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The Cycle of Nationalism in North East Asia

Tom French believes that China, Japan and South Korea are locked into a spiral of mutual suspicion, insecurity and even hate. So what should they do about it? He believes it's time to jettison the hyper-nationalism and pursue mechanisms that lift the three countries beyond their troubled pasts.

By Thomas French for ISN

The anniversary of the defeat of Japan in 1945 regularly triggers a cycle of provocative actions, condemnatory statements and nationalist rhetoric between Japan and its near-neighbors China and South Korea. But while relations between Tokyo, Beijing and Seoul have significantly deteriorated in recent years, the causes of mutual distrust, suspicion and rivalry remain more or less the same. Among the most significant is the subjective perceptions of history that each state 'feeds' to its general population.

'Minimizing' Japan's Past

In Japan, where modern history is [poorly taught](#), most textbooks gloss over the country's brutal colonial rule. And while some of this neglect is due to time pressures on the Japanese school system, there has nevertheless been a [longstanding drive to minimize the 'masochistic' content](#) of Japan's past. These shortcomings have resulted in a population that possesses a very limited understanding of their country's imperial past. Instead, many Japanese view their country as [a victim](#) (of nuclear weapons, aerial bombardment etc.) rather than an erstwhile expansionist power responsible for its own fate. This ignorance and sense of victimhood, in turn, leads a lack of understanding of the grievances held by Japan's neighbors. In addition, the idea that modern Japan is still being victimized for the misdeeds of a previous generation is also proving to be a fertile breeding ground for renewed nationalist sentiment – something the Shinzo Abe government has sought to harness through its [policy](#) agenda.

It's not a view shared by the entire Japanese population. Many view the policies and statements made by the current Prime Minister as harking back to Japan's past as both an ultranationalist regime and foe of the United States. Such concerns undoubtedly resonate with statements coming out of Beijing and Seoul that also [link Japan's current outlook](#) to the pre-war era. But that's not to say that nationalism plays no part in China's and South Korea's anti-Japan rhetoric.

Papering over South Korea's 'Cracks'

Like Japan, education and political discourse in South Korea has taken on a much more nationalistic

tone in recent years. The content of many history textbooks has arguably adopted an equally distorted view of South Korea's past as those of Japan. Issues which [have allegedly been downplayed](#) include collaboration with the Japanese occupiers, atrocities committed by South Korean troops during the Korean War and the human cost and authoritarian character of the Rhee and Park regimes. Accordingly, this approach papers over some of the darkest episodes of South Korea's modern history in an effort to promote unity and preserve the '[legitimacy of the South Korean government](#)', as has been claimed by the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology. This 'editing of history' was resisted by more liberal scholars in Korea, who sought to [push a more critical stance](#) of both the Seoul government and colonial period.

Yet, despite their differences both sides appear to be moving towards a shared and heavily critical perspective of the Japanese occupation of the Korean Peninsula. This undoubtedly benefits those South Korean politicians with direct links to previous hard-line regimes and aspects of the country's less-than-illustrious past. This is particularly true of the current President Park Geun-hye, the daughter of a former military strongman and imperial Japanese Army officer. Her particular brand of anti-Japanese rhetoric helps to decouple her from her father's rule and his collaboration with the Japanese. It also demonstrates that there are perhaps more opportunities for the ratcheting up of nationalist sentiment in South Korea, given that the country is free from the constitutional restraints and war guilt associated with Japan.

It Also Works for China

Nationalism has also been used by China to mitigate the social stresses of development and economic growth. After the reforms of the late 1970s and the decline of the prestige of communism after 1989, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) could no longer rely on communist rhetoric as a unifying factor. As a result, economic growth and nationalism became the key pillars of the Party's legitimacy and the tools to divert China's growing middle class away from calls for political reform and towards focusing on material gain and the 'rise' of the country.

Another major element of China's nationalist message focuses upon catching up with and overtaking those states that subjected the country to its era of '[national humiliation](#)', with Japan being the most obvious target. The content of many history books extensively detail the wartime atrocities committed by Japan. Historical memories of the war and the general [antipathy towards Japan](#) are also reinforced by the vast amount [popular cultural products set during the Japanese invasion](#). Yet, in keeping with its neighbors, China's history books also ignore some of the darkest episodes in the country's recent history, such as the millions of deaths in the Mao era and the Tiananmen Square massacre.

Mounting Concerns

Each of these instances of nationalism and seemingly wilful ignorance of past deeds are worrying enough in isolation. Yet, their interconnected nature and the cycle of worsening relations they seem to be fostering are an increasing cause for concern. Through this mutually reinforcing cycle of deeds and statements in which one side responds to the other's actions and/or statements, relations between Japan, China and South Korea are increasingly being locked into an ever worsening trajectory.

The cycle takes the form of statements or provocative actions by one side, such as visits to controversial or contested sites like [Yasukuni shrine](#) or [Liancourt rocks](#). These actions necessitate a response by the other side, often in the form of condemnatory statements, but also occasionally taking the form of concrete actions, which in turn propagates the cycle. Through this process relations

deteriorate and both sides increasingly see the other as intransigent, and in many cases strengthen their determination to further resist / contest the issue at hand as a point of national pride, prestige or sovereignty.

In addition, this mutual antagonism and the insecurity it helps to generate are regularly used to garner greater domestic support for the governments involved. In doing so, the nationalist rhetoric coming out of Beijing, Tokyo and Seoul appears to replicate two of the most powerful effects of nationalism itself: the ability to both unify and divide. Such actions promote the unity of the side conducting them, often manifesting themselves in greater support for the leadership. They also create a greater sense of division and difference between the two opposing countries involved. The same impact is also felt in the other country. In this respect, it could even be argued that provocative symbols such as Yasukuni Shrine are, in fact, symbols of Korean and Chinese nationalism; dark and opposite reflections of the pure and [sacred image some Japanese have of the shrine](#).

Another worrying trend is that this mutually reinforcing cycle of deteriorating relations, at least in the case of South Korea and Japan, is actually being exacerbated by China. In what appears to be an effort to increase tensions between Seoul and Tokyo - and with the possible overall goal of weakening South Korea's ties to the US - Beijing regularly expresses solidarity with South Korea and encourages it to further criticize Japan in the process. China has also taken more concrete steps to boost ties with South Korea and provoke Japan, such as the construction of the [An Jung-geun memorial hall](#) (the [Korean national hero](#) who assassinated [ItÅ Hirobumi](#), Japan's first Prime Minister) in Harbin.

Playing with Fire

Looking at such a mutually reinforcing cycle of antagonism, it is logical to ask where such a process might end up, and whether it could trigger a more serious breakdown in relations or even conflict. Modern East Asian international relations, like that of all regions of the globe, operate on multiple interconnected levels including economic, security and cultural relations. Thus far the influence of these other dimensions, have helped to slow the pace of the cycle of nationalism and antagonism across the region. The leadership of all three powers have also [shown their willingness and ability to step back](#) from such rhetoric when needed, turning the ratchet back a notch or two for the sake of the strong economic ties that exist between them. However, if the mitigating effects of the other fields of exchange were to weaken as a result of an economic or security crisis, nationalist sentiment could be reignited to such an extent that it will be difficult to reign in. For example, if the legitimacy of the CCP was to be undermined by an economic crisis, nationalism would almost certainly become a much more important tool for maintaining control over China.

A further risk is that while the leaders of China, Japan and South Korea can now slow the progress of the cycle of nationalism when desired, by invoking such rhetoric directly at home and indirectly overseas, they potentially weaken their ability to control it in the future. As feelings of mutual antagonism and distaste increase between the respective populations of each state, compromise and de-escalation become more difficult. Moreover, as the feelings of distrust and concern increase, more conservative political elements could become more powerful thereby limiting opportunities for rapprochement. However, perhaps the most dangerous permutation of this situation is that of a government becoming unable to control the forces it has engendered and being overtaken by the nationalism it has instilled in the population.

Accordingly, the leaders of China, Japan and South Korea risk playing with fire every time they stoke nationalist sentiment. As a counter, the spiral of nationalism could be broken through greater communication and exchange between the people and leaders of the region that is built on a genuine desire to move on from a past shared by all parties. Unfortunately the unwillingness to do this by the leaders of all three countries, their use of nationalism as a domestic political tool, their shifting power

relationships, unresolved territorial disputes, and the arrival of an arguably increasingly nationalistic younger generation unfortunately make this an unlikely prospect.

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