Northeast Asia’s New ‘History Spiral’

Amy King* and Brendan Taylor

Abstract

The remembered history of the Second World War continues to infect contemporary relations between China and its Northeast Asian neighbours. This article argues that a ‘history spiral’ has taken hold in Northeast Asia as a result of the region’s changing strategic order and domestic politics in China, Japan and South Korea. Using the case studies of the Diaoyu/Senkaku islands territorial dispute, the Dokdo/Takeshima territorial disputes, and Sino-South Korean memorial diplomacy, we explore the interactive spiralling dynamics of Northeast Asia’s history problems. We suggest that despite some recent signs of an improvement in Northeast Asian relations since late 2014, the ‘history spiral’ is likely to remain a fixture of Northeast Asia’s international politics owing to the region’s changing strategic order.

Key words: history, memory, Northeast Asia, security, Second World War

1. Introduction

As 2015 marks the 70th anniversary since the ending of the Second World War, the international relations of Northeast Asia are seemingly being held hostage to history. Superficially irrational controversies over small rocks and islets, school textbooks and war memorials are intensifying to the point where they are, ostensibly at least, preventing the otherwise highly interconnected societies of China, Japan and South Korea from cooperating more deeply and effectively. The spectre of conflict, sparked by such issues, has even been raised (Holmes 2014). Is this just a passing phase or is it likely symptomatic of a more deep-seated enduring trend in this important subregion? With three of our four largest trading partners located in Northeast Asia, the answer to this question is of critical interest and importance to Australian policymakers.

In this article, we seek to make the case for the latter scenario. Turning from the domestic level analysed in the previous article (Jakobson & Manuel 2015) to the regional level, we show how a new ‘Northeast Asian history spiral’—much like a classic security dilemma, but with purely ideational characteristics—has taken hold in this region. We argue that this ‘history spiral’ in Northeast Asia is the product of Asia’s changing strategic order: China, Japan and South Korea are using history in instrumental ways to shape and contest a regional order that is being transformed by China’s rising power. Yet, we also suggest that the role of history in Northeast Asia is not purely instrumental. Rather, Northeast Asia’s history continues to infect contemporary relations between China and its Northeast Asian neighbours, creating a ‘history spiral’ that is likely to remain a fixture of the region’s international politics owing to the region’s changing strategic order.

* King: Coral Bell School of Asia Pacific Affairs, ANU College of Asia and the Pacific, Canberra, ACT 0200, Australia; Taylor: Coral Bell School of Asia Pacific Affairs, ANU College of Asia and the Pacific, Canberra, ACT 0200, Australia. Corresponding author: Amy King, e-mail <amy.king@anu.edu.au>
Asia’s experience of war and imperialism has deep and emotive roots in the domestic societies of China, Japan and South Korea. These domestic roots, which were exploited, encouraged or simply allowed to flourish at the end of the Cold War, have created powerful contending narratives of history that shape how each of these societies interprets Asia’s changing strategic order.

The article is divided into three parts. In part one, we observe that Northeast Asia’s ‘history problems’ are a relatively recent phenomenon—a product of the changing international strategic environment at the end of the Cold War and attendant (though largely unrelated) domestic developments in China, Japan and South Korea. In part two, we describe how Northeast Asia’s history problems have gradually taken on an interactive, spiralling quality, using the Diaoyu/Senkaku territorial disputes, the Dokdo/Takeshima territorial disputes and Sino-South Korean memorial diplomacy for illustrative purposes. In part three, we canvass arguments for why Northeast Asia’s history problems are unlikely to endure and put forward counter-arguments supporting our case that this new ‘history spiral’ is likely to remain a fixture of Northeast Asia’s international politics for some time to come.

2. Re-remembering Northeast Asia’s History

The history of the Second World War did not feature prominently in Northeast Asia during the Cold War. Instead, in the space of a few short years from the end of the Second World War in August 1945 to the outbreak of the Korean War in July 1950, Northeast Asia underwent a paradigm shift. The dominant battle was no longer that between the Allied forces and Imperial Japan but was replaced by a new battle between the forces of communism and capitalism. In this new Cold War world, the United States dealt Japan a troublesome hand. The United States simultaneously rehabilitated Japan as the key base for the US forward presence in Asia, permitted Japanese elites to ‘forget’ the trauma of Japan’s invasion of China and South Korea, and accused Japanese who dared question this narrative of being communist sympathisers. Similarly, in South Korea, the United States encouraged successive governments to play down the history of Japanese aggression and imperialism, and instead to pursue Japanese economic assistance and join with Japan in supporting the US strategic presence in Asia. In the People’s Republic of China (PRC), meanwhile, there was staunch condemnation of the new US ‘imperialistic’ presence in Asia, but far less attention paid to re-remembering the horrors of war with Japan. The Communist regime was eager to focus its attention on new enemies—Chiang Kai-shek’s Republic of China and the United States—and had little desire to acknowledge the ‘united front’ that had defeated Japan in 1945. Given the variety of new security challenges that emerged in this Cold War context, there was little appetite for elites in China, Japan and South Korea to engage in debating the war legacy, settling accounts or pursuing deep reconciliation (Mitter 2003; Goh 2013, p. 166–169).

However, as an extensive literature has shown, the changing international strategic order at the end of the Cold War, and domestic developments in each country, catalysed a process of re-remembering the Second World War in China, Japan and South Korea. In China, the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Tiananmen Square massacre, and the increasing economic polarization that followed in the wake of Deng Xiaoping’s Reform and Opening caused a crisis of legitimacy for the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). The result, in the early 1990s, was a patriotic education campaign that sought to bolster popular nationalism and support for the CCP by invoking memories of the CCP’s defeat of Japanese imperialism and fascism in 1945 (Mitter 2003; Yahuda 2014). In Japan, similarly important transitions, including the end of the Cold War, fears of US drawdown in Asia, reforms to Japan’s electoral system in the mid-1990s and economic stagnation led to the eruption of major—and still unresolved—debates about Japanese national identity, Japan’s wartime responsibilities and the country’s future security posture in Asia (Yahuda 2014). Finally, in South Korea, the combination of democratization and the ending of the Cold War in the late 1980s
enabled the development of strong civil society movements, prominent among which were groups led by former ‘comfort women’ who had been forced into sexual slavery by Japanese forces during the Second World War. These groups were particularly successful in challenging the Cold War narrative of Japan–South Korean reconciliation, and in bringing to light extensive claims of Japanese atrocities during the war (Goh 2013, pp. 171–172, 189–194). The re-remembering of the history of the Second World War by China, Japan and Korea was a process that began as a largely inward-looking, domestically focused exercise and which was caused by global structural change associated with the ending of the Cold War. The end of the Cold War served as a common catalyst for this re-remembering because it broke down the ‘strategic imperatives’ that bound Japan, South Korea and US aligned-China together in a contest against the Soviet Union (Goh 2013, p. 174). Important to acknowledge, however, is that the emergence of China’s Patriotic Education Campaign and Korean civil society groups such as the Korean Council for the Women Drafted for Sexual Slavery by Japan (established in November 1990), had very little to do with Japan’s own behaviour and security posture at that time. Instead, these campaigns and the museums, academic conferences, international legal challenges and memorial sites associated with them were enabled, exploited or encouraged by domestic social and political changes in each of the three countries.

3. Northeast Asia’s new ‘History spiral’

In the decades since the end of the Cold War, this re-remembering of history has spilled over from the domestic level to the regional level, creating a potentially dangerous new Northeast Asian ‘history spiral’. This spillover is in part the result of clashes between the inward-looking historical narratives produced in China, Japan and South Korea at the end of the Cold War, but it is also the result of the instrumental use of history by elites who are seeking to shape and contest Asia’s changing strategic order. Like the security dilemma, a ‘history spiral’ is an interactive process whereby one party’s view of history may render another party’s view of history inaccurate, illegitimate or incomplete. Thus, efforts by one country to propagate or remember its own view of history provoke countermeasures by the second party to put forward a competing view. The result is a spiralling, competitive approach to the history of Northeast Asia in which each side ratchets up its efforts to put forward the ‘truth’, and in so doing, creates a deeply contested set of views about the history of Northeast Asia. Crucially, the contest we are witnessing in Northeast Asia is not merely a contest about past historical facts, but is also a contest about Asia’s current changing strategic order. As Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi made clear following a March 2015 trilateral summit with his Japanese and South Korean counterparts, ‘the problems related to history are not about the past, but are about the present’ (Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi 2015). As we shall see in succeeding text, Japan is now using history to signify its support for ongoing US primacy in Asia and to challenge China’s potentially disruptive rise. At the same time, China is using history to dispute Japan’s right to modernize its military, strengthen its alliance with the United States and constrain China’s rise. Finally, South Korea’s approach to history depicts its position as Northeast Asia’s perpetual ‘swing state’: caught between its desire to prevent Japan from growing too strong and its desire to maintain the US strategic presence in Asia as an important hedge against a rising China. More than a decade ago, Thomas Christensen (1999) argued that the security dilemma in Northeast Asia was exacerbated by China’s historically fuelled distrust of Japan; a distrust that stemmed from the legacy of Japanese imperialism and aggression in China during the first half of the twentieth century. We agree that the historical legacy does indeed appear to exacerbate the security dilemma in Northeast Asia, but in contrast to Christensen, we demonstrate that this mechanism works in more than one direction. In what follows, we show that the ‘history spiral’ in Northeast Asia not only shapes Chinese (and Korean) mistrust of Japan but also shapes how Japan
responds to China and, in turn, how Korea responds to Japan. First, we explore how conflicting Chinese and Japanese interpretations of history are fuelling conflict over the Diaoyu/Senkaku islands in the East China Sea. Second, and similarly, we show how the Dokdo/Takeshima islands dispute has become a key site of the ‘history spiral’ between Japan and South Korea. Finally, we examine how the interactive ‘history spiral’ has also worked as a force multiplier in the China–South Korea relationship; we examine how these two states’ mutual antipathy towards Japan’s view of history has resulted in collaboration on a key Northeast Asian commemorative site.

4. The Diaoyu/Senkaku ‘History spiral’

The East China Sea has emerged as a major security flashpoint in Northeast Asia, as a result of disputes between China and Japan over the sovereignty of the islands known as ‘Diaoyu’ in China and ‘Senkaku’ in Japan. In 2012, the Japanese Government, in a bid to prevent the nationalistic and anti-Chinese Mayor of Tokyo from purchasing the islands, nationalised three of the islands in the Diaoyu/Senkaku island chain. The Chinese Government responded by increasing its air and maritime surveillance around the islands, and by introducing a Chinese Air Defence Identification Zone over swathes of the East China Sea. We suggest that the disputes over the Diaoyu/Senkaku islands are not merely disputes about territorial and maritime sovereignty in the East China Sea; rather they are symbolic of the spiralling contests over the history of the Second World War in Northeast Asia and, in particular, contests over the international order that was put in place in Northeast Asia at the end of the Second World War.

The question of sovereignty in the East China Sea stems from debates between the three countries over whether key wartime and post-war treaties—such as the 1943 Cairo Declaration, 1945 Potsdam Proclamation and 1952 San Francisco Peace Treaty—revoked or upheld Japanese claims to the Diaoyu/Senkaku islands. Yet, these treaties are unhelpfully ambiguous about the precise sovereignty claims in the East China Sea. Moreover, these treaties also put forward competing perspectives about Japan and China’s status in the post-war international order. The Cairo and Potsdam declarations, which were signed by the United States, Great Britain and the Republic of China, entrenched a very particular role for Japan as a constrained and ‘abnormal’ non-military power. These declarations also enshrined an important role for China (albeit the Republic of China) as a leading power and one of the authors of the post-war international order (King 2014). In contrast, the 1951 San Francisco Peace Conference and subsequent Peace Treaty with Japan was very much a product of the divided Cold War world. The conference and treaty rehabilitated the relationship between Japan and the Allied Powers but included no representation from China or Korea. Despite having been the two most important victims of Japanese aggression during the Second World War, China and Korea were denied a role in this important post-war settlement with Japan.

The way in which China and Japan have responded to the Diaoyu/Senkaku dispute, and the particular post-war treaties they have invoked in doing so, is a clear demonstration of the ‘history spiral’ in action. Since 2012, the two sides have propagated competing views of history by making reference either to the Cairo and Potsdam declarations (in the case of China) or the 1952 San Francisco Peace Treaty (in the case of Japan). In doing so, each side’s historical ‘evidence’ delegitimises and contradicts the ‘evidence’ put forward by the other.

On the Japanese side, the San Francisco Peace Treaty has been invoked to underpin Japanese claims to sovereignty over the Diaoyu/Senkaku islands and to demonstrate that Japan supports the current, US-led international order. In February 2013, the Abe Government established the Office of Policy Planning and Coordination on Territory and Sovereignty. Within a year of its creation, this Office had launched a website dedicated to explaining and demonstrating Japanese
sovereignty over the Diaoyu/Senkaku islands, as well as its sovereignty claims over the Dokdo/Takeshima islands and the Northern Territories/Kuril islands. The website hosts dozens of items, including posters, videos and pamphlets in multiple languages each emphasising that ‘the Senkaku Islands are indisputably an inherent part of the territory of Japan in light of historical facts and based upon international law’ (OPPCTS 2015, emphasis added). The ‘historical facts’ referred to in the case of the Senkaku Islands are the 1952 San Francisco Peace Treaty, which granted the United States ongoing administrative control over the Nansei shoto group of islands, which included the Senkaku, and the 1972 United States—Japan Okinawa Reversion Agreement, which transferred administrative control over the islands from the United States to Japan (MOFA 2014). Japan has also drawn an explicit connection between the San Francisco Peace Treaty and the Diaoyu/Senkaku island dispute as a way to demonstrate that Japan’s behaviour upholds international order and the rule of law, and that China’s behaviour undermines it. For instance, in 2012, the then Japanese Foreign Minister Gemba Koichiro (2012) put forward this argument on the pages of the New York Times:

As a first step after the war, Japan concluded the San Francisco Peace Treaty, which was signed by 48 other countries, including the United States. The treaty constitutes an important element of the postwar international order, but the Chinese government considers the treaty “illegal and void.” In addition, China enacted a Law on the Territorial Sea and the Contiguous Zone in 1992 that treats the Senkaku Islands as belonging to China, thus trying to unilaterally change the status of the islands defined by the San Francisco Peace Treaty. Which country, Japan or China, negates the postwar international order?

In contrast to Japan, the Chinese Government’s rhetoric on the Diaoyu/Senkaku dispute frequently refers to the Cairo and Potsdam declarations, which revoked sovereignty over territory seized by the Imperial Japanese Government between 1895 and 1945. For instance, in November 2013, in a direct response to Prime Minister Abe’s calls to resolve maritime security disputes through international law, Chinese Foreign Ministry (2013) spokesperson Qin Gang stated that

I have also noticed that Japan seems to lay a special emphasis on the norms of international law. Then we wonder, on the issue of the Diaoyu islands, whether the Cairo Declaration and the Potsdam Proclamation still count or not, whether the outcomes of the victory of the world anti-Fascist war and the post-war international order should be observed or not and whether the purposes and the principles of the UN Charter should be upheld or not?

Similarly, shortly in the wake of the Japanese Government’s purchase of the islands, then Vice President Xi Jinping criticised ‘some political forces in Japan’ for having ‘openly questioned the international legitimacy of the Cairo and Potsdam declarations’ and by ‘intensifying territorial disputes with its neighbours’ (People’s Daily 2012).

These contested views of history matter not only for adjudicating sovereignty claims in the East China Sea but also because they underpin contested Chinese and Japanese views of the future international order of Northeast Asia. Japan is using ‘history’ to criticise Chinese behaviour in the East China Sea and, more importantly, to emphasise Japan’s status as a rule-abiding and peaceful supporter of the international order created by the United States at the beginning of the Cold War. At the same time, China is using ‘history’ to criticise Japanese behaviour in the East China Sea and, more importantly, to delegitimise Japan’s attempts to become a ‘normal’ military power, and thereby undermine the international order created at the end of the Second World War.

5. The Dokdo/Takeshima ‘History spiral’

Relations between Japan and South Korea are routinely described today as experiencing an especially low ebb. Historical tensions between these Northeast Asian neighbours date back a long way to Japan’s invasion of the Korean Peninsula in the late sixteenth century. However, it is the period of Japanese colonisation from 1910–1945 that drives the ‘history spiral’ between Seoul and Tokyo today.
The ‘spiral’ in this particular case is personified in the current leaderships of Japan and South Korea. Current South Korean President Park Guen-Hye’s father, the late Park Chung-hee, served in the Japanese Imperial Army during the Second World War. He went on to become the leader of South Korea in a military coup in 1961 and in 1965 signed a normalisation treaty with Japan. Likewise, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe’s father was also a wartime leader and became Japanese Prime Minister during the postwar period.

Abe is often criticised, particularly in China and Korea, for his reluctance to fully atone for Japanese actions during the Second World War. His very direct familial links to this conflict may, however, provide one reason for his unwillingness to do so. In Park’s case, concerns about being perceived as too moderate towards Japan due to her own familial ties to the war explains her more hardline attitude towards Tokyo. This has been epitomised by Park’s refusal to hold a summit with Abe. (McGill 2014)

Yet, the ‘history spiral’ between Japan and South Korea is not just a feature of their current leaderships. As with China and Japan, Tokyo and Seoul have their own territorial dispute in the East China Sea over islands that the Koreans call ‘Dokdo’ and the Japanese refer to as ‘Takeshima’.

South Korea named the first of its Landing-platform experimental ships, commissioned in 2007, after these islands and included the words ‘Project Power’ under the name of the vessel. However, it was then-South Korean President Lee Myung-Bak’s August 2012 visit to the islands—the first of any sitting South Korean President—which led to an intensification of the spiral around this particular set of disputes. Japan reacted to Lee’s visit by withdrawing its Ambassador and by publicly stating its intention to take the territorial disputes to the International Court of Justice. The Japanese Parliament subsequently passed a resolution condemning Lee’s visit, while then-Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda also sent a personal letter to his Korean counterpart reiterating Tokyo’s condemnation, which Seoul refused to receive.

Consistent with our conception of a ‘history spiral’, invective around the Dokdo/Takeshima disputes has not flowed in only one direction. During the first half of 2015, for instance, there have been several instances where Seoul has summoned Korean-based Japanese officials to formally protest the portrayal of the Dokdo/Takeshima disputes in government publications. In January of this year, for instance, South Korea called in the military attaché for the Japanese Embassy in Seoul to protest claims made to the islands in the Korean language version of Japan’s 2014 Defence White Article. Similarly, when Japan’s ‘Diplomatic Bluebook’—a summary of Japan’s foreign policy and activities produced by the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs—was released in April, another Japanese Minister based at the Embassy in Seoul was summoned over claims made to the disputed islands as well as the document’s depiction of Korean comfort women/sex slaves during the Second World War (Kang & Bang 2015).

6. The China-Korea ‘History spiral’

The continuation and intensification of historically grounded tensions between Seoul and Tokyo has proven to be a particular source of frustration for Washington. Especially over recent years, these tensions have not only complicated US efforts to ‘pivot’ to the Asia-Pacific and to effectively implement its so-called ‘re-balancing’ strategy. Perhaps of even greater concern to Washington is the extent to which mutual historical antipathies towards Tokyo are driving Seoul and Beijing increasingly closer together. In some respects, this is a history spiral of a different kind and one that is, according to some analysts, driving Seoul into Beijing’s strategic orbit.

It is true that China and South Korea are currently closer than at any time since Beijing formally normalised relations with Seoul in 1992. Park is the first Mandarin-speaking President of South Korea. In clear contrast to their noticeable reluctance to meet with Abe, Park and Chinese President Xi Jinping have thus far already met formally six times during their respective terms in office.
One of the most recent manifestations of Chinese and Korean mutual antipathy towards Japan took the form of a memorial hall opened in Harbin, the capital city of the Northern Chinese province of Heilongjiang. The memorial honoured a Korean Independence activist named Ahn Jung-geun. In 1909, Ahn assassinated four times Japanese Prime Minister and the first resident governor of Korea, Ito Hirobumi, on the eve of Korea’s formal annexation with Japan. From a Korean perspective, Ahn is a national hero who gave his life in the name of independence. For Japan, however, he was a criminal who assassinated a prominent statesman and historical figure. The opening of the memorial to Ahn thus understandably drew criticism from Tokyo, although it is interesting to note that its opening came less than a month after Abe’s controversial December 2013 visit to the Yasukuni shrine, which honours Japanese war dead including fourteen so-called ‘Class A’ criminals from the Second World War. Abe’s 2013 Yasukuni visit drew fierce criticism from both Beijing and Seoul.

China and South Korea have certainly found common cause in their mutual dissatisfaction with Japanese apologies for its actions during the Second World War. During his historic May 2015 visit to the United States, for instance, Abe became the first Japanese Prime Minister to address both Houses of Congress. During his speech, which was delivered in English, he conveyed Japan’s ‘eternal condolences to the souls of all American people that were lost during World War II.’ Abe’s lack of reference in this ‘apology’ to Asian women coerced into sexual slavery during the war drew criticism from both China and Korea (Lee 2015).

Interestingly, however, although mutual historically grounded antipathy toward Japan has driven China and Korea closer over recent years, there are apparently limits to how close that relationship can ultimately become. Seoul’s decision to expand its own Air Defence Identification Zone in response to China’s declaration of an East China Sea Air Defence Identification Zone in November 2013, for instance, served as a reminder of an often forgotten territorial dispute between China and Korea over a submerged rock in the Yellow Sea, which the Chinese call ‘Suyan’ and the Koreans ‘leodo’ (Kuo 2013). More recently, Park also ‘politely declined’ an invitation from Xi for a joint Chinese–Korean commemoration of the ending of the Second World War (Glosserman & Snyder 2015).

7. Back to the Future?

American policymakers, in particular, will have been relieved to see that there remain limits to the burgeoning friendship between Beijing and Seoul. And there are some reasons to conclude that the worst could soon be over in terms of Northeast Asia’s history problems, particularly if one sees these primarily as a product of timing and individual personalities. Moreover, while leadership change is not imminent in either Beijing, Seoul or Tokyo, South Korea’s next Presidential election is scheduled to take place in 2017, which could well change some of the dynamics of China–Japan–South Korea relations. For example, while coming from the same side of politics, Park’s predecessor Lee Myung-bak adopted a far more circumspect approach to relations with China than has Park (Cook 2014, p. 6).

Since late 2014, we have also seen some very early signs of a thawing in relations between China and Japan. Abe and Xi met, for instance, on the sidelines of the November 2014 APEC summit and again in April 2015 at a gathering of Asian and African nations celebrating the 60th anniversary of the Bandung conference. While continuing to criticise her Japanese counterpart, in May 2015, President Park also noted that South Korean diplomacy should not remain ‘buried in the past’. This statement was regarded by some commentators as signalling a willingness on Seoul’s part to finally move on from the history disputes with Japan (Gale 2015).

However, there are good reasons to indicate that the ‘history spiral’ will continue to shape relations between China and its Northeast Asian neighbours long after the 70th anniversary commemorations in 2015. First, China’s
Patriotic Education Campaign—which was introduced at the end of the Cold War—has been remarkably successful in creating a powerful strain of anti-Japanese sentiment among the domestic Chinese population. On occasions, this domestic sentiment has constrained China’s foreign policy towards Japan, such as in 2008 when the Hu Jintao Government was pilloried at home for ‘selling out’ to Japan on joint resource development in the East China Sea. These sorts of events demonstrate that Northeast Asia’s ‘history spiral’ is enduring because it is not merely an instrumental, government-driven phenomenon. Instead, in China, government officials, education ministries, and producers of online warcraft games, television dramas and other cultural products have exploited, encouraged or allowed the flourishing of anti-Japanese historical narratives such that they have taken on a powerful emotional hold at the domestic level. In recent years, the Chinese Government has become increasingly sophisticated in dealing with this domestic sentiment, using the tools of internet and media censorship and suppression of large-scale public protests when it needs to manage its domestic population and foreign policy towards Japan (Reilly 2011; Stockmann 2010). Yet, the government has also skilfully used the ‘history problem’ as a bargaining chip in foreign policy negotiations with Japan; permitting a small amount of anti-Japanese protests within China allows Beijing to signal to international audiences that Chinese foreign policy decisions are constrained by domestic public opinion (Weiss 2014). For these reasons, Beijing has incentives to maintain a modicum of anti-Japanese sentiment at home even as it improves its ability to ensure that popular sentiment is kept below dangerous thresholds.

Second, even if Beijing is increasingly able to shape and moderate the impact of the remembered history within China, it is not able to control the use of history by Japan. This is one of the most problematic aspects of the ‘history spiral’. At a time of changing power relations in the Asia-Pacific region, Japan’s Abe Government is now instrumentally using history to defend its sovereignty over disputed territory in the East China Sea, to strengthen ties with friends and allies such as Australia and the United States, and to shore up domestic support from conservatives to change Japan’s security posture in Asia. Prime Minister Abe’s April 2015 address to US Congress was indicative of this approach. Abe spoke of joint US and Japanese commemoration of the Second World War, Japanese gratitude for American post-war economic assistance to Japan, and Japan’s ‘choice’ to follow US leadership in the wake of the war (MOFA 2015). Although Abe also indicated his remorse for Japanese actions that caused suffering in Asia during the war, his failure to issue an apology for Japan’s wartime aggression was quickly criticised in China and South Korea, as noted previously.

Since early 2015, Korean and Chinese leaders including President Park, Premier Li Keqiang and Politburo Standing Committee member Yu Zhengsheng have each signalled their desire to improve relations with Japan. Yet in doing so, each of these leaders has indicated that it is up to Japan to do the heavy lifting on the history issue. In his 15 August commemoration address, Abe used key phrases such as ‘deep remorse’ and ‘heartfelt apology’ for the wartime damage and suffering caused by Japan. Yet, Abe also made clear his view that future generations of Japanese should not be ‘predestined to apologise’ for the past and emphasised Japan’s major contributions to Asia’s postwar peace and prosperity. Abe’s statement included a far more fulsome apology than many expected, and thus received only muted criticism in China and Korea. Yet, this is not a sign that the ‘history spiral’ is behind us. For Japan, the history that is now remembered is one that celebrates Japan’s rehabilitation as a rule-abiding and peaceful supporter of the US-led order created in Northeast Asia at the beginning of the Cold War. Despite the innumerable Japanese who feel uncomfortable with Abe’s view of history, there is little appetite for changing the US-led order that has underpinned Japanese security for the past 70 years. Rethinking views about the
future of Northeast Asian international order might be the only way to rethink views about its past.

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