

China and Japan: Will they ever reconcile?

Yes, but they need to overcome three hurdles: the burden of history, competing ambition to lead Asia and the deficit of strategic trust

Tommy Koh

Let me begin my essay by telling you a story. In 1996, then Singapore Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong was successful in convening the inaugural meeting of the leaders of Asia and Europe, in Bangkok.

The leaders agreed to establish the Asia-Europe Meeting. They also agreed to establish the Asia-Europe Foundation (Asef) to promote better mutual understanding between the peoples of the two regions.

Following the summit in Bangkok, Mr Goh and my boss at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Mr Kishore Mahbubani, requested that I be the founding executive director of the Asia-Europe Foundation.

The 3½ years I spent in that job enabled me to learn, more deeply, the history of the post-war European integration project.

I was particularly struck by the miracle of reconciliation that had taken place between historic enemies, such as between France and Germany.

ASEF: CHINA AND JAPAN SAY 'NO'

At Asef, I proposed convening a seminar to consider how Asia can learn from the European experience of reconciling historic enemies.

To my surprise, the governors from China and Japan objected to my proposal. When I pressed them to explain their objection, they said that their countries were not ready.

In exasperation, I said that if they were not ready, more than 50 years after the Pacific War had ended, when would they be ready?

In view of their objections, I had to abandon my proposal.

There will be no peace in Asia unless there is peace between China and Japan. It is therefore important for us to help those two great countries to reconcile and to

live at peace with each other.

I co-chair the Japan-Singapore Symposium and the China-Singapore Forum. When misunderstandings occurred between them, I had tried to explain China to Japan and Japan to China.

LEE KUAN YEW AND KIICHI MIYAZAWA

I once sought the advice of the founding prime minister of Singapore, Mr Lee Kuan Yew, on what I could do to help China and Japan achieve a historic reconciliation.

He was quite pessimistic. He told me that he had once asked Mr Kiichi Miyazawa, former prime minister of Japan, whether the Chinese would ever forgive Japan for all the wicked things that Japan did in China, from 1931 to 1945.

According to Mr Lee, Mr Miyazawa's reply was "never".

I am an optimist. I am not prepared to accept, as inevitable, that China and Japan will never reconcile.

Let us examine the three impediments to such a reconciliation: (a) the burden of history; (b) the competing ambition to lead Asia; and (c) the deficit of strategic trust.

THE BURDEN OF HISTORY

It is a historical fact that Japan invaded China in 1931 and waged a war, from 1931 to 1945, in a failed attempt to conquer that country.

It is also a fact that during those 14 years, the Japanese army committed many atrocities against the Chinese people.

In Europe, Germany was the aggressor. The German government and army had committed many crimes against the French and other victims, especially the Jews.

After the war, Germany repented for all the crimes it had committed against the French people. In



A 2011 file photo of a Japanese Maritime Self-Defence Force patrol plane flying over the East China Sea islets called the Senkaku Islands in Japan, and Diaoyu Islands in China. The writer says the dispute over the islets is one example of a deficit of strategic trust between China and Japan. PHOTO: AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

return, France forgave Germany. There was repentance on one side and forgiveness on the other.

Why can't the same thing happen between China and Japan?

China says that Japan has not repented for its wrongs. It says that all the apologies expressed by the leaders of Japan had been nuanced and had fallen short of a sincere apology.

Japan denies this. It says that its leaders have apologised on several occasions. Prime ministers Morihiro Hosokawa and Tomiichi Murayama had apologised without reservation.

It states that the problem is on the Chinese side. It holds the view that China will never forgive Japan, no matter how many times it apologises.

I have often wondered why Japan finds it so hard to apologise and China finds it so hard to forgive.

Why can't they behave like the Germans and the French? Is there something in the character, culture and value systems of China and Japan that distinguish them from the Germans and the French?

I don't know the answers to the questions.

COMPETING AMBITION TO LEAD ASIA

The second obstacle is the competing ambition of China and Japan to be the leader of Asia.

One of my previous Japanese co-chairmen of the Japan-Singapore Symposium was Mr Shotaro Yachi.

When he was the deputy foreign minister of Japan, he said that China and Japan were struggling for leadership and locked in a rivalry

The key question is whether the leaders of the two countries see each other as friends or as enemies. If they see each other as enemies, then the status quo will continue. However, if they see each other as friends, then many steps can be taken, at all levels, to improve understanding and to reduce distrust. At the moment, I think they see each other as frenemies, part friend and part enemy. As long as this is the case, no historic reconciliation between them will occur.

that would last a long time.

Both the Chinese and the Japanese believe in the saying that there can only be one tiger on a hill. Both China and Japan want to be that tiger.

Why can't we see Asia as not a hill, but a mountain range with several peaks? The Chinese tiger can be on top of one peak, the Japanese tiger on another and the Indian tiger on a third peak.

This works as long as the Chinese tiger and the Japanese tiger are not competing to occupy the highest peak.

I would respectfully point out to

both China and Japan that Asia cannot be dominated by any one country. There are three major powers on the continent, namely China, Japan and India.

An extra-regional power, the United States, claims to be a resident power of the region. It is more powerful than any of the three Asian powers. It will never allow the region to be dominated by a regional hegemon.

My advice to China and Japan is to compete, but not to seek to put the other down. It should be a win-win and not a zero-sum competition.

Asia is big enough to accommodate a rising China, a rising Japan and a rising India.

DEFICIT OF STRATEGIC TRUST

The third impediment is the deficit of strategic trust. It is unfortunately true that China does not trust Japan, and Japan does not trust China.

Because they don't trust each other, they have tended to oppose each other's initiatives and to misread each other's intentions.

A few examples should suffice: China is opposed to Japan's quest to be a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council; Japan does not support the China-led Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank or the Belt and Road Initiative.

The Chinese suspected that the Japanese government's decision to nationalise the Senkaku or Diaoyu islands was intended to change the status quo.

I don't think this was the case. The Japanese government had nationalised those islands in order to prevent their private owners

from causing trouble.

How to reduce the mistrust between China and Japan? How to promote better understanding and mutual trust between them?

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CONCLUSION

Will there ever be a historic reconciliation between China and Japan? The pessimists say: never. As an optimist, I think it is possible, provided we can overcome the three obstacles I have described.

• Tommy Koh is a professor of law at the National University of Singapore (NUS) and an Ambassador-at-Large at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. He is rector of Tembusu College and chairman of the governing board of the Centre for International Law at NUS. He is also co-chairman of the China-Singapore Forum and the Japan-Singapore Symposium.

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