

# The History of the “History Problem”: Historical Recognition between Japan and Neighboring Asian Countries

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## *Abstract*

*Today’s simultaneous trends of “globalization” and “regionalization” paradoxically intensify nationalistic conflict in Northeast Asia, especially over history issues. After the division of the region into nation-states under the Cold War system, each nation developed its own version of national history. In the context of globalization, information flows between these nations with ever-greater speed, which gives rise to the possibility of both dialogue and controversy. The issue of history is a factor of instability in Northeast Asia, especially between Japan, Korea and China. Mutual distrust is deeply rooted in memories of war and imperialism. This paper takes up the “history problem” in contemporary Northeast Asia. It does not try to set straight “what actually happened” in the past, but considers why this history problem remains unresolved, and why it appears as a clash between nationalisms.*

*The memories of the past war constitute contemporary national identities, but the treatment of these memories has a specific history. The article considers how in the immediate postwar global order, defined by the Cold War, Japan substituted war reparations with alternative forms of economic assistance that avoided a resolution of the history issue with Korea and China, and how that frozen set of relations in Asia thawed as the global order shifted again after 1989. While inter-government talks have sought to construct friendly relationships with future-oriented strategies, some conservative politicians – particularly in Japan – have tried to increase national integration by emphasizing patriotic school curricula. This tendency has resulted in history textbook controversies within Japan and between Japan and its neighbors, which also give rise to the need for transnational dialogue. The controversies, through reflecting on knowledge of the past – or pasts – , hint at the future actions that must be taken to commence historical reconciliation and community building in Northeast Asia.*