



Japan's East Asia Problem: A Sixtieth Anniversary Perspective on the Postwar

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by Yoichi FUNABASHI

This year marks the 60th anniversary of the end of World War II. Three-quarters of Japan's population was born after the war.

Despite the passage of time, Japan's postwar problems continue. Public opinion is split over Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro's visits to Yasukuni Shrine. China and South Korea are also unhappy about the visits.

To remember the tragedy of the war and the importance of peace, events are being planned across the world this year to mourn the war dead.

At the Japan-China summit on the occasion of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum in November, Chinese President Hu Jintao said: "We cannot avoid history. I want (Japan) to deal with the problem properly. In particular, 2005 is a sensitive year that marks the 60th anniversary of anti-fascist victory."

The "sensitive" part mainly has to do with Japan.

The Memorial Museum of Chinese People's Anti-Japanese War in Beijing's Lugouqiao (Marco Polo Bridge) is currently under renovation.

According to the November 21 Beijing Daily, the renovation is aimed at "fully reflecting the great process of the anti-Japanese war; exposing crimes of Japanese imperialism such as the massacre of the Chinese people and colonial rule; and creating space to fully exhibit the important role China played and the great sacrifice it made in the anti-fascist war."

To display China's "role and sacrifice," some officials of the Chinese Communist Party and the government are proposing to host an international ceremony this year.

"Up to now, such commemorative events have been held only domestically," a senior official of the Chinese Foreign Ministry said. "But from now on, there is talk of holding them internationally. The plan is part of such an idea but it hasn't been decided yet."

Perhaps the proposed event was also inspired by Russia's plans to host a May celebration to commemorate the 60th anniversary of the victory against Nazi Germany.

Russia is planning the occasion to coincide with celebrations of the 60th anniversary of the establishment of the United Nations. And in November, the U.N. General Assembly adopted a resolution to declare May 8 and 9 in 2005, "Remembrance and Reconciliation Days."

However, a number of Central and Eastern European countries that suffered under Soviet aggression have opposed Russia's plan, saying, "The message is good but the messenger is not."

Meanwhile the United States, Britain and France have agreed to attend. Russia also invited Germany. It has agreed to send its chancellor to the celebration.

The Putin administration wants to use the historical symbol of having won World War II as a member of the Allied Forces along with the United States to elevate itself. To Russia, which lost its status as a superpower, the victory is both an important psychological compensation and a diplomatic asset.

Invaluable diplomatic asset

China's case is similar in this regard. It sees the 60th anniversary of the end of the war as an invaluable "diplomatic asset" for maintaining the legitimacy of its position as a permanent member of the U.N. Security Council for having defeated Japan, maintaining U.S.-China relations and applying pressure to Japan.

Opportunities to make good use of it "come around several times a year on July 7, Aug. 15, Sept. 2, Sept. 18 and Dec. 13," a researcher of a Chinese think tank said. The dates refer to the Marco Polo Bridge Incident (1937), Japan's defeat (1945), Japan's signing of the official instrument of surrender on board the USS Missouri (1945), the Mukden (Manchurian) Incident (1931) and the Nanking massacre (1937).

"Each time Prime Minister Koizumi visits Yasukuni Shrine, China can use them to retaliate," the researcher said. If Japan and China enter such diplomatic psychological warfare, 2005 could turn into a gloomy year.

Meanwhile, Japan and South Korea will be celebrating the 40th anniversary of the normalization of diplomatic ties. The two governments designated 2005 as Japan-South Korea Friendship Year and are planning various events.

The two countries signed the Japan-South Korea Basic Treaty in 1965. In lieu of reparations, Japan provided economic assistance to South

Korea. While Japanese aid contributed to South Korea's economic advancement, many problems were left unsettled, including apology and compensation to former "comfort women" who were forced to have sex with Japanese soldiers.

Recently, the South Korean parliament adopted a resolution to seek "the establishment of a history museum to recover the honor and human rights of comfort women."

At the same time, voices calling for the disclosure of diplomatic documents to clarify the policy-making process for the signing of the basic treaty are growing stronger in South Korea.

This is part of the movement to "settle" history against "pro-Japanese elements" under the initiative of the Roh Moo Hyun administration.

In a 2004 speech to mark Independence Day, Roh said: "Even now, pro-Japanese vestiges have not been cleared, nor has the truth of history been clarified. We must correct distorted history." For that, South Korea established a law to examine history closely.

The "pro-Japanese school" is said to have emerged on the Korean peninsula in the five years from the signing of the Second Japan-Korea Agreement in 1905, by which Japan made Korea a protectorate following the Russo-Japanese War before finally annexing it.

This year also happens to be the 110th anniversary of the assassination of Queen Min and the centennial of the signing of the Second Japan-Korea Agreement.

"After liberation, the Rhee Syngman administration tried to investigate the pro-Japanese school but couldn't. Soon the Cold War began and the Korean War broke out. Eventually, an anti-Communist authoritarian regime took root," said Kang Chang Il, a lawmaker of the ruling Open Uri Party.

It cannot be denied that the Cold War distorted history. However, even after the Cold War, the world is not free from attempts to distort history.

Anti-Japanese nationalism

While China is a communist dictatorship, its economy and media are rapidly becoming market-oriented. With the end of the Cold War, socialism collapsed and China needed a new ideology to justify the maintenance of communist leadership. Patriotism and "anti-Japanese" nationalism form the core of the ensuing ideology.

Former Chinese President Jiang Zemin ordered diplomatic authorities not to needlessly bow to Japan but to deal with it with fortitude. During the Jiang era, anti-Japanese monuments called "patriotism educational bases" were built across China.

Furthermore, with the advancement of the market economy, the inclination to view history in class terms waned. The premise that "Japanese advocates of militarism are the aggressor and the Japanese people are their victims" became vague.

Instead, an attitude to lump all Japanese as one emerged, as can be seen in Jiang Zemin's comment to South Korean President Kim Dae Jung that "Japan is not trustworthy."

Meanwhile, the Korean Peninsula remains divided. North Korea is in a critical condition and appears ready to play a dangerous game by using its nuclear weapons program as a card to maintain its regime.

In South Korea, a pro-North nationalistic sentiment backed by a sort of social revolutionary grudge is on the rise.

As for criticism of "pro-Japanese elements," in order to soften the impression that it is aimed at labeling them as "the bad guys," a move is afoot to replace the term "pro-Japanese" with "subordination to Japan," according to Kang.

Lawmaker Park Jin of the opposition Hannara Party said: "The Roh administration says condemning the pro-Japanese school is a domestic problem and has no impact on Japan-South Korea relations. But that's not true. The movement will spread to attacks on pro-American elements after the war and eventually affect U.S. relations," he warned.

As Japan suffered an economic recession during the 1990s—also known as "the lost decade"—China emerged as a regional power while North Korea test-fired a Taepodong missile over Japan. The abduction problem also encouraged the Japanese to turn to nationalism to vent their bottled-up feelings.

The trauma of the Persian Gulf War and Japan's desire to become "a normal country" intermingled. As Japan seeks to achieve this status, China is standing in the way. Japan wants to express its gratitude to the people who gave their lives for the country, but China is preventing it from doing so, provoking feelings of resentment and frustration.

It appears that history, which used to play a supporting role, has become the leading player on the East Asian international political scene where the past is more unpredictable than the future.

War reflection can lead to the formation of a new identity

What should we do to overcome the history problem, even if by a little, on the 60th anniversary of the end of World War II? As far as Japan is concerned, it should formulate policies and take concrete measures to advance the following initiatives:

* Re-establish the statement made by the prime minister on the 50th anniversary of the end of the war as Japan's fundamental recognition of the past.

In 1995, the government released Prime Minister Murayama Tomichi's statement. It may still be inadequate, but it admitted Japan's war responsibility and expressed the feeling of remorse more frankly than any other official statement that had been made public up to that time. However, the statement is not well-known throughout Asia and the rest of the world.

Last summer, when then Foreign Minister Kawaguchi Yoriko met with her Chinese counterpart, Li Zhaoxing, Kawaguchi referred to the "Murayama statement." In response to Li's request, Kawaguchi showed him the statement written in kanji.

However, a senior Japanese government official who was present stated, "It did not seem to ring a bell (with Li). It is my guess that he didn't know about it."

Li is not the only one. In fact, it is questionable how many Japanese actually know about it. Why? One reason is that it is more commonly known as the "Murayama statement" and not "the prime minister's statement." The appellation almost suggests that it was an "irregular" comment made during the coalition government led by Murayama.

* Formulate East Asian regionalism and regional cooperation.

Never before have relations among East Asian countries, including economic integration, been as close as now. For Japan, this is an ideal opportunity to build a relationship of trust and reconciliation with Asia. Regional cooperation must not be stalled because of the history problem. When we think about the past, Japan's responsibility is grave in this regard.

As a U.S. ally, can Japan make an East Asian community compatible with the Japan-U.S. alliance and have it play the role of a ballast for peace and stability to take root in the region? This is none other than a 100-year national plan for Japan.

* Share Japan's postwar experiences as well as the assets and resources it built in the process as a major civilian power for world peace and stability and economic advancement.

The Japan-South Korea reconciliation process that Prime Minister Obuchi Keizo and South Korean President Kim Dae Jung started in 1998 was made possible only because the president commended Japan's peace Constitution and postwar experiences such as its provision of aid to developing countries.

For Japan, "looking to the future" means passing down the essence of its postwar experience of living together with international society to posterity and advancing it.

Incidentally, Indonesia will host a ceremony to mark the 50th anniversary of the Bandung Conference this year. Leaders of nearly 100 Asian and African nations are expected to come together.

Prime Minister Koizumi is also expected to attend. He should take advantage of the occasion to show Japan's reflection on the war and the lessons it learned from it. He should also present Japan's new role and responsibility in the United Nations and show what it can do to help developing nations in nation building and personnel training, conflict prevention and maintenance of peace. He should also propose a notion to promote new solidarity for Asia and Africa.

* Contemplate the history problem while considering long-term national interests.

After the Chinese president requested the prime minister to refrain from visiting Yasukuni Shrine, some people felt, "So long as China tells him not to go, there is no option but to go." But such a reaction is too passive and controlled by the situation.

Lessons from history should help us to become more astute.

Former Prime Minister Yasuhiro Nakasone made an official visit to Yasukuni Shrine in 1985 on the occasion of the 40th anniversary of the end of the war. That time, too, Japan-China relations had become strained, leading Nakasone to stop his shrine visits. Nakasone explained to the Diet that he stopped out of Japan's "national interests." Politicians are urged to take to heart that a nation's leader is the nation's "diplomat in-chief."

* "What kind of country should Japan be?"

In the same Diet explanation, Nakasone said, "Japan also has the ability to reflect on itself to adapt to democracy" and stressed "the need to internationally demonstrate" this. How sincerely can Japan reflect on its failures and mistakes, turn it into momentum for a fresh start and reflect it in the country's future national image and vision?

The process itself creates Japan's identity. In other words, what kind of a country does Japan want to make itself and how does it want to be remembered in history? This is a problem in the realm of aspiration.

Let us mark the 60th anniversary of the end of the war with wide, open hearts.

Yoichi Funabashi is an Asahi Shimbun senior staff writer and foreign affairs columnist.

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