

## History as a barrier to charting a better future

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### Abstract

The official history of any nation, however big or small, embodies a blend of fact and fiction. Besides such politicized construction of history, Asia must also deal with harmful historical legacies, revisionist history, and territorial revisionism that are threatening its peace and economic renaissance. The squabbles over history and remembrance have already cast a long shadow over Asia's extraordinary rise. Yet history problems are only intensifying, with growing nationalism among the major actors fueling disputes over everything from territory and natural resources to war memorials and textbooks. The time is overdue to draw a line under the past. Nations in the region must find ways to commemorate their past without alienating, insulting, or offending their neighbors. Asian nations cannot change the past, but they can strive to shape a more cooperative future — without, of course, forgetting history's lessons.

### Introduction

Ever since Japan rose dramatically as an economic powerhouse in the 1970s, analysts have predicted the arrival of the “Asian century.” However, history, often linked to colonialism or past aggressions, remains a barrier. A potent mix of domestic politics, growing geopolitical competition, and military tensions has turned history into a driver of corrosive nationalism. Conflicting historical memories and narratives constitute one of the biggest impediments to political reconciliation.<sup>1</sup> This holds long-term ramifications for Asia, including its continued ability to spearhead global economic growth and gain centrality in international relations.

Make no mistake: whatever historians may say, history is never an objective chronicle. It is not uncommon for countries to create self-serving, sanitized narratives about their past to purge the wrongs they inflicted on others and to portray their historical opponents as rapacious foes always at fault. Many nations, in fact, openly blend historical fact with myth. As George Orwell said, “Who controls the past controls the future. Who controls the present controls the past.”

Let us be clear: history is written by the victors. Japan, as a nation vanquished in World War II, remains under pressure to this day to make amends for its colonial history and activities during the war. However, there is no similar pressure on Britain, France, and other colonial powers that emerged victorious in that war, whose outcome shaped the current international institutional structure. The victors' atrocities in their colonies and during World War II, for example, have

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<sup>1</sup> Gi-Wook Shin and Daniel C. Snieder (eds.), *History Textbooks and the Wars in Asia: Divided Memories* (London, Routledge, 2013).

been whitewashed or simply forgotten.

## **The politicization of national commemoration**

The squabbles over history and remembrance in Asia are particularly worrisome because they cast a long shadow over the region, reinforcing negative stereotypes of rival nations and helping to rationalize claims to territories long held by other states. With attempts to rewrite or sugarcoat history persisting to this day, history remains a principal obstacle to enduring peace and stability in Asia.

The paradox is that East Asia's history problems have been intensifying lately, with growing nationalism among major actors such as China, Japan, and South Korea fueling disputes over everything from territory and natural resources to war memorials and history textbooks. These bitter disputes over issues of historical memory are poisoning relations.

Take national commemoration, which is usually linked with national identity. Erecting memorials to newfound heroes is inciting greater regional rancor and recrimination.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, inter-country squabbles in Asia over remembrance are threatening to sow fragmentation and instability. They have also fueled Asia's more recent territorial disputes. The fact is that the politicization of history, including through textbook revisions along nationalist lines, makes it very difficult to establish institutionalized regional collaboration.

How did Yasukuni, a stately Shinto shrine in the heart of Tokyo, become the center of an international controversy? For an answer, it is more instructive to look not so much at the present but recognize how rival states in East Asia are using history as a geopolitical instrument. Moreover, unresolved historical grievances have constricted the diplomatic space for building reconciliation among China, Japan and South Korea. It is in this atmosphere of nationalist grandstanding over conflicting historical narratives in East Asia that Yasukuni has become an oversized issue.

Yasukuni, built in the 19th century to honor Japan's war dead, enshrines the spirits — not the bones or ashes — of Japan's 2.5 million war dead. It is not widely known overseas that Yasukuni honors Japan's war dead not just from World War II but also from earlier wars extending from the Satsuma Rebellion to World War I, when Japan was allied with the United States. Among the World War II dead the shrine honors are 14 individuals who were convicted as Class A war criminals by a military tribunal established by the World War II victors. The 14 include Hideki Tojo, the prime minister who ordered the attack on Pearl Harbor largely in response to the U.S. oil, steel and scrap-metal embargoes on Japan. The Pacific War was triggered not just by Imperial Japan's frenzy of territorial conquests but also by U.S. sanctions on Japan. As the U.S. political scientist Graham Allison has said in the context of the present U.S.-China tensions, "Could a trade conflict become a hot war that ends with nuclear explosions? As preposterous as that may sound, remember that Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor happened after the United States imposed crippling sanctions on Japan, bringing this country into a war that ended with atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki."<sup>3</sup>

In keeping with the dictum that history is written by the winners, the so-called International Military Tribunal for the Far East (which was established by a charter issued by U.S. Army General Douglas MacArthur) delivered "victors' justice," with its proceedings tainted by extreme arbitrariness not seen at the Nürnberg trials in Germany. In fact, one of the tribunal's justices, Radhabinod Pal of India, dissented from the other judges to contend that the trials were conducted unfairly as an exercise in retribution by the victors. While the Nürnberg tribunal tried

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<sup>2</sup> Hiro Saito, *The History Problem: The Politics of War Commemoration in East Asia* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2016).

<sup>3</sup> Graham Allison, "How Trump and China's Xi Could Stumble Into War," *Washington Post*, March 31, 2017.

twenty-two Nazi leaders, including one in absentia, and convicted nineteen of them, the trials under MacArthur's charter lasted two years (more than twice as long), with all the twenty-five Japanese defendants convicted. Seven of them were sentenced to hang, sixteen were given life imprisonment, and two were sentenced to lesser terms. However, with the Cold War heating up, the U.S. occupation authorities in Japan by 1958 pardoned or paroled the remaining convicts, further undercutting the credibility of the original trials (several of the convicts had died of natural causes earlier in prison). Today, Pal's sculpture adorns the gardens of Yasukuni.

It was only in 1978 that the names of the fourteen "war criminals" were added to the list at Yasukuni, which memorializes the collective memory of the fallen soldiers, and it was not until 1985, after more than twenty post-war visits by prime ministers to Yasukuni, that China raised the Yasukuni issue in the wake of then Prime Minister Yasuhiro Nakasone's official visit to the shrine to pray for peace and for the souls of the war dead. Nakasone turned what previously had been private visits to the shrine into an official visit as part of a pledge to make a "final accounting" of the taboos of Japan's postwar era. Not only were funds from the national treasury used to pay for the flowers that Nakasone placed at Yasukuni, but also he signed the shrine's visitor book as "Prime Minister Yasuhiro Nakasone," unlike previous visits, when he had signed as "a man named Yasuhiro Nakasone who is prime minister."<sup>4</sup>

Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, for his part, had long held back from visiting the Yasukuni Shrine. Abe did not pray at Yasukuni during his first stint as prime minister from 2006-2007. However, Abe found little reason to restrain himself after Beijing in November 2013 aggressively established an air defense identification zone (ADIZ) that usurped international airspace over the East China Sea and covered the Senkaku Islands (which China claims sovereignty over but does not control). Abe's visit to Yasukuni in late 2013 was also a way to assert Japan's right to independence from external pressure, and it inflamed nationalistic passions in China and South Korea.

To China and South Korea, Yasukuni remains a spiritual symbol of Japan's prewar militarism, with its adjoining Yūshūkan war-history museum promoting the view that Japan waged aggression in Asia to liberate it from European colonial rule. Many foreigners contend that the museum presents a revisionist interpretation of twentieth-century history to portray Japan as the victim in order to rationalize its militaristic past. However, it is often overlooked that in contrast to war museums in a number of other countries, like Musée de l'Armée at Les Invalides in Paris, France, the Yūshūkan is a strictly private museum not officially endorsed by the state; it is administered by the Shinto organization that is in charge of Yasukuni. Since the end of the war, there is a strict separation between the state and religion in Japan that forbids the government from interfering or intervening in religious affairs.

All this, however, cannot obscure a key question: even if Japan still needs to atone for its past actions, doesn't it have the same right today as other nations to honor its citizens killed in World War II and the wars before? All nations, after all, honor their war dead, even if they were the aggressors, plundering distant lands, as European colonial powers did. The United States honors those who died fighting its wars of aggression, including in Vietnam and its decade-long occupation of Iraq.

Even as the values of pacifism and rejection of war remain largely dominant in today's Japan, the Japanese culture, with its martial traditions, places a high premium on honoring the war dead, with the spirits of the fallen soldiers deified. Indeed, the valor of Japanese soldiers is instilled by the belief that, even if they die in battle, they will live on in spirit. In the absence of any other commemorative monument, Yasukuni serves as Japan's war memorial. Japanese politicians, especially those on the political right, like to compare Yasukuni with the Arlington National Cemetery outside Washington D.C. that also honors and memorializes the war dead.

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<sup>4</sup> Sam Jameson, "Nakasone's Visit to Wartime Shrine Criticized," *Los Angeles Times*, August 16, 1985.

Given that a prime ministerial visit to Yasukuni now ignites nationalistic passions in China and South Korea, would these countries accept an alternative war memorial in Japan? What if Tokyo proposed building a national war memorial where Japan's leaders could pay respects to the collective memory of the fallen soldiers without igniting international controversy? Such a proposal would most likely come under immediate attack from China and South Korea as a new Japanese project to honor past militarism. In other words, no war memorial, given Japan's imperialist history, would be free of controversy in today's geopolitical environment.

Another classic example of resurgent history issues linked to colonialism is the century-old case of Korean activist Ahn Jung-geun. The case exemplifies history's divisive hold. Considered a terrorist in Japan, where Ahn was hanged, but a hero in South and North Korea, Ahn assassinated a top Japanese leader, Hirobumi Ito, in 1909 at the Harbin Railway Station in China. Ito was a highly decorated, four-time Japanese prime minister and the first resident-general of Japanese-ruled Korea. In recent years, that case has resurfaced after China opened a memorial hall at the Harbin Railway Station in 2014 to commemorate Ahn. Indeed, as if to cement Ahn's status as a hero in Korea,<sup>5</sup> his image has appeared on a 200-won postage stamp in South Korea, while Ito's image can be seen on Japan's 1,000-yen note.<sup>6</sup>

The new Ahn memorial in Harbin is actually part of the larger geopolitical tug of war in East Asia. The hall was built at the suggestion of South Korea's now-impeached president, Park Geun Hye, during a meeting with Chinese President Xi Jinping in the summer of 2013. Xi, seizing the opportunity to drive a wedge between America's two main Asian allies, quickly built the memorial to Ahn. Japan responded by blasting China for lionizing a terrorist and propagating a "one-sided" view of history — a move that, Japan asserted, was "not conducive to building peace and stability."<sup>7</sup>

The irony is that China, while portraying the Yasukuni Shrine as a symbol of Japan's unrepentant view of past militarism, found no contradiction in opening a memorial hall honoring an assassin. "History is the teacher of life," China's official news agency, Xinhua, said on the occasion of the opening of the memorial glorifying a murderer.<sup>8</sup> "With Japan treading a dangerous path once again, the need for vigilance and a joint international effort is clear if we are to prevent a Japanese militarist resurgence," it added. The construction of the Ahn memorial has been likened by some to building a statute in Dallas to President John F. Kennedy's killer, Lee Harvey Oswald.<sup>9</sup>

The Ahn memorial — intentionally designed to be antagonistic to Japan — is just one example of how national commemoration can be manipulated to serve narrow geopolitical agendas. Of course, there is no dearth of cases where one country's heroes are villains for another.

## **Varied experiences, varied reactions**

If one examines China, South Korea, India, Taiwan, the Philippines, and Indonesia, it is apparent that national feelings and reactions to historical, especially colonial, experiences vary significantly across the Asian region.

South Korea, where hyper-nationalism is also a way to erase the memories of close cooperation of the Korean elites with Japanese colonial rulers, has sought to purge all vestiges of Japanese colonial rule. On both sides of the divided Korean Peninsula, Korean nationalism is roused by a common factor — a deep sense of historical victimization by larger powers that

<sup>5</sup> Ahn Jung-geun's image on 200-won postage stamp, <https://goo.gl/4EkgfX>.

<sup>6</sup> Bank of Japan, "Banknotes, The Bank's Treasury Funds and JGS Services," <https://goo.gl/joqd5X>.

<sup>7</sup> Alastair Gale, "Chinese Shrine to Korean Assassin Irks Japan," *Wall Street Journal*, January 21, 2014.

<sup>8</sup> Xinhua, "Memorial of Korean Patriot, Reminder of History," January 19, 2014.

<sup>9</sup> Jennifer Lind, "When History Humiliates Former Enemies," CNN, January 3, 2014.

treated Korea in the past as a vassal state or even annexed it during different periods of its history. North Korea boycotted the 1988 Summer Olympics because they were held in Seoul, yet such is the underlying cross-border Korean nationalism that people in one Korea cheer for the other Korea when it competes with any other country, especially Japan. Against this background, South Korea still insists that Japan address lingering issues over its annexation of Korea more than 100 years ago.

Not all Asian countries, however, seek to obliterate their colonial pasts. They include the Philippines, Singapore, and Indonesia, which were also victims of Japanese aggression. India, which fell prey to British colonialism, has also largely moved on.

In fact, India continues to transact much of its key government business from British-era edifices, and some of its major criminal and civil laws date from the colonial period. In fact, after independence, India voluntarily adopted British-style parliamentary democracy, although this system is rife with inefficiencies and other drawbacks, as the experiences of not only India but also Britain show just in recent years. The parliamentary system might suit a small, homogenous nation but, in a large, diverse country like India, it is at the root of many political ills, besides fostering a fractious polity. It speaks for itself that the U.S. occupying authorities imposed a parliamentary system on Japan, rather than the American-style presidential system. This was done apparently in order to preclude a strong federal government in charge of Japan's destiny. The U.S. president has immense executive powers and can, for example, tear up long-standing trade agreements or wage wars in secret, without Congress and the courts being able to stop him. By contrast, the parliamentary system has fostered coalition governments in India and elsewhere.

Whether it be from strength or weakness, the fact is that India has long declined to hold any grudge against Britain for its nearly 200 years of colonial exploitation and plunder of the Indian subcontinent. Around the start of the 18th century, as the Mughal Empire began to gradually fragment across the subcontinent — a development that led to European imperial powers initially eyeing India and then intervening, one by one — India's share of world GDP stood at 27 percent, according to the British economist Angus Maddison.<sup>10</sup>

When the British seized India, India was clearly one of the richest societies in the world. Not surprisingly, the British labeled India, with its size and wealth, as the “jewel in the crown” of the British Empire. By the time the British left India, though, they had reduced it to one of the world's poorest. According to Maddison, India's share of the global GDP stood at just 3.8 percent in 1950, just after independence.<sup>11</sup> In the words of the award-winning Indian author Shashi Tharoor, “The British conquered one of the richest countries in the world and reduced it, after over two centuries of looting and exploitation, to one of the poorest, most diseased, and most illiterate countries by 1947.”<sup>12</sup>

Britain's brutal colonial past in India included engineering a famine in Bengal that led to millions of deaths, punitive expeditions, scorched-earth policies, and even concentration camps.<sup>13</sup> By diverting Indian resources to support Britain's role in World War II, Winston Churchill not only presided over the hideous Bengal famine in 1943 that left some three million Indians dead, but he also mocked the Indian suffering, saying the starvation was “merrily” culling the

<sup>10</sup> Angus Maddison, *The Economic and Social Impact of Colonial Rule in India in Class Structure and Economic Growth: India & Pakistan since the Moghuls* (London: Routledge, 2006), chapter 3.

<sup>11</sup> Angus Maddison, *The Economic and Social Impact of Colonial Rule in India in Class Structure and Economic Growth: India & Pakistan since the Moghuls* (London: Routledge, 2006), chapter 3.

<sup>12</sup> Shashi Tharoor, *An Era of Darkness: The British Empire in India* (New Delhi: Aleph Book Company, 2016).

<sup>13</sup> Madhusree Mukerjee, *Churchill's Secret War: The British Empire and the Ravaging of India during World War II* (New York: Basic Books, 2010).

Indian population.<sup>14</sup> In truth, this was a major atrocity, but since Churchill was on the side that won World War II, the blood on his hands mattered little in the victors' historical narrative that prevailed globally with the war triumph.

In this light, it is remarkable that India, which prides itself as the world's largest democracy, remains a member of the Britain-led Commonwealth of Nations. India's equanimity and lack of rancor vis-à-vis Britain stand in stark contrast to South Korea's unforgiveness about its suffering under Japan's colonialism. Like India, Taiwan — a former Japanese colony — also displays a more tolerant view of its period of colonial subjugation.

China, for its part, still harps on its "century of humiliation" and colonial degradation that began with Britain's victory over Manchu-ruled China in the First Opium War in 1839. In this "century of humiliation," Western powers intervened and imposed unequal treaties on the Qing dynasty in Beijing and Imperial Japan invaded and occupied parts of China. Sun Yat-sen, who founded the Republic of China, once said that China's nineteenth-century fate was worse than India's because "India was the favored wife of Britain while China was the common prostitute of all the foreign powers."<sup>15</sup> In reality, the Qing dynasty was not Han Chinese; it was established in the seventeenth century by the Manchus who seized Beijing. Remaining in power until the early twentieth century, the Qing conquered the lands of other non-Han Chinese people, trebling the size of the empire's territory as compared with the preceding Ming dynasty (1368-1644). Like the Mughal integration in India, the Qing respected the Confucian political tradition and Sinicized non-Chinese minorities in their empire, even as their rule left a "Manchufied" imprint on Chinese politics and society.

Still, China's experiences under Japanese and Western colonialism were a key factor in the rise of the Chinese Communist Party, which convinced many Chinese that only it could restore the country's pride and which today still harps on its "heroic" role in "the people's War of Resistance against the Japanese aggression." The paradox here is that China today is itself using colonial-era principles to create a Sino-sphere of client or tributary states. With the intent to corner natural resources in distant lands, dump goods in their markets, and serve its other interests, it is employing predatory finance to ensnare states in a debt trap. In essence, this is an imperial project aimed at making real the mythical Middle Kingdom.

Since coming to power in 1949, the Chinese Communist Party has unfailingly played the history card to instill fear in Chinese society of foreign powers encircling China. As its ideological underpinnings have eroded, it has made ultra-nationalism the legitimating credo of its monopoly on power. Just as the United States presents itself as the world's indispensable nation, the Chinese Communist Party — inflating China's past achievements and capitalizing on the country's dramatic economic rise since the 1990s — presents China as central to global economics, politics, and culture. According to the Harvard University academic Graham Allison, China and the United States today share one similarity: "Both have extreme superiority complexes. Each sees itself as without peers."<sup>16</sup>

Indeed, no country plays the history card with as much relish and ingenuity as China. In recent years, for example, it has sought to draw attention to the atrocities committed by the Imperial Japanese Army before and during World War II. Through government projects and subsidies, China, among other things, has expanded and renovated war museums memorializing Japan's 1931-1945 invasions. As though to stir its people into a frenzy of patriotism, China in 2015

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<sup>14</sup> Sheila Musaji, "Winston Churchill's Bigoted Statements Prove Nothing," *The Muslim American*, June 9, 2013.

<sup>15</sup> Shivshankar Menon, "The China Conundrum," *ICS Analysis* (May 2016).

<sup>16</sup> Graham Allison, "How Trump and China's Xi Could Stumble into War," *Washington Post*, March 31, 2017.

introduced two new national memorial days to commemorate China's long battle against Japanese aggression in World War II: "War against Japanese Aggression Victory Day" on September 3 and "Nanjing Massacre Day" on December 13 (Japanese troops captured Nanking, or Nanjing, on December 13, 1937, and Japan officially surrendered to the Allied Powers on September 2, 1945). China has also other days dedicated to remembrance of its long conflict with Japan, including September 18, which marks the day Japanese forces entered Shenyang city, opening the path to a wider Japanese takeover of northeast China.

Such is China's widespread politicization of history that its official calendar, to be clear, is also dotted with days of commemoration for events and causes not linked with Japan. Such national days are not public holidays; rather the commemoration is marked by feisty speeches and essays. Yet no issue better illustrates China's use of history to whip up nationalism at home than Japan. For example, as the 70th anniversary of the end of World War II approached in 2015, China announced a grand military parade in Beijing on September 3, with the Communist Party's mouthpiece, the People's Daily, saying the parade would display China's military prowess and "make Japan tremble."<sup>17</sup> An increasingly muscular China, however, is rattling not only Japan but also its other neighbors.

What if the victims of China's aggressions since 1949, such as Vietnam and India, emulated its example by dedicating days to commemorate Chinese attacks on them? China, while seeking to obscure its own aggressions and occupations since the communist "revolution," including the 1951 annexation of the sprawling Tibetan Plateau and invasions of India and Vietnam in 1962 and 1979, respectively, has long called on Japan to "take history as a mirror" and demonstrate greater remorse for its past aggressions. Should India designate October 20 as the "Day of Infamy" to remind itself of the lessons from the Chinese trans-Himalayan invasion, which began on that day in 1962?

In fact, China illustrates how historical denial is unabashedly selective. The Chinese Communist Party, for instance, seeks to shore up its legitimacy by harping on Japan's pre-World War II militarism but denying China's own post-1949 aggressions. A visit to the Military Museum in Beijing shows how China employs revisionist history both to portray itself as the victim even when it initiated war (such as against India and Vietnam) and to rationalize its assertive territorial claims today. Such is the enforced historical amnesia about China's invasions of India and Vietnam that few Chinese know about the attacks.

A Pentagon report has cited examples of how China engaged in military preemption in 1950, 1962, 1969, and 1979 in the name of strategic defense. The report, released in 2010, stated: "The history of modern Chinese warfare provides numerous case studies in which China's leaders have claimed military preemption as a strategically defensive act. For example, China refers to its intervention in the Korean War (1950–53) as the 'War to Resist the United States and Aid Korea.' Similarly, authoritative texts refer to border conflicts against India (1962), the Soviet Union (1969), and Vietnam (1979) as 'Self-Defense Counter Attacks.'"<sup>18</sup> All these cases of preemption occurred when China was weak, poor, and internally torn, so China's rapidly accumulating power today naturally raises legitimate concerns in Asia. Indeed, China's seizure of the Paracel Islands from Vietnam in 1974, its 1995 capture of the Mischief Reef from the Philippines, and its 2012 seizure of the Scarborough Shoal from the Philippines are also examples of offense as defense.

Take Cambodia: while China insists that Japan "shoulder the historical responsibilities for crimes committed by past generations," as Chinese Premier Li Keqiang put it in 2015, Beijing's

<sup>17</sup> Franz-Stefan Gady, "Parades to Fear, Not Celebrate," *New York Times*, March 20, 2015.

<sup>18</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2010*, Report to Congress Pursuant to the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2010 (Washington, D.C.: Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2010), 24.

message to Cambodia is to forget the past. The reason? China has yet to acknowledge its role in one of the worst genocides in post-World War II history. In the 1970s, as part of the Mao Zedong-initiated effort to carve out a client state in the context of serious Sino-Soviet ideological conflict, China aided the rise to power of the Marxist leader Pol Pot and his Khmer Rouge in Cambodia, a development that led to mass starvation and mass slaughter. The brutal regime was overthrown by invading Vietnamese forces in 1979 but not before the Khmer Rouge claimed the lives of up to two million people in just four years of rule. Beijing, however, continued to recognize the Khmer Rouge as the legitimate rulers of Cambodia until 1992.

The Chinese Communist Party's gory history is also apparent from the domestic pogroms that occurred in the first decades of its own rule. Yet political power in China still rests with the same party and system responsible for the death of tens of millions of Chinese during the so-called Great Leap Forward, Cultural Revolution, and other state-induced disasters. The decade-long Cultural Revolution upheaval claimed the lives of one million or more Chinese, including China's head of state, Liu Shaoqi, who died in custody in 1969 after two years of abuse. The death toll from the Cultural Revolution could have been as high as eight million, according to Song Yongyi, who served five years in prison in that period and became a scholar of the Cultural Revolution — a research focus that led to a second incarceration in 1999 for stealing “state secrets.”<sup>19</sup>

In fact, it was Mao's quest to subdue nature that precipitated the greatest genocide in modern world history — the “Great Leap Forward,” a forced attempt at the collectivization of agricultural and industrial output that helped create one of the world's worst famines between 1958 and 1961. Some 36 million people perished (more than three times the number killed in World War I) in the supposed Great Leap Forward, according to the well-researched 2008 book *Tombstone* by longtime Chinese communist Yang Jisheng.<sup>20</sup> However, a Western scholar, Frank Dikötter, who accessed the Chinese Communist Party's files relating to the horror, estimates that the Great Leap Forward was responsible for at least 45 million deaths.<sup>21</sup>

Add to the picture the ruthless crushing of student-led, pro-democracy demonstrators at Beijing's Tiananmen Square in 1989. Hundreds, perhaps thousands, of civilians were killed in the Tiananmen massacre, China's most significant political event in a generation. That the Communist Party continues to monopolize power despite its past gory excesses indeed is remarkable. China is now the oldest autocracy in the world. As an international newspaper put it, “Its constant demands that Japan square up to the past would be more convincing if it were not so wantonly dishonest about its own bloodstained history.”<sup>22</sup>

As for Japan, its historical narrative is complex and difficult, especially in relation to China and South Korea, because in the last century Japan was a victor and a loser, as well as an oppressor and a victim. It was a colonizer, yet between 1945 and 1952 it was occupied by the United States. That occupation period has greatly shaped Japan's political, economic, and educational systems. It is extraordinary that Japan has not changed one word to this day in its U.S.-imposed Constitution, although constitutional reform is linked to national-security reform and national-security reform, in turn, is linked to the country's changing security environment.

To be sure, Japan's history problem with its neighbors goes back much farther than World War II. Japan decisively defeated Manchu-ruled China in 1895, only to be defeated and occupied by the United States fifty years later. In between those two great wars, Japan colonized Korea and

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<sup>19</sup> Verna Yu, “'Enemy of the People' Historian Song Yongyi Gives as Good as He Gets,” *South China Morning Post*, February 19, 2013.

<sup>20</sup> Yang Jisheng, *Tombstone* (Mùbēi), in Mandarin, vols. 1 and 2 (Hong Kong, 2008). The book has not been translated into English thus far. It has been banned in mainland China.

<sup>21</sup> Frank Dikötter, “Mao's Great Leap to Famine,” *New York Times*, December 15, 2010.

<sup>22</sup> *Financial Times*, “Asia Should Focus More on the Future Than the Past” (editorial), August 16, 2015.



invaded Manchuria and China, following the model of Western colonial powers of the time. It is thus no surprise that the baggage of history seriously weighs down Japan's relations with China and the two Koreas.

Even the Chinese-Korean relationship has a history problem, as underscored by China's revisionist historical claim to the ancient kingdom of Koguryo, founded in the Tongge River basin of northern Korea. This claim prompted U.S. Senate Republican staff members to warn in a December 2012 report that Beijing "may be seeking to lay the groundwork for possible future territorial claims on the Korean peninsula."<sup>23</sup> The Koguryo kingdom bestrode the period before and after Christ and, at its height, included much of Manchuria. The posting of the claim by the Chinese foreign ministry in 2004 was seen as an attempt to hedge China's options with a potentially unified Korea.

### **The factors at play**

What explains the fact that China harps on the colonial ravages it suffered, South Korea is prone to dredging up historical grievances, and India, Taiwan, the Philippines, and Indonesia are more tolerant of their colonial pasts? Domestic politics, educational systems, regional geopolitics, and other factors contribute to these varying reactions in the different countries about their colonial experiences.

The fact is that, in an economically integrated but politically divided Asia, relations between many countries remain trapped in a mutually reinforcing loop: the baggage of history weighs down interstate relationships, with poor political relations, in turn, helping to magnify and accentuate the history problem, thus reinforcing inter-country ties being held hostage to history.

There are at least three reasons why history issues have resurfaced with a vengeance in Asia. The first factor is that, within a few years of World War II's end, Asia fell into a Cold War freeze that precluded any serious discussion on history. Such a discussion became possible only after the Cold War between the U.S. and Soviet blocs ended. The end of the Cold War was actually followed by the start of Asia's own cold war and the disinterring of the ghosts of history.

A second factor is Asia's economic rise. The vicious circle in which many Asian states find themselves has a clear catalyst: Asia's rising prosperity. As their economies have expanded, Asian countries have gained the confidence to construct and exalt a new past, in which they either downplay their own aggressions or highlight their resoluteness in the face of brutal victimization. This trend, by letting loose the demons of nationalism, has helped resurrect ugly questions of history.

The third factor is underlined by the rise of a powerful, revisionist China that plays the history card to justify its territorial creep in the South and East China seas and the Himalayas. China currently has unresolved land or sea border disputes with 11 of its neighbors, including one of the world's smallest nations, Bhutan, and its technical ally North Korea. In all the cases, China's claims are based not on international law but on purported history, including the contention that its merchants or sailors "got there first" or that Tibet enjoyed ecclesial or tutelary links with certain territories in the past. By building mega-dams and other hydro engineering structures in its borderlands, China is also disturbing the status quo on the cross-border flows of Asia's major rivers, which originate on the Tibetan Plateau.

To make matters worse, China has incurred no international costs for its revisionist activities or even for flouting the 2016 ruling of an international arbitral tribunal, which knocked the bottom

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<sup>23</sup> Chico Harlan, "China Might Block Eventual Korean Unification, Report Says," *Washington Post*, January 18, 2013.

out of its expansive claims in the South China Sea.<sup>24</sup> In fact, Beijing has publicly ridiculed the tribunal's ruling, which held that China has no legal or historical basis to claim the South China Sea. Through its contempt for the ruling, China is saying that it should be the judge in its own cause. More significantly, it also highlights a "might makes right" strategy that aims to extend Chinese control to strategic areas and resources by gradually altering the status quo. The strategy focuses on a steady progression of steps to create new facts on the ground by confounding and outwitting neighbors while avoiding a confrontation with the United States, which sees itself as a geographically non-resident power in Asia.

To be sure, Asia's history problem extends beyond China. In fact, all countries' legitimizing narratives blend historical fact and myth. In some cases, though, historical legacies can gain excessive influence over present policies to the extent of overwhelming the capacity of leaders to make rational policy choices. Historical grievances should not be allowed to trump mutual economic and security interests between any two countries.

That history continues to hinder relations even between democracies is apparent from the strained relations between America's closest allies in East Asia — South Korea and Japan. South Korea clings to the past while Japan wishes to forget the past. Japan believes that it has acknowledged and apologized sufficiently for its war crimes, and that it is now time to move on. South Korea vehemently disagrees with that position. For example, the now-impeached former South Korean president, Park Geun Hye, called on Japan to face up to the historical truth by resolving the "comfort women" issue — referring to the sexual exploitation of Korean (and other) women by the Imperial Japanese Army. Indeed, Ms. Park persisted in raking up the past even at the expense of the bilateral relationship.

## **Beyond the history spats**

In Europe, the more time that has passed from the bloody wars in the first half of the twentieth century, the more the historical animosities and ill will have lessened between traditionally rival countries. In Asia, paradoxically, the opposite is true: since the end of World War II, the antagonisms have only intensified with the passage of time, resulting in diplomatic relationships being held hostage to history. As a result, the history problem is now more dangerous than it has been for years.

Asian states have two ways essentially to deal with their history problems. One way can be called the minimalist or self-restraint approach, involving mutual commitments not to disturb the status quo or rake up historical grievances. Avoiding provocative statements or actions is the essence of this approach. The other way is a more challenging proactive approach, pivoted on initiating concrete healing. Such constructive action centers on building historic reconciliation through negotiations and by enhancing mutual trust.

Either approach is possible only if Asian states are willing to come to terms with history or at least to stop resurrecting the ghosts of history. Without sincere efforts to step out of the shadows of history, squabbles over remembrance, textbooks, and other issues will continue to spur competing and mutually reinforcing nationalisms and foster tensions and instability in bilateral relationships.<sup>25</sup> Such feuds will also be used to justify efforts to disturb the territorial or maritime status quo. To help build new bridges across the interstate divides, the politicization of history

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<sup>24</sup> Permanent Court of Arbitration, Award by the Arbitral Tribunal in the Matter of the South China Sea Arbitration, PCA Case No. 2013-19, July 12, 2016, <https://goo.gl/twe9Nn>.

<sup>25</sup> See Mikyoung Kim (ed.), *Routledge Handbook of Memory and Reconciliation in East Asia* (Oxon, U.K.: Routledge, 2016); Gerrit W. Gong (ed.), *Memory and History in East and Southeast Asia: Issues of Identity in International Relations* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2001); and Jun-Hyeok Kwak and Melissa Nobles (eds.), *Inherited Responsibility and Historical Reconciliation in East Asia* (Oxon, U.K.: Routledge, 2013).

must stop.

Breaking out of the vicious cycle fostered by the history problems, of course, demands forward-looking governments and the will to pursue political reconciliation. Through sincere efforts, the adverse impacts of historical grievances and claims on bilateral relationships can be minimized. Honoring one country's heroes and history, for example, can be done without seeking to provoke, humiliate, or rub salt in the wounds of another nation. Nations should find ways to commemorate their past without alienating, insulting, or offending their neighbors.

It is past time to draw a line under the past. Asian nations cannot change the past, but they can strive to shape a more cooperative future — without forgetting history's lessons. To focus more on the future than the past, they should heed the wisdom of a pithy Russian proverb, "Forget the past and lose an eye; dwell on the past and lose both eyes."