Japan’s colonization of Korea and military aggression toward China in the first half of the last century left a lasting legacy of mistrust. In the early 1990s, following the end of the Cold War, Japan sincerely tried to bridge this trust gap. Since then, conservative and nationalist forces in Japan have reversed those efforts. It will take a renewed push in Japan, but also from leaders in China and South Korea, to give reconciliation another chance, writes Yoshihide Soeya.

THE TRUST GAP THAT Japan suffers from seems perpetual: the vicious cycle of animosity with its immediate neighbors, especially South Korea and China, has worsened in the last decade. But this widening trust gap would not exist if all sides weren’t in some sense contributing to it. In this essay, I attempt to explain how pluralism in Japanese domestic politics regarding memories of the past feeds this vicious cycle. To understand why the trust gap has widened in the last decade, it is necessary to begin by reflecting on what happened in Japan a decade earlier, in the 1990s.

TRUST-BUILDING IN THE 1990S

A new, post-Cold War era for Japanese diplomacy began following the Gulf War of 1991, when Japan was severely criticized for its failure to contribute meaningfully to the international effort to oust Iraqi forces from Kuwait beyond providing $13 billion in funding for the multinational forces. As a result, Japan felt isolated and impotent in the international community, accused of being engaged in nothing but “checkbook diplomacy.” This “Gulf shock” gave rise to a sense of trauma among Japanese policymakers and opinion leaders, and provided the central impetus for Japan’s enactment of the International Peace Co-operation Law in June 1992. That law made it possible for the Japanese Self-Defense Force (SDF) to join international peacekeeping operations for the first time, starting with the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC).

As a result of these experiences, a debate about the revision of Japan’s postwar constitution, particularly its war-renouncing Article Nine, gradually became more open and widely accepted in Japanese society. Importantly, the philosophy of internationalism, rather than nationalism, became the driving force behind this evolution in Japanese thinking. For instance, polls by the daily Yomiuri Shimbun in 1995 showed the percentage of those in favor of revising Article Nine had more than doubled from 22.6 percent in 1986 to 50.4 percent, with 59.6 percent of those in favor of revision saying they supported it because Article Nine hindered Japan’s “international contribution.” 1

While internationalism provided the motive for the SDF’s participation in peacekeeping missions and the more open constitutional debate, the reaffirmation of the US-Japan alliance in the post-Cold War era. The most critical trigger was the North Korean nuclear crisis in 1994, which led to the revision of the Guidelines for US-Japan Defense Co-operation (originally adopted in 1978). At that time, the United States was on the verge of conducting surgical strikes against North Korean military facilities, and Tokyo and Washington had to face the stark reality that they had not prepared for how the SDF would help the US military in such a contingency. First and foremost, therefore, the revision of the guidelines was an attempt by Japan and the US to contribute to South Korean security through more effective management of the US-Japan alliance.

As internationalism inspired a rethinking of Japanese security policies in the 1990s, Japan simultaneously engaged in a number of serious attempts to mitigate the burden of history with its neighbors. It was all too obvious to Japanese policymakers and the political elite that addressing the history problem, or trust gap, with its neighbors was crucial in order for Japan to transform itself from the pacificism of the Cold War era into active internationalism after the Cold War. As a result, we witnessed a series of statements by Japanese government officials facing up squarely to a past characterized by colonization and aggression and expressing “deep remorse and heartfelt apology.” Below is a list of the most important of these occasions when expressions of apology and remorse were made:

• Prime Minister Tomiichi Murayama on the 50th anniversary of the end of the Second World War (Aug. 15, 1995);
• Prime Minister Moritomo Hosokawa at a joint press conference with South Korean President Kim Young-sam (Nov. 7, 1993);
• Letters from Prime Ministers Ryutaro Hashimoto, Keizo Obuchi, Yoshiro Mori and Junichiro Koizumi to former “comfort women” (beginning in 1996);
• Prime Minister Takayoshi Hata’s letter to Prime Minister Koizumi (Aug. 15, 1995);
• The Murayama statement recognized the “irrefutable facts of history” (of colonization and aggression) and expressed “feelings of deep remorse and heartfelt apology.” The Korean government’s acceptance of these statements and letters by Japanese prime ministers to former comfort women recognized and apologized for the involvement of the Japanese military, both directly and indirectly, in the establishment, management, and recruitment of comfort women into forced prostitution. 2

Also, Prime Minister Hosokawa in 1993 made a specific reference to the fact that during the Japanese occupation, the Korean people were deprived of their names and the Korean language, and expressed deep remorse and apology in a nationally televised press conference from Kyongju, the old capital of Korea. Prime Minister Obuchi’s agreement to accept a request by South Korean President Kim Dae-jung to insert the

2 The letters to the Prime Ministers of Japan were delivered to former comfort women together with monetary compensation from the Asian Women’s Fund, signed by Hashimoto, Obuchi, Mori, and Koizumi, starting in 1996. However, only a couple of former comfort women accepted the one-time compensation of 2 million yen and the letter, while many did so in other countries such as the Philippines, Indonesia, and the Netherlands. Digital Museum “The Comfort Women’s Issue and the Asian Women’s Fund” (http://law.or.jp/).
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But from Japan’s perspective, it is also clear that policymakers and opinion leaders in China and South Korea may themselves want to carefully reflect upon their tendency to demonize and dump almost everything on Japan.

apology into the joint declaration of 1998 opened up a new chapter in South Korea-Japan relations. This is not to argue that the record is perfect or complete. The fact remains, however, that these efforts were conscientious, and the Japanese government made them publicly and officially, despite the well-known opposition or even antagonism from conservative forces in Japanese society and politics. Essentially, these efforts represented an equilibrium point in postwar Japan’s relationship to its past.

CONSERVATIVES FIGHT BACK
So, what has gone wrong since the turn of the century? From the end of the 1990s through the first decade of this century, conservative elements in Japan, motivated by a sense of nationalism, virtually hijacked the Japanese debate about internationalism. By the time of the first administration of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe (September 2006-September 2007), nationalist voices became central to the debate about constitutional revision. Likewise, the strengthening of the US-Japan alliance, including the issue of the right of collective self-defense, became part of the nationalist agenda on security policy. Closely associated with this was the nationalist challenge to the internationalist interpretation and handling of history. Conservatives accused the internationalists of being too “self-degrading.”

In retrospect, the Asian diplomacy of Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi during his five-year tenure (April 2001-September 2006) proved to be a critical turning point, without him necessarily being aware of it, let alone intending it.3 First and foremost, his annual visits to the Yasukuni Shrine from 2001 to 2005, where the spirits of Second World War Japanese war criminals are enshrined along with other war dead, clearly changed the nature of the Yasukuni problem as a diplomatic issue. The previous “gentlemen’s agreement” between Tokyo and Beijing, crafted in the 1980s (to the effect that China would conduct visits by officials other than the prime minister, foreign minister and chief cabinet secretary), was abandoned, and Yasukuni became a symbol and even a litmus test for China and South Korea over Japan’s attitude toward the past. Under these emotionally charged circumstances, revisionist voices on the history problem only fuels conservative and nationalist forces in Japan and China.

BREAKING THE CYCLE?
Is there a way out of this vicious cycle that is widening the trust gap between Japan and its two important neighbors? It is clear that further debate still needs to take place within Japan itself. But from Japan’s perspective, it is also clear that policymakers and opinion leaders in China and South Korea may themselves want to carefully reflect upon their tendency to demonize and dump almost everything on Japan.

First and foremost, the joint Prime Minister Abe-Junichiro Koizumi meeting in May 2006 was a symbolic and concrete breakthrough. The Abe administration’s visit to the Yasukuni Shrine in September 2006 represented a new chapter in Japanese relations with China and South Korea.

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Japan’s experiences trying to bridge the trust gap in the 1990s are not yet obsolete. There may come a time when internationalism will once again inform the national debate over the supremely vital trust issue with its neighbors, constitutional revision and security policy including the right of collective self-defense within the US-Japan alliance (an issue that should also resonate with South Korea, given its security reliance on the US).4 When and how this might happen again will also greatly depend on the approach taken by leaders of various sectors in South Korea and China.

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