

Abe's Perilous Patriotism

*Why Japan's New Nationalism Still
Creates Problems for the Region
and the U.S.-Japanese Alliance*

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Thomas U. Berger

Executive Summary

Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's push to promote "healthy patriotism" presages neither the end of democracy in Japan nor the return to militarism that his critics claim. Rather, Abe's brand of nationalism needs to be understood within the context of post-1945 Japanese politics, where how to evaluate modern Japanese history has been a central bone of contention for decades. For conservatives like Abe, a positive view of Japanese history is necessary to rebuild the vital link between the Japanese state and society and allow Japan to mobilize its energies for a variety of pressing tasks, including reviving the economy, addressing various social problems and defending against external threats. Historically, whenever there has been pressure on Japan to do more on defense and national security issues, Japanese conservatives have pushed hard to strengthen Japanese nationalism. In this they have been supported by more moderate Japanese, who view tolerating some part of the conservative agenda as part of the coalition-building process needed to get changes on defense issues through Japan's tortured political process. However, whenever Japanese governments have gone too far in promoting nationalism, moderate support has evaporated and nationalist leaders have been forced to settle for relatively marginal gains in terms of both defense policy and changes in the national discourse on defense. The Abe government today seems to be repeating this process, and one might be tempted to expect a similar result as in the past. Much to do about nothing, as it were.

Today, however, the larger international framework within which this process is taking place has changed in several important ways. The sensitivity of neighboring countries, in particular China and Korea, to expressions of Japanese nationalism has increased, and their ability to take retaliatory action against Japan has gone up as well. In both countries, nationalist sentiment focused on historical and historically laden territorial issues have become a central feature of their political cultures. This is particularly the case in South Korea, but it is true of China as well. While Chinese and Korean leaders could try to ignore these pressures, they can do so only at a cost. Given the perception that Japan under Abe is unwilling to engage in a genuine dialog on historical issues, they have little or no incentive to pay that cost. In addition, in China the leadership may have concluded that there are benefits to whipping up nationalist sentiment instead. As a result, in recent years tensions over historical anti-Japanese issues have gone up sharply and increasingly have spilled over into other policy domains, including regional institution building, defense cooperation, and most alarmingly, territorial disputes. Today, for the first time in decades, there is a real risk of, if not war, then military clashes between Japan and China, fueled in no small

measure by nationalist passions on both sides that feed on each other in a potential vicious cycle.

What was once an intra-Asian drama is thus taking on a larger regional and even global significance. It is in this context that the United States is increasingly becoming concerned about Japanese nationalism. While the United States welcomes many of Abe's initiatives and is glad that—to quote the prime minister—“Japan is back,” the increased regional tensions inevitably are becoming a source of concern in the alliance. Abe's willingness to press ideological issues is arguably needlessly provoking China, complicating relations with South Korea, and raising questions in the United States about Japan's reliability at a time when there are growing fears that Japan could draw the United States into a conflict in the East China Sea, in which the United States arguably has only a tenuous interest.

The solution, however, is not to simply castigate Abe or other Japanese leaders for promoting patriotism. Doing so would be both counterproductive and ineffective. Counterproductive because many Japanese, including even many moderates and liberals, would resent such an intervention in Japan's domestic affairs. Ineffective, because by itself Japanese restraint is unlikely to yield increased regional harmony. Apologies have to be accepted if they are to be effective, and both China and South Korea have been unreceptive to earlier sincere if imperfect Japanese efforts in this regard. Rather, the United States and Japan need to make historical issues part of a “two-track” diplomatic strategy for the region that balances strategic reassurance against possible aggression with active engagement of potential opponents.

Introduction

Recent months have seen an upsurge of concern over what is commonly described as the rising tide of nationalism in Japan. Much of this concern is exaggerated, and many of the criticisms are misplaced. Japan certainly is not on the verge of turning into a militaristic revanchist power intent on dominating East Asia, as many in China and elsewhere would have us believe.¹ Nor is Abe the chauvinist nationalist he is sometimes portrayed as being. As Kevin Doak recently point out,² Abe is in fact more of a civic than an ethnic nationalist, one who believes that people's nationality is not and should not be a matter of their ethnicity, but rather whether they voluntarily adhere to the norms and values of society. Abe's primary goal is to foster a healthy sense of patriotism in Japan, one that encourages the Japanese people to be proud of their country while at the same time respectful of contemporary Japan's democratic political system and supportive of a peaceful East Asian regional order.

Yet, regardless of Abe's intentions, his brand of healthy patriotism creates tensions, both inside the Japanese political system and with Japan's neighbors. These tensions are not entirely new. There is a very old pattern, dating back to the 1950s, where efforts to create a stronger sense of national pride in Japan triggers a backlash both at home and abroad. In the past, the periodic *contre temps* over historical issues blew over with relatively little lasting damage. In recent years, however, the region has

¹ See for instance “China Scathes Abe's Yauskuni Visit,” *People's Daily*, December 26, 2013, <http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/90883/8496810.html>.

² Kevin Doak, “Abe's Civic Nationalism,” *CSIS Japan Chair Platform*, May 13, 2013, <http://csis.org/publication/japan-chair-platform-shinzo-abes-civic-nationalism>.

changed in ways that makes Abe's brand of Japanese nationalism more of a lightning rod than ever. Tensions over history have spilled over into territorial disputes and other issues. Today, disputes over history, which long have been an intra-Asian issue, are taking on a broader significance and increasingly may have an adverse impact on U.S.-Japanese relations as well.

To better understand these dynamics, it is necessary to briefly examine three central issues: the domestic context in which Abe's efforts to promote nationalism is taking place; the political dynamics that traditionally have surrounded Japanese nationalism; and new patterns emerging from the interaction between Japanese nationalism and the changing East Asian regional environment. In conclusion, some thoughts will be offered regarding the implications of the analysis for the U.S.-Japanese alliance.

Abe and Japan's Fractured Nationalism

Like all forms of nationalism, Japanese nationalism is essentially a form of collective identity. Human beings have a propensity to create such identities (or "imagined communities," to use Benedict Anderson's formulation) and use them to mobilize societal resources in pursuit of a common purpose. As such, nationalism can be a powerful instrument for both constructive purposes (propelling economic development or developing social solidarity) as well as destructive ones (waging war or persecuting political dissenters or minorities).

On the most basic level, nationalism is a political doctrine that argues that the cultural unit (the nation) should be coterminous with the political unit (the state).³ The definition of the cultural unit—the nation—has an inherently arbitrary element. While most nations may have their roots in existing social and ideological structures,⁴ their boundaries can shift over time, and they can be invoked for many different purposes. Inevitably, different groups in a society try to define the nation in ways that fit their own preconceptions and further their own definitions of interest.

Japan is no exception in this regard. Indeed, one of the defining characteristics of modern Japanese nationalism is its deeply fractured and contentious character. In the pre-World War II period, the Imperial Japanese state was able to effectively impose a master narrative of the nation as united around the Imperial institution, which was defined in both religious and secular-traditional terms.⁵ This Imperial narrative was fatally damaged by the catastrophic failure of the Empire in the 1930s and 1940s.

In postwar Japan, a fierce struggle broke out in which different groups tried—unsuccessfully—to create a consensus around a new definition of the Japanese state and the ideals and values that it should represent. While there were many different groups, there were two dominant poles, one on the left end of the political spectrum, the other on the right.

For the Left, the central focus of nationalism was the Japanese people, who they portrayed as having been betrayed and abused by the Imperial state and in particular

³ Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1983), chapter 1.

⁴ Anthony Smith, *The Ethnic Origins of Nations* (New York: Blackwell, 1987).

⁵ Carol Gluck, *Japan's Modern Myths: Ideology in the Late Meiji Period* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985).

the military, which had led them into a disastrous war waged to the bitter end with utter disregard for the immense suffering of the civilian population. Ideologically, the Japanese Left was strongly influenced by Communist and Socialist thinking and thus favored strong state intervention into society. However, they were inherently opposed to the postwar Japanese state, which continued to be dominated by the same conservative elites who had played a key role in the Imperial era and who in many respects wanted to return to a political system similar to that of the prewar period.

The Left sought to mobilize the Japanese people against the postwar state, with a special emphasis on checking any expansion of state power that might threaten personal liberties in the name of national security or social order. Japan, in their view, should become a “peace nation”—one dedicated to promoting international peace. The key institutional expression of this new identity was Article 9 of the 1947 constitution, in which the Japanese people forever renounced the sovereign right to wage war as a means of resolving international disputes. The central historical symbol employed by the Left was the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, which graphically illustrated both the victimization of the Japanese people and demonstrated the dangers and horrors of modern warfare.

The political Right, in contrast, had a far less negative view of the Imperial state or its post-1945 successor. While Japanese conservatives for the most part did not want to return to the old Imperial system, they wanted to recreate the unity between the postwar state and the Japanese people defined in vaguely cultural terms. It was that unity that they felt had helped propel Japan from being a backward, semifeudal nation into the ranks of the world’s leading powers. The collapse after 1945 of that sense of unity crippled Japan on a spiritual level and made it potentially vulnerable to its enemies, both foreign and domestic.

For the Right, the problem of postwar Japan was thus not having too much nationalism, but too little—or to be precise, too little of the kind of patriotism that would support the state. Reestablishing the link between the postwar Japanese state and the people was their overriding political priority. Doing so, however, would require reversing several aspects of the post-1945 political system, beginning with the entire ideology of Japan as a “peace nation” embodied by Article 9 of the constitution. Pride in the nation requires that the Japanese people be prepared to defend the Japanese state from its enemies, as opposed to being lost in what conservatives derided as a “pacifist haze.” A more positive image of Japanese history had to be instilled in the population, one that stressed the historical accomplishments of the Japanese nation rather than its failings. The wholly negative historical narrative established by the Allied Tokyo War Crimes Tribunal and propagated by Japanese progressive intellectuals had to be refuted, and more broadly the pernicious influence of the Left had to be purged from the educational system. Honoring those who sacrificed their lives in the service of that state became a key component of the Right-wing agenda, and visiting the Yasukuni assumed a central symbolic role for the Right.

The problem that both the Japanese Left and the Right faced was that the majority of the Japanese people were simply not that interested in their grand political projects and wanted to focus instead on more mundane priorities such as strengthening the economy and raising the standard of living. Certain elements of the Left- and Right-wing worldviews, however, enjoyed broad popular resonance. Many Japanese shared

the Left's suspicion of state power. In particular they were adverse to overseas military adventures. On the other hand, they were suspicious as well of the Left's ideological Marxism and found their proposed foreign policy of "complete, unarmed neutrality" unconvincing. Many key sectors of the Japanese elite, especially in the business community and in the bureaucracy, were likewise uninterested in ideological posturing and were far more concerned with getting on with the pragmatic tasks of rebuilding and reform.

As Japan grew and prospered, a diffuse form of popular national pride did emerge, but it did not focus either on the Japanese state—as the Japanese conservatives would have it—or on the Japanese people as a peace nation—as propagated by the Left. Instead, ordinary Japanese tended to take pride in their nation's social, cultural, and economic accomplishments. In the 1970s through 1980s, the booming economy was a particular source of pride. In the 1990s, as the Japanese economy went into decline, the emphasis shifted to Japan's high levels of social order and stability, as well as Japan's natural beauty and artistic attainments, both traditional and modern. The growing global popularity of Japanese manga and anime have fed into this trend, fueling a wave of pride in "Cool Japan" and the notion that Japan can be a "soft power superpower."⁶

These preferences have been consistently reflected in Japanese public opinion data. According to surveys taken by the Japanese government, large majorities of Japanese (over 87 percent since 1987) indicate that they love their country either strongly or to some degree.⁷ When asked, however, what it is about their country that they are proud of, the number one answer was the high level of public safety (56.7 percent) followed by the beauty of nature in Japan (54.1 percent) and Japan's excellence in culture and arts (50.5 percent). Pride in Japan's economic strength has sunk to under 13 percent and in its technological ability to around 25 percent.⁸ When asked how they personally would hope to contribute to society, the focus overwhelmingly tends to be on social solidarity, not national defense. Indeed, when asked how they would respond if Japan were invaded, only 6.6 percent of respondents said they would join the Self-Defense Forces (SDF) and fight the invaders and only 3.7 percent of those in the 20- to 29-year-old age bracket!⁹

⁶ Yasushi Watanabe and David L. McConnell, eds., *Soft Power Superpowers: Cultural and National Assets of Japan and the United States* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2008). The term "Cool Japan" was popularized by Douglas McGray in his article "Japan's Gross National Cool," *Foreign Affairs* (May 2002). The term was quickly picked up by many in the Japanese government, including notably Aso Taro who served as foreign minister in the first Abe government from 2005 to 2007 and later became prime minister.

⁷ See Cabinet Office, Government of Japan, "Survey on Social Consciousness 2014" [Shakai Ishiki ni Kan Suru Yoron Chosa], chart 2, <http://www8.cao.go.jp/survey/h25/h25-shakai/zh/z02.html>.

⁸ *Ibid.*, table 19, <http://www8.cao.go.jp/survey/h25/h25-shakai/zh/z19.html>.

⁹ *Ibid.*, table 9, <http://www8.cao.go.jp/survey/h24/h24-shakai/zh/z09.html>. On the willingness to fight, see the 2012 "Survey on the SDF and Defense Issues" [Jieitai to Boeimondai ni Kan suru Yoron Chosa], chart 20, <http://www8.cao.go.jp/survey/h23/h23-bouei/zh/z20.html>.

56.6 percent would say they would try to do everything other than fight to support the SDF. 18.9 percent say they would refuse to cooperate with the invading power, 4.8 percent say they will not resist at all. The number who say they would support the SDF has gone up from 35.7 percent, but still nearly a quarter of the Japanese populations supports a Gandhian position. Poll numbers like these drive conservatives to despair and redouble their resolve that the Japanese government needs to foster a willingness in young people to defend the nation from potential enemies.

From the perspective of both the Left and the Right, the Japanese people's diffuse form of national identity is a reflection of popular apathy and a perennial source of frustration. Yet, despite their repeated efforts to shift the discourse in a different direction, the Japanese public stubbornly refused to be moved.

Waiting for the Rising Sun: The Recurring Drama of Resurgent Japanese Nationalism

The relationship between the different components of the Japanese discourse on nationalism have evolved considerably over time. It is possible to discern a cyclic pattern where an apparent rise in Right-wing nationalist discourse was followed by a rejection of the conservative agenda and an extended period of ideological quiescence. These cycles occur with a frequency of every five to ten years and tend to follow a similar pattern.¹⁰

The initial trigger for an upsurge in nationalist rhetoric often comes from outside of Japan. Shifts in the international environment would emerge that created a widely shared sense that Japan needs to adapt its security policy in response. In the late 1950s, Japan's reemergence as a major, independent international actor against the backdrop of a highly volatile East Asian security environment created a ground swell of support for revising Japan's security arrangements, beginning with the original, highly unequal Mutual Security Treaty imposed by the United States at the end of the Occupation. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, growing concerns regarding the U.S. security commitment in light of the Vietnam War and American domestic political disarray provoked a serious debate over whether Japan should continue to rely on the United States or develop a more independent defense capacity. In the late 1970s, the Soviet military buildup in the Far East seemed to pose a direct threat to Japan. After the Cold War, the emergence of new regional security threats in the shape of a nuclear North Korea and an increasingly powerful and assertive People's Republic of China stimulated Japan to reforge its security relationship to the United States.

In each instance, Japanese conservative nationalists formed a de facto alliance with more pragmatically minded centrists to push through much-needed changes in Japanese defense policy. Since for Right-wing nationalists, ideological issues are part and parcel of any effort to reform Japanese defense, changes in national security policy were always paired with highly nationalist rhetoric and changes in other policy domains. So for instance, in the late 1950s, the revision of the Mutual Security Treaty was accompanied by changes in educational policy aimed at clamping down on the influence of the powerful, Left-wing Japanese teachers' union. The 1978 guidelines on U.S.-Japan defense cooperation was paired with the reintroduction of the Imperial calendar system and the old national anthem, *Kimi ga yo*. Prime Minister Yasuhiro Nakasone famously linked increasing the Japanese defense budget with reevaluating Japanese history when he visited the Yasukuni Shrine in 1985. Hashimoto Ryutaro did much the same when he visited the shrine in 1995, while at the same time setting into motion the political process that led to the revision of the guidelines in 1998.

¹⁰ The author has looked at this issue extensively in earlier work. See Thomas U. Berger, *Cultures of Antimilitarism: National Security in Germany and Japan* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998).

In each and every instance, these nationalist gestures and policies provoked howls of protest. The Japanese Left would warn that the conservatives were undermining the foundations of postwar Japanese democracy. The Left, as well as many critics abroad, would warn that Japan was about to remilitarize and become once again a threat to the rest of Asia. The Japanese public and centrist elites, however, would go along with the Right-wing, old-style nationalist agenda because they viewed it as the price that had to be paid to push reform through.

Once necessary changes to defense policy had been made, and if the Right seemed to go too far in pressing for a nationalist revival, popular opposition would mount and Centrists would cease their support. Right-wing leaders then had two choices. They could tone down their nationalist rhetoric and satisfy themselves with having pushed the national debate a step further toward the right. This is what happened with Prime Minister Nakasone, who abandoned plans to visit Yasukuni after 1985. Or they could be forced out and be replaced with a more moderate figure, as occurred with Prime Minister Nobusuke Kishi in 1960. Some significant changes would be made in terms of defense policy, although those changes generally proved less dramatic in retrospect than they were typically portrayed as being at time. Ties with neighboring Asian countries would be mended and even improved. And the Japanese people would relapse into their semi-somnambulant, post-nationalist slumber.

Prime Minister Abe today seems to fit very much the pattern described above. The confrontation with China over the disputed Senkaku-Diaoyu Islands in the East China Sea, which spiked up sharply since the summer of 2012, has provoked a profound sense of crisis in Japan. China's relentless stance on the islands, combined with emotional anti-Japanese riots in major Chinese cities, created a perception of threat in the Japanese public greater even than at the high point of the Cold War.

In 2007, Abe had been forced to step down as prime minister when his nationalist agenda led to a devastating defeat in elections for the Japanese Upper House. In the fall of 2012, however, Conservatives inside the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) were convinced that Japan needed a strong, pro-defense leader to face up to the Chinese challenge. They gave Abe another shot at the prime minister-ship, choosing him as party leader over other, more moderate figures. Having learned his lesson from his first term in office, Abe took pains to reassure Centrists in the party, as well as the Japanese public, that his top priority was economic reform. Abe also put many prominent pragmatists such as Kishida Fumio, Yachi Shotaro, and Kanehara Nobukatsu in key foreign policy posts.

Abe's nationalist instincts, however, could not be denied. Inevitably, whether out of deep personal conviction or in order to appease his own Right-wing supporters, Abe combined his efforts at defense reform with all the elements of the postwar Japanese conservative agenda: constitutional revision, educational reform, and a revisionist stance of history as signaled by his trip to the Yasukuni Shrine and a reopening of the debate over the thorny issue of the "comfort women."

Predictably, Abe's moves have provoked a storm of protest. Japanese liberal media outlets have accused the prime minister of opening the door to becoming embroiled in overseas military adventures and have been especially critical of what they portray as his undemocratic political methods. Beijing has sounded the alarm that Japan is once

again turning to militarism and has tried unsuccessfully to convince Washington that Japan could be a threat to the region. Meanwhile, in Seoul the newly inaugurated government of Park Gyeun He has expressed intense displeasure with Japan, suspending cooperation across a broad range of diplomatic and national security areas and making common cause with China in condemning Japan's historical revisionism.

Will the Abe administration today follow the pattern of previous conservative administrations? There are some signs that this is in fact taking place. Public opinion data shows that support for the administration is declining despite signs of continued economic improvement.¹¹ Opposition from within the government, in particular from his Buddhist coalition partners—the Clean Government Party—has forced Abe to water down parts of his agenda. He has abandoned for now pressing for constitutional revision and satisfied himself with merely reinterpreting the constitution. And even then, he has attached conditions under which the right to collective self-defense can be exercised.¹²

If the current cycle of Japanese nationalism holds true to past form, we can expect that Abe will either have to give up his nationalist rhetoric or be forced out of office, as his centrist allies and supporters abandon him and public support ratings plummet. In so doing, he will be replicating the fate of his grandfather and political role model, Nobosuke Kishi, who was forced out of power in 1960 as a result of the storm of controversy over the revision of the Mutual Security Treaty with the United States. History would repeat itself—as Marx one put it—not so much as tragedy but as farce.

History does not necessarily repeat itself, however, and there are reasons to fear conditions have changed in such a way that the outcome this time around will be far more tragic than it has been in the past.

New Problems in Old Bottles: The Changing Context of Japanese Nationalism

While there is much that is familiar about the current wave of Japanese nationalism, there are at least three ways that the international context in which it is unfolding has changed. Each one of these changes, taken by itself, suggests that the outside world

¹¹ Recent polls show support has dropped to 43 percent in the wake of the recent debate over redefining the Mutual Security Treaty to allow for the exercise of the right to collective self-defense. See “Naikaku Jiji teika 43%” [Support for Cabinet declines to 43%], *Asahi*, June 23, 2014, p. 1. Still respectable numbers, especially in the context of Japanese politics but lower than the 60 percent numbers that Abe enjoyed until recently. Supporters of the Abe administration stress that following Abe's November 2013 visit to Yasukuni, public approval ratings held steady at over 55 percent. However, this probably had more to do with the public's perception that the economy was on the mend than support for the shrine visit itself. Some survey data show that the public is in fact skeptical about the trip itself and is particularly concerned about the impact of the trip on Japan's foreign relations. See “69% say Abe should heed the fallout from Yasukuni,” *The Japan Times*, December 29, 2013, <http://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2013/12/29/national/69-say-abe-should-heed-fallout-from-yasukuni-poll/#.Us8VPbQUZm4>.

¹² See, for instance, Brad Glosserman, “Japan and Collective Self Defense: less than meets the Eye,” *PacNet*, no. 49 (July 2, 2014), <http://csis.org/files/publication/Pac1449.pdf>.

has become much more sensitive to Japanese nationalism. Taken together, they indicate that the region faces a very serious problem indeed.

The first is that other Asian countries, in particular China and the South Korea, have become ever more sensitive to Japanese historical revisionism over the past few decades. In both countries, anti-Japanese sentiments have been deeply embedded in their national identities for nearly a hundred years. In the early twentieth century, modern Chinese and Korean nationalism grew out of popular movements protesting Japanese Imperial policies. However, these anti-Japanese sentiments were tempered for much of the post-1945 period by pragmatic considerations. In the case of China, first Mao Zedong and later Deng Xiaoping found it useful to downplay anti-Japanese feelings in favor of courting Japanese support, first to help balance against the Soviet Union and later to assist in China's economic modernization. Similar motivations were at play in South Korea in the 1960s through 1980s, when authoritarian military governments in Seoul turned to Japan to support ambitious programs aimed at building up Korean heavy industry.

Beginning in the 1980s, however, both China and Korea underwent domestic political changes that allowed for the more open expression of public views. This was most clearly the case in South Korea, where a vibrant democratic order emerged in the late 1980s, following decades of military rule. But in China as well, there was a considerable loosening of controls on public discourse, as long as it did not directly challenge the rule of the Chinese Communist Party.

Under these new conditions, groups representing the victims of Japanese Imperialism came to the fore. In China, the central focus of a new generation of so-called history activists¹³ was the Nanjing Massacre; in Korea, it was groups representing the tens of thousands of so-called Comfort Women who had been pressed into sexual slavery for the Japanese military.¹⁴ In both cases, these narratives included a strong element of resentment directed against their own governments. While it remained impossible to criticize the Chinese Communist Party directly, it now became possible to protest the government for not being sufficiently nationalistic, and any apparent failure to condemn Japanese historical revisionism could become a lightning rod for popular criticism. Although Chinese political leaders could suppress such movements, it became increasingly costly for them to do so, and at times Chinese leaders could use those sentiments for their own purposes.

In Korea, the government's decades-long neglect of the former Comfort Women came to be seen as emblematic of the Korean state's willingness to subordinate the human rights of its citizens to the national interest. The fact that many leaders of post-1945 Korea had been in positions of authority during the colonial era, and thus had at least indirectly supported the systematic abuse and exploitation of their fellow Koreans, further heightened the emotional sensitivity surrounding the issue. While South Korea continued to need to cooperate with Japan on a wide range of issues, including trade, finance, regional institution building, and dealing with an increasingly unstable

¹³ James Reilly, *Strong Society, Smart State: The Rise of Public Opinion in China's Japan Policy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

¹⁴ C. Sarah Oh, *Comfort Women: Sexual Violence and Postcolonial Memory in Korea and Japan* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

North Korea, it became completely impossible for Korean leaders to ignore the long-suppressed issue of historical justice.

A second development was the increased economic and political power of other Asian countries. For over a hundred years, from the time of the first Sino-Japanese War into the twenty-first century, Japan was the dominant economic and at least potentially military power in the region. As late as 2000, China's GDP was only \$3 trillion (measured in purchasing parity terms), only two-thirds of Japan's. By the start of the twenty-first century, however, Japan's relative power had declined significantly. It now became possible for China, Korea, and other Asian countries to place pressure on Japan in ways that had been impossible earlier, including over historical issues.

This trend was already evident by the end of the Cold War. In response, Japanese policymakers began to try to tackle the historical issue in the 1990s, with a certain degree of success. By the late 1990s, Seoul and Tokyo appeared well along the path toward reconciliation, and Chinese and Japanese policymakers were successful in preventing the issue from overly affecting the diplomatic agenda. In the early 2000s, however, cooperation over historical issues fell apart completely. The immediate reason for the crisis was Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi's repeated visits to the Yasukuni Shrine beginning in 2001. On a deeper level, the crisis was also spurred by a backlash from Japanese conservatives, who felt that Japanese leaders in the 1990s were succumbing to a "self-flagellatory" version of history that would permanently undermine their efforts to create a healthy form of national patriotism. A general sense of national malaise brought on by over a decade of lowered economic growth, declining birth rates, and political ineptitude, exacerbated the conservatives' sense of frustration, and caused them to redouble their efforts to promote a Right-wing nationalist agenda. Perversely, Japan's relative decline made it simultaneously more sensitive to pressures from neighboring countries and more reluctant to accommodate those pressures.

In this context, tensions over a largely symbolic issue—history—began to spill over into other areas, including most importantly Japan's territorial disputes with its neighbors. These disputes—over the Dokdo/Takeshima islands with Korea and the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands with China—were of long standing and had been successfully managed by successive Japanese, Chinese and Korean governments. In the 2000s, however, they reignited, disrupting relations with both Seoul and Beijing. As a result, Korean-Japanese security cooperation came to a virtual standstill, while China began to send in ships and planes to challenge Japan's control over the Senkaku/Diaoyus. For both Korea and China, control over the disputed islands came to be defined as a historical issue. Korea connected Japan's continued claim to Dokdo/Takeshima to Japan's colonial annexation of Korea in 1910, while China argued that Japan's control over Senkaku/Diaoyu was an extension of the Sino-Japanese war of 1894–1895.¹⁵

In both instances, the United States quickly became involved. From the perspective of U.S. policymakers, Seoul and Tokyo, as the United States' two chief allies in East Asia, should be working together to deal with North Korea instead of fighting over a virtually worthless set of rocks in the Sea of Japan (or East Sea, as Korea insisted on calling it). Even more alarmingly, for the first time in the history of the U.S.-Japan

¹⁵ See Thomas U. Berger, *War, Guilt and World Politics after World War II* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), chapter 5.

alliance, Washington began to worry that Tokyo might drag the United States into a conflict in which it had no interest. While the United States as a matter of general policy refused to take a stance on who actually owned the islands, it clearly had a strong interest in preventing these conflicts from any further escalation.

Washington soon found itself frustrated by the tensions it faced in defending its interests. On the one hand, it came under pressure to reassure Tokyo of its support in the event of a conflict with China. On the other hand, the United States continued to be strongly committed to engaging China and turning it into, to use former deputy secretary of state Robert Zoellick's phrase, a "responsible stakeholder" in the international system. Even more frustrating was the apparent inability and even unwillingness of Korea and Japan to get along with each other, despite their many obvious common interests.

Washington's frustrations in coming to grips with the new situation in East Asia has been compounded by a perceptual disconnect between U.S. and Japanese policymakers. In Tokyo, the problem of history and territory are seen through the political cultural lenses described above. For the United States, however, the dominant historical narrative is that of the U.S. war in the Pacific, which began with Japan's treacherous attack on Pearl Harbor and is linked inextricably with the larger, just war waged by the United States and its allies against the forces of Nazism and Fascism. In American eyes, Abe's efforts to promote a more positive view of modern Japanese history seems to smack of historical revisionism, his tendency to minimize Japanese Imperial atrocities reminiscent of Holocaust denial. Even worse, Abe's tendency to downplay the cruelty of the Comfort Women system, as well as Japan's complicity in the forcible conscription of tens of thousands of women for sexual slavery, challenges fundamental human rights norms, especially those regarding sexual violence against women.

The Abe administration has tried to counter its negative image in the United States by stressing the many positive things that it is doing to bolster the alliance—moving forward on the relocation of the Marine Corps base in Futenma, joining the Trans-Pacific Partnership trade talks, and reinterpreting the Japanese constitution to allow (with certain qualifications) the Japanese Self-Defense Forces to take on a larger defense role. History, spokesmen for the Japanese government insist, is and should be treated as basically a domestic political issue. In addition, the Japanese Foreign Ministry has launched an active public relations campaign designed to support Japan's stance on the territorial and related issues based on historical and legal arguments.

Unfortunately, under current conditions in East Asia, Abe's nationalism very much becomes an issue for the United States. If Abe's nationalism leads Japan to needlessly provoke China over the Senkaku/Diaoyus, it undermines Washington's confidence in Japan's reliability as an ally. If Abe's stance on the Comfort Women and other historical issues continues to undermine cooperation between Tokyo and Seoul, it greatly complicates U.S. planning for dealing with military contingencies in the region and weakens U.S. diplomatic efforts to present a strong, united allied front. Japan's public relations makes matters worse in that it is spreading the perception that on fundamental issues such as human rights Japan "just doesn't get it." After two decades in which Japan's public image in the West has continuously improved, Japan's public

relations campaign perversely runs the risk of turning what used to be intra-Asian disputes over history into a transpacific issue as well.

Conclusions

Clearly, Japanese nationalism has become an issue for Tokyo and Washington in a way it never was in the past. While it would be wrong and even counterproductive to oppose Abe's efforts to promote a healthy form of nationalism in Japan, it would be just as much a mistake to pretend that this is purely a domestic issue that does not have serious foreign policy ramifications. Moreover, left unattended, the problems associated with Japanese nationalism are likely to get worse, potentially leading to a weakening of the alliance relationship and increasing the risk of militarized conflict in the region.

To deal with this problem, U.S. and Japanese policymakers will need to further intensify their diplomatic cooperation and extend it to new areas. The central challenges that face Washington and Tokyo are well known, the interlocking dilemmas of how to manage the rise of China while maintaining the alliance. The first dilemma revolves around the conundrum of how to engage China while at the same time dissuading it from aggressive behavior. The second dilemma centers on the central tension between reassuring an ally (in this case Japan, but also the United States) that it will not be abandoned in the event of a conflict, while simultaneously avoiding being dragged into a conflict in which one has no interest (for instance, over the Senkaku/Diaoyus).

While these tensions in alliance interests are challenging and cannot be fully resolved, they are not insurmountable. There are certain parallels here to the situation the United States and its European allies faced in the 1960s, when the rise of the Soviet Union's military power combined with the drive to engage Moscow through the policy of *détente* created considerable tensions within NATO. The solution at that time was to develop the so-called dual track approach—adopted by the North Atlantic Council in 1967—in which the allies defined both engagement and deterrence as central goals and that each should be pursued without undermining the other. Efforts at relaxing military tensions with the Soviet Union were to be paired with a commitment to maintaining an adequate defense posture; measures to strengthen defense had to be balanced with continued diplomatic outreach to Moscow.

A similar approach should be adopted vis-à-vis Beijing and modified for the military and economic realities of the region.¹⁶ In this context, history has to become a component of any engagement strategy. Washington and Tokyo need not come up with a consensus position on historical issues, and it would be wrong for the United States to insist that Japan offer unilateral apologies and compensation for past transgressions. It is important, however, that policymakers in Tokyo acknowledge the diplomatic importance of these issues and take steps—where possible—to reduce tensions over historical issues. In return, the United States may offer general diplomatic support to Tokyo when it reaches out and tries to manage or alleviate the

¹⁶ Fortunately, tensions in East Asia have not yet reached the levels seen in East-West relations during the Cold War. China is not as much a “clear and present danger” as the Soviet Union was, and countervailing economic and political ties between China, the United States, and other Asian countries are far stronger.

nationalist tensions that have emerged. This is particularly important in the context of the Japan-Korea relationship, where there is a real possibility for progress if both sides are willing to take the initiative.

Japanese flexibility on historical issues need not mean that Japanese conservatives such as Abe abandon their goal of promoting national pride. After all, it was Nakasone Yasuhiro, one of the most nationalist prime ministers in post-1945 Japanese history, who was the first Japanese leader to acknowledge that World War II was a war of aggression and that Japanese rule over Korea had been oppressive in character. The United States as well has been able to acknowledge that it has been guilty of historical misdeeds (e.g., slavery and Jim Crow) without diminishing the strong sense of pride that most Americans feel in their country. What is needed is for Japanese leaders to find ways in balancing the darker and brighter chapters of their nation's history for the sake of the larger national interest. If Abe and his successors can do so, they will have taken a giant step toward truly promoting a healthy sense of Japanese patriotism.

About the Author

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