
SESSION 4

Date: May 1, 2013

Time: 09:00-10:15

Place: Regency Room

Confronting History in East Asia

Moderator: Christopher Nelson, Samuels International Associates, Inc.

Speakers: Bong Youngshik, The Asan Institute for Policy Studies

Mark Manyin, Congressional Research Service

Pan Zhenqiang, China Reform Forum

Tatsumi Yuki, Stimson Center

Rapporteur: Steven Denney, Yonsei University

Through a volley of quotes about history by various intellectuals, moderator Christopher Nelson, senior vice president of Samuels International Associates, highlighted the political importance of “remembering,” the significance of national histories and discourse, Inc., and the security implications of history in East Asia. Mr. Nelson pointed to the resolution condemning Shinzo Abe’s visit to the Yasukuni War Shrine, passed by the Korean National Assembly as he and others were making their way to the Plenum, as an indication that history, especially in East Asia, is as William Faulkner understood it: “not...past.”

In good humor, Bong Youngshik, director of the Center for Foreign Policy at the Asan Institute, began by thanking the Shinzo Abe government for making the panel extremely relevant. Speaking for his native South Korea, Dr. Bong focused on the Japan-Korean bilateral relationship, with insights on the possibility of Japan and South Korea improving their bilateral partnership by overcoming the burden of history. Going forward, Dr. Bong’s assessment of the prospects for reconciliation between the two Northeast Asian neighbors is best summarized by a quote from his introductory remarks: “It seems that it is impossible...to get an apology [from Japan] that will satisfy South Koreans.”

Overall, Dr. Bong finds little reason to be optimistic that South Koreans can overcome the “burden of history.” Dr. Bong cited four reasons for his pessimistic assessment: 1) He finds it unlikely that any future apologies will satisfy South Koreans. “There is a feeling amongst the South Korean people that the apology should come from the emperor that will transcend” previous apologies made by Prime Ministers (one in 1989 and the other in 1995). Though this is highly unlikely, it is held as “a sort of demand made by the South Korean public.” 2) The Dokdo/Takeshima territorial dispute dominates the psychology of the South Korean public. In fact, according to Asan’s Annual Survey from 2012, more than half of the population feels this way. The Survey contained responses to the following question: “What is the

biggest obstacle to the development of Japanese-Korean relations.” The top two responses were: Dokdo (60%) and “comfort women” (7.5%). No matter what progress both governments make in other fields, Dr. Bong stressed, historical antagonisms will continue to hinder an improvement in bilateral relations. 3) If the Japanese government denies the significance of the 1995 apology issued in a statement by Prime Minister Murayama, it will have a devastating impact on historical reconciliation. Conversely, if the Japanese government maintains the Murayama Statement, it will not do much good to earn credit and respect from the South Korean public.

Dr. Bong added that there is very little understanding or appreciation for the Murayama Statement. In another Asan survey, the following question was asked: “Have you heard about the Murayama Statement that was issued in 1995?” Only 14.3 percent of South Koreans responded in the affirmative. A follow-up question asked whether they had a correct understanding of the Murayama Statement. The 25 percent who had heard of the apology believed it was a promise by Japan to give up their claim of sovereignty over Dokdo. Another 10.2 percent believed it was a promise by the Japanese Prime Minister to cease official visits to the Yasukuni Shrine. Eight percent thought it was a statement in support of stronger trading relations and cultural ties between the two countries, and 4.5 percent believed it was a promise by Japan to return national treasures taken during the colonial period.

Pan Zhenqiang, senior advisor of China Reform Forum, coming at the issue from a Chinese perspective, made three general points. The first was related to, as Professor Pan put it, “the many tragedies in East Asia, caused by Japanese aggression.” In the face of such tragedies, “many Chinese wonder why the Japanese so obstinately refuse to face modern history.” For Professor Pan, Japan’s current behavior is unsettling for the Chinese. “Today many Chinese here and back in my home are wondering whether Japan today is...something out of the 1930s.” For Professor Pan, “a country besieged by many domestic problems, and decades of economic stagnation,” will have a hard time confronting its past and dealing with it in a way befitting of a responsible country.

“America has a role in the historical issue,” Professor Pan stated. Taking a position similar to that of Japanese historian John Dower, Professor Pan pointed to Japan’s special relationship with the United States, forged in the post-World War II era, as one major factor preventing the US from taking a more responsible role in resolving “the history issue.” He reminded the audience “that right up until the end of World War II, China was the center of gravity for America’s Asia policy.” According to Professor Pan’s understanding of post-war history, the relationship forged with Japan for broader geopolitical goals prevented Japan from reflecting, in a way similar to the Germans, on the pain and destruction it caused during the colonial and war periods. Though “Washington pretends not to see many things,” as Professor Pan euphemistically put it, there is no small amount of pre-1945 continuity in Japan. “I know that many of the imperialist generals and high-ranking officials continue to serve in the Japanese government and in corporations,” he remarked.



Professor Pan's third and final point related exclusively to China's understanding of history. Though the Japanese may refuse to acknowledge history and Americans may simply ignore it, the Chinese position is that history should be understood and taught literally—implying that it should be politicized. To illustrate, Professor Pan told a story of how he, as a professor in China, had to teach the importance of peace and reconciliation to his students who were involved in demonstrations against the Chinese government's policies toward Japan; the students thought the government was too soft on Japan. Professor Pan recalled, "professors like me went to the classroom to explain why we must seek reconciliation with Japan... otherwise there would be no peace and stability in the regime amongst the major powers." This effort, Professor Pan emphasized, "requires a correct understanding of history."

Tatsumi Yuki, senior associate of Stimson's East Asia Program, provided some balance by highlighting the Japanese perspective. She started off by reading three different apologies that have been proffered by three different Japanese prime ministers over the last 18 years, starting with Murayama's 1995 apology. She emphasized that though she has lived away from Japan for the last 20 years, she still finds herself defending Japan, to an extent, when it comes to historical issues. "I still get into a debate when people say Japan didn't admit what it did" during the colonial and war periods. However, when it came to the issue of honoring the war dead, she criticized Japanese officials for visiting the Yasukuni Shrine. "If [officials] think [they] are honoring the war dead" by making a trip to a national cemetery, "why not go the secular memorial too," which is, as Ms. Tatsumi noted, an apolitical, secular alternative.

Though she sided with her Chinese, Korean, and American colleagues that visits to the Yasukuni Shrine by high level officials, in addition to other provocative decisions (e.g. support for textbook revisions), work against Japan's self-interest and further entrenches the region's negative views towards Japan, Ms. Tatsumi entreated those concerned with the issue to consider how the Japanese have internalized the

ideational issues related to the Asia-Pacific war. To this Ms. Tatsumi added, "When [people] say, 'you don't recognize what you did, who are [they] referring to? Me, the government, who?'" This sort of blanket criticism, she reasoned, is also unhelpful, because it has the effect of holding ordinary Japanese citizens responsible for the poor decisions made by the government. "As they [continually] get blamed in this view, [even ordinary Japanese] become resentful."

Mark Manyin, specialist in Asian affairs at the Congressional Research Service, presenting an American perspective on the issue, concluded the panel by painting a narrative that allowed him to portray America as playing the role of "referee" in an ideational soccer match. As such, Dr. Manyin provided a general critique of all players involved. In addition to agreeing with others on the panel that Japanese politicians' visits to the Yasukuni Shrine are detrimental to Japan's image and regional relations, he emphasized that Abe's return to the position of prime minister was in no small part a reaction to the highly nationalistic behavior of China and South Korea during 2012. "For those wringing their hands over Abe, they should remember that South Korea and China's actions last year played... a role in Abe's return to power."

Furthermore, on the issue of holding Japan accountable for its past actions, Dr. Manyin emphasized what it takes to achieve reconciliation: a partner. He added, "while the primary responsibility goes with the aggressor, it is also true that you cannot have reconciliation without [having] a partner, and many Japanese feel that they don't have a partner." Actions like President Lee Myung-bak's visit to Dokdo and his inflammatory comments about the Japanese Emperor elicited a nationalist response in Japan. Moreover, Dr. Manyin added that for issues like Dokdo, "South Koreans want people to pick sides," but picking a side "would be a huge mistake and... a test of the alliance." According to Dr. Manyin, this is the sort of test that the "US would fail [because there is] no way to take sides" in the issue. In the end, though he confessed his belief that Japan and South Korea have quite a wall to scale in overcoming the ideational divide, Dr. Manyin remained hopeful that through prudent political leadership, and the use of existing frameworks for dialogue, reconciliation can be achieved.