

Korea-Japan Study Group
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Panel recommends depoliticizing history textbooks to calm South Korea-Japan tensions

Americans should not overreact to or exaggerate what appears to be a rise in nationalism in Northeast Asia. In order to reduce tensions between South Korea and Japan over history, however, the governments of those countries should try to depoliticize school history textbooks by letting individual schools decide which textbooks to use. Those were conclusions shared by a Korea Japan Study Group panel entitled “Textbooks, Education and National Sentiment” on November 3, 2005 at CSIS. The panel was moderated by William Breer, Japan Chair, CSIS.

The first panelist, Leonard Schoppa, Associate Professor, University of Virginia, said national sentiment is not new to Japan. As soon as the US Occupation left Japan, “Conservative members of the Diet began scheming to undo the excesses of Occupation reforms.” Japan saw a second generation of young nationalists in response to Prime Minister Tanaka’s decision to normalize relations with China in the 1970s. Leading the charge was a group of 30 young Diet members, including Mori Yoshiro, Ishihara Shintaro, Nakagawa Ichiro, Hiranuma Takeo, and Mitsuzuka Hiroshi.

Schoppa argued that what has changed is the domestic and international context in which Japanese nationalists are heard. Domestically, there is no longer a Socialist Party or a Yoshida Doctrine-wing of the LDP to check the nationalists. The other reason nationalist statements seem more worrying is because they are resonating in a geo-strategic environment that is different from the 1970s and 1980s when similar things were said before. When Japanese show signs of nationalism nowadays, it is directed at China and Korea, not the Soviet Union.

Schoppa recommended liberalizing the textbook selection process so that local high schools can accept any textbook they want, and to encourage a panel of Asian historians to read Japanese textbooks and endorse one or more.

The second panelist, Sam Shepherd, President of the National Association of Japan-America Societies, was previously the executive director of the Fulbright Commission in Japan and served as a member of the Japanese Central Council of Education in the mid 1990s. Shepherd provided a historical summary of the textbook debate in Japan beginning with historian Ienaga Saburo’s suit against the Japanese Ministry of Education in 1965 through the more recent formation of the Japan Society for History Textbook Reform by professors Fujioka Nobukatsu and Nishio Kanji, both proponents of eliminating “harsh” language and references to the “dark” side of national history. Shepherd reminded the audience that only 12 schools in Japan use the controversial textbooks.

Shepherd suggested that there might be a silver lining in the text-book controversy, in that it has raised the awareness of many Japanese about how important certain parts of history are to the national psyche of its neighboring countries. In this sense, perhaps the debate has been healthy and will lead to better understanding of the historical context.

Shepherd also recommended that Asian scholars should get together to discuss the textbooks and local constituencies should be given more input into the textbook selection process, in line with the current trend. A multinational committee of reputable scholars could lead not only to a level of agreement on the “facts” of history but also increase appreciation for just how the historical narrative in widely used texts may influence future generations’ attitudes in a constructive or destructive way.

The final panelist was Kirk Larsen, Assistant Professor, George Washington University. Larsen said textbooks are significant because they train next generation of young minds, and the curricula form very small part of identity and historical memory. Textbooks are also symbols or emblems of officially supported orthodoxy. The best way to resolve the textbook problem is get the state completely out of the textbook business.

Larsen argued that flare-ups shouldn't mask the general trajectory of broadening and deepening South Korea-Japan relations. Since 1999, we have seen joint naval search-and rescue exercises, formation training, and port calls in August 1999 (an act unprecedented in the history of modern Japan-ROK relations); initiated quarterly meetings with the United States on North Korea in the Trilateral Coordination and Oversight Group (TCOG); and exchanges between representatives of Korean and Japanese militaries' joint chiefs of staff, transforming once unofficial, sporadic, and taboo discussions into official, regular, and institutionalized channels of bilateral security dialogue.