



The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus

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On History, Nationalism and a Northeast Asian Community

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Upon my inauguration in February 2003, I laid out three major national policy goals: Establishment of participatory democracy, balanced development of society, and the opening of a new era for a peaceful and prosperous Northeast Asia. This third objective has served as the backbone of my government's foreign policy – an attempt to build a Northeast Asian community through a new regional order of cooperation and integration that transcends old antagonisms and conflicts among countries in this region. I believe this policy is vital in ensuring our survival and enhancing our prosperity.

For the past four years, I have proposed multilateral security cooperation, as well as regional economic, cultural, and social cooperation to realize the vision of a peaceful Northeast Asia. Unfortunately, several factors have impeded such efforts to create a peaceful and prosperous Northeast Asia, the North Korean nuclear issue being the biggest stumbling block. Tensions stemming from some historical issues among some countries in the region also serve as a major obstacle.

I had hoped and believed that Japan would act decisively to resolve the burden of its wartime history through an appeal to its own conscience and rational wisdom. Thus, I chose not to raise this subject as an official agenda or issue during my earlier summit talks with my Japanese counterpart. My goodwill was not answered. On the contrary, Japan undertook a series of actions to justify its grim history of wartime aggression by paying tribute to the Yasukuni Shrine, distorting and airbrushing history textbooks, claiming territorial sovereignty over Korea's Dokdo islets, and denying that the Japanese Imperial Army forced huge number of Asian women into sexual slavery during World War II. Such behavior cannot be tolerated, especially since some Japanese political leaders persist in purposely repeating these distortions. These developments are unfortunate even for the future of Japan.

Some have accused me of contriving tension with Japan over historical issues for domestic political reasons. I firmly reject this charge. It is the moral obligation of a leader to confront and redress past historical wrongs, to draw from them a lesson for the present and ensure that the future remains free from such mistakes. Such distortions of history will only perpetuate a vicious cycle of distrust and animosity, leaving all of us miserable.

While Japan has issued statements of regret and apologies for its past wrongdoings at various occasions, we are led to question their sincerity when they are marred by acts at odds with their expressions of repentance. Koreans were not alone in their anger facing the recent public denial by the Japanese leadership who denied the coercive nature of the euphemistically termed 'comfort women' forced into sexual servitude by the Japanese Imperial Army. Such remarks, effectively invalidating Japan's previous apologies, have evoked enormous criticism from the international community, including the United States, because they are tantamount to a rejection of universal values, and cast a cloud over our common future.

My commitment to setting history right is not limited to Japan. I have been equally stringent at shedding light on Korea's own turbulent history because true reconciliation, whether domestic or international, is possible only on a foundation of historical truth. Moreover, our understanding of history shapes our very future and destiny. Distortion of history and failure to confront the past can foster parochial nationalism and even ultra-nationalism. If left unchecked, such behavior risks drawing the region into a vortex of escalating conflict. In contrast, a shared understanding of history grounded on truth can lay the foundation for harmony and cooperation through the enhancement of open and enlightened nationalism.

The evolution of the European Union offers a rich lesson for the future of Northeast Asia in this regard. Europe has transformed itself, moving from a history of confrontation and destruction into a future of peace and prosperity.

Modern history of Europe is most noted for its wars – one may even describe early modern European history as a history of war. Over hundreds of years leading up to the 19th century, Europe endured numerous armed conflicts culminating in two devastating World Wars in the first half of the 20th century. The underlying force at work was destructive nationalism, which spawned mutual distrust and confrontation, leading to an incessant series of wars.

But in recent decades, the Europeans, befitting of a people who invented democracy based on rational thought, are writing a new history based on the lessons learned from their long string of wars. They are creating a new history of peace and coexistence, proving that they are capable of reflecting on their past and re-imagining their future. Some of the most prominent leaders are: Jean Monnet, who is called the father of European integration; Robert Schuman, who advocated the creation of the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC), an early experiment in European integration; Konrad Adenauer and Charles de Gaulle, who laid the foundation for integration of Western Europe; and Willy Brandt, who initiated reconciliation between Eastern and Western Europe.

Many scholars define the 19th century as the Age of Europe, the 20th century the Age of the Atlantic, and predict the 21st century will be the Age of the Pacific or Northeast Asia. I do not agree with this description. While we have seen the gravity of economic and productive power shift from Europe toward the Atlantic, and more recently to Northeast Asia, such a shift does not necessarily put Northeast Asia at the heart of world civilization.

There are many elements which constitute world civilization. Economic power and technological prowess may be the most basic or visible mark of civilization, but the more important element, I believe, is how well individuals and nations have learned to peacefully co-exist with one another. If we were to see democracy within a country as the domestic manifestation of the wisdom of co-existence, then the EU represents the highest level of the wisdom of co-existence achieved at the international level. Thus, I believe that the EU is still at the center of world civilization because it has been shaping an order of co-existence through peaceful and cooperative means.

On the other hand, regional order in Northeast Asia still remains unstable. Nationalistic stirrings, territorial disputes, and arms races are the dark specter of history which could be revived. The destructive and tragic history of Northeast Asia should never be repeated. It is for this reason that a regional community, anchored by institutionalized cooperation and integration, is urgently needed in Northeast Asia.



Efforts need to be made to foster the creation of a regional community of peace and prosperity, outlined in the following:

First, we need to create a new regional order for economic cooperation and integration. Although economic interdependence among Korea, China and Japan has intensified in recent years, the countries have not been able to institutionalize economic integration, even in the most rudimentary form, namely, a Free Trade Agreement (FTA). Cooperation and integration should be further institutionalized in order to maximize the economic potential of the region while mitigating the uncertainties arising from growing competition in the region, as well as to promote a more harmonious regional division of labor. In this regard, multifaceted cooperation in such areas as foreign exchange and finance, free trade, energy, transportation and distribution of goods, and the environment is essential for the integration of markets and institutions in the region.

Second, we need to forge a regime for multilateral security cooperation in Northeast Asia. The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), which helped bring down the Cold War wall of distrust and laid the foundation for an integrated Europe, provides a valuable lesson for multilateral security cooperation in this region. While it may not be easy to apply the European experience to Northeast Asia, given contextual differences, what is most important for the region in undertaking this initiative is the leadership to present a shared long-term vision to establish a multilateral security cooperation regime and the political will to realize that vision. Such an arrangement in this region need to be founded on mutual trust and respect, and in complementarity with existing security mechanisms.

Recent breakthroughs in the Six-Party Talks have profoundly heightened prospects for Northeast Asia's multilateral security cooperation. The September 19 Joint Statement, adopted in Beijing in 2005, linked the resolution of the North Korean nuclear issue to the establishment of a peace regime in Korea and multilateral security cooperation in Northeast Asia. More recently, the February 13 Agreement at the Six-Party Talks this year, which set forth initial actions to implement the September agreement, has activated a working group on a "Northeast Asia peace and security mechanism." I believe these efforts will contribute not only to resolving the North Korean nuclear problem, but also to laying the foundation of peace and security in Northeast Asia. In the future, the Six-Party Talks should evolve into a Six Party Foreign Ministers Talks, and at a separate forum, the directly involved parties should convene to discuss the permanent peace regime on the Korean Peninsula.

Third, the role of the U.S. should be underscored in creating a Northeast Asian peace and security mechanism. To build a thriving regional mechanism, a sense of belonging shared by its prospective members is just as important as geographical proximity. The U.S. has historically had wide-ranging interests in Northeast Asia and a strong feeling of attachment to the region. The participation by the U.S. as a key player in charting the order and structure of multilateral cooperation in Northeast Asia, therefore, will greatly contribute to enhancing stability and prosperity.

Fourth, we need to confront the past and build a common ground of historical understanding. Germany thoroughly reflected on its past after World War II, and has helped heal the long-festering wounds of European history. This process laid a psychological foundation for European integration. It also produced a tangible outcome, exemplified by Germany's initiative in co-authoring history textbooks with France and Poland that have contributed immensely to instilling in the next generation an accurate and common historical perspective. Germany's actions also represent a strong bulwark against divisive chapters of history that might otherwise stand in the way of progress toward a united future.

The European experience suggests that we could benefit from such joint history research projects among scholars in this region. Common history curricula, as well as history textbooks, could be instrumental in helping Northeast Asia to move beyond their respective national identities to a common identity for Northeast Asia. To this end, the Korean Government created the Northeast Asian History Foundation in 2006 and introduced East Asian history into the school curriculum as a separate course. Such an initiative will not only contribute to shaping a common regional identity, but also help transform parochial nationalism, a root cause of intra-regional conflicts, into an open nationalism which enables mutual trust and understanding.

Northeast Asia may continue to make remarkable economic progress, but it will fail to develop into a "center of civilization," unless it can build an institutionalized system of peace and coexistence as seen in Europe. Many difficulties certainly lie ahead, but we have to proceed boldly and with a common vision. Now is the time for countries of Northeast Asia to transcend the confines of traditional walls, behind which they seek immediate national interests.

Now is the time to write a new chapter of history based on mutual understanding and the common good of all our peoples. As early as a half century ago, the countries of Europe conceived common goals for the future and sowed the seeds of peace. Just as Europeans have done, the countries of Northeast Asia should become partners in resolving their differences and eliminating threats to their common future in pursuit of a new order of cooperation and integration.

History does not unfold in a pre-designed fashion. It evolves in a direction determined by the will and consensus of people who choose to walk the common path. There are bound to be many setbacks and hardships, but our conviction and commitment will pave the way to our common future. Marching together toward peace, prosperity, democracy, and a common community, that is progress in history.

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