

Smart Talk 3

Summary

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This product presents a policy-oriented summary of the Smart Talk.

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Reconciling Rivals: War, Memory, and Security in East Asia

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The question of reconciliation amongst East Asian countries, particularly between Japan and its neighbors, has long been a source of tension and debate. Many assert that the region's past, as well as disputes over that history, have affected regional security and hindered the development of a regional identity in East Asia.

Why has the process of reconciliation in East Asia been more difficult than in Western Europe? How can the region develop a shared history and a shared strategic interest to engage in reconciliation? Will building a common regional identity in East Asia ease security tensions and aid the process of reconciliation?

Such questions were addressed by leading experts at the East Asia Institute's third Smart Talk on July 9, 2009. The EAI invited Mike Mochizuki, associate professor of political science and international affairs at the Elliot School at George Washington University, to examine this complex issue of historical reconciliation in East Asia. Mochizuki discussed how contested memory and divided domestic politics within Japan have hindered reconciliation in East Asia, and how the United States should be involved in the reconciliation process. The following panel discussion, moderated by President Sook-Jong Lee, exchanged views on a number of topics related to the strategic context of historical reconciliation, Japan's attitude toward the process, the prospects of developing a common regional identity or a set of common values to ease tensions, and the challenges of developing a shared his-

tory.

Presentation

Contested Memory and Divided Politics within Japan

One of the obstacles to reconciliation between Japan and its East Asian neighbors is not just a matter of differences in historical narratives between countries, but also a division within Japan itself about historical memory. When it comes to history, perhaps Japan suffered not so much from "collective amnesia" but rather from "schizophrenia." In the years immediately following the war, the general consensus and commonality in Japanese discourse was the "victim" narrative. However, by the 1960s, there was a move to challenge the "victim" narrative and to begin addressing the perpetrator aspect of Japan's past, such as the tragic consequences of Japanese imperialism.

It has commonly been argued that the situation in East Asia differs from Western Europe's due to such contextual factors as geopolitics, the lack of a multilateral security mechanism (such as Europe's NATO), and the U.S. settling for security bilateralism in East Asia. However, Mochizuki argues that the United States' preference in Asia is not security bilateralism but a multilateral collective defense pact. And instead of being the driver of memory politics, the security organization in East Asia has essentially been driven by memory politics.

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Furthermore, the divide in Japanese domestic politics remains one of the most enduring problems in the country today. As long as the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) stays in power, Japan's gestures of contrition are motivated not by a robust, domestic political force or an internal relooking of history, but by external diplomatic pressure, which often creates a backlash. When the LDP fell from power in the early 1990s, there was a brief change in Japanese politics, during which Prime Minister Hosokawa stated that Japan had launched a war of aggression and also gave an extemporaneous apology during his visit to Korea. Various initiatives such as the Kono Statement on the comfort women issue or the Murayama statements had domestic support, but they were also met with strong domestic opposition. And unfortunately, the progressive opposition did not stay in power long enough to effectively change the domestic discourse.

The LDP is currently in power, and the only way Japan can address the problem of reconciliation is by overcoming this political divide in order to achieve some consensus. An ideal situation would be for the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ), in coalition with the Social Democrats, to stay in power for a long-term period. At this point, however, it is unlikely that the DPJ will become a single party majority.

A more realistic alternative, then, is to try to find some middle ground. While most Japanese agree that Japan did a lot of wrong things in East Asia, they also justify the war with the United States as an act of self-defense and that its colonial rule in Korea had many positive influences as well. The question that remains is whether a consensus in the middle

can even provide a potential foundation for reconciliation. For example, will reconciliation with Korea only be possible if Japan's view of history goes all the way to where progressive democrats and social democrats are? East Asian reconciliation is thus hindered by a divided historical memory within Japan

The Role of the United States

The role of the United States in the process of historical reconciliation is both a matter of history as well as of strategic interest. Since the United States played a role in some of these historical problems, it has a responsibility – perhaps even a moral one – to aid in the process of reconciliation. In addition, reconciliation in East Asia serves a significant strategic interest for the United States, especially given the end of the Cold War, the rise of China, the uncertainties on the Korean Peninsula, and now the American embrace of East Asian community building.

In order for the United States to play a constructive role in historical reconciliation, it should be self-reflective and self-critical in its approach, a perspective that is currently lacking. Its current attitude – one in which the United States is an innocent bystander, but is on a high moral ground and thus able to push Japan – is likely to be met with repulsion, especially from the Japanese conservative camp. The United States must recognize its historical role not only as the enabler of Japanese imperialism but also having been an imperial power itself. As long as the United States continues to deny its imperialistic history, it will not be able to play a constructive role in historical reconciliation today, especially with the Japanese. Despite the alliance relationship between

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the United States and Japan, historical reconciliation is still problematic because the alliance itself is very thin and a result of Cold War interests, which meant that many historical issues were swept under the rug. Therefore, the United States must recognize that there is a historical issue between Japan and the United States, and must deal with such issues as the Tokyo War Crimes trial, the atomic bombings, and the imperial responsibility issue.

The United States has already been involved in the reconciliation process in a reactive, ad hoc way, but it must also take a more systematic approach. First, it should actively promote security understanding and cooperation between Japan and Korea without making Japan think that it is taking the side of Korea or China on some of these historical debates. To accomplish this, the United States must move beyond its “hub and spokes” security architecture to multilateral security architecture. Creating a more conducive strategic environment and regional multilateral alliance relations – such as that in Europe – is the key to achieving historical reconciliation in East Asia.

Second, the United States must push for a multilateral approach to dealing with the issues of redress and compensation. It should *not* press for reinterpretation of the San Francisco Peace Treaty to allow for individual claims. Such a move would only damage U.S.-Japan relations. The Asian Women’s Fund has been a unilateral effort by Japan, as opposed to the German slave labor initiative, which was multilateral and diplomatic. An initiative for redress and compensation for forced labor in Japan must be multilateral, with the involvement of South Korea and possibly even China. At the same time, the key objectives of

any such initiative should be acknowledgement, contrition, and education.

Developing a Shared History

In terms of developing a shared history, Mochizuki disagreed with the common belief that developing a shared history means achieving some kind of regional consensus or agreement on history. Instead, reconciliation efforts should take a more realistic form, such as by the fact-collecting and evaluation process described by Susan Dwyer, during which facts are collected and then evaluated in order to distinguish between fact and interpretation. The point is to eliminate the most egregious distortions by establishing the most obvious falsehoods. And to aid in this process, there should be both international and domestic pressure for Japan to release more information, so that the facts can be evaluated and the most egregious distortions eliminated.

Factual evaluation makes it possible to determine the plausible range of narratives that might be consistent. This is not necessarily agreement, but more a matter of narrowing the differences. The ultimate objective is not to negotiate a single interpretation, but to identify and eliminate a set of interpretations that are mutually coherent. In so doing, former adversaries will come to share a range of historical views from which they can agree to disagree. And hopefully over time, the lines of debate and disagreement will begin to transcend nationality with greater frequency.

In addition to factual evaluation, examining other experiences, such as French colonial rule of Algeria, will also be helpful in establishing certain international standards of appropriate and expected behavior for historical

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reconciliation. The German model could be applied as well, albeit in a more complex, as opposed to a mechanical, manner. Furthermore, since state-to-state reconciliation is not sufficient in many respects, scholarly dialogue is important in working out the norms of shared history. At the same time, it is also important to include the producers of popular culture into these discussions, as it is popular culture – in the form of films, novels, comic books, TV programs, and the like – that shape popular conceptions of history. When it comes to these memory wars, we are now in a ceasefire or truce, thanks to the current leaders who have pursued their own material and political interests. Such a ceasefire has the danger of complacency about history issues. At the same time, however, this ceasefire can also be an opportunity for South Korea to invest in developing dialogues and institutional networks.

In the end, the focus of historical reconciliation efforts should be on institution building and the development of a trilateral initiative among the United States, Japan, and Korea. Under President Obama’s leadership, the United States is as close to being self-reflective and self-credible, and has the potential to play a more constructive role in the process of historical reconciliation in East Asia. The climate in Japan is generally hospitable, especially due to the strong presence of the DPJ, whose center of gravity generally leans towards pro-reconciliation – at least much more than the LDP. South Korea, who has steadily increased its economic and cultural exchanges with Japan, has also been more hospitable. Such a trilateral initiative can help persuade China as well.

Discussion

DPJ’s Position on Past History Issues

One participant asked for Mochizuki’s personal insights on the DPJ’s stance regarding the issue of history, as Mochizuki is acquainted with most of the party’s leaders. According to Mochizuki, DPJ leaders instinctually believe that dealing with the history issue more forthrightly is in Japan’s own national interest. At the same time, however, the DPJ’s manifesto for the upcoming election is focused on domestic issues, and the party has not yet developed a consensus on foreign policy and on U.S.-Japan alliance issues. While the DPJ refers to the history issue in a very positive light, it is not the top priority, and will probably not even be addressed in the manifesto. Mochizuki observed that activism regarding the history issue still remains at the lower levels of the party.

Reconciliation at the Societal Level

In response to Mochizuki’s argument that historical reconciliation should take place not only at the state-to-state level but also at the societal level, another discussant raised the concern that reconciliation at the societal level would be more forward-looking, with less focus on compensation or what happened in the past. Mochizuki refuted this comment by emphasizing that reconciliation is an ongoing, almost never ending process. The point of compensation is not to say that once the victims have received compensation and an apology, society is free to forget the past and move on. Rather, the people of today – even though they did not commit the acts – have a

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collective responsibility to remember what happened in the past, and this is a responsibility that continues into the future. Furthermore, there is an inter-generational responsibility in the sense that Japanese society as a whole must acknowledge that even average Japanese citizens were involved, and are responsible because they are beneficiaries of the past.

The same participant also noted that Mochizuki’s presentation about how to interpret and develop this reconciliation failed to answer the question of how East Asia can achieve any concrete form of reconciliation. Mochizuki noted that reconciliation is a two-way process – not only must the wrongs be acknowledged, but the victims must also accept the other side’s sincerity. He expressed the need for the Japanese to address the fact that its peace constitution, for example, simplified the positives of Japanese imperialism without understanding the negatives.

Another discussant questioned who would be willing to initiate efforts for reconciliation at the societal level, since Japanese scholars do not seem to want to discuss the topic, particularly such sensitive issues as the comfort women issue. Mochizuki disagreed with this comment, asserting that there are some Japanese scholars who *are* willing to discuss historical reconciliation at the societal level, and that it is more a matter of engaging them and broadening the circle. In this respect, Mochizuki stated that it is the responsibility of the Japanese government to support this kind of research and scholarly work.

Strategic Context of Historical Reconciliation

Regarding Mochizuki’s emphasis on the role of domestic memory politics in hindering

Japan’s reconciliation efforts – despite overall recognition that reconciliation is necessary in order for the country to maintain its influence in Asia, one participant suggested the need to consider the influence of external security and economic relations as well. If DPJ members today recognize that it is in Japan’s national interest to reconcile with its neighbors, the discussant suggested that perhaps Japan did not recognize this interest in the 1940s and 1950s because it did not feel the need to reconcile with its regional neighbors. With the recent rise of China and other Southeast Asian countries, however, external security and economic relations may have been a driver for the politics of historical memory today.

In response, Mochizuki stated that the LDP in the 1950s did indeed have an interest in achieving reconciliation with its regional neighbors, although it was more a superficial interest concerned with building commercial relationships with Southeast Asia and Australia. With China, Japan had to be cautious in pursuing reconciliation with the Republic of China (ROC) because it wanted to leave open the possibility of improving relations with the People’s Republic of China (PRC), although the Cold War divide prevented them from doing so. And regarding reconciliation with Korea, Mochizuki observed that Prime Minister Yoshida’s primary concern was the repatriation of Koreans, not historical reconciliation. In addition, there was a strategic reason for not reconciling with Korea due to Japan’s hesitation to get involved in the security of the Korean Peninsula. In turn, the socialist party also did not push for reconciliation in the 1950s because the Social Democratic Party had been not just an enabler but also a supporter of Japanese militarists, making the top-

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ic a sensitive one. Therefore, initiatives aimed at reconciliation did not begin until the 1960s, with the beginning of compensations, study groups, and dealing with the history. Japan at this time also began to normalize relations with Korea due to economic interests.

Another discussant underscored the importance of the strategic context of historical reconciliation, especially since the debate over history is very political because it forms a national identity. In this sense, he suggested that South Korea, Japan, or China have no reason to build a common regional strategic identity for peace, because there is no strategic motive to push people into historical reconciliation. And since reconciliation is not really about the past but more about the future, he questioned whether there is a future-oriented strategic region where historical reconciliation can begin. Mochizuki responded that there are at least three strategic motives for the region to pursue historical reconciliation. First, regional strategic interest hinges greatly on how China is perceived by its neighbors. If the common view regarding how to deal with the rise of China is to balance it, then historical reconciliation, particularly between Japan and China, may not be viewed favorably because China should be contained. However, both Japan and the United States do not favor pursuing an engagement policy, as this has historically led to hegemonic conflicts. From this perspective, then, there indeed *is* a strategic imperative to promote historical reconciliation because power transitions – which often lead to security dilemmas – are hard to manage. Second, Mochizuki asserted that fears of Korea becoming “unanchored” and drifting towards China – possibly due to a dispute on history between Japan and Korea – are another

strategic motivation for reconciliation; such a situation would be sub-optimal for the United States as well. Finally, if the notion of an East Asian community is viewed as a positive strategic objective, then the history issue is an obstacle that must be cleared. Economic interactions can only do so much to build a community, and historical reconciliation is necessary in order to pursue this strategic objective.

The Role of a Common Regional Identity

The discussion then turned to whether the region needs to have common values, such as in the form of a democratic alliance, in order to have a common lens by which to view history. Mochizuki expressed his doubts on how clear a liberal lens on East Asian history would be. Although it may be straightforward on human rights concerns such as the comfort women issue, it would be more ambiguous in terms of the fire or atomic bombings, for example. Liberalism could argue that democracy should be preserved using any means necessary, or it could contend that the ends do not justify the means. In addition, liberal states have shown mixed approaches to prosecuting atrocities, with the United States, for example, not joining the International Criminal Court. Mochizuki thus questioned whether an agreement on social values would translate into regionalism. Even with the notion of Asian values, there has not been a positive announcement of it, nor has it been incorporated in community-building efforts.

Based on the assumption that regional conflict or rivalry can be somewhat reduced if the people in East Asia share a common identity much like the European case, another participant raised the question of how to form a

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regional identity in East Asia, and whether the concept of identity could affect overall security concerns in the region. In response, Mochizuki observed that while the Europeans have the Euro and the European Parliament as symbols of their regional identity, Asia is missing commonly agreed upon symbols on what Asia is. Although there are “raw materials” for creating such symbols, there are no prominent efforts aimed at generating the notion of pan-Asianism. In fact, such a notion is being defined in negative terms. Mochizuki thus expressed his skepticism, stating that the notion of regional identity in East Asia still remains somewhat hollow with no real content.

In analyzing the prospects of developing a regional identity, it may be relevant to consider how the young generations view their national identities. One participant raised the question of how to use the changing identities of Korean youth and Japanese youth to form a common identity in the future. He pointed out that today’s Korean youth, for example, are nationalistic but also cosmopolitan, and will therefore view historical reconciliation differently. Mochizuki was doubtful whether the Japanese embraced a clear national identity. According to a recent public opinion poll, if Japan were attacked, Japanese young people responded they would either surrender or flee. Another discussant added that Korean young people also seem to be losing their sense of patriotism, although their level of patriotism is still higher than that of Japanese youth.

Searching for a Moral Imperative?

Regarding Japan’s motivation for historical reconciliation, one participant observed that

Japanese intellectuals, government policy makers, and even journalists tend to perceive historical reconciliation as necessary primarily due to strong pressure by neighboring countries. In this sense, Japan’s efforts are very reactive rather than proactive. This presents a problem, according to the discussant, because historical reconciliation can be delayed if there is no national interest to pursue it. History is taught in limited terms in Japanese public schools, and many Japanese intellectuals also seem to avoid addressing the historical issue. For this reason, many Koreans and Chinese wonder if Japanese society, particularly the average Japanese citizen, understands past history. If historical reconciliation is pursued because neighboring countries strongly request it, the participant argued that self-reflection cannot occur within such a context. He raised the question of how the Japanese can be persuaded to take a proactive stance on historical reconciliation, and suggested a different way of teaching history in public schools or conveying the necessity for historical reconciliation to the Japanese public.

Mochizuki countered that statement, asserting that just because national interest drives reconciliation policies it does not necessarily mean that Japan’s motivation is reactive. If there is no national interest, according to Mochizuki, then there is no strong motivation, either. In Japan, it has been reactive because most Japanese felt there was not a strong national interest. In the past, Japan could always rely on the United States; even if it became isolated in Asia, it still had the United States. However, this is no longer possible, providing a stronger motivator for historical reconciliation.

In terms of seeking reconciliation as a

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moral imperative, Mochizuki suggested that Japan’s motivation for reconciliation is tied to some enlightened version of national interest, rather than to a moral imperative. This may be due, at least in part, to the fact that Japan lacks visionaries like German Chancellor Willy Brandt who emphasize that reconciliation is necessary because it is noble for a country to do so. Furthermore, the moral imperative for reconciliation is often associated with transnational religious movements. In Europe, various religious organizations were actively involved in healing the wounds of war. This is not the case in East Asia, where religious organizations seem to remain largely silent.

Lastly, it was implied that without historical reconciliation or historical reflection, Japan cannot be a leader in East Asia or become a genuinely democratic society. Mochizuki refuted this point by arguing that democracies are not always good at reconciliation. Although they may make progress in certain areas, in other areas democracies can also be self-righteous about their cause. He concluded that it is important to understand that while the Japanese recognize what Koreans are asking of them, it is a very high standard and therefore a very challenging task.

Conclusion

The Talk highlighted the difficulties of reconciliation between Japan and its East Asian neighbors. Although Japan has in recent years shown a stronger interest in pursuing reconciliation with its East Asian neighbors, its motivation still seems to be related to strategic

national interests, as opposed to some form of moral imperative. Divisive domestic politics in Japan, continued disputes over history, and the lack of a more multilateral approach to reconciliation further complicates the issue. In addition, the notion of an East Asian identity still remains weak and premature.

The participants agreed that reconciliation must not only recognize the past, but also look toward the future. However, Japan’s past history still remains a rather sensitive topic in Japan, and many Japanese are hesitant to even discuss the past. Thus, how to strengthen the Japanese resolve for reconciliation, broaden the scope of reconciliation initiatives, and develop a shared history remains a challenge in achieving historical reconciliation in East Asia.■

— Mike Mochizuki holds Elliott School’s endowed chair in Japan-U.S. Relations in memory of Gaston Sigur. He came to the George Washington University from the Brookings Institution where he was a senior fellow. He was formerly with Research and Development (RAND) Corporation where he served as co-director of the Center for Asia-Pacific Policy.

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