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Troubling Sino-Japanese ties

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BEIJING – There are many obscure tourist sites in Beijing. One missed by many foreigners is the Chinese People’s Anti-Japanese War Memorial Hall. The museum illustrates why China, the United States’ most fearsome potential competitor, and Japan, Washington’s most important Asian ally, often are at odds. The two are a conflict waiting to happen, which could draw the U.S. into war with a nuclear power.

Chinese President Xi Jinping presided over last week’s World War II victory parade in Beijing. Declared Xi, the victory “put an end to China’s national humiliation of suffering successive defeats at the hands of foreign aggressors in modern times.”

However, the conflict with Japan continues in many people’s minds. In 1931 Tokyo occupied Manchuria (creating the nominally independent kingdom of Manchukuo) and six years later initiated an aggressive war against the rest of China. In the ensuing civil war Mao Zedong and the Chinese Communist Party defeated Chiang Kai-shek’s Kuomintang, or Nationalists, and established the People’s Republic of China.

Following Washington’s lead, Tokyo did not recognize the PRC until 1972. Since reestablishing official ties the two countries’ relationship has gyrated up and down. More than talking is necessary to resolve four major disputes: history, trade, territory and security.

Although the CCP manipulates history for its own benefit — young Chinese learn little about the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests — the CCP has been quick to criticize Tokyo for failing to take responsibility for Imperial Japan’s actions.

While China’s demand for remorse is understandable, the vast majority of Japanese are horrified by the prospect of conflict. Even more nationalistic Japanese, such as Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, don’t contemplate a new round of military aggression — which would be impossible against nuclear-armed China. Yet high Japanese officials continue to inflame Chinese sensibilities by disputing (out of personal conviction or for domestic political purposes) the criminality of the wartime regime and flaunting wartime symbols, such as Yasukuni Shrine.

Commemorating World War II’s end Abe offered official regret for the conflict, reiterating the statements of previous premiers, expressed “deep repentance for the war,” and pledged “never to wage a war again.” Yet his remarks were dismissed by the leaders of China and other nations as “evasive” and not “sincere.”

Beijing has its own historical agenda. The regime has been battling Western influences and recently unleashed a veritable tsunami of documentaries, concerts, exhibitions, movies, television shows, musicals, children's programs, and more to promote nationalistic fervor. Criticism of Japan is central.

Two months ago, the Xi government opened a new exhibition at the anti-Japanese memorial, or Museum of the War of Chinese People's Resistance Against Japanese Aggression. The government quoted visitors as calling the museum "a very good place to experience and see atrocities the Japanese imperialists committed." The museum illustrates the challenge to China-Japan relations. It devotes 887 exhibits with 5,000 documents and relics and 3,800 photographs to sully Japan's reputation.

Economics provides an area of both cooperation and tension. After the PRC's founding, commercial ties developed slowly and were vulnerable to political disruption. Since China and Japan established diplomatic relations in 1972, both trade and investment expanded greatly. Total bilateral trade ran about \$344 billion in 2014. However, politics continues to undermine the relationship.

Territorial disputes have grown increasingly vitriolic. Conflict has been worsening over the status of the unpopulated Senkaku Islands, which are claimed by both nations. The half dozen islets are controlled by Japan, but China now conducts air and sea patrols around the contested islands. Tokyo has pressed the U.S. for explicit defense assurances for the islands.

Security remains a top Chinese priority. Japan recently proposed its largest defense budget yet, about \$42 billion. China is Tokyo's primary target.

The Japan-U.S. alliance greatly magnifies Japanese military strength. Moreover, Washington not only has supported Tokyo in the controversy over the Senkakus, but also has offered general backing for the Philippines and an ambiguous commitment to Taiwan's independence.

While the U.S. and Japan have no aggressive designs on China, Beijing understandably looks uneasily at the alliance of its old enemy with the globe's dominant power. Thus, China is developing a military capable of confronting American as well as Japanese military action, no easy task.

The animus between China and Japan should scare the rest of the world. While war between China and Tokyo seems — and should be — unthinkable, it could be just one drunk ship captain or careless fighter pilot away.

The people of China and Japan should work through their difficult histories. The future belongs to those now living. They must find reconciliation and create a better world for those yet born.

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