Handling History

If mishandled, disputes over historical issues could remain an obstacle to the further improvement of bilateral ties between China and Japan, some American scholars believe.

By WANG YANJUAN & CHENWEN

Disputes over historical issues have been a factor affecting China-Japan relations for quite some time. If mishandled, they could remain an obstacle to the further improvement of, some American scholars believe. Richard C. Bush, senior fellow and director of the Center for Northeast Asian Policy Studies at the Brookings Institution; Richard J. Samuels, Director of the Center for International Studies at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) and Founding Director of the MIT Japan Program; and Ezra F. Vogel, a renowned U.S. scholar who specialized in East Asian studies and now is emeritus Henry Ford II Professor of the Social Sciences at Harvard University, shared their views on this issue with Beijing Review.

Beijing Review: How do you view the history issue in the China-Japan relationship?

Richard C. Bush: This is a very complicated issue and it has evolved over time. Japan is a very pluralistic society and there are competing views. There is understanding in Japan that the Japanese military caused great suffering throughout Asia in the early part of the 20th century. There are people who regrettably refuse to accept that point of view, or maybe they understand it, but do not wish to remind others.

Richard J. Samuels: Americans are critical of Japan. Americans are critical because they also are the objects of the revision of history in Japan. Americans expect China and Japan to have good economic relations and better political relations.

Ezra F. Vogel: I think [former Chinese leader] Deng Xiaoping put it well when he went to Japan in 1978. He said that for 2,500 years China and Japan had a history of good relations, except for the 50 years from 1895 to 1945. He hoped that they would again return to the historical pattern of good relations. And I think that was a very excellent statement.
What are the major challenges affecting bilateral relations?

Samuels: For the Japanese side, there is a failure to confront the history issue. There is a group of quite powerful and quite influential conservatives in Japan who resist the idea of making a full accounting for Japan's behavior during World War II. For the Chinese side, there seems to be an interest in maintaining the anti-Japanese, or some level of anti-Japanese, feeling. It becomes a situation in which the blame is on both sides.

Bush: I think the major challenge has to do with the security relationship. Japan has military capabilities. It is deepening its alliance with the United States, it may change its Constitution [to allow its military to take a more assertive posture] and it is planning to build up a missile defense. China at the same time is building up its military capabilities. There is the possibility that each side's looking at the action of the other could create a vicious circle, but this is not inevitable. The two sides should be mature enough, I think, to understand that might happen and create a dialogue to build mutual trust and mutual understanding to prevent it. This is the same situation actually that the United States and China are in. In a way, the Japan-China security situation is linked to the U.S.-China security situation, so all three countries need to work together to ensure that their security buildups are handled in a mature way.

Vogel: They will both be the great powers for the rest of the century and they have many common interests: trade, finding energy resources, avoiding pollution problems, avoiding accidents, avoiding conflicts over Taiwan, commercial relations and industrial relations. These are very important and very much in the interests of the two countries. But there are emotions on both sides that will make it difficult to achieve cooperation.

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What action may the administration of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe take in dealing with the history issue?

Samuels: I think the Abe administration will be more pragmatic and they'll back down from the more aggressively revisionist position. They may not believe it's correct in their view of history but they are going to step back because there is too much at stake: the relationship with China and with the United States. These are very important relationships. I think the ideology is going to be suppressed. Things have improved since Abe's visit to Beijing and will continue to improve.
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Bush: One step that the Abe administration has already taken in the wake of the prime minister's visit to China in October last year was to set up a joint commission on the study of history. Prominent historians from both countries are members of that commission. I think commissions like that can play a very important role. Emphasizing the positive interests that both countries share can be very important. I do think that over time it is important to find ways for the two countries to reconcile over these very tragic issues.

Vogel: It's not clear what kind of actions Abe will take, because any political leader, especially in a democracy, must consider views from the political standpoint in the country. As you know, Abe has been losing popular support. If he feels that he needs to get more public support, he should do things like visiting the Yasukuni Shrine, but that will be bad for international relations.

On the other hand, if things go well between China and Japan, if the visit by [Chinese Premier] Wen Jiabao goes smoothly, then I think that will increase public support for Abe. And he does not have to visit the shrine. So if foreign relations go well, it will increase the chances of [Abe] not visiting the shrine.

What should be done by both sides?

Samuels: The Japanese have to confront history more squarely and begin to have a conversation with the Chinese side. And the Chinese side has to resolve not to maintain the anti-Japanese feeling. Anti-Japanese sentiment in China and an anti-China backlash in Japan are both served politically at home and should be resisted by smart leaders.

I think they have to be more open to the idea of full public education. The Chinese textbooks are like the Japanese textbooks in the way in which they limit a full account of the war and the relationship over the following 60 years. I think focusing on Japan's peaceful role in Asia over the last 60 years is something that the Chinese Government can do more of. And I think focusing on the crimes during World War II more forthrightly is something that the Japanese side can do. Getting the history right is critical.

Bush: (Currently) in each society, the media plays a role, and the education system plays a role. In Japan, certainly, politicians sometimes play a role. In this situation it is the job of leaders to lead, to remind the public that the two countries have many common interests, they have a responsibility to the world to work to protect international peace and security, and that the past is the past. As Chinese leaders say, it should be a mirror but it should not be a kind of restraint to block the two countries from realizing the opportunities and the potential for the future, for future cooperation.

If the history issue is mishandled it could be an obstacle [to bilateral ties]. But with proper leadership on both sides and responsible management and correct management, it doesn’t have to be an obstacle.

What is your expectation about the China-Japan Joint History Research Committee, which aims to narrow the differences between the two countries?

Vogel: The joint group can accomplish something but it's very difficult, because...
when you have government officials on both sides, they will represent the emotions of the people. So the experience of Japan and Korea in their government-sponsored joint textbook commissions has not been very successful, because the governments represented the emotions of the people and it's difficult to get the detachment necessary to do the work properly. On the other hand, I was able to organize research scholars from Japan, China, Europe and North America to work together at a conference on what happened during World War II and we made excellent progress. We were working together and trying to develop an understanding of each other's point of view. So I think it's more promising when scholars do it without the government. When the government gets involved, it becomes more complicated. Of course it's a good thing that they have governments making an effort but I do not expect great achievement from that effort.

I think it has the potential to be very helpful, but sometimes when the two governments talk about the issue, they have very different points of view. It's easy to get into arguments. So it could be helpful, but I think it's also somewhat risky when there are just two countries doing it. I think it's helpful when other countries are involved. That's why when I organized the conferences on World War II, we included scholars from other countries as well. That was appreciated by both the Chinese and Japanese. It just reduced the chances for arguments. And we encouraged everybody to take a scholarly point of view instead of just having two sides quarreling with each other.

(Reporting from New York)