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Facing the Past: War and Historical Memory in Japan and Korea

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(Korean text also available [here](#))

All states have dark secrets, and none finds it easy to confront them. Yet the best assurance that past mistakes and misdeeds will not be repeated is that they be faced, responsibility recognized, and apology and compensation attempted.

In Northeast Asia the record on this score is mixed. It was 1995, a half century after the end of the Japanese colonial empire, before Japanese Prime Minister Murayama Tomiichi expressed Japan's regret and apology for the pain and harm done by the four decades of colonialism. A few years later, a similar apology was extended to cover the Comfort Women and in 1998 that apology was explicitly directed to South Korea (by Prime Minister Obuchi).



Prime Minister Murayama Tomiichi in a 1995 speech

However, the apologies, supposed to resolve the issue of responsibility for colonialism and war once and for all, instead stirred fierce conservative outrage in Japan, and over time the opposite view gained ground: Japan had nothing to apologize for and should instead insist on its "pure" and "proud" history and on history texts that would appropriately reflect it. Japan was, in Prime Minister Abe's words, a "beautiful country." As political groups that rejected the Murayama apology and instead looked back to wartime Japan for inspiration replaced Murayama and his colleagues in government, the Dietmembers' Associations "for the Passing on of a Correct History," for a "Bright Japan", and for "Reflection on Japan's Future and History Education," gained influence, as did the Shinto Politics League.

In this context, the head of Japan's Air Self Defense Forces, General Tamogami Toshio, in October 2008 submitted an essay in a competition on the theme of "Steering Japan towards a Correct Understanding of History as an Independent Nation." He defended Japan's colonialism and war and lamented the loss of national pride due to the adoption of a false understanding of the past. His essay was awarded the \$30,000 prize, but it stirred such furor that the government had to demand his early retirement.

Tamogami, appointed to senior SDF post under Koizumi and retained or elevated under the three Prime Ministers who succeeded him, had made no secret of his views, so that it may be presumed that the governments that appointed and promoted him found nothing offensive in them. According to Tamogami, 20th century Japan had been responsible for praise-worthy colonial development in Taiwan and Korea in accord with international law and treaties, and had ruled them peacefully and to good economic and social effect, while resisting terrorism and communist provocation. In China, communists had launched a terrorist campaign of resistance, leaving Japan no alternative but to use force to try to put them down. President Roosevelt tricked Japan into full-scale war. False and unnecessary shame should be set aside, Tamogami argued, concluding that "we must take back the glorious history of Japan." Ninety-four of Tamogami's subordinates wrote essays for the competition in similar vein.

Young officers being trained at the Joint Staff College under his direction were treated to lectures by Tamogami (or his guest lecturers, most of whom were members of the "Tsukurukai" or Association for New Textbooks in History) on subjects such as the injustice of the Tokyo tribunal (1946-48) and the disastrous effects of the US occupation's purges (that allowed "anti-Japanese" leftists to seize far too much power in the country, especially in the universities).

Weeks later, on 11 November, Tamogami went further, telling a House of Councilors sub-committee that he also favored explicit revision of the constitution and of the 1995 Murayama apology. One major newspaper (Sankei shimbun, 15 November) explicitly endorsed that stance, calling for the Murayama apology over colonialism and war to be withdrawn, even though such an act would be seen by neighboring countries as a slap in the face. Tamogami told that same paper later in the month (27 November) that the Murayama statement was "strongly disagreeable" and was being used as "a tool to suppress free speech."



Tamogami testifying on November 11, 2008.

Opinion surveys in the aftermath of Tamogami's unrepentant Diet appearance suggest that his stance enjoyed considerable, perhaps majority support. For some, at least, he came to be seen as a man victimized for a courageous stand on principle. Yet the critic, Tahara Soichiro, commented that the collective action led by Tamogami amounted to organized rebellion on the part of serving senior military staff against the state and constitution, in effect an uprising (kekki), albeit at the level of words. For him it called to mind 1930s acts of insubordination and eventually rebellion that opened the way to fascism and war. If he is right, the Tamogami affair should be viewed with foreboding, a sign of things to come, as much as, or more than, of things past.

The shrillness of the message of Tamogami and other diehards is sharpened by the fact that their brand of so-called conservatism is actually not "nationalist" or "Japan-first"-ism at all. This "conservatism" is better seen as a variant of "USA-first"-ism." Especially since 2001, assigned by the Bush administration the task of turning the US-Japan relationship into a "mature" alliance, Japanese civil and military leaders have done their best to reinforce Japanese military subordination and integration under US command, sending Japanese forces to the Indian Ocean and Iraq, endorsing a much tighter integration of Japan's Defense Forces under US command, removing barriers to their active service on "collective security" missions, and taking preliminary steps towards revising the constitution (as counseled by US government officials). Tamogami had no criticism of the steps taken by "conservative" and "nationalist" governments to deepen Japan's subjection to US regional and global purpose.

What the Tamogami affair therefore exposed was the immense strain caused to the national psyche by the unequal nature of the alliance, and its gradual descent from limited autonomy under previous governments into full "Client State" subordination under Koizumi, Abe, Fukuda, and Aso. Six decades after the collapse of emperor-centered nationalism, Japan has constructed an elaborate but fragile model of dependent (or zokkoku) nationalism, that I have called a "Client State." The more leaders in Japan struggle to meet US demands, the more they experience a sense of grievance and victim consciousness. As Japan's subordination deepens, Abe Shinzo takes refuge in the fantasies of "beautiful country" and Tamogami laments his lost country, both being functionally necessary mechanisms of compensation. On the one hand Japanese politicians and bureaucrats deepen their dependence on the US, on the other, they lament their lost soul.

"America-first"-ism" is of course well-known in South Korea too, but on the whole without the tone of resentment that marks much high-level Japanese discourse. Furthermore, the Korean Truth and Reconciliation Commission, established under a special law in 2005, has been engaged on a massive enterprise designed to explore precisely the sort of skeletons in the national cupboard that Tamogami in Japan refuses to acknowledge, documenting the claims of the countless victims of former regimes. It makes the claim "we will strive to be an international role model as a truth commission. Korea is the only country in Asia that reveals its shameful past to the public." Through it Koreans do indeed actively and seriously confront their history. The scope of the national project for truth and reconciliation has yet to be formally extended beyond Korea's borders, but Korea is also the only former member of the US-led coalition that fought in Vietnam to have made steps, however tentative, to apologize for the "pain" (Kim Dae Jung's word in 2001), caused to the Vietnamese people. It may be far from perfect, but Korea nevertheless constitutes a beacon of light in Asia calling all countries to do what they must do if democracy is to advance: honestly face their past.

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