Contrary to what many observers had expected, this year, which marks the 100th anniversary of Japan’s forcible annexation of Korea, has been characterized by an atmosphere of reconciliation between the two countries. Above all, the diplomatic gestures on both sides — even if they might not have satisfied everyone — have been carried out with a careful regard for feelings in both places.

For example, Japanese Prime Minister Naoto Kan on Aug. 12 issued a courageous and heartfelt apology to South Korea for his country’s period of brutal colonial rule, expressing deep remorse and handing over Korean cultural artifacts that had been seized during the occupation. South Korean President Lee Myung-bak responded positively to Kan’s apology five days later in his address on the 65th Anniversary of South Korea’s national liberation.

And yet, it is by no means clear that the process of historical reconciliation between the two countries — which are geographically so close and yet emotionally so far apart — is over. As recently as 2005, relations between South Korea and Japan, as well as those between China and Japan, appeared headed off a cliff because of acrimonious clashes over the politics of national identity and history. Japanese leaders, in their effort to move Japan toward becoming a more “normal” nation, took ill-considered actions that inflamed sentiments in South Korea and China — such as former Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi’s annual visits to the Yasukuni Shrine, where Japanese war criminals are interred along with other war dead, or the Shimane Prefectural Council’s decision to designate “Takeshima Day,” a provocative reference to the disputed islets also claimed by South Korea and known to Koreans as Dokdo. Actions such as these triggered harsh and sometimes violent reactions and threatened their relations with Japan.

The incidents in 2005, as well as others in recent years, can be viewed in terms of what might be called “nationalist linkage politics,” in which the clashes of national identity, especially among hard-line nationalists in each of these three countries, are played out through explicit linkages between views on history and current policy issues. For example, South Korean President Roh Moo-hyun and Chinese President Hu Jintao engaged in this kind of linkage politics by conditioning support for Japan’s bid to join the United Nations Security Council with its willingness to acknowledge its behavior in World War II. Koizumi rejected this approach as irrational interference in Japan’s domestic affairs and unilaterally suspended Overseas Development Assistance to China beginning in 2008.

This notion of linkage politics goes beyond governments in the three countries to include their societies at large. Revisionist historians and right-wing politicians in Japan have been particularly active in leading the discourse on restoring what they describe as Japan’s national history. This, in turn, has activated similar discourses in South Korea and China. As a consequence, hard-line Japanese, Korean and Chinese nationalists have fed off of each other, leading to excessive politi-
What are Kang’s main arguments?

We are required first to understand the concept of Kokutai, which means the ‘fundamental character’ of the Japanese state, but so far nobody can clearly say what that character is.

Instead, he suggests a fourfold notion that captures a wider range of meanings. First is a dualism that simultaneously encompasses the logic of beauty and the logic of politics. The first part of that dualism emphasizes the world of god without any manipulated social norms, while the second recognizes a wide range of political realities such as fanatic ultra-nationalism, the symbolic Emperor system, and so on. Second, Kang argues that Kokutai has flexible boundaries, enabling it to incorporate non-Kokutai ideas such as fascism and democracy. Third, he argues that Kokutai incorporates an historical imagination that pen-
It would have been much better if Kang and others quoted in these books had given us more concrete ideas on how to manage Japanese neo-nationalism. Their most specific prescriptions involve an open and multilateral network of regionalism, but they appear over-confident that this will be effective.
in Japanese society, an economic nationalism that accommodated American Cold War strategy also emerged. Japan’s subsequent economic success gave birth to *Nihonjin Tokushuron* (the theory that the Japanese are a distinct people), which further subdivided Japanese nationalism into “internationalized nationalists” and anti-American nationalists. Economic globalization since the 1990s, combined with Japan’s own economic problems from that decade onward, however, took the steam out of Japanese economic nationalism. Today, neo-nationalism in Japan consists of nationalism from above (political actors) and nationalism from below (intellectuals, the mass media, and so on). Both of these forms of nationalism are keenly focused on the state: What should be the nature of the Japanese state? How should it respond to international society? How should Japanese feel about their homeland?

Kang says Japanese neo-nationalists in the 21st century are trying to construct a new version of Kokutai nationalism relying not on the Emperor but on strong political leadership under the banner of neo-nationalism. He argues, less convincingly, that Japan wants to be a major member of the newly emerging global governance system, by turning the US-Japan alliance into an Asian version of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, and by accommodating Japan to the global forces of market fundamentalism. In this regard, Japanese neo-nationalism is focused rather more on the state (or statism) than on the nation, responding to the forces of globalization, while attempting to integrate Japan’s increasingly disunited people.

If so, how do Kang and others propose to handle this formidable challenge? Kang’s suggestion appears a bit idealistic, but it has a certain attraction from a long-term perspective. He argues that the open and multilateral network of Northeast Asian regionalism is crucial and even indispensable to avoid a gloomy future for the region; free Japan from the constraints of Kokutai; resist the violence of empire; and even redress the imbalances in the US-Japan relationship. He also suggests that cultural studies are an effective way to dispel the deeply rooted presumption that the collusion of US and Japanese intellectuals in the post-War period to perpetuate an Emperor-centered Kokutai nationalism, as well as Japan’s post-War prosperity, were the result of the United States’ benign occupation policy and the so-called San Francisco system (where the terms of the post-War order with Japan were defined). In addition, Lummis, in the third volume reviewed here, shows his deep confidence in the constructive and critical role played by Japanese civil society in so far successfully resisting the violence of the state.

It would have been much better if Kang and others quoted in these books had given us more concrete ideas on how to manage Japanese neo-nationalism. Their most specific prescriptions involve an open and multilateral network of regionalism, but they appear over-confident that this will be effective. For his part, Kang says he tried to address the challenge of reversing Japanese neo-nationalism by finding shortcuts that might be available through his experiences as a Korean resident of Japan, but in the end, he criticizes Japan mainly through the eyes of progressive intellectuals on both sides of the Pacific — such as Masao Maruyama, Bunso Hashikawa and Dower. Despite some shortcomings, these books provide valuable insights into the cognitive map of Japanese intellectuals and neo-nationalists. As Kang says in his second book, he has so far succeeded in carving out a space in Japanese national identity that enables the viewpoint of the internal “other” in Japanese society to be heard. Put in other words, he has become “an internal other” who scratches Japanese society where it itches.

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