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Japan's Historical Memory: Reconciliation with Asia

Kazuhiko Togo

Introduction

Historical issues haunt Japan. The world is facing a crisis, which may become a once in a century depression in the wake of Wall Street's financial meltdown and the subsequent recession throughout the world. Japan is no exception. At this time of crisis each country must show its resilience to alleviate immediate pain while implementing a long-term policy to strengthen the fundamentals of its economy and society. Japan is asked to come up with a powerful economic policy to overcome its crisis and contribute to global solutions. Barack Obama was elected president of the United States, and expectations are rising not only in the States but throughout the world that the U.S. will confront this challenge effectively. This is a golden opportunity for Japan because the fundamentals of Japan-US relations are solid and much of Obama's agenda coincides precisely with what the Japanese government has asserted for decades: the necessity for a sustainable global economy, emphasis on the environment, need for a long-term energy policy, serious concern about nuclear disarmament, cooperation through the United Nations and so on. Why not come up with creative ideas to attract the attention of Obama's new team and consolidate the alliance?

At a time when Japan needs to concentrate its energy on such urgent problems, Gen. Tamogami Toshio published a prize-winning thesis justifying pre-war Japanese wartime actions and claiming that Japan was a victim of Kuomintang and Soviet intrigues forcing the nation to go to war with the United States. Tamogami, the Air Self-Defense Force Chief-of-Staff, was immediately dismissed from the service, but because he was an officer of the highest rank the event left uncertainty whether the post-war Japanese Self Defense Forces have developed a balanced and appropriate perspective on the nation's past.

General Tamogami

Historical memory is a thorny issue in Japan where opinions are divided, and in particular, in recent years views from the right have become louder and more shrill in attacking the left. I argue, however, that there is a centrist view and that there is a need to be cognizant of it and to help consolidate it. The analysis which follows largely draws on my new book *Rekishi to Gaiko: Yasukuni-Ajia-Tokyosaiban (History and Foreign Policy: Yasukuni-Asia-The Tokyo Tribunal*).

Historical memory in relation to Asia

In analyzing Japan's war memory in relation to Asia, the central feeling which I wanted to convey in this book was one of contrition generally shared by the Japanese of my generation. My generation did not participate in the war and most of us have no direct memory of war. But we recall vividly the destruction which led to Japan's defeat. In the process of post-war recovery from that destruction, we learned of information disclosed at the Tokyo Tribunal on past wrongdoings, including the Nanjing massacre, accounts of soldiers who came back from the front, particularly from China, speaking of atrocities they committed, [1] reports by Japanese journalists such as Honda Katsuichi who collected testimony from victimized Chinese in the 1970s, [2] and the publication of Morimura Seiichi's *Devil's Gluttony (Akuma no hoshoku)*, a 1982 best seller describing the biological weapons experiments conducted by Unit 731.

The Nanjing massacre, which was disclosed during the Tokyo Tribunal, was heavily debated in the first half of the 1980's. The numbers of Chinese who perished in the massacre continued to be debated, but Japanese of my generation wanted to know what happened and to draw moral lessons from the incident. The following conclusion drawn by the veterans' organization Kaikosha well represents my generation's memory of that incident. After the heated textbook controversy in 1982, Kaikosha conducted its own research and concluded that there were at least 3,000 to 13,000 unlawful killings at Nanjing. This number was far less than those presented by some Japanese scholars, and the 300,000 figure given by the Chinese government, but in announcing its conclusion, Kaikosha made the following statement in the monthly journal *Kaiko* in March 1985:

> We apologize deeply to the people of China. We say again, 13,000, and even our minimum figure of 3,000, is an astonishingly huge number. We began our work of checking the military history, knowing that we were not completely clean. But with this huge number, we simply have no words. Whatever the severity of war or specificity of war psychology, we just lose words faced with this mass illegal killing. As those associated with the prewar military, we apologize deeply to the people of China. It was truly a regrettable act of barbarity.

Nanjing Memorial: the iconic 300,000 figure

Many of my generation remember Nanjing with this spirit of contrition. The numbers presented diverge from other sources, but for many the fundamental issue was not the numbers but the fact that large-scale atrocities were committed. In this way the issue has been etched in historical memory to be transmitted to future generations with a sense of contrition and questioning: how could we have done this?

During the first half of the 1990's serious talks were conducted between the Japanese and South Korean governments on the issue of the comfort women. Recognition of the physical and spiritual pain of these women led to the 1993 Kono Statement, which acknowledged government involvement, accepted Japanese responsibility, and expressed apology and determination to seek ways of making concrete the nation's apology and atonement. The statement became the basis for the activities of the Asian Women's Fund from 1995 to apologize, provide financial compensation, and atone individually to former comfort women. [3]

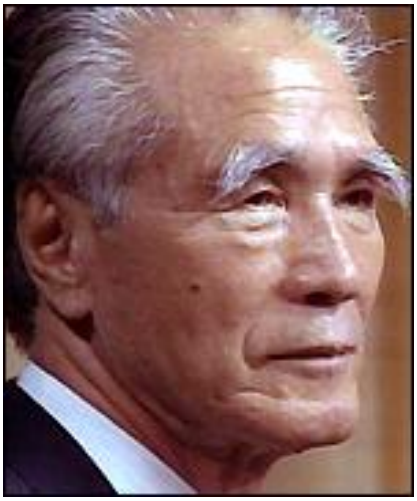
Asian women's fund digital museum

The first half of the 1990's was also the period when apologies to Korea and China were most powerfully expressed by the Japanese side. The apology to Korea was most vividly expressed during President Roh Tae Woo's visit to Japan in 1990. In relation to China, Emperor Akihito expressed in his visit to China in 1992 his "deep sorrow" regarding the "period when our country created tremendous suffering to the people of China." The series of apologies culminated in Prime Minister Murayama Tomiichi's comprehensive statement of

1995. The key paragraph reads as follows:

> "During a certain period in the not too distant past, Japan, following a mistaken national policy, advanced along the road to war, only to ensnare the Japanese people in a fateful crisis, and, through its colonial rule and aggression, caused tremendous damage and suffering to the people of many countries, particularly to those of Asian nations. In the hope that no such mistake be made in the future, I regard, in a spirit of humility, these irrefutable facts of history, and express here once again my feelings of deep remorse and state my heartfelt apology. Allow me also to express my feelings of profound mourning for all victims, both at home and abroad, of that history."

From the time of its pronouncement, the weight of this statement has been undermined by rebukes from conservative politicians and opinion leaders. But this statement had much greater importance than has been appreciated, particularly by analysts and opinion leaders on Japan relying on English texts. Above all, the wording and the spirit of this statement reflect well the feeling of the Japanese of my generation who recognize that something was profoundly wrong in the behavior of our soldiers in China acting so inhumanly. It also reflects our historical understanding that policies of rigorous Japanization in Korea hurt deeply the feeling of Koreans. The Murayama Statement was adopted by cabinet decision, which is the highest format of government decision making. Furthermore, as a member of the Japanese foreign ministry until 2002, I personally witnessed vividly that the statement had real life meaning, pointing the way in reconciliation talks with Great Britain, Korea and China in 1998 and the Netherlands in 2000. Prime Minister Koizumi expressed historical contrition by practically confirming the Murayama statement word for word at the Asia-African leaders' meeting at Bandung in 2005 with added emphasis on the record of post-war pacifism in Japan. The statement remains the official position of the Japanese government.



Prime Minister Murayama Tomiichi

Current situation and immediate task

Japan's centrist position has been subjected to criticisms both by the left and

the right. On Nanjing, the number of victims shown by Kaikosha was far less than some scholars maintained, and less than ten percent of the official number of 300,000 insisted on by the Chinese government. On comfort women, the centrist position under the Kono Statement was attacked from the left for its failure to accept legal responsibility and because atonement was provided by funding from private citizens rather than by taxpayers' money. Even when taxpayers' money was used, budgetary expenditures were made through the appropriation of humanitarian-medical assistance, hence lacking the structure of contrition. The Murayama Statement was criticized on the grounds that the expressions were too vague, failing to accept legal responsibility for Japan's wars of aggression from the Meiji to the end of World War II. It was said to be no more than the result of careful "bureaucratic writing" devoid of personal spontaneity, in contrast to Willy Brandt's "kneeling down" at the Warsaw Ghetto in 1970. Koizumi's Bandung statement, moreover, was quickly overshadowed by his yearly Yasukuni visits and is scarcely remembered.

But recently the right in Japan has been more vocal than the left in trying to bring down the above-mentioned centrist position. They constitute a powerful minority. There are those who argue that no "massacre" took place in Nanjing and that the perception of atrocities was generated primarily by the Kuomintang's war propaganda. The Kono Statement was heavily criticized in the 1990's on the basis that it led to a fundamental misconception of the comfort station as a "rape center." The Murayama Statement was rebuked as a symbol of "self negation" of pre-war honor and a distortion of history. Koizumi's historical apology was criticized as harshly as Murayama's by several prominent scholars from the right.

All the more because the centrist position rests on a still fragile foundation, the fundamental need remains for Japan to make further efforts to consolidate that position. One might argue that a policy to perpetuate memories of the Nanjing massacre in the form of war museums in China is no way to achieve reconciliation, but there is a need to make Kaikosha's position better known among all those who are interested in this issue, Japanese or otherwise. One may not accept the view that the comfort station was a rape center, but what comes first is the sympathy and contrition directed to the women who suffered there. The April 2007 Supreme Court verdict relieving the state of legal responsibility for pre-war forced labor and the comfort stations is a genuine opportunity for the state to revive and extend on a moral basis the Asian Women Fund's activity. Even if that does not occur, there should be a way to uphold the spirit of the Kono Statement. Supporting the Murayama Statement does not mean that all Japan's pre-WWII activities should be considered wrong and aggressive. There were genuine acts of idealism based on the reality of the international situation which existed then. For instance, some Manchurian Japanese tried to establish a land of harmony of five peoples in Manchuria toward the end of the 1920's; Hirota Koki's foreign policy after the establishment of Manchukuo was to limit Japan's expansion outside Manchuria; and Shigemitsu Mamoru asserted a policy of complete withdrawal from China after the conclusion of the Pacific War. But these initiatives were rapidly overtaken by expansionist moves or were articulated too late. In

reality, there were irrefutable atrocities and arrogance in China. In this situation the Murayama Statement must be upheld as an important pillar of Japanese historical memory. In the latest controversy around General Tamogami, most of the media reports described his views as "diverging from the government's view as formulated by the Murayama Statement." That divergence cost General Tamogami his position as soon as his article became public knowledge. It indicates the continued salience of the Murayama Statement in the historical consciousness of the Japanese.

Is the consolidation of the centrists' position really necessary?

Jennifer Lind wrote an inspiring article in *Japan Focus* questioning the traditional view that apology is a prerequisite for reconciliation. [4] Historical records show that contrition was not necessarily required for reconciliation. Furthermore, contrition expressed eloquently sometimes aroused a backlash from nationalists at home. This, in turn, fueled emotions on the part of those countries with which apologists sought reconciliation. There is undeniable truth in Lind's observation.

When reconciliation between Japan and China was achieved in 1972, the history issue was just one of many factors under consideration. It was primarily political considerations of the power balance under the Sino-Soviet split and U.S. detente policy that governed Mao and Zhou's thinking in normalizing relations with Japan. When Japan and Korea established diplomatic relations in 1965 after 14 years of negotiations, it was primarily President Park Chung-Hee's determination to rebuild the South Korean economy rather than reconciliation achieved by both sides that became the motive of normalization. Conversely, the Kono Statement became one of the major objects of attack from the right in the latter part of the 1990's, and its continuous criticisms inflated Japan's non-apologetic image. The Murayama Statement has long been remembered for the right wing's rebukes against it rather than its genuine apologetic intent, and these right wing images fueled more anger in China and Korea. Ienaga Saburo's victory in 1997 at the Supreme Court after 34 years of a court case against the state on history textbooks was probably a vital factor which invigorated the Tsukurukai movement demanding textbook revision. All of these examples clearly indicate that had there not been major steps expressing contrition, there would have been less backlash from the right, and, therefore, less occasion for China and Korea to fuel further anger against Japan.

Having acknowledged all these factors, questions are bound to be raised: should such steps taken to express contrition be avoided? After all, Japan has come to terms with all pre-war related issues through the treaty structure of the 1950's and 1960's. Could not Japan just stay quiet under this structure to avoid stirring emotions either from the left or from the right? Furthermore, henceforward, should Japan stay away from efforts to strengthen the middle road which fundamentally express contrition, because these renewed efforts might invite a costly backlash? These are questions raised by Lind, and they merit thorough consideration. I do not pretend that I have full answers, but I consider that there are several reasons for continuing to consolidate the

middle.

First, it is important to understand all of Japan's historical memory discourse in the context of Japan's own reconciliation with the past. This takes us back to the psychological hollow into which Japan was thrown in August 1945, the overwhelming rise of negativism about pre-war activities among opinion leaders, intellectuals, the media, and opposition leaders, followed by timid efforts, which started in the 1960's, to see pre-war history in better balance, acknowledging some honor. Reconciliation with Asia was an important factor underlining the discourse, but more often than not, how the Japanese could reach historical truth and reconcile with history was the primary agenda. It is not easy just to halt that discourse until there emerges a middle road as a consensus within society, or at least, as a common framework in which that discourse can be conducted in a non-emotional manner.

Second, even if the way Japanese became embroiled in their historical discourse was not the wisest way to achieve reconciliation with Asia, history has already etched its lines on Japan's historical memory. Even if one contends that Nakasone's visit to Yasukuni in 1985 and Murayama's apology statement in 1995 were not the wisest moves, we have passed the point of erasing them. The accumulated line of apology has already become part of historical reality. If the right, as a backlash against this centrist line, would dictate Japan's historical memory anew and establish a national memory outside the Kaikosha-Kono-Murayama statements, this would be taken by the international community as a denial of past wrongdoings. As Lind underlined in her article, perceived denials provoke anger in the minds and hearts of all those who bear victim consciousness. I see no alternative, so as to keep Japan's reconciliation with its own history and eventually with Asia, to maintaining the positions expressed in the Kaikosha-Kono-Murayama statements. The dialectical truth of human nature and politics is that, if one side intends to modify the status quo and the other side just stays immobile hoping that the status quo is preserved, the immobile side invariably loses. If one considers the Kaikosha-Kono-Murayama statements to be the centrist line around which Japan might create a consensus, those who think that way have to act to consolidate that position, even at the risk of provoking some sort of backlash.

Third, I, therefore, argue that there is further need to consolidate the middle road by way of resolving concrete issues which have split the historical discourse inside Japan. Yasukuni is another example. I have argued already for more than two years that there is a need to introduce some fundamental reform to Yasukuni, and while this reform is proceeding, prime ministers should impose a moratorium on their visits. Since Koizumi's visit to Yasukuni on August 15, 2006, no prime ministers have visited, but no reform has been introduced. Should this reform be introduced, it may entail some political row from fundamentalists. That row itself might prove to be provocative to the Chinese and Koreans, reminding them of their haunting historical memories. But then, could the Japanese just leave the Yasukuni issue in today's suspended situation, where the Emperor's visit is de facto prohibited and prime ministers are at best put under a moratorium? In my view, this domestic

contradiction must be overcome.

Prime Minister Koizumi at Yasukuni Shrine, August 15, 2006

How to achieve reconciliation with Asia?

This leads to the next crucial question: can Japan continue to seek harmonization of its own memory with history, while achieving reconciliation with Asia simultaneously? This is again a very difficult question about which I do not have a definite answer. But I can outline the relevant circumstances and indicate that further strengthening of the centrists' position on historical memory may lead to, or at least be compatible with, reconciliation with Asia.

First, it is axiomatic to say that "apology is a one-way action, whereas reconciliation requires a two-sided action. You apologize because you think your actions were wrong. You do not apologize on the condition that the apology be accepted." [5] Keeping the centrist position strong is partly based on the hope that this may be helpful to achieve reconciliation, but that does not mean that Japan is in a position to enforce reconciliation. China and Korea might have reasons to accept or refuse reconciliation depending on their national memory and national interests. Should an apology not immediately result in reconciliation, this should be well understood right from the beginning.

Second, China and Korea have a clear policy option in dealing with the apology-backlash situation in Japan. If China and Korea find it in their own interest to fuel anger against Japan's backlash, they may, of course, do so. But by responding emotionally against the backlash in Japan, they risk fueling another backlash in Japan. Political relations between Japan and that country would inevitably deteriorate. Would China or Korea invariably react emotionally against a Japanese backlash? Not necessarily. The latest response by the Chinese and Korean governments to the Tamogami's incident could be considered reasonably contained, taking into consideration Aso's swift decision to relieve Tamogami of his official duties. Had the Chinese or Korean government wanted to fuel nationalist emotions, Tamogami could have given ample reason to point to him as a symbol of Japan's growing non-apologetic behavior. This did not happen. This may leave some hope that even if a

nationalist backlash occurred in the future against a strengthened centralist position, China and Korea's reactions could remain reasonably contained.

Third, consolidation of the centrist position is certainly compatible with other measures which would help to enhance reconciliation, as suggested by Lind. One of the clearest examples is recently begun by countries in Northeast Asia to improve mutual understanding on history textbooks. [6] Joint study and publication of history textbooks is a significant step toward reconciliation. It must not, and it cannot, start with the objective to achieve a common textbook. But it certainly should be able to compare how textbooks differ from one country to another and discuss why these differences emerge. A third party can be usefully involved. The latest project of comparing history textbooks published in Japan, China, Korea, the U.S., and Taiwan at Stanford University is one of the best examples.

Conclusion

The central theme of my new book is to urge Japanese society that the time has come to overcome the sharp split between the right and the left and develop a synthetic and centrist position on historical memory. What I wanted to convey is a message which I have developed in the course of my own trajectory (in spending six years abroad). Has not the time come to end Japan's drift on historical memory for 60 years and terminate the harsh split between the right and the left? Differences of views would not be discontinued, but is there not a way to overcome them and respect each other as Japanese and find a broad consensus on an all-Japan basis? [7]

If so, how can we realistically achieve it? As Lind argues, part of the answer derives from Japan's domestic situation and the surrounding international situation. But in order to achieve that centrist position, I also urge that all Japanese become more interested in history, that individually they read writings from the left and the right and that each develops his/her own perspective on historical memory. I have learned much by reading narratives from both the right and the left. I believe in the strength of reason. If everyone has the opportunity to consider diverging views, ultimately, as individuals and as a nation, there should be a way to reach a synthetic position.

It is my earnest hope that through the consolidation of these non-extremist centrist positions, Japan would find a way to depoliticize historical memory issues in relation to China and Korea and, ultimately, achieve reconciliation with Asia. There is also the issue of historical memory in relation to the U.S., but that is a subject best dealt with in a separate article.

Kazuhiko Togo is the author of Rekishi to Gaiko: Yasukuni-Ajia-Tokyosaiban (History and Foreign Policy: Yasukuni-Asia-The Tokyo Tribunal) (Kodansha 2008). He retired from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 2002. The book draws on personal experience in confronting historical memory issues while teaching and researching in Leiden, Princeton, Tansui (Taiwan), Santa Barbara (California)

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[1] The accounts are here. (acess December 17, 2008)

[2] Honda Katsuichi, *Chugokuno Tabi*, 1971 (Asahibunko, 1981).

[3] For the activities of the Asian Women's Fund, see their website: (access December 17, 2008). Also refer to the report by Wada Haruki.

[4] Access the article here.

[5] Kazuhiko Togo, "A Moratorium on Yasukuni Visits," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, June 2006, p.13

[6] *See* Mitani Hiroshi "The History Textbook Issue in Japan and East Asia: Institutional Framework, Controversies, and International Efforts for Common Histories," *and* Mikyoung Kim "Myths, Milieu, and Facts: History Textbook Controversies in Northeast Asia," in Tsuyoshi Hasegawa and Kazuhiko Togo eds., *East Asia's Haunted Present: Historical Memories and the Resurgence of Nationalism* (Westport: Praeger Security International, 2008)

[7] *Rekishi to Gaiko: Yasukuni-Ajia-Tokyosaiban* (Tokyo: Kodansha, 2008), pp.19-20.

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