

THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION
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**WHITHER NORTHEAST ASIA?
MANAGING TENSIONS AND AVOIDING
CONFLICT IN A TROUBLED REGION**

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Summary

Tensions are rising in Northeast Asia, threatening more than a generation of peace and prosperity that has made the region's growth and development the envy of the world. Regional reaction to China's declaration of an "air defense identification zone" encompassing areas controlled by South Korea and Japan is the latest sign that longstanding rivalries, territorial disputes, and historical antagonisms increasingly have the potential to result in conflict.

The downturn in relations between China and Japan and between Japan and South Korea represents a serious challenge to regional stability and a deep concern to the United States, which has a major stake in the region and important alliances with both Seoul and Tokyo.

Many of the Northeast Asia region's problems have deep roots and long histories, and emotion and resentment play a significant role in keeping old disputes alive. If the region is to avoid conflict, it must find a way to move past the often-tragic legacy of its history. China, Japan, and Korea must understand the seriousness of the situation and share responsibility for addressing it. Failure to do so is not an option, since the region's stability and prosperity are at stake.

This essay offers ten principles and guidelines for managing current tensions and creating a framework for intra-regional cooperation. The United States has a major role to play, including by reassuring its allies and by making clear to China that it is prepared to defend them. Those tasks will be high on Vice President Biden's agenda during his visit to Asia this week. Helping the region resolve its current crisis will be a major test of the credibility of the U.S. "rebalancing" policy and could bring about another generation of peace, stability, and prosperity in Northeast Asia.

Rising Tensions

Relations between China and Japan and between South Korea and Japan are deteriorating, escalating tensions in an already troubled Northeast Asia region. Now, China's declaration of an "air defense identification zone" (ADIZ) that includes territories controlled by Japan and South Korea is fueling concerns that things may be about to get worse among the three neighbors.

Rivalries and difficult relations are nothing new in a region marked by competing nationalisms, historical antagonism, a legacy of past invasions and occupations, and territorial disputes. Still, the region has managed to produce more than a generation of peace and unparalleled prosperity that has made it the envy of the

world. However, there are signs that cooperation is fraying as old resentments dressed in new clothing are dominating regional relations.

In the late 19th and early 20th century, Northeast Asia witnessed a dramatic shift in power as a rising Japan sought to lead the region and replace a Western imperialist-dominated order with its own. This shift and Japan's ambitions led to a bitter legacy of invasions, colonialism, and war that eventually drew in the United States. Today, it may be fair to ask whether we are witnessing a 21st century version of this tragic drama, this time with China in the role of the region's ambitious rising force.

The Stakes for the United States

Ever since World War II, the United States has been a major actor in Northeast Asia, with a profound interest in the region's peace, stability, and prosperity. So it is troubling that China's decision to add a new military dimension to its dispute with Japan over the Senkaku Islands (known as Diaoyutai in Chinese) increases the possibility of confrontation in an area where PRC and Japanese air and naval forces are already operating in close proximity to each other. For the United States, which has made clear that the U.S. treaty commitment to defend Japan would apply if the islands were attacked, this latest Chinese move represents a significant challenge.

Another challenge for the United States is the downturn in relations between its two key regional allies, Japan and the Republic of Korea (South Korea).

South Korea has reacted strongly to a perceived rise in Japanese nationalism and "militarism." It protested visits by Japanese politicians to Yasukuni Shrine, where the spirits of convicted Japanese war criminals are among those honored. Seoul has complained that Tokyo's expression of regret and remorse for its past occupation of Korea is "insincere," and is engaged in an international campaign against Japan's claim to the Korean-occupied Liancourt Rocks ("Dokdo" in Korean and "Takeshima" in Japanese). South Koreans have also expressed anger at Japan's refusal to provide direct government compensation for women forced to provide sexual services to Japan's Imperial Army during World War II.

South Korean President Park Geun-hye, inaugurated in February, has yet to meet with Japanese Prime Minister Abe, arguing that talking with him under the current circumstances would likely just make matters worse. She has, however, held summits with leaders of both China and Russia, countries that provided massive support for North Korea's invasion of the South in 1950 and that have yet to offer any apology for doing so. Meanwhile, Seoul has also criticized Japan's efforts to

modernize its defense posture, including Tokyo's plans to expand defense cooperation with the United States and to come to the aid of U.S. forces by allowing its military to engage in "collective self-defense."

Since U.S. bases in Japan are a critical component of the U.S. military posture in the Western Pacific, the deterioration of ROK-Japan ties has the potential to complicate U.S. efforts to maintain peace and stability in the region and even to defend South Korea against a North Korean attack.

There is virtually no possibility that Korea-Japan tensions could lead to a physical confrontation, but the fact that America's two key regional allies are not on the same page surely benefits North Korea, which can exploit the gap between two countries who should be natural security partners. At the same time, ROK-Japan differences are probably also helpful to China, which has aggressively courted Seoul as part of its regional diplomacy.

Meanwhile, ROK-PRC relations have also been roiled by China's new ADIZ, which includes airspace over a submerged rock (the Socotra Rock or Ieo-do in Korean) claimed by South Korea. Seoul has protested China's move and sent aircraft over the rock to challenge the Chinese declaration. One casualty of this development may be the honeymoon in bilateral ties seen since PRC President Xi Jinping and ROK President Park came into office.

Asia's Paradox

Rising tensions and the deterioration of intra-regional relations are clearly not in the interest of the United States. Nor are they in the interest of the resident regional powers, since they put at risk the stability and economic success that have made Northeast Asia a major driver of the global economy.

This juxtaposition of economic cooperation and success combined with divisive intra-regional diplomatic and security relations has been described by South Korea's President Park as "Asia's paradox." Resolving that paradox and ensuring that economic growth and development, not rising tensions and conflict, will shape the region's future, is the dominant challenge facing the region today.

To overcome this challenge, President Park has proposed a "Northeast Asia Peace and Cooperation Initiative" (NAPCI) – a far-reaching proposal aimed at fundamentally transforming regional relations. In Park's view, if NAPCI is successful, it could also create the conditions for resolving the North Korea nuclear issue and achieving North-South Korean reconciliation.

Faced with a regional legacy of conflict and disharmony, critics may find it easy to dismiss Park's idea as quixotic. But if the current dangers facing the region are to be overcome, it will take vision, determination, and a willingness to move beyond past approaches and the status quo.

For President Park's initiative or any other new approach to managing regional security relations to succeed, what must be done? How can regional powers, including the United States, create the conditions for cooperation in Northeast Asia?

Northeast Asia's Challenges

Among the most important priorities is for regional powers to recognize the obstacles that lie in the way of cooperation and that have given rise to rivalry and misunderstanding. They should acknowledge the potential for current problems to lead to military confrontation. They should accept that this potential requires them to lower the temperature, manage their differences, and set the region on a more positive course.

Confucius' doctrine of *zheng ming* (Korean: *chung myung*) or the 'rectification of names' called for people to use the proper designations of things for society to work in harmony. That was good advice 2,500 years ago, and it remains good advice today. Properly described, the main challenges are clear:

- A 'trust deficit' among regional powers caused by:
 - Uncertainty and suspicion generated by a rapid change in regional power relationships, driven mostly by China's increasing military capabilities and more aggressive security and foreign policies
 - Competing, contradictory versions of history, and the lingering burden of past conflict, occupation, colonialism, and exploitation, and the resulting historical resentments that these have generated
 - The tendency of governments to use nationalism for domestic political purposes
- Unwillingness on the part of China and Korea to accept the sincerity of Japan's statements of apology and regret, on the one hand, and Japan's unwillingness to consider warranted additional steps at reconciliation, on the other
- Insufficient transparency about defense plans and intentions
- Zero-sum approaches to dealing with territorial disputes

For those who follow the region closely, this list is all too familiar. Finding a way to manage and eventually resolve these problems will not be easy, but rising tensions and the prospect that things may get worse underscores why doing so is an urgent task.

Managing Tensions and Avoiding Conflict: A Prescription for Action

Here are ten principles and guidelines that could help regional powers move from confrontation to cooperation:

- Each country's leadership and citizenry must recognize that remaining on the current trajectory of rising tensions with the potential for military conflict is not an option. Every country in the region would suffer; none would "win." A region so vital to the world's economy, a region that contains some of the world's largest militaries, and a region where miscalculation and misperception could lead to conflict cannot be allowed to drift towards confrontation.
- Although Northeast Asia is certainly not Europe, the lessons of Europe – including the Helsinki Process – are useful in suggesting how historical and ideological reconciliation and territorial settlements can be achieved. The Helsinki negotiations culminated in non-binding accords pledging respect for sovereignty and international law, and called for all participating countries parties to refrain from the threat or use of force. Those agreed principles could provide a template for a Northeast Asian accord.
- The most important historical lesson for Northeast Asia is how the shifting tectonic plates of power roiled the region in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The developments of that era, which put the region on a tragic course for more than a century, must never be repeated.
- Territorial disputes pose the region's most volatile challenge. Regional powers should acknowledge that many of these disputes may never be resolved in our lifetime. Rather than ramping up tensions, raising the political and diplomatic temperature, and risking confrontation, every effort must be made to put as many of these disputes on the shelf as possible.

In the Senkaku-Diaoyu dispute, the shelf has become much more difficult to reach, so it may be best to focus on realistic interim goals, particularly de-militarization, as well as seeking an extended 'time-out' to avoid further escalation. The PRC's establishment of an ADIZ that includes the islands has made this task all the more urgent. Military aircraft and warships

operating in close quarters without agreed rules of engagement and with unclear motives is a recipe for miscalculation, and this danger is all the greater if one party throws down the gauntlet, as China appears to have done.

- Joint development of resources or finding ways to share resources produced in or near disputed territories, together with efforts to separate resource development and sovereignty should be actively explored. Indeed, agreements in the former area might bring about flexibility in the latter. In any event, sticking to zero-sum approaches in either area is a sure-fire prescription for continuing confrontation.
- Fully reconciling competing historical narratives may prove impossible, although ongoing efforts by the region's historians to bridge the gaps between their respective history books are useful and should continue. In the end, regional leaders may need to accept that the way forward is to acknowledge, but not dwell on, the tragedies of the past, and focus instead on developing future-oriented cooperative agendas. Those who forget the past may be condemned to repeat it, but those who live in the past are certainly fated to stay there. Regional powers will not be able to unlearn history, especially histories that have become part of their national founding myths and narratives, but they can work together to create a different future.
- Nationalism can be a destructive force if it is exploited for domestic political purposes. Any regional power that treads this path risks becoming a captive of forces that it may not be able to control. To one degree or another, Beijing, Seoul, and Tokyo have each sought to play the nationalist card in relations with others. Continuing to do so will only exacerbate current problems. It is time to put away polarizing nationalist narratives.
- In their relations with Japan, China and South Korea frequently question whether Japan's many apologies over the years are "sincere" or not. Unfortunate statements by individual Japanese politicians that run counter to the letter and spirit of past apologies have encouraged such skepticism. But it may also be the case that some in Seoul and Beijing see value in using such skepticism to perpetuate their historical narrative and keep Japan on the defensive. This has the perverse effect of increasingly alienating mainstream Japanese, causing them to question the value of making new or even stronger expressions of regret or apology if they are seen as unlikely to satisfy their neighbors.

Perhaps a more fruitful approach for Seoul and Beijing would be to accept Tokyo's statements of apology and regret for past actions at face value and then hold Japan's political leaders to them. "Locking in" a former adversary to a statement of regret or apology in the eyes of the international community and insisting that he stand by his commitments is a more useful technique than questioning his sincerity.¹

- There must be increased transparency by the region's militaries. China's rapid military buildup has given rise to deep concerns in Japan and Korea. Meanwhile, Japan's defense reform plans, including its intention to exercise its right to collective self-defense in support of its U.S. ally, need to be better explained by Tokyo to ease the concerns of its neighbors.
- Each party in the region, including the United States, but especially the resident powers, should acknowledge its special responsibility to prevent conflict. Each should contribute a substantial "down payment" to the cause of creating a regional community of interests and aspirations, such as that envisioned in President Park's Northeast Asia Peace and Cooperation Initiative. Doing so will require each party to set aside past resentments, calm current emotions, step back from maximalist positions, and seek win-win outcomes.

It will also be important for each country in the region to ask itself whether it has done all it can to achieve reconciliation and to contribute to a forward-looking agenda for the region. Each country has a responsibility in this regard. For Japan, its contribution might be a decision to take the moral high ground and agree to additional, including official, compensation for the surviving so-called 'comfort women.' The Republic of Korea should recognize that for the past 68 years Japan has been a positive force for regional peace and prosperity and that Japan's enhanced contributions to the U.S.-Japan alliance strengthen America's ability to defend the ROK. And the PRC could do much to ratchet down tensions by agreeing with Japan that there is no military solution to their territorial dispute and that a mutual withdrawal of military and paramilitary forces in and around the Senkaku-Diaoyu Islands is in the region's best interests.

¹ Such an approach could have been taken in response to Japanese Prime Minister Abe's recent comments affirming that his government would take the same stance as previous governments that had conveyed high-profile apologies. Both Beijing and Seoul chose ignored Abe's pledge. See: "Abe to retain past apology statements," *Asahi Shimbun*, October 19, 2013, available at:

http://ajw.asahi.com/article/behind_news/politics/AJ201310190044

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Whither Northeast Asia?

Managing Tensions and Avoiding Conflict in a Troubled Region
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The United States has no less responsibility than China, South Korea, and Japan to maintain regional stability, and dealing with rising regional tensions must be an urgent national priority for the United States.

The Obama Administration's "rebalancing" or "pivot" to Asia was intended to demonstrate a renewed and reinvigorated commitment to a region of vital importance to the United States. The current escalation of tensions is an important test of that commitment. Washington's timely use of the full range of its diplomatic and other tools can do much to encourage the region's actors to reduce tensions and to explore ways to move the region in a more positive direction.

The Obama Administration has already taken important steps in this regard, including Vice President Biden's visit to the region this week, where he will meet with leaders in Tokyo, Beijing, and Seoul. Biden's discussions will enable him to convey in person U.S. concerns about rising tensions, including the PRC's declarations of an ADIZ in the East China Sea. The Vice President will also be able to reassure allies of U.S. support, America's firm commitment to its treaty obligations, and U.S. opposition to any attempt to change the status quo by force. Such reassurances are particularly important at this moment when Chinese intentions are unclear. So are concrete actions, such as the recent flight of U.S. B-52s through the claimed PRC ADIZ, which serve as reminders both to China and U.S. allies of America's capabilities.

Finally, the Vice President will also have much work to do in Seoul and Tokyo, particularly in urging these U.S. allies to manage their differences, refrain from taking steps that might further sour ties, and to remember the other threat to regional peace and stability that is well poised to take advantage of the current contretemps, North Korea.

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