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Perceptions of Inherited Histories and Other Discussion Relating to East Asian Cooperative Security

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Part One

On one hand, East Asian history includes the ancient, modern, and contemporary histories of East Asia. On the other, it has as its primary components the internal histories of the different East Asian nation-states and the external histories of the relations among and between them. In other words, regional history is roughly a combination of national histories and international ones, with different national entities within the region as main actors. There is in each of these components and their branches basic elements that contribute to blocking the emergence of the East Asian community.

As to the ancient history of East Asia, the most important and the most protracted fact is probably the “Chinese Empire.” In the historical memory of the Chinese, the Chinese Empire had been a great empire, especially in its periods of “golden summits” with extraordinary expansion, prosperity, and dynamic stability. The splendor of the empire in this perception refers to its power, civilization, and cultural achievements, and its greatness has a moral meaning of beneficence, benign “kingcraft” (*wangdao*, in opposition to *badao*, arbitrariness relied on raw force), peaceful though not necessarily equal intercourses with neighboring countries, and even some self-righteously perceived altruism.

However, the other nation-states in East Asia, especially China’s land neighbors, have some memories about the Chinese Empire that the Chinese have typically underestimated, ignored, or even rejected. Their negative memories not only help produce disputes about ancient history, like that between China and the Republic of Korea (ROK), but also aggravate their worries about the future in the context of China’s current rise. In some sense, the more today’s China talks about its ancient splendor and greatness in Asia, largely for the purpose of mass mobilization for domestic ends, the more its neighbors worry about China’s future and that of Asia.

Now turn to the modern history of East Asia. The critical components of this history may be reduced to the two most primary. First, the history of Japanese aggression from the Sino-Japanese War in 1894 to the end of World War II in 1945. Second, the rise of modern nationalism in almost all East Asian countries, in which the national experience of resisting Japanese aggression played a decisive part. As to the first, the major problem is that the majority of Japanese are inclined to understate or dilute this history—and the rightists even reject it as false in large degree—while this kind of behavior itself has deepened the commitment of Chinese and South Koreans to remember Japanese aggression.

As to the second, it embeds a fundamental difference between the East Asian modern historical experience and that of modern Europe. After the huge catastrophes of two World Wars, Europeans finally concluded that extreme nationalism should be abandoned, thereby creating the essential intellectual condition for the “post-modern” building of a European integrated community. However, what the two World Wars, especially the second, brought to Japan’s neighbors in East Asia was modern nationalism, as the emergence of modern nation-states in East Asia occurred in and even resulted from these wars. One now has to wait to see which force will be more potent: East Asian nationalism or economic interdependence.

The contemporary history of East Asia includes the Cold War, whose legacy inhibits the creation of an East Asian community. In the minds of most Japanese, China is a relic of the Cold War era, as an authoritarian if no longer a totalitarian state. In the minds of ROK people, legacies from the Cold War like the national division, North Korean problem, and military alliance with the United States raise negative

feelings toward China, Japan, the United States, and even toward themselves. In the minds of the Chinese, the U.S.-Japan and U.S.-ROK military alliances established during the heydays of the Cold War and maintained up to now have always been targeted against China, whatever other purposes they may have. This belief, combined with other factors, often led to a feeling of being “encircled” and somewhat “threatened” among many Chinese.

Part Two

To sum up, histories and the perceptions of them are obstacles to cooperative security and joint development in East Asia. For the present and the future, these barriers should be overcome as much as possible.

Moving forward in this context involves essentially “truth” and “reconciliation.” Generally speaking, public discussion of the negative side of regional relations should be as cursory as possible. Some negative aspects should be entirely avoided, and the discussion of the positive aspects should far exceed that of the negative. Meanwhile, the best approach toward history can be suggested as follows: (1) to review and judge history according to both the past facts and later developments as accurately as possible; (2) to respect the historical memories, images, and national feelings of both one’s own and foreign people, and endeavor as hard as possible to mitigate or dilute the clash when they collide with each other; and (3) to prioritize the present and the future in dealing with past complaints.

How should China deal with its historical issues with Japan? China should not and will not forget the history of the Japanese aggression against China, but nor should it focus on the past. What is overwhelmingly important is not history, but preserving and promoting current national interests in the future, which depend on an amicable and cooperative relationship with Japan. Unless the Japanese government retrogresses fundamentally from its post-World War II recognition of, and apology for, Japan’s modern armed aggression and colonization, the historical issues between China and Japan should be treated strategically and shelved at large on behalf of truth to the future. In this respect, the strategic approach taken by the United States throughout the post-World War II years can be a model for China as well.

Former Japanese prime minister Shinzo Abe’s visit to China in October 2006, Premier Wen Jiabao’s visit to Japan in April 2007, and President Hu Jintao’s visit to Japan in May 2008 were three major events representing the biggest improvement of bilateral relations since the Koizumi administration. The China-Japan Joint Press Statements that these trips produced are compatible with the approach suggested here. They were based on forward-looking talks between the leaders of the two national governments, and they laid out the principles for a strategic relationship of mutual benefit. The relationship moved from being limited to the issues of history and Taiwan to including East Asian security, energy, environmental cooperation, military exchanges, mutual trust-building, and cooperation for global stability and development. Long-standing disputes over territorial claims have not been resolved, but it is just these that make the approach mentioned here relevant and imperative.

How should China deal with its historical disputes with the ROK? The primary factor motivating the Chinese to revise their previous description of the ancient history of the peninsula is probably as follows: Due to the strong nationalism held by both South and North Korea (especially the “popular nationalism” in the South), together with the prospect of reunification of the peninsula, the Chinese side probably believes

that the peninsular state(s) might raise territorial and even ethnic claims against China in the future based on “historical justification.” Thus, China’s revision of history is precautionary. But no matter the historical facts, China does not need to offend the Korean people or make it abandon its own national history.

In the discussion between the Chinese and ROK governments on the history dispute, two major principles should be carried out. First, the dispute must have a political rather than any other (including the once-pursued academic) solution in order to quell the nationalism in both societies. Second, the essential principle dominating the common search for a political solution should be permanent maintenance of status quo. The latter means that both governments should make assurances that it will never raise territorial claims against the other.

Part Three

Patriotic historiography, a topic closely related to the theme of the present article, should be touched here. It has been a prominent phenomenon in East Asian countries, with its positive as well as negative impact upon the perceptions of inherited histories and the prospects of East Asian cooperative security. As discussed above, the two World Wars brought nationalism to East Asia, accompanied by a patriotic historiography with often contradictory branches in each East Asian country. Because of the sensitivity of this topic, the discussion here prefers to take only a general form and not go into the concrete details of the patriotic historiographies in the region.

Patriotism is a feeling of love and devotion to one’s own homeland. It can be voluntary, but it can also be promoted or even imposed by the government of a nation-state. On one hand, patriotism, like the distinguished historian Donald Kagan says, does not require one to hate, condemn, denigrate, or attack any other country, nor does it require one to admire his or her own country uncritically. The latter behavior or mentality is not patriotism proper but intolerant, arrogant, and bellicose chauvinism, or in Kagan’s words “militant and boastful devotion to and glorification of one’s country.”¹

Historiography has demonstrated this. Not long after Herodotus and Thucydides, mainstream historiography of the ancient West began to be characterized, definitely and quite permanently, by something like “moral nationalism.” From its beginnings, Roman historical writing was narrow in scope and intolerant in its attitudes. Historian Ronald Mellor says, “Roman historians were initially not interested in the history of the whole world nor in the geography and customs of other peoples; instead they focused on the Roman state ... [and] created a chauvinistic historiography whose ethnocentrism left little sympathy for Rome’s opponents.”² Albert Sorel, the great nineteenth-century historian, describes excessive French patriotism: “For them the happiness of the world was bound up with the greatness of France. It seemed for them beyond question, and to their minds nobody could doubt it. ... They thought all methods legitimate to achieve such a great object, and all arguments good in support of such a cause. They cited all the texts that were furnished by the confused erudition of the time. ... Contradictions never worried them.”³

The standard form of excessive patriotic historiography with disastrous consequences is, of course, the German example from the nineteenth century. Heinrich Luden was among several of the most famous German historians from this period. He first claimed in a lecture on the study of German history delivered in 1808, “It is the happiness of German history that the Germans never sank to the level which is the shame of other peoples, but always strove with powerful determination for what they held to be the true worth of mankind.” In *History of the German People*, which was published in twelve volumes between 1825 and 1837,

his admiration for German character, as Historian G. P. Gooch describes, is ardent beyond limitation. "Of the new peoples," in his words, "they [the Germans] stood highest both in power and in culture." The main purpose of the book was political and ethical rather than historical, and as Gooch says, no works are more quickly superseded than patriotic histories.⁴

Although German patriotic historiography in the nineteenth century (especially during its latter half) is a notoriously extreme case, it is in fact far from so extreme as to make it a unique exception. It may be asserted that contemporary East Asian historiography in almost every country has more or less elements of excessive patriotism that hurt both truth and reconciliation, and is thereby not compatible with the interests of regional cooperative security.

Part Four

The ultimate purpose of this discussion is to promote cooperative security in Asia, especially Northeast Asia, which is closely connected to the relationship between China and security multilateralism in the region. Security multilateralism is both a way to construct the international security regime for the common security of the international community and a national strategic instrument for pursuing national interests as they are traditionally defined. For both these reasons, China has recently increased its commitment (in principle) to security multilateralism.

China has experienced several difficulties in the making of an East Asian multilateral security regime. So far, China's focus on multilateralism has been limited to economics. Its thinking and practice on mitigating East Asian security problems through multilateral security regimes is therefore infrequent and vague, except in the case of the Six Party Talks. Moreover, statements frequently encounter opposition when they become reality. China knows, in theory, the benefits of multilateral security regimes, but things become more complex when they encounter concrete international security issues, such as disputes about maritime territories and exclusive economic zones. In theory, the principles of international cooperation are designed to deal with these kinds of issues, but in practice, traditional politics still dominate the game.

An even bigger impediment to security multilateralism in China's foreign policy is its strategic suspicion of Japan. China-Japan relations influence the whole range of China's East Asian multilateral cooperation, although the situation has been much improved in the past three years. The United States is focusing its policy attention on its bilateral military alliances in the region and shows remarkable passivity toward pan-regional or subregional multilateralism in this part of the world.

Since the East Asia Summit in December 2005, Washington has been particularly concerned that China might use multilateralism to reduce and finally exclude U.S. influence in East Asia. In negotiations leading up to the summit, partly from their own worries and partly under U.S. influence, Japan, Singapore, and Indonesia fought hard to broaden the membership to include Australia, New Zealand, and India. U.S. worry has made China back away from East Asian multilateralism to avoid damaging China-U.S. relations.

Last, but not the least important, there has been a lack of China-U.S. systematic and institutional strategic negotiation, and thereby the lack of related system of norms, on the most critical strategic bilateral issue between these two great powers. These issues include Taiwan; strategic nuclear weapons; naval build-up and strategic naval activities; China's security relations with the U.S. military presence in East Asia and the West Pacific, and with the U.S.-Japan and U.S.-ROK military alliances; and the Sino-American

long-term strategic mistrust. These unresolved tensions make the emergence of an East Asia multilateral security regime difficult or even impossible.

Part Five

As noted above, the protracted strategic suspicion and negative factors in China-Japan relations are among the most powerful impediments against the development of security multilateralism in the region. China-Japan relations underwent a particularly severe crisis from early 2004 to late 2006. But crisis implies a chance for mitigation, arising primarily from fear of conflict. Shinzo Abe, the first post-Koizumi prime minister of Japan, feared a lot and learned a lot. He had been consistently hard toward China as a politician, but in the context of domestic division over Koizumi's China policy and Japan's increasing isolation in international stage, he softened his attitude toward China.

China's top leadership, inclined to improve bilateral relations and worried about the cost of confrontation with Japan, sensed clearly the emerging "Abe orientation." Shortly after Abe became prime minister, Chinese president Hu Jintao decided to make a "strategic experiment" to change the situation, accepting Abe's suggestion to visit Beijing and trying to improve bilateral relations based on a mutual understanding to shelve the history dispute.⁵ This strategic experiment effectively broke the stalemate and spurred the beginning of a thaw between the two countries. Since Abe's visit to Beijing on October 8, 2006, both Beijing and Tokyo have been extremely careful to prevent any move to spoil the beginning of the thaw and have tried to bypass the major disputes between the two countries (which are still far from being resolved).

It was against this backdrop that the "ice-thawing visit" to Japan by Chinese premier Wen Jiabao took place in April 2007. The trip achieved broader results than anticipated thanks to Wen's statesmanship and charm.⁶ The China-Japan [Joint Press Statement](#) based on talks between the two leaders lays out the principles for a strategic relationship of mutual benefit between the two nations. It significantly expands the range of China-Japan relations as well as the basic rules.

Abe's visit to Beijing and Wen's visit to Tokyo spurred remarkable improvements in China-Japan relations, but they also exposed the limits of the relationship. China-Japan relations have not made sufficient progress, especially in the East China Sea dispute upon which both sides futilely exerted their sincere and protracted efforts to try to make a breakthrough.⁷ If bilateral relations during the Koizumi years could be defined as a deteriorating stalemate, relations one year after Abe's visit to Beijing could be regarded as a much-improved stalemate. It seemed that both sides were losing momentum to pursue "the win-win strategic partnership" declared during the initial rapprochement.

The common task of addressing the global financial crisis brought the first substantial and concrete steps from China, Japan, and the ROK in the direction of Northeast Asian economic integration.⁸ But even though the Japanese domestic "political revolution" brought a more Asian-oriented party to power in Japan—and therefore fresh hope of new cooperation with China⁹—it is unclear whether these developments could spill into the bilateral political field and usher in a genuinely new stage of China-Japan cooperation. The situation is more optimistic than ever before, but all the restraints discussed above invite a cautious prediction.

Part Six

To break the much-improved stalemate, a real long-term normalization of the China-Japan relations should be pursued. That would require accommodating the respective core interests, national sensibilities, and aspirations of both China and Japan by partially restructuring the fundamental regime of bilateral relations, known as the 1972 regime.¹⁰

Since 1972, when the China-Japan diplomatic normalization dramatically began, there has been a political and legal regime for China-Japan relations that was defined and most authoritatively demonstrated by the [Sino-Japanese Joint Statement](#) of September 29, 1972, and the [Sino-Japanese Treaty of Peace and Friendship](#) concluded on August 12, 1978. This regime, called “the 1972 regime,” defines Japan’s war against China in the 1930s and 1940s as an unjustifiable armed aggression, and Taiwan as part of the People’s Republic of China. U.S.-China rapprochement and the so-called Nixon shock suffered by Japan were important factors in the regime, as was the strategic desire of both sides then to check the Soviet geopolitical power. It is obvious that the 1972 regime has been highly favorable to China, and one might also say that it was more so to China than to Japan.

Since then, China’s rise and the relative power distribution between China and Japan have become even more favorable to China. At the same time, the problem of the 1972 regime has become more and more obvious. The regime has not become fundamentally outdated—any new regime of China-Japan relations must still uphold China’s vital interests on the questions of history and Taiwan. But the most fundamental circumstances have changed in the past three decades in China, Japan, and the world, making the 1972 regime insufficient. To stay relevant, the regime should be expanded.

Besides the existing core norms on the issues of history and Taiwan, four sets of new norms should be added: (1) norms for controlling the China-Japan confrontational dynamics and establishing “crisis management”; (2) norms for helping to produce the constructive political/strategic effects from the economic interdependence between China and Japan, and for cooperation in the fields of energy, environmental protection, technological cooperation, and global development; (3) norms for participating and promoting the regional and subregional multilateral cooperation among nations in East Asia; and (4) norms concerning East Asian security, including the military strength and development of the two countries, China’s relations with the U.S.-Japan military alliance, the scope and extent of Japan’s “military rights” that could be accepted by China, peace and stability in the Korean peninsula, and regional nonproliferation. Of course, this last set of norms is most difficult to be constructed, with most numerous and greatest uncertainties.

Meanwhile, on the precondition that Japan conduct peaceful relations with China, Japan’s aspiration to become a “normal state,” together with its legitimate rights and status as not only a sovereign state but as one of the most important nations in the world, should be recognized and respected by China in the expanded new regime.

Part Seven

Dr. Sheila A. Smith, senior fellow for Japan studies at the Council on Foreign Relations, recently wrote to this author about the prospect of the Six Party Talks transforming into a more formal cooperative mechanism. This seems quite premature and, for some regional experts, inappropriate to the broad agenda

confronting the region. However, the Six Party Talks have been the first (and, up until now, the only) “experimental ground” for multilateral collaboration on major issues of Northeast Asian regional security. What one could learn from this “experimental” process would be helpful in looking more realistically at the present and more wisely to the future.

China has learned lessons from its multilateral experience on the North Korean nuclear problem, including its protracted efforts to sponsor the Six Party Talks and engage Pyongyang and Washington through bilateral meetings. One of the most influential experiences for China was Washington’s reduction of Beijing’s role after the January 2007 U.S.-North Korea talk in Berlin.¹¹ After the talk, the North Korean nuclear problem transformed from a multilateral puzzle to a bilateral one, in which China’s central position had been replaced by the United States as the primary decision-maker. The Six Party Talks, now dormant for many months, have become like a rubber stamp, endorsing predetermined trade-offs made by the United States and the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) through their bilateral negotiations. It may therefore be said that the United States has marginalized China in the North Korean nuclear problem since its bilateral talk with North Korea in Berlin.

Washington’s turnaround fit with Pyongyang’s strategic purpose. North Korea temporarily suspended its nuclear development so it could extract concessions for its partial “denuclearization.” It aims at eliminating the collective and individual sanctions imposed by the United Nations and various states. It also hopes to further the U.S. inclination to discount its quest to really denuclearize North Korea. Moreover, in all possibility, it wants to demonstrate to Beijing that is able to pursue (and make Washington pursue) some rapprochement with the United States independently while keeping its cold attitude toward Beijing. One even could suppose that Pyongyang wants to become a long-term “strategic partner” of the United States.

In some sense, China can blame no one. More than six years since China engaged in international efforts to denuclearize North Korea, almost no one inside or outside China regards its protracted endeavor as a positive record of achievement. This is remarkable and even somewhat surprising in the context of China’s dramatic rise as a great power. In the North Korea problem, China has hitherto suffered its single greatest failure in modern diplomacy and foreign policy.¹²

There is a perennial strategic challenge: the need to balance opposing imperatives and deal with them with less efficient half-measures. The hesitation and half-measure practice are partly due to the division of elite opinion within China on the North Korea problem, reflecting the complexity of China’s interests in the region. A quiet but steady majority (though not a large one) are “defeatists” who accept Pyongyang’s de facto possession of nuclear arms. They blame current efforts to curb North Korea’s nuclear ambitions for the deterioration of China-DPRK relations—a development they consider dangerous for China’s strategic environment in Northeast Asia.¹³

Added to China’s domestic policymaking difficulties is the fact that the North Korean nuclear problem relates to a xenophobic DPRK, China’s volatile and hard-to-handle “ally.” The related discussion and policy consultations in China have thereby been confined to an exceptionally narrow and quite confidential extent. As a result the “input” and transmission of ideas, so often an indispensable condition for the making of strategy, have been greatly limited.¹⁴

For China, the difficulty lies in the mutually contradictory nature of its vital interests in North Korea. The disabling effects of this predicament on the Chinese leadership have been severe, especially considering their strategic culture of prudence and conservatism. They have been seeking, through years of

frustration, an uneasy balance among the following vital interests: (1) ensuring peace and fundamental stability on the peninsula; (2) fostering North Korea's denuclearization; (3) seeking to preserve a continued relationship with North Korea; and (4) helping to prevent the collapse of the Pyongyang regime and the resulting chaos in North Korea.

The third vital interest needs elaboration. China would rather not have—and in a sense, cannot afford to have—a hostile North Korea at its border. China's leaders believe that China must prevent the denuclearization process and its own role within it from seriously damaging China-DPRK relations through too much alienation from the Pyongyang regime, which would make China a loser in a major geopolitical game even if DPRK were really denuclearized. A closely connected issue is China's concern about the possible collapse or severe disability of the Pyongyang regime, and the chaos that could ensue in both North Korea and its neighbors. In this sense, Beijing's strategic interests in North Korea are not acquisitive, as so many people in ROK suspect, but preventive.

Beijing has been even less willing to damage its relationship with Pyongyang because of its persistent hope that Pyongyang can finally be reformed. China's "reformist" approach initially emerged in 2004, and has lingered with reducing effectiveness ever since.¹⁵ Increased economic aid was considered an incentive to tactfully induce, encourage, or facilitate some slow, cumulative economic reform in North Korea. The hope was that economic aid would gradually change Pyongyang's outlook on both domestic and foreign policy, thereby making it devalue its nuclear program while increasing the stability of the regime and solidifying China's long-term influence on North Korea. Those effects have been elusive, but the reformist hope has persisted.

China, like Japan and South Korea, remembers that the United States made perhaps the first remarkable violation of the sanctions stipulated by [UN Security Council Resolution 1718](#) set in October 2006.¹⁶ The United States gradually and quietly abandoned the objective of North Korea's complete denuclearization and, by its bilateral negotiations with Pyongyang, marginalized all other relevant powers. Largely because of this experience, the Northeast Asian countries worried about former U.S. president Bill Clinton's surprising visit to Pyongyang on August 5, 2009, and asked themselves, as an East Asian newspaper said about Japan and ROK, "whether the United States might sell them out on the policy toward North Korea."¹⁷ The Obama administration's repeated statements about the event do not eliminate this memory, and much will depend on its future pattern of action. There is already a feeling that, as a famous South Korean commentator said, "Obama has saved Kim Jong-il."¹⁸

U.S. movement in this direction could force China to take unilateral action to win Pyongyang's favor, which would end any prospect of five-power joint action.¹⁹ The stakes are high for the United States in its relations with its most weighty long-term economic partner and two of its most important allies. Both the United States and China should understand that the North Korea problem and domestic political interest related to it are far less important than the holistic relations between themselves and the fundamental importance of a healthy international relationship among China, the United States, South Korea, and Japan.

Part Eight

China is still committed in principle to multilateral cooperative security in the region, despite its frustrating experience in dealing with the North Korean nuclear problem. It is engaging more proactively in security

multilateralism for the common interests of the world and the particular interests of itself. But a broader vision, more innovative concepts, and increased endeavors are left to be desired. The most critical area is still Northeast Asia. China, like other major actors, needs comprehensive, long-term strategic thinking and firmer determination in practice to overcome the obstacles to Northeast Asian peace and security.

Endnotes

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10. The following ideas have been largely expressed in the following two articles by this author: “A Reconstruction of Regime of China-Japan Relations” (in Korea), *Dong-A Ilbo*, December 15, 2006; “The Rise of China and the Strategic Situations of Her Relations with U.S. and Japan” (in Chinese), *China Review* (Hong Kong), issue of June 2007.
11. See a detailed exploration: Shi Yinhong, Shi Yinhong, “China and the North Korea Issue: Competing Interests and Persistent Policy Dilemmas,” *Korean Journal of Defense Analysis*, Vol. 21, No. 1 (March 2009), pp. 33–47, esp. pp. 38–42.
12. Cf. Shi Yinhong, “China and the North Korea Issue: Competing Interests and Persistent Policy Dilemmas.”
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17. “Japan and ROK Fear US Bypass Them to Be Intimate with North Korea,” *China Times* (Taiwan), August 7, 2009, gb.chinatimes.com/.../0,4521,50401449+112009080700127,00.html.

18. See “Obama Has Saved Kim Jong-il,” *Chosun Ilbo*, September 14, 2009, http://chn.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2009/09/14/20090914000019.html.

19. Refer to China’s Premier Wen Jiabao’s visit to Pyongyang in early October. See Choe Sang-hun, “China Aims to Steady North Korea,” *New York Times*, October 6, 2009. It made ROK government even publicly expressed its nervousness: “We are expecting China to explain the details of its economic cooperation programs with North Korea and whether they violated the Security Council resolutions,’ Foreign Minister Yu Myung-hwan told a group of South Korean news media editors, according to Yonhap.” Ibid.