

# Narrowing the Gap between China and Japan: Three Dimensions of National Identity and the Korean Factor

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## Abstract

In 2010–12, Sino-Japanese relations deteriorated without the Yasukuni Shrine or Chinese human rights violations in the forefront. To improve relations, attention should turn to what I label the ideological, sectoral, and horizontal dimensions of a national identity gap between these countries. They have each figured in the decline and offer more promise than the temporal dimension, with its symbols of wartime memories, and the vertical dimension, where sensitive Chinese internal affairs are at stake. The sectoral dimension comprises political, economic, and also cultural national identity, each of which has grown more intense in China, while cultural identity is still a force in Japan. Establishing an East Asian community is now the centerpiece in the hope that the horizontal dimension will be an impetus for mutual understanding, yet the notion of community is repeated with no sign of a shared vision of the outside world, whether the US role or the international arena and regionalism. With South Korea, their partner in trilateralism and North Korea's transformation at the crux of all three of these dimensions, this paper emphasizes the way divergent views of the peninsula keep growing in importance for bilateral relations. It suggests ways to reframe relations through cooperation over Korea. As difficult as Korean relations are for both states, it is a test case for their identity gap.

Sino-Japanese relations are troubled by a yawning gap in national identity.<sup>1</sup> Narrowing this gap is important for boosting cooperation. Reflecting on the period 2010–12, this paper focuses on differences over three dimensions of identity, leaving aside

<sup>1</sup> On how to analyze and estimate a national identity gap, see Gilbert Rozman (ed.), *National Identities and Bilateral Relations: Widening Gaps in East Asia and Chinese Demonization of the United States* (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press and Stanford University Press, 2012), especially the Introduction to Part 1, 'Conceptualizing National Identity Gaps in East Asia', and the Introduction to Part 2, 'The US Factor and East Asian National Identity Gaps', pp. 1–14 and 155–72.

the temporal dimension, which includes preoccupation with the symbols of wartime memories, and the vertical dimension, which is the arena for criticisms of Chinese authoritarianism and human rights violations.<sup>2</sup> While these conspicuous examples of the identity gap figure into the coverage later in the paper, the primary interests here are the ideological, sectoral, and horizontal dimensions, each of which is explained below. This paper argues that the most conspicuous dimensions in this relationship do not provide a promising starting point for a breakthrough, while it points to the Korean factor as an urgent test in the next phase of bilateral diplomacy.

Pragmatism that marginalizes ideology may be critical to trust, but in Japan the residue of ideology is still alive while in China ideology is regaining its force. The sectoral dimension comprises political, economic, and also cultural national identity, each of which has grown more intense in China, while cultural identity is still a force in Japan. Establishing an East Asian community is now the centerpiece in the hope that the horizontal dimension will be an impetus for mutual understanding. The notion of community, however, continues to be repeated with no sign of a shared vision of the outside world, whether the US role or the international arena and regionalism.

With South Korea their partner in trilateralism and North Korea's transformation at the crux of all three of these dimensions, this paper emphasizes the way divergent views of the Korean peninsula keep growing in importance for bilateral relations. It concludes with suggestions for reframing relations through cooperation over Korea.

The case for looking beyond historical memories and human rights abuses to comprehend Sino-Japanese mistrust is clarified by looking back at relations over the four decades since normalization in 1972.<sup>3</sup> In 1995 when China was capitalizing on the fiftieth anniversary of the end of the war with Japan and in 2005 when Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro visited the Yasukuni Shrine, the object of fierce denunciations, history took center stage. Yet, during the first decade after normalization and at other times, such as in 2006–08 when the emphasis was on the warming of bilateral relations, China's leadership, and mainstream writers, relegated history to the sidelines. It was not the impetus for the widening identity gap from 2010. Similarly, Japan's government and public often put human rights aside, especially in the period from 1972 to 1988 and even early in the 1990s when optimism intensified that a special relationship was within reach. After 4 June 1989, the mood changed for a time, the impact of human rights normally has been far less than in the United States. Other factors clearly stand in the forefront.

<sup>2</sup> For a fuller discussion of the six dimensions, see Gilbert Rozman (ed.), *East Asian National Identities: Common Roots and Chinese Exceptionalism* (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press and Stanford University Press, 2012).

<sup>3</sup> For the principal assessment of the evolution of Sino-Japanese relations covering national identities, see Ming Wan, *Sino-Japanese Relations: Interaction, Logic, and Transformation* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006). Also see Ming Wan, 'National Identities and Sino-Japanese Relations', in Rozman (ed.), *National Identities and Bilateral Relations*, Chapter 3, pp. 65–94.

If imperialist history and suppression of human rights are excluded from the picture, then a different impression forms about what is driving what many now see as an irreparable breach in mutual trust. Below I highlight the concept of autonomy, which bridges the three dimensions covered. It is connected to sovereignty and an escape from one-sided dependency, themes which have resonated strongly in China and Japan since the 1950s.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, it is rooted in the inward-looking orientation of China in the Ming and, especially, the Qing dynasties and in Japan's self-imposed sentence of solitary confinement known as *sakoku* in the Tokugawa era. Although in the early 1950s it appeared that China's embrace of socialism following the model of the Soviet Union under Josef Stalin and Japan's embrace of democracy based on the constitution written under the US occupation defied longstanding beliefs in what is essential for autonomy, the evidence over the past half century proves that striving for autonomy continues to be deeply embedded in the worldview of both countries.<sup>5</sup>

The intensity of the quest for autonomy in China and Japan is not the same, as indicated on all three dimensions of national identity highlighted in this paper. If the conservative revisionism still prominent in the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) retains its ideological coloring and the progressive pacifism not yet eliminated in the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) is part of an ideological legacy, neither has the significance of China's new ideological amalgam of socialism, Confucianism, and anti-imperialism. Furthermore, as the power of *Nihonjinron* as a force for Japanese cultural national identity and of Japan, Inc., and 'vertical society' as a symbol of economic national identity has receded, that of 'Eastern civilization' and 'harmonious society' has risen precipitously along with claims to a superior, top-down organization of society under the Chinese Communist Party.<sup>6</sup> Finally, on the horizontal dimension a stark contrast exists between China's anti-Western and Sinocentric outlook and Japan's acknowledgment that it must strive for regionalism on the basis of globalization consistent with US leadership. Given these contrasts, the meaning of autonomy for the two countries remains fundamentally different.

The Japanese are inclined to manage potential problems in bilateral relations in a subdued manner. This was true of the September 2010 boat-ramming incident in the East China Sea and the February 2012 island naming hubbub within the chain known as Senkaku or Diaoyu. Yet, China's leadership has shifted to intense reactions to make its unhappiness known. In 2010, public outrage knew few bounds until the Japanese government had released the Chinese captain accused of the intentional ramming. In 2012, President Hu Jintao canceled a meeting with seven official groups that had

<sup>4</sup> Yuichi Hosoya, 'Japan's National Identity in Postwar Diplomacy: The Three Basic Principles', and Ming Wan, 'China's National Identity in Postwar Diplomacy: Noninterference in Internal Affairs', in Rozman (ed.), *East Asian National Identities*, Chapter 6, pp. 169–95, and Chapter 10, pp. 257–72, respectively.

<sup>5</sup> Kazuhiko Togo, 'The Search for Japanese Identity by Foreign Service Officials', in Rozman (ed.), *National Identities and Bilateral Relations*, Chapter 1, pp. 15–44.

<sup>6</sup> Gilbert Rozman, 'East Asian Regionalism and Sinocentrism', *Japanese Journal of Political Science*, 13 (1) (March 2012): 143–53.

gathered in Beijing to celebrate the fortieth anniversary of normalization of relations. Also mentioned in the Chinese about-face was the absence of any former prime minister to indicate that Japan treats this relationship sufficiently seriously.<sup>7</sup>

The first requirement is to agree not only that the subdued way of managing relations is preferable, but also that narrowing the national identity gap based on a new framework of relations is desirable. Since the East Asian community is already a shared objective and the trilateral CJK (China–Japan–Korea) grouping is the venue for pursuing a new FTA (free trade area) within the larger ASEAN + 3 and ASEAN + 6, CJK constitutes the basis for the new framework discussed below. The Japanese approached the ‘arc of freedom and prosperity’ as if South Korea did not exist. Out of deference to North Korea, the Chinese have often excluded the South from non-economic plans. Putting it at the crux of a joint framework defies past thinking about a community, but has merit in obliging both countries to deal with the national identity gaps noted below. This exercise in specifying the nature of the existing gaps and pointing to a framework to narrow them is not based on the idealistic notion that a breakthrough is within reach. Rather, it is an acknowledgment of pessimism about ongoing developments coupled with a sober assessment of what it will take for a turnaround, however unlikely that is. If some object that adding a third state – South Korea – only complicates matters, my response is that Japan should rid itself of any illusion that a shortcut to regionalism exists apart from the South, and China should recognize that it cannot separate the Korean peninsula as its own bailiwick if it is serious about Japan and regionalism.

The impression has spread that Sino-Japanese relations have deteriorated episodically since 1989 in response to specific events or statements. Given this way of thinking, efforts to restore closer relations have concentrated on overcoming the setbacks rather than addressing their root causes. Beginning with the ‘friendship’ approach to bilateral relations, shortcuts that bypass the principal causes of distrust have been repeatedly tried. Even arguments centered on the temporal and vertical dimensions are unduly constrained in identifying various deeper sources of division. Concentrating on three other dimensions, we can probe for the heart of the problem.

### **The ideological dimension**

An ideological gap exists between China, whose communist leadership has brought ideology back to the fore, and Japan, whose leaders of both the LDP and DPJ have put new emphasis on ideological themes in recent years. This gap will persist. China’s commitment to socialism, anti-imperialism, and Sinocentrism is ideological in nature and gained momentum in 2008–10 with no sign of fading afterwards. The Japanese embrace of freedom, as in the ‘arc of freedom and prosperity’, may not be continuously showcased in a slogan, but it will not diminish, even if some success is realized in diminishing the role of revisionism and pacifism. Nor can we expect any leadership

<sup>7</sup> ‘Hu Meeting Nixed Amid Senkaku Spat’, *The Japan Times Online*, 12 February 2012.

to welcome China's outlook on the three parts of its ideological amalgam, including anti-imperialism that easily translates into demonization of today's Japan. Progress in bilateral relations is possible not by overcoming ideological differences, but by putting them in a different framework, in which ideology would be redefined.

Narrowing the ideological gap is a function first of all of a shift toward the center, independent of bilateral relations. Japan bears part of the burden, needing to clarify its support for universal values in a manner that suggests a shared ideology with the United States, Australia, South Korea, and various states in Southeast and South Asia. This means further discrediting of the progressive legacy, which in 2009 informed Hatoyama Yukio's rhetoric, and of the revisionist legacy, which still stifles pragmatic approaches toward territorial issues, textbooks, and regional diplomacy.

Without repudiating all past views, a forward-looking shift should suffice for Japan. The burden on China is greater. It has the difficult challenge of reversing course. The 2008–12 rising ideological intensity defies the requirements of bilateral progress. To change course on socialism and anti-imperialism to a return to the low-key approaches to these themes of earlier years may suffice. Sinocentrism, however, is a thorn in the path of mutual trust. China's leadership must reconsider its role in ideology, gaining trust by acknowledging the legitimacy of a region that is not centered on China. Let discussions proceed on the various options for regionalism, as explained in regard to the horizontal dimension below, but China's only hope for narrowing differences with Japan and many other neighboring countries is to divorce them from ideology.

Dislodging Sinocentrism will be difficult in part because it is now entangled with 'socialism with Chinese characteristics' and 'anti-hegemonism' as a code word for anti-imperialism and rejection of a significant, lasting role in the region for both the United States and Western civilization. Whereas the Japanese and South Korean quests for greater autonomy from the United States and a balance against Western civilization did not challenge the main currents from these external forces, China's challenge is much more far-reaching and steeped in censorship and one-party rule that hardens ideological thinking. Moreover, the fragmented nature of a collective leadership, in which the posts held by Li Changchun and Zhou Yonggang are being given to others with similar hard-line attitudes, complicates narrowing the gap.

The revival of ideology in China contrasts with the uncertainty over it during the 1980s. Despite Deng Xiaoping's clear message in 1979 on the 'four fundamental principles' (stifling the debate over the communist party's leadership, its theoretical sources, the prospects for change in China's political system, and the possibility that socialism would not prevail) and the purge of Hu Yaobang, who tolerated far more questioning on ideological matters than other leaders accepted, the decade of the 1980s saw almost no progress in reconstructing ideology. In contrast, since 1989, especially after 2008 with Confucianism reinterpreted to reinforce socialism there has been no let-up in ideological assertiveness. This has meant tightened censorship and greater encouragement for extreme views, including on socialism vs. capitalism.

Chinese politics pretends that an ideological consensus exists immune to any public discussion, while Japanese political campaigns avoid ideological debates. The idea of debates between candidates with differing views on ideology is rejected. This leaves concrete issues faced by politicians in office as tests of ideological change. In 2009, China's shift to stronger support for North Korea had ideological overtones, as it rekindled concern over Sinocentrism. Also, in 2009, Hatoyama's decision to stress the East Asian community centered on China, rather than to take advantage of Lee Myung-bak's outreach to Japan, was an indication that progressive idealism labeled 'Asianism', laced with a residue of revisionist resentment of South Korea, guided the choices of the DPJ. A decision in China to fix blame on North Korea for belligerence and to coordinate more closely with the United States, South Korea, and Japan could have transformative consequences for the region and China's ideological thinking. If Japan were to abandon claims to Takeshima, agreeing to call it Dokdo at the end of negotiations on fishing rights and other disputed matters, this too would be viewed as an ideological transformation. Since China was cooperating in 2006–08 with those who prioritize the North Korean threat and since Japan has gone 60 years without control over this disputed rock, the policy shift needed would not be revolutionary. The ideological significance, however, of a clear-cut shift would be far-reaching.

South Korea is of ideological significance to both China and Japan, but they should be better able to narrow the ideological gap with it. South Koreans are better disposed toward Confucianism than are the Japanese, and the Korean War has far less impact on Chinese opinion than Japan's aggression in the 1930s and 1940s. If China could shed the image of favoring North Korea for ideological reasons (many in the South appear ready to give it the benefit of the doubt), the anti-imperialist theme would be easier to manage. Since the 1990s, Japanese public opinion toward South Korea has improved a lot amid shared acceptance of 'universal values'. Coordination in facing China could draw the two countries closer, engaging it albeit with some hedging.

If China responds to the lowering of the ideological tension between Japan and South Korea as threatening, instead of seeing this as an opportunity to lower tensions with the two countries, then this could well suggest that its strategy is to divide them rather than forge a community. Japan should be suspicious if this is the case. Many in China lately have been warning others, particularly South Koreans, that cooperation with Japan or even the United States is playing into a containment strategy against China. Such zero-sum thinking is a warning signal. To turn South Korea against Japan or both countries against the United States should be understood as nothing more than Sinocentrism that widens all of the identity gaps.

If China and Japan are burdened by ideology, they have little room to explore pragmatic solutions to bilateral problems. If national interests alone are the driving forces, compromise is much more likely. This is desirable for dealing with their own territorial dispute, the multilayered nature of regionalism, and the challenge of joint approaches to dangerous situations, especially North Korea. On the one hand, lately Ishihara Shintaro, the governor of Tokyo and a longstanding revisionist, was intent on

interceding in the territorial dispute, defying China by selling the land with development the objective. On the other hand, Chinese ideologues, twisting views of anti-imperialism and Sinocentrism, are starting to press for Okinawa (the Ryukyus) in opposition to Japanese sovereignty. Ideology threatens to exacerbate tensions.

### **The sectoral dimension**

Despite growing economic interdependence, shared cultural background, and overlapping political challenges, China and Japan have during the past quarter century grown further apart in how they define this sector of their identities. On the political side, they are not, as in the 1980s, enduring one-party governments averse to US-style politics and groping for limited pluralism with the possibility of finding common ground. Japan's 'administrative guidance' could even have played a role in China's political reform. As Chinese officials explored limited political reform prior to 1989, the Japanese experience since 1945 drew attention, as an alternative to the repudiated, stagnant Soviet model and the feared, free-wheeling US model. As for a cultural model, Chinese writings on how Japan blended East and West and deviated from the individualism of the United States, in a successful approach to management and to social stability, was optimistic for relations before it gave way to scorn for the 'cultural fever' that endangered China, as it did the Soviet Union, and for the 1990s' Japanese cultural inertia in the face of urgent problems. In turn, Japan's romanticism about Confucian culture displacing alien communist characteristics yielded to alarm about a widening Sino-Japanese cultural gap. When China rejected political reform and its leaders lost any appeal in Japan, Japan came to represent political stagnation unable to address its mounting problems. Neither state had further appeal to the other in the sectoral dimension, which served as a starting point for a growing gap.

The three sides of the sectoral dimension have flipped from Japan's peak in pride in the late 1980s to China's peak two decades later. Whereas Japanese pride combined confidence in the continuation of its 'economic miracle' attributed to a superior society and *Nihonjinron* claims to a unique culture impervious to influence associated with modernization, Chinese arrogance runs deeper, rising rapidly as Japanese pride declined. It is rooted in even higher expectations of an 'economic miracle' persisting until the United States is left well behind, and reflecting state–society relations more distinctive than Japan's had been. In addition, the basis of cultural national identity is the assumption of millennia of a civilization distinct from others and not in need of borrowing. China's political national identity is an even greater contrast with Japan's, bolstered by views of centrality in history and of socialism as a source of uniqueness continuing from the second half of the previous century. Japan's peak gave it the optimism to think that the Chinese would want to draw closer and narrow the identity gap, whereas China's peak leads to a wider identity gap since the Chinese generally assume that they can now be more assertive against Japan while expressing with less disguise than before their nation's deepest identity claims.

The starting point for narrowing differences over sectoral identity is to shift toward pride in the regional economic success since the 1950s as part of triangular CJK cooperation, including an FTA. Instead of focusing on what is distinctive about China's 'economic miracle' and concentrating on the superiority of its state-owned enterprises, China would have to refocus on regional identity consistent with global standards. At the same time, all three states in this new FTA would highlight culture that is shared without agreeing to its Sinocentric character in support of communist authoritarianism. If these steps occurred, the political identity of a regional entity would begin to take shape, with protections against China using it versus the West. Neither country is prepared for such changes. For China, this would be a great jolt.

The rise of East Asia can be viewed as each of three countries demonstrating its superiority or as shared regional factors contributing to successive successes. If it is easier for Japan and China to recognize commonalities with South Korea, then this bilateral acknowledgment could be the starting point. The Japanese could highlight the economic overlap between the Japanese and South Korean models of modernization and the shared values that increasingly draw the two nations closer. Above all, there is room for shared political identity, as the Japanese acknowledge that their country has fallen from the top ranks of world power and will not recover while South Korea is a middle power with strikingly similar circumstances within the power balance of the Northeast Asia region. China's embrace of South Korea would require turning away from the sophomoric name-calling over cultural theft to recognition that Confucian traditions are regionally shared. The CJK FTA should be celebrated as a fitting climax to economic successes, with awareness that looming problems require even closer integration. Most importantly, China must narrow the divide over political identity. As long as it tilts toward North Korea politically, this gap is unlikely to be reduced.

The Sino-Japanese gap in economic, cultural, and political identity is greater than the gaps between either country and South Korea. Moreover, the incentives for South Korea to improve relations and reduce distrust with both China and Japan are greater, given the North Korean presence and its greater economic vulnerability. To maximize the positive contribution of the United States to narrowing identity gaps also raises the profile of South Korea, which has drawn closer to its ally and stands on the frontline in facing the North Korean threat, critical to Sino-US relations. The illusion that Sino-Japanese gap narrowing could occur independent of South Korea as well as the United States should be discarded by those serious about progress. A critical role will be played by the president elected to succeed Lee Myung-bak, who presumably will remain in office until 2018 and provide continuity missing in Japan.

To reduce the obsession with autonomy in identity, economic thinking has the advantage of drawing on the strong impact of accelerating economic integration. The CJK FTA offers an opportunity to agree not only on modest plans to lower trade barriers, but also a broader understanding on how to increase trust over fairness in dealing with theft of intellectual property, non-tariff trade barriers, including state procurement and the role of state-owned enterprises, and increased concerns that



zero-sum thinking is superseding win-win thinking. A new vision of joint economic identity, using regionalism to ameliorate nationalism, is a desirable starting point. Yet, economic identity without cultural and political identity is prone to reversal. If the new identity is seen as coming at the expense of trans-Pacific identity and US ties, then political identity will be confused. If the CJK vision lacks a model of more cultural trust and reduced gap widening in this area, then the widening discrepancy between ‘economics hot, culture and politics cold’ will not be reversed. Economic talks offer some promise, but leave issues that so far are unlikely to be addressed.

### The horizontal dimension

Japan and China were involved in early 2012 in a naming duel for the islands in their competing versions of their Economic Exclusions Zones (EEZs). On 29 January Japan named 39 places, leading to China’s warning to Japan that this infringed on China’s ‘core interests’. Rather than interpreting this as an outgrowth of the clash over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, which Japan should best try to keep from heating up, *Sankei shimbun* stated, in advance of the Party Congress, that China’s leaders are seeking to solidify military support, allowing its influence to grow, leading, in turn, to a hard-line posture.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, Chinese sources, especially the *Global Times*, interpret this dispute and others as proof of the remilitarization of Japan. As naval and air forces of the two countries come into ever closer proximity, rhetoric blaming the other side’s national identity makes confidence-building measures and trust more difficult. The immediate focus may be maritime boundaries and islands, but the larger context is the nature of regionalism or the future US role in the area.

The Japanese have spent more time pondering how to ‘reenter Asia’ and assert leadership there than how to coordinate with the United States and its other allies in a joint regional strategy. The case for the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) or Kevin Rudd’s ephemeral ‘Asia-Pacific Community’ proposal has not drawn the sustained support needed to persuade the Japanese public. The notion of ‘Asianism’ has mesmerized progressives and even many conservatives with faulty arguments about how it can be linked to ‘internationalism’.<sup>9</sup> When Foreign Minister Aso Taro in 2006 proposed the ‘arc of freedom and prosperity’, it was not coordinated with the thinking in any other state, including the United States, and did not even receive backing from the prime minister, Abe Shinzo, or from Aso two years later when he assumed the top position. As the Obama administration has demonstrated, the optimal strategy for approaching China is to forge regional consensus with others to proceed in unison.

China’s strategies for regionalism have floundered. It has taken great pride in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), guided by the ‘Shanghai spirit’, but the four participating Central Asian states resist China’s proposals for strengthening

<sup>8</sup> *Sankei shimbun*, 30 January 2012, p. 1.

<sup>9</sup> Gilbert Rozman, ‘Internationalism and Asianism in Japanese Strategic Thought from Meiji to Heisei’, *Japanese Journal of Political Science*, 9 (2) (Spring 2008): 209–32.

it economically, strategically, or culturally, and Russia is so skeptical that it counters with the 'Eurasian Union'. China's hopes also centered on ASEAN + 3 or ASEAN + 1; yet most Southeast Asian states sought more balance from the East Asian Summit as it was established and enlarged, with further US cooperation sought in security and through the TPP. The Six-Party Talks were the other showcase of China's embrace of multilateralism until its defiant backing for North Korea exposed the shallowness of this posture. Sino-Japanese cooperation in the Six-Party Talks has been minimal, as the existing agreement on ASEAN + 3 proved to have a narrowly economic purpose.

The situation worsened in the summer of 2012 at the ASEAN Regional Forum when China pressured host Cambodia to refuse to issue a communiqué, which most of ASEAN sought as the basis of an ASEAN code of conduct for the South China Sea. As tensions deepened over China's military assertiveness toward the Philippines and Vietnam in disputed waters and Japan in the East China Sea, especially over the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu islands, China's interest in multilateralism was in doubt.

The lynchpin in the horizontal dimension remains perceptions of the role of the United States, an obsession in all three of these states. It is the core of what all see as internationalism, not the United Nations, which Japan's strategic thinking overrated from the Kishi era and China's thinking applauds as a venue to block the application of 'universal values' through its and Russia's threat of veto power. Only agreement that regionalism includes the United States except on narrowly economic matters and is built on the foundation of the international system, not in opposition to it, has a chance of being realized. Japanese–South Korean consensus would be a necessary but not sufficient condition. Above all, it is China that must reconsider the relationship of regionalism and internationalism to reassure these two US allies.

Referring to South Korea as 'balancer', Roh Moo-hyun was roundly criticized for exaggerating its potential clout. Yet, its role as 'facilitator' keeps growing, seen in the many international summits it hosts. China may have regarded ASEAN as well as Russia as alternative partners for boosting multilateralism in Asia, but alienation of South Korea would doom its aspirations for regionalism. It serves as a critical link between emergent regionalism and established internationalism. Regretting its loss of a similar role, marked by greater leadership aspirations, Japan would benefit by joining forces with South Korea and capitalizing on longstanding US aspirations for a triangular alliance system steeped in values. In dealing with the South China Sea, India's 'look East' moves, Russia's interest in multilateralism and developing what is now called the 'Far Eastern Republic', and North Korean divisive strategies, Japan has ample reason to increase cooperation with South Korea in accord with US aims. This would build a foundation for Sino-Japanese cooperation through regionalism.

CJK talks have the potential to narrow national identity gaps should the concept of the East Asian community be taken seriously and linked to a parallel search for clarity on China's approach to the international community as well as a Japanese–South Korean understanding of a new Asia-Pacific community. The meaning of the term 'community' cannot be ignored if progress is to be made. The foremost goal of an

international community is peace. Yet, in the summer of 2012, threats to peace in the Middle East were rising, as Russia and China seemed determined to assist the Assad regime to survive in Syria, and the United States was warning that Syria's ally, Iran, would not be allowed to acquire nuclear weapons or reach the point where it could do so quickly. Japan has little chance to influence the impending showdown. Sino-US relations appeared poised to worsen without recognition that China is playing the role of a 'responsible stakeholder', a starting point in 2006–08 for the upswing in Sino-Japanese relations at a time when Sino-US cooperation was seen favorably.

The most obvious test of the East Asian community is to define it in a manner that endorses an Asia-Pacific community to the satisfaction of Japan as well as South Korea. This would require a sharp about-face from China, increasingly insistent on an exclusive community consistent with Sinocentrism. Discussions of a 'harmonious world' are steeped in references to the 'tributary system', a hierarchical order with no balance of power and no place for the West as a political and cultural presence in East Asia. Aggressive assertion of territorial claims and opposition to the alliances that have ensured stability for more than half a century deprive 'community' of any substance, which could be acceptable to China's neighbors, Japan and South Korea.

### **The temporal and vertical dimensions of national identity**

The half-century 1894–1945 remains in the forefront in thinking about the long history of Chinese interactions with Japan. The Chinese perceive the Diaoyu issue in this context, while the Japanese prefer to visualize the Senkaku issue as a post Cold War problem caused by oil and gas interests. Since residence on the islands is unlikely, a solution would involve Japan recognizing that a territorial dispute exists, talks to permit joint development and agreed lines of separation for energy and fishing, and textbook revisions on both sides to explain how different positions need not be a result of clashing national identities. This level of agreement would not remove the historical memory divide, but it could reduce its intensity. Meanwhile, a deepening divide over premodern, Cold War, and post Cold War history needs to be addressed.

Over the past decade, division over historical memory has extended toward the United States and China. Long suppressed criticisms of US behavior came more into the open from Japanese revisionists and South Korean progressives as well as growing into a more sweeping Chinese attack linked to Western imperialism. While the Japanese and South Korean critiques of the United States are controversial and have weakened under a growing consensus to strengthen the alliance with it, recent Chinese demonization of US history in all periods, including the post Cold War era, compounds demonization of Japanese and South Korean history. For Sino-Japanese trust to grow, this pattern of overlapping Chinese demonization must be reversed.

The post Cold War decades are the essential starting point. To interpret this period as a continuation of anti-Communism and containment under the shadow of Cold War mentality is to deny the possibility of narrowing differences. The Japanese may join the Americans and South Koreans in encouraging a different Chinese assessment

in keeping with an earlier positive outlook in China. If joint history efforts are unlikely to be revived on earlier periods, this period stands the best chance of agreement. It would serve as a test of China's willingness to reverse recent trends. Similarly, the late Cold War period after Sino-Japanese normalization should be addressed to see if the shift in China to cover the Cold War as primarily the fault of the United States and its allies, rather than the Soviet Union, is irreversible. Going back further, one critical test is how China assesses the Korean War after Xi Jinping on the sixtieth anniversary of China's entry praised North Korea's role, calling the war 'glorious'.

The crux of the historical memory divide need not be approached right away, but the extension of the divide to other periods as well as the most potent symbols of the divide is an indispensable part of any strategy to build trust. The superficial progress in Sino-Japanese treatment of history in 2006–08 shows that a much more substantial approach is required to manage this divide, while other dimensions of the national identity gap are addressed. Since the gap over historical memory is far more central to the Japan–South Korea relationship, that gap should take priority.

The vertical dimension has proven not to be amenable to various types of exchanges. Student exchanges, tourism, sister-city agreements, and the like do not narrow differences over human rights associated with Chinese communism and the lack of genuine apology associated with the legacy of Japanese militarism. The Chinese are too secretive and defensive about the repressive elements in their society, and the Japanese are too ignorant and defensive about the offensive behavior of their past. The exceptions only reinforce these impressions because of their powerlessness. In these circumstances, trust is difficult to achieve. One way to sidestep the problem is to vest some authority in the Seoul secretariat of the trilateral group, establishing a shared community organization around which some identity can emerge. Yet, only a fresh attitude toward candor and censorship will make this identity meaningful. The factors that arouse distrust toward China's vertical identity are likely to reappear in the new setting. As in the case of the temporal dimension, the gap in vertical identity is not a promising starting point for narrowing the overall national identity gap.

Although attention is best diverted to other dimensions of national identity, this does not mean that the two most inflammatory dimensions can be approached carelessly. To improve relations with China, Japan must avoid provocative moves such as a visit by the prime minister to the Yasukuni Shrine. Cabinet members need to act and speak in accord with the overall objective of restraint on sensitive issues. More difficult, given recent trends, will be the burden on China's leadership to show restraint in managing authoritarian behavior. Violent crackdowns, expulsions of foreign journalists, and tightening controls over the Internet and media reverberate in Japanese public opinion. Even without substantial progress on these matters, the two sides can calm the atmosphere that will allow for progress on other dimensions.

In late July 2012, vice foreign minister Cui Tiankai published a joint article on Sino-US relations in the context of China's overall foreign policy. It raised doubts that

high-sounding official US statements about accepting China's rise are no more than a smokescreen for actual US intentions. Instead of pointing the way to mutual efforts to resolve disputes, it portrayed China as the victim on which harm has been imposed, not as the cause of problems or of harm to others.<sup>10</sup> This outlook at a time of rising tension indicates one-sided demands for a US retreat and puts problems in the context of national identity centering on victimization and the other side's long-term intentions rather than in a context more amenable to resolution. With similar thinking toward Japan, the prospects are low for progress in improving bilateral ties and in lowering the temperature of national identity rhetoric now soiling relations.

### **Politics and national identity gaps**

As divisive as Japanese politics remain, they have been narrowing national identity gaps. Abe Shinzo's aspirations for reconstructing identity were thwarted, as he prioritized stable relations with China and made little progress on an agenda to build a 'beautiful Japan'. Hatoyama Yukio's ambitions for shifting regional identity stumbled against harsh realities, preventing a widening of the US identity gap. Abe's return may renew the initiative from the right in 2013. Chinese gap widening still can reverberate in the Japanese response, but the old cleavage between conservatives and progressives has become less of a factor. This is not equivalent, however, to pragmatism focused on national interests, which would be inclined to prioritize improved relations with South Korea rather than identity.

South Korean politics are still prone to gap widening, especially when the progressives hold the presidency. Their resentment of the United States runs deeper than that of today's Japanese progressives, and emotions toward North Korea play a role that is unparalleled in Japan. Attitudes toward China are buffeted between the two objects foremost on the agenda. Yet, China has increasingly become a focus in its own right, and even among the progressives there is wariness about damaging the US alliance. Roh Moo-hyun pulled back from policies that alienated this ally, and a new progressive president would likely show more restraint. Volatility still exists without any pragmatic consensus on prioritizing Japan rather than identity.

The initiative in East Asia remains with China, although the United States has responded with its own vigorous agenda and North Korea has forced China's hand. Despite the opaqueness of Chinese politics, more has been revealed in 2012 during the Bo Xilai affair and other challenges at a critical time for selecting who will be the fifth generation leadership. Since the 17th Party Congress, China has veered toward widening the national identity gaps with Japan, South Korea and the United States. The balance of factions in the leadership chosen at the 18th Party Congress may have a far-reaching impact. Moreover, given the fragmentation that stems from collective authority in the hands of the seven-person Political Standing Committee, each given

<sup>10</sup> Cui Tiankai and Pan Hanzhao, 'Waijiaobu fubuzhang Cui Tiankai: Zhongguo waijiao de quanquzhong de Zhongmei guanxi', *Zhongguo wang*, 20 July 2012.

a distinct realm of control, many personnel decisions matter. With the Propaganda Department remaining in the hands of those close to Li Changchun, gap narrowing is unlikely. If Zhou Yonggang, despite being tainted as a supporter of Bo Xilai, transfers his coercive power to a like-minded hard-liner, then the voices of reform are likely to be further stifled. The advice of Chinese academics, supportive of a conciliatory approach to national identity differences, would be taken more seriously and recent censorship of their forthright analysis would be relaxed if the leadership struggle were resolved in a manner favorable to Wen Jiabao, unlikely as that is. To reframe relations depends more on China's political transition than on choices by Japan.

### **The bridging significance of the Korean peninsula**

North Korea poses a grave threat to Japan and the United States as well as to South Korea. It raises not only security questions but also identity ones, since China sees it through the lens of socialism and Japan cannot escape the North's lens of past colonialism yet to be resolved through normalization of relations. To prove that it is responsible despite the socialist bond, China must demonstrate that it prioritizes peace and stability, as it has long claimed. This means conditioning its treatment of North Korea on the North's willingness to forego belligerence and move toward denuclearization in return for economic assistance and security understandings. For Japan, the challenge of historical reconciliation follows only after preconditions have been met, including on history and abductees. To reassure the South Koreans and also the Chinese, it must overcome any hint of revisionism, prioritizing both security and economic development in the region. Since the North Korean question is critical to the identity gaps in Northeast Asia and is understood in South Korea as relevant to its identity gaps with China and Japan, it will be a stern test in the coming years.

South Korean politics are the most volatile in the region. There is a wide gap in reasoning on national identity between conservatives and progressives. China has made no secret of its preference for the progressives. In contrast, Japan's DPJ and LDP prefer to see the conservatives in power in Seoul. Neither the Chinese nor the Japanese are genuinely trusting of their preferred partner. The Chinese find the progressives still attached to the US alliance and leaning towards Western civilization rather than Eastern, while the Japanese, especially conservatives, find the South Korean conservatives hard to accept due to emotionalism on history and territorial issues. If there were greater consensus in South Korea, this would clarify the challenges for the other two states, but they each face an even more urgent task of reconsidering their own qualms.

South Korea's natural position is that of a bridge between China and Japan. If the North Korean threat is not handled in a way that forces it to suspect the motives of China and if Sino-US relations do not deteriorate to the point that straddling the divide is not feasible, then South Korea would be apt to find some middle ground. In Japan this tendency could serve a positive role in Sino-Japanese rapprochement. To the extent that the Sino-South Korean identity gap widens, then Japan cannot expect to act

as a bridge. It should, along with the United States, side fully with South Korea in light of the expected causes of the deepening rift. The overlapping identity gaps in China's relations with Japan and South Korea raise the stakes for close coordination.

A downturn in Japanese–South Korean relations in July 2012 over the failure of South Korea to go forward with an agreement on military intelligence sharing is a blow to bilateral relations and to US–South Korean relations. Attributed to failure to consult before springing the proposal on an unprepared populace, which remains wary of Japan due to historical memory, this missed opportunity may also signify an effort by South Korea to reassure China. This bodes poorly for the broader alliance framework sought by the United States. If South Koreans anticipate that the path to Pyongyang runs through Beijing, then they are misjudging what China requires and how negatively the impact is likely to be on relations with Tokyo and Washington.

On various dimensions, Japanese–South Korean cooperation has the potential to have a positive impact on China. The two countries have similar outlooks on the premodern history of China and how to interpret Sinocentrism. Their mixed views on the nature of the Sinocentric world are not so critical of China that agreement on a largely positive assessment is impossible, as long as Chinese representatives agree that recent glorification of this history is not sustainable. As for cultural identity, the Japanese and South Koreans both face a challenge of moving away from claims of ethnic homogeneity toward a more inclusive approach. This could facilitate a similar Chinese shift toward an inclusive East Asian cultural identity with elements from Confucianism, including harmony, but no insistence that this is an alternative to the spread of universal values and democracy. Together, Seoul and Tokyo also would be better able to define the East Asian community as a complement to the international community, not in opposition to it. Trilateralism puts a premium on dyadic efforts to steer the third party in a desired direction, a worthy objective for China's neighbors.

China also is able to shape trilateralism by arousing competition between the other two states. In the case of the FTA talks set to begin by the end of 2012, Japan is eager not to allow South Korean electronics and automobile firms to gain the edge in an earlier bilateral FTA. With Lee Myung-bak and Wen Jiabao setting the target for 2015 at \$300 billion in two-way trade, this sets a high bar for competition. The FTA itself is bound to have many exceptions, which means Japan and South Korea would strike a better deal through coordination rather than waiting for China to play one off against the other. The three-way summit in May 2012 has launched this process.

### **The trilateral summit of May 2012**

At the third trilateral summit on 29–30 May 2010, the leaders adopted the Trilateral Cooperation Vision 2020 with diverse objectives, including joint efforts for international peace and stability. Yet, such ideals were overshadowed by China's refusal to support South Korea days after an international report identified North Korea as the aggressor that had sunk the Cheonan in March. Coming during a year of notable progress in Japanese–South Korean relations, the triangle was being

tilted by China's foreign policies. The following trilateral summit on 21–22 May 2011 came on the heels of the 3/11 nuclear disaster following an earthquake and tsunami in Northeast Japan. While there was clear economic progress, reflecting Japan's more urgent needs, and China made considerable strides to damp anxieties from its assertiveness in 2010, the North Korean issue still left a dark shadow. When the 12–13 May 2012 summit convened in China, the focus was on the start of talks aimed at establishment of an FTA. As usual, the Chinese side was the most upbeat, suggesting that this was an auspicious time due to multiple anniversaries, including the fortieth anniversary of Sino-Japanese normalization and the twentieth anniversary of Sino-South Korean diplomatic relations.<sup>11</sup> Yet, as tensions over the selection of the fifth generation leadership corps were increasingly coming into the open in China, Japan was totally immersed in what appeared to be its most substantive policy struggle in decades over a major increase in the consumption tax, and South Korea's lame duck president was unlikely to take major initiatives, rhetoric was not easily matched by action. Progress in the trilateral summit is bound to be slow apart from economics.

Even if trilateralism is a long-term process, the vision can be taken seriously, unlike the vision of the East Asian community over more than a decade since it was welcomed by ASEAN + 3 and the East Asian Study Group. That kind of image invites scorn when countries show no regard for enhancing trust and forging a community. It should have been made very clear that community building means that Japanese leaders must not visit the Yasukuni Shrine, South Korean leaders must cool passions over Dokdo/Takeshima and not revisit the history of normalization, and, above all, Chinese leaders must abandon insistence that other countries do not have the right to interfere in internal affairs. A community means that countries do have that right.

There was agreement at the 2012 summit that any further provocations by North Korea are unacceptable. Wen put the onus on the other states too, arguing: 'We need to leave Cold War thinking behind . . . pay attention to the reasonable security concerns of all parties and make joint efforts to promote long-standing peace in Northeast Asia.'<sup>12</sup> This is standard rhetoric for meeting North Korean and Chinese demands for weakening alliances and agreeing to a security framework that transforms the regional balance of power. As North Korea appeared to prepare for a nuclear test and kept up fierce warnings of an attack on South Korea, all eyes were on China to determine how serious it would be in opposing any provocations rather than using these destabilizing acts as a means to pressure South Korea and its allies. Yet, Lee Myung-bak's emphasis on this problem did not result in any reference to it in the summit communiqué, as China balked at such joint management of the North. Despite the hoopla of progress in starting FTA talks, the summit did not add to trust.

<sup>11</sup> 'China–Japan–ROK Cooperation', *China Daily*, 11 May 2012.

<sup>12</sup> 'China, Japan, ROK Leaders Meet in Beijing', *China Weekly*, Global Edition, 15 May 2012.



## Overview

Japanese and Chinese national identities are riddled with delusions, rooted in the temporal dimension. Japanese amnesia about Japan's imperialist aggression in the 1930s and 1940s coupled with Chinese censorship or deception regarding communist repression over nearly a century since the Bolshevik Revolution and the founding of the Chinese Communist Party makes it difficult to narrow the national identity gap. Instead of combating this intractable problem, given existing leadership dynamics, the approach here is to concentrate on other dimensions of identity to advance ties.

On the Japanese side, images of China's human rights violations, including oppression of ethnic minorities in Tibet and Xinjiang and of champions of the rule of law and democracy, are indications of another dimension of national identity that is the source of a wide gap. Chinese are guilty of linking current Japanese leaders to the militarists of another era, contributing to the gap. Without any likelihood that this gap will be narrowed, attention best turns elsewhere for progress in relations.

On the ideological dimension, China faces a far-reaching decision. Alienating neighbors on all sides, it has become isolated on non-economic matters across the region.<sup>13</sup> Improving relations with Japan offers one way to ameliorate this situation, as it did in 1990. Since the gap with Japan is largely perceived as over history, toning down Sinocentrism as well as anti-imperialism offers a way forward. Yet, expecting such a sharp turnabout from China's leadership is letting idealism replace realism.

The sectoral dimension offers promise of a shared economic identity through regionalism, which could boost a shared political identity as the core of the East Asia community and even a common cultural identity as the heirs of Confucianism. All of these seemed within grasp to Japanese boosters of regionalism in the 1990s. Given developments over the past decade, the burden is on China to breathe new life into this three-part identity complex. On economics, the recent slowdown in China's rate of growth should give it an incentive to change not only its model but also its claims to superiority through contrasts with other states. New emphasis could be placed on the region's long-term success and prospects for trilateralism with a new engine of growth reassuring to Japan and South Korea. In culture, the overlap of international culture with universal values and East Asian culture revitalized without loss of its flexible traditions would prove reassuring. Finally, political identity could point to a regional union taking shape with its own identity that helps states deal with current problems while narrowing gaps as each state downplayed political distinctiveness. However desirable, these changes fly in the face of Chinese rhetoric and policies.

On the horizontal dimension, there is still hope that regionalism will move forward, giving some substance to the ideal of the East Asian community. Security must be in the forefront, rather than an afterthought. This puts a burden on China, above all, in dealing with North Korea and the South China Sea as well as in staying focused on

<sup>13</sup> Gilbert Rozman, 'Russian Possibilities for Integrating into the Asian Regional Order', Carlyle, PA: Army War College conference paper, May 2012.

keeping relations with the United States from deteriorating. As Easley argues, security trust is a cornerstone of managing East Asian identity gaps.<sup>14</sup> With such tensions better managed, China and Japan can focus more clearly on how to reach an interim agreement on their territorial dispute. Since this struggle is now centered on resource exploration and development in the East China Sea and the extent to which naval and coast guard vessels cross perceived territorial borders, any agreement needs to seek compromises on these matters. From an identity perspective, this means recognition that the sea is the common arena of the two nations. Although the Japanese have been hesitant to explore new approaches to the Senkaku/Diaoyu question, an exception can be found in Togo Kazuhiko's new book, which proposes a coordinated approach to the three territorial problems that are continuing to bedevil Japan's regional relations, widening national identity gaps.<sup>15</sup> To the extent Japan through pragmatic arrangements is able to separate peripheral territory from identity, it can narrow its national identity gaps, even with China.

The crux of the identity gap between China and Japan is the obsession with autonomy in both states. For China 'non-interference in internal affairs' is almost a mantra in its narratives on relations with the outside world. For Japan in the 1980s talk of 'internationalism' proved to be a façade for scant progress compared to the other states at comparable levels of development, in the 1990s shock over the loss of self-esteem economically, politically, and culturally did not jolt the nation into any serious action, and in the 2000s Japanese study of English and study abroad lagged far behind currents elsewhere. The pull of East Asia is too weak to overcome this predilection toward autonomy. For these two states and South Korea the principal national identity gap is with the United States, and the forces working to counteract autonomy center on interactions with that country. Trilateralism focused on forging an East Asian community proceeds in the shadow of internationalism concentrated on the United States. If US political dysfunction intensifies, the US magnet will fade and the pull of internationalism will weaken. US leadership remains essential for the trust necessary to open the door to multilayered communities, in which the East Asian one can find its place. To the extent that East Asia is perceived in opposition to the United States and the West, prospects for close Sino-Japanese relations are poor.

China is the rising power, the driving force in East Asia, and a country caught in its past and dominated by a communist party striving to narrow the options for both the future of China and that of Asian regionalism. The Chinese Foreign Ministry and academic counterparts one meets are prone to put a positive spin on prospects for cooperation, but they also tend to skirt tough issues on which genuine trust must be built. Proceeding as if the tough issues can be postponed to well into the future is

<sup>14</sup> Leif-Eric Easley, 'Diverging Trajectories of Trust in Northeast Asia: South Korea's Security Relations with Japan and China', in Gilbert Rozman (ed.), *Asia at a Tipping Point: Korea, the Rise of China, and the Impact of Leadership Transitions* (Washington, DC: Korean Economic Institute, 2012), pp. 149–69.

<sup>15</sup> Hosaka Masayasu and Togo Kazuhiko, *Nihon no ryodo mondai: Hoppo yonto, Takeshima, Sentaku shoto* (Tokyo: Kadokawa shoten, 2012), pp. 156–68.

not the answer if mutual benefits are not to be overcome by mounting problems. To become heavily dependent and trusting is not a strategy for reframing relations for the long term. Japan and South Korea as well are much more vulnerable than China due to: lower military budgets, greater political divisiveness and strategic wavering, and more separation between economic leverage and political decision-making. The mindset of a middle power in the shadow of a great power rapidly widening the gap is required to find a strategic response. Many more mutual benefits are realizable in this context. To make sure that these are not ephemeral and that the costs are kept from overtaking the benefits requires much greater coordination between Japan and South Korea and by both states with the United States, should US leadership prove forward looking. Bilateralism with China does not suffice for any of its neighbors.

### **About the author**

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