacifist nation.

Building Long-Term Cooperation with China

China is a rising star on the global stage, having achieved unprecedentedly rapid economic growth, hosting key international events such as the 2008 Beijing Olympics and the 2014 APEC Summit, and engineering new international institutions in which it expects to play a central role, such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the Xiangshan Forum.

From Japan's perspective, there is a risk that as we approach China's own commemoration of the end of the war, which it observes on September 3, Chinese leaders might, for the sake of short-term domestic political gains, choose to escalate anti-Japan rhetoric, further politicize history, move unilaterally in the East and South China Seas, and pursue their version of a "new model of great power relations" with the United States in a way that marginalizes Japan.

The meeting between Prime Minister Abe and Chinese President Xi Jinping at the APEC Summit was an important first step in repairing Japan-China relations, but further follow-through is needed. To this end, both countries need long-term, win-win strategies to deepen regional cooperation. China's continued portrayals of Japan as a present-day adversary undermine the long-term peace and prosperity of both China and the region by damaging not only Japan-China trade and investment relations but also,

and more critically, the requisite regional stability needed for high-level regional cooperation aimed at managing the shifting balance of power and deepening regional economic integration.

The AIIB provides an example of China's potential to make positive contributions to regional public goods, but also of the need for China to further open up and engage in more intensive communication with regional partners. Indeed, the need for investment in infrastructure in emerging and developing economies across the region is huge. But the manner in which China announced the establishment of the bank without prior consultations with other countries leaves uncertainty as to whether it will uphold international labor, environmental, and good governance standards, as well as concerns about equitable representation for all member nations. Japan, South Korea, the United States, the EU, and Australia should seriously consider joining the AIIB, but they must first ensure that concerns on standards and representation are resolved.

Repairing Japan–South Korea Relations

Japan-ROK relations have been frosty over the last few years, and Prime Minister Abe and President Park Geun-hye have yet to meet bilaterally despite both being in office for two years. The primary issue that is blocking not only a leaders' meeting but also bilateral cooperation on other fronts is the comfort women issue. It is right for Japan to express its sincere apologies and remorse for the treatment of the comfort women, such as through the 1993 Kono Statement and the efforts of the Asian Women's Fund. But Seoul's preconditions, which essentially assume that Japan should do more unilaterally to resolve the issue despite the need for strong leadership from both sides, have been disappointing. In order to realize a mutually acceptable resolution, Japan and South Korea must enhance bilateral communication channels at all levels of government and find a way to work together.

As the two most economically advanced East Asian democracies, Japan and South Korea share overlapping strategic interests. They both have a stake

in coordinating joint contingency planning vis-à-vis North Korea, promoting a regional order based on liberal free market principles and open regionalism, and negotiating free trade pacts such as the China-Japan-ROK Free Trade Agreement and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership with the ASEAN+6 countries. There is no time to waste in resolving the comfort women issue, but at the same time, discussions on critical shared interests cannot be postponed as a diplomatic bargaining chip. It is time for Japan and South Korea to reestablish a mindset of being regional partners with shared democratic values and an atmosphere that encourages collaborative work.

Solidifying US Engagement in Asia

While the US-Japan alliance remains strong 70 years after the war, a number of thorny issues must be tackled to ensure it remains a bedrock for regional stability. Two issues in particular that have the potential to damage alliance confidence if not properly managed are the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) negotiations and the Okinawa military base issue. With regard to the first issue, early agreement on the TPP is imperative not only for the further liberalization of markets but also because the TPP has the potential to be utilized as a vehicle to deepen cross-Pacific economic integration and establish rules needed for 21st-century economic relations.

On the question of US military bases in Okinawa, while it is regrettable that the relocation of the Futenma Air Base has dragged on for so many years, the current Henoko plan is a positive step toward relieving tensions. At the same time, due consideration is needed of public sentiment in Henoko and on Okinawa more broadly in light of the November 2014 gubernatorial election, in which incumbent Hirokazu Nakaima, who supported the Henoko plan, was defeated by Takeshi Onaga, who advocated moving the base out of the prefecture. Similarly, in the December 2014 Lower House election, the LDP lost all four of the single-member district seats in Okinawa Prefecture due to its support for the Henoko plan.

This issue shows why constant and intensive US-Japan strategic dialogue is needed. The best solution would be if the Henoko plan could go forward. However, the bigger issue at hand is the broader strategic context of how the US forward deployment can meet US objectives and the needs of the US-Japan alliance. The question of whether the concentration of bases in Okinawa might be gradually reduced needs to be periodically reviewed within the context of the overall American forward deployment throughout the region, advances in military technologies, the evolving roles and functions of the SDF, and the expanding military cooperation between the United States and other regional partners such as Australia, India, the Philippines, and Vietnam.

The United States has repeatedly insisted that it is committed to remaining deeply engaged in Asia, but doubts still persist around the region among those who have seen Washington's involvement ebb and flow over the years. Given the growing importance of the region, what is needed is a shift in the United States toward a mindset in which it feels comfortable viewing itself as a "resident political power" in East Asia. One way in which the United States could move toward that goal is by spearheading the establishment of a four-party China-Japan-ROK-US confidence-building mechanism. The US alliances with Japan and South Korea and the growing strategic weight of the US-China relationship place the United States in the best position to take the lead in creating such a mechanism. It is an urgent task, given the need to manage the shifting balance of power in the region, not to mention the serious risk of accidental conflict if US-Japan and US-ROK joint military exercises are misinterpreted by China's increasingly active navy. A good first step would be to establish standardized protocols and permanent emergency hotlines to deal with any potential crises in the most efficient manner.

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As we pause 70 years on to reflect on the devastation of World War II, we must take this moment as an opportunity to renew regional cooperation. Future peace

should not be taken for granted. The most pressing task for the leaders of Japan, China, South Korea, and the United States at this juncture must now be to build mutual trust and enhance regional cooperation in order to manage the shifting balance of power and ensure shared prosperity for the decades and centuries to come.

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East Asia Insights

East Asia Insights is an occasional newsletter focusing on East Asia community building from the Japanese perspective.

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