

Ending East Asia's History Wars

By KOIKE Yuriko

Georges Clemenceau, who, as France's prime minister, led his country to victory in World War I, famously said that "war is too important to be left to the generals." Japan is now discovering that history is too important to be left to newspaper editors.

In the 1990s, the newspaper Asahi Shimbun caused a firestorm at home and in South Korea by publishing a series of articles, based upon testimony by the former Japanese soldier Seiji Yoshida, on "comfort women" – Koreans forced to provide sexual services to the Japanese Imperial Army during World War II. Asahi has now admitted that the soldier's confessions were unfounded, and has disavowed the core supporting evidence for the articles.

That retraction appears to be causing as much embarrassment – and diplomatic vitriol – in Japan and South Korea today as the original series did. But, at a time when both countries cannot afford to permit partisan or sloppy abuses of history to roil their bilateral relations, Asahi's careless work has turned out to be more than abysmal journalism; it has introduced a dangerous element into regional diplomacy.

Some say that Japan and South Korea should follow the example set by France and Germany. Reconciling in the first two decades following the Nazi Occupation of France, these countries' leaders understood that their security and economic ties were far too important to their citizens' wellbeing to allow the old hatreds to fester. They knew that the unimaginable violence of WWII was a direct result of the antagonisms that had festered since the Napoleonic Wars and that were allowed to persist after 1918.

In Charles de Gaulle and Konrad Adenauer, France and Germany had two of the twentieth century's greatest statesmen, leaders who were able to discern the broad sweep of history through the fog of quotidian politics. Their loyalty was not only to the citizens who elected them, but also to the generations of the past that had endured the consequences of Franco-German enmity, and to generations yet to come, which would benefit from reconciliation.

Of course, given that Japan and Korea have not fought a series of wars against each other, their relationship is not the same as that between Germany and France. But it is clear that no one will benefit from a new round of heated historical debate. To avoid this, political leaders like de Gaulle and Adenauer are needed. Only when we can discuss the past without endangering the future will the countries of Northeast Asia be able to establish a truly durable structure of peace.

As Admiral Dennis C. Blair, a former commander of the US Pacific Fleet, stated at a recent conference, “The history of Asia from the 1930s to about 1955 or so was not pretty in any way....I don’t think any country can have a monopoly on righteousness, or on guilt and shame” for that time. Blair added that “the attempt to hold a ‘we were right’ and ‘you were wrong’ sweepstakes is not going to help our children and grandchildren understand what happened there.”

Japan and South Korea need to take responsibility for the future, not obsess about the past. A recent Japanese government white paper called South Korea the country “that shares the closest relationship with Japan historically and in areas such as economy and culture.” No doubt, many, if not most, South Korean foreign-policy experts and strategists share that sentiment. But it will take committed leadership to transcend the history wars and tap the full potential of Japanese-Korean cooperation, something that both countries’ key ally, the United States, strongly desires, as it seeks to draw China into a lasting and peaceful Asian order.

For too long, intemperate historical debates – often driven by biased newspaper accounts – have poisoned bilateral relations. Now, as another war of words heats up, Japanese and South Korean leaders need to step back, recognize where the real interests of their people lie, both today and in the future, and calmly begin to take the measures required to ensure durable reconciliation.

(This is the text of an article by Ms. KOIKE Yuriko, Trustee of JFIR and Member of the House of Representatives, which was originally posted in “Project Syndicate” on August 28, 2014.)