

Historical Reconciliation and East Asian Community Building

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Following decades of rapid economic development, East Asia is undergoing a major power transition. China has become an engine for economic growth, but the rise of China has created many uncertainties. Japan is adopting the strategy of hedging by strengthening its military alliance with the US and by building new partnership with other regional players. The lack of historical reconciliation among the close neighbors is a consequence of the postwar geopolitics as well as domestic politics; it is also a major contributing factor to the rising tensions and mistrust among them.

Historical reconciliation is both a process and an end. Achieving historical reconciliation in East Asia, more than in other parts of Asia Pacific, has many obstacles; at the same time, it is more necessary than ever due to the toxic mix with geopolitical rivalry and territorial disputes that can flare up into armed conflict. Moreover, regional issues such as the North Korean nuclear tests as well as the environmental problems all require closer cooperation among the neighboring countries in East Asia.

Given the economic inter-dependence and increased opportunities for people-to-people exchanges, there are ample opportunities for laying the groundwork for deep historical reconciliation as well as an embryonic community in East Asia. Such a regional community in turn offers one of the most promising ways of diffusing tensions arising from the past conflicts and geopolitical uncertainties about the future.

Intellectuals and civil society actors can contribute to this long-term process by envisioning a peaceful and prosperous future for the region, by promoting cross-border ties and dialogues over a wide range of common issues, and by shaping public opinion at home. Political leaders have to act by enacting policies and creating institutions for the East Asian community.