

Peace in Asia and the world and the choice facing Japan: The importance of reflecting on the past and present with humility

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Seventy years have passed since the end of World War II. In that time, Japan has risen from the ashes of war to become an advanced nation that has made important international contributions in many areas, including the provision of funds to support the United Nations' human rights protection and other activities, and the provision of development aid to developing countries. Under its Constitution, which renounces the use of force as a means of resolving disputes, Japan has also pursued an exclusively defensive security policy and refrained from exporting weapons to other countries in accordance with its Three Principles on Arms Exports, actions that have won it acclaim as a pacifist country.

However, these laudable aspects of Japan in the postwar period have been fundamentally eroded since the start of the new millennium. Japan previously enjoyed a positive reputation in the Middle East due to its image as a pacifist and economically advanced country that had never attempted to colonize the region, but in 2003 the Koizumi administration, prioritizing Japan's relations with the U.S. above all else, fully backed the U.S. invasion of Iraq, an invasion that had no basis in international law. As well as providing it with substantial logistical assistance, the Japanese government also permitted the U.S. military, which is supposed to be stationed in Japan to maintain peace in Japan and the Far East, to launch attacks against Iraq from its bases in Okinawa and other parts of Japan. Later, Japan also assisted the U.S. by dispatching members of Japan's Self-Defence Forces (SDF) to Iraq in the name of "reconstruction" aid.

The destruction of public order in Iraq caused by the war and the subsequent persecution of Sunnis by the new Iraqi government intensified religious conflict in Iraq and neighboring countries, and were factors in the rise of Islamic State, which has its roots in the Sunni extremist group al-Qaeda in Iraq. The massacre of civilians in Fallujah and other parts of Iraq, torture and abuse in Abu Ghraib prison, and torture and abuse in the Guantanamo Bay detention center, where many people have been interned on the mere suspicion of ties to al-Qaeda, have caused many Muslims to feel hatred towards the U.S. military and countries that have supported it. The orange clothing worn by Kenji Goto and Haruna Yukawa after their capture by Islamic State is modeled after the orange jumpsuits worn by inmates at Guantanamo Bay. While the inhuman acts of Islamic State deserve the strongest condemnation, we must also be aware of the fact that Japanese government policies dating back to support for the war in Iraq in 2003 have contributed in no small way to the rise of Islamic State.

Japan ought to be looking squarely at this chaotic situation that it has helped create and rethinking its policy of following the lead of the U.S., but in fact it is doing completely the opposite. For example, it has done an about-face to permit in principle the export of weapons, in effect abolishing the Three Principles on Weapons Exports. Further, the Abe administration, which advocates "proactive pacifism," has laid the groundwork to make it possible to dispatch SDF troops to participate in U.S. military actions anywhere in the world, by

approving the exercise of collective defense, which is not permitted under the Constitution of Japan, via a Cabinet decision. Most recently, while fully aware that Kenji Goto and Haruna Yukawa were being held by Islamic State, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe visited the Middle East. After announcing the provision of financial aid to countries fighting Islamic State, Abe proclaimed Japan's intention to fight terrorism standing alongside Benjamin Netanyahu, the Prime Minister of Israel (a country that has killed many Arabs, including children, in its repeated bombing of the Palestinian Autonomous Areas). It goes without saying that taking hostages, making threats and carrying out executions are contemptible acts, but it is clear that Prime Minister Abe's visit to the Middle East and his subsequent words and actions simply provoked Islamic State to no productive end.

Taking advantage of the tragic kidnap and execution of Kenji Goto and Haruna Yukawa, and under the banners of "proactive pacifism" and the "war on terror", the Abe administration is working to increase the scenarios under which the SDF could be sent overseas, including scenarios involving the rescue of Japanese nationals abroad. However, using troops to rescue hostages being held in other countries is a difficult undertaking. The U.S. has not succeeded in carrying out such missions, and it is highly unlikely that the SDF would be able to do so. Ordering the SDF to engage in such missions would be a foolish act demonstrating no concern for the lives of SDF troops.

Further, and even more crucially, such uses of military force would only make the current situation worse, and increase the danger of SDF troops, and in turn all Japanese citizens, becoming the target of revenge attacks in Japan and abroad. Since the terrorist attacks in the U.S. on September 11, 2001, the U.S. has proclaimed a "war on terror" in which it has pursued an anti-terror policy relying on the use of military and other kinds of force, involving torture and abuse in Guantanamo Bay prison, the war in Iraq (despite the lack of any convincing link between the 9.11 attacks and the regime of Saddam Hussein), and killing via drones. However, far from winning the "war on terror," the U.S. has succeeded only in increasing the number of people whose families have been horribly killed and as a result harbor strong feelings of hatred toward the United States (and who are willing to blow themselves up to achieve revenge), and the situation has bogged down with no sign of improvement. Osama Bin Laden may be dead, but we are now in an age in which Islamic extremists from around the world are joining together to attack the U.S. and its allies (and the nationals of these countries). The Japanese government talks about "proactive peace" and the "war on terror": Does it intend to ignore the reality described above and plunge down the path already well-trodden by the U.S. of reacting with military force, thus placing SDF troops and the Japanese public as a whole at greater risk of terrorism?

The change in policy to enable SDF troops to be sent overseas will also greatly increase tensions with Asian countries that were colonized or invaded by Japan in the past. Even if we say that Japan has become a peaceful country in the postwar era, the historical views held by successive Liberal Democratic Party administrations, particularly the current Abe administration, leave Asian countries with no choice but to be wary of Japan. Through his words and actions, such as arguing that there is no definition of "aggression" in international law, Prime Minister Abe has given the impression that he wishes to create ambiguity over whether or not Japan actually engaged in a war of aggression. The acceptance by Japan of the Treaty of San Francisco, which included a clause that stated that Japan accepted the judgment of the International Military Tribunal for the Far East, was the starting point of Japan

regaining sovereignty after the war. However, Cabinet ministers have continued to visit Yasukuni Shrine, where the souls of war leaders convicted as Class A war criminals are enshrined along with the souls of ordinary soldiers. While expressing pity for Japanese military sex slaves, or “comfort women,” they obstinately insist that these women were not forcibly recruited. For countries and individuals victimized by Japan in the past, these are provocative words and actions that make them feel that Japan will never recognize the facts about its past acts and is attempting to deny or distort the facts at its own convenience, and cause them to question whether Japan really has the intention to overcome the past and reconcile with neighboring countries.

Let us look at the question of the “comfort women.” Since the first Abe administration in 2007, Prime Minister Abe has consistently taken the position that the comfort women were not “coerced” in the sense of being “kidnapped,” and that while it is true that there were comfort women, they were not forcibly recruited. The comfort women were in fact recruited in a variety of ways; in addition to cases of abduction, kidnapping and intimidation by the Japanese military or by authorities under the control of the Japanese military, there were also many cases on the Korean Peninsula, which had been colonized by Japan, of recruitment by deception, for example telling women that they would be working in a factory. However, there is no difference between cases of forcible recruitment and cases in which the victims were recruited by deception and only learned that they would be serving as comfort women after arriving at their destination, because in neither case did the women consent at any point to becoming comfort women. Regardless of how the women were recruited, the situation in which they were all eventually placed was one of sexual slavery: confined in comfort stations and subjected to sexual violence on a daily basis with no freedom to refuse. With regard to the abduction of Japanese nationals by the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK), the Japanese government does not distinguish between cases in which people were taken by force and cases in which they were tricked into going along with their abductors, recognizing both as cases of abduction (the Center for Research and Documentation on Japan’s War Responsibility also points this out, in its “Statement on the Japanese Military ‘Comfort Women’ Issue” of June 9, 2013). Further, it recognizes these people as victims of abduction on the basis of testimony, etc, regardless of whether there are any official documents proving that they were taken by force. We can thus see that the stance of Prime Minister Abe in rejecting the coercive nature of the experiences of the comfort women and narrowly defining coercion as a situation in which a person is forcibly kidnapped cannot be considered convincing or persuasive.

At present, the idea that the comfort women issue is pure fiction is being confidently disseminated in Japan, taking advantage of the Asahi Shimbun’s admission in August 2014 that some of its reporting on the comfort women had contained erroneous information. However, it should be immediately obvious that the fact that Seiji Yoshida provided false testimony about his experiences on Jeju Island does not mean that all other cases of women being enslaved as comfort women are fake. Comfort stations were established in all parts of Asia occupied by the Japanese military, including China, the Philippines, Burma and Indonesia, and the comfort women included women recruited and transported by sea and land from the Korean Peninsula and Taiwan, both Japanese colonies at the time, as well as those recruited from the local population. After the comfort women issue came to light at the international level in the 1990s, the Japanese government carried out its own investigation into the issue. The results of this investigation showed that the comfort women system was

overseen and controlled by the Japanese military, from the establishment of comfort stations, through the recruitment and transportation of women, to the management of comfort stations (see the Digital Museum established by the Asian Women's Fund, at <http://www.awf.or.jp/e6/document.html>). The erroneous reporting by the Asahi Shimbun does not change these findings of fact by the Japanese government in any way. Any consideration of Japan's responsibility should take the results of this investigation, which was carried out by the Japanese government itself, as the starting point, not the testimony of Yoshida. Ignoring these findings and arguing as if the comfort women issue originated in the reporting of the Asahi Shimbun is nothing more than an attempt to shift responsibility from where it belongs.

The Yoshida testimony is included in the report on the comfort women issue by the United Nations Commission on Human Rights Special Rapporteur Radhika Coomaraswamy, and some people claim that this has resulted in "misunderstandings" on the part of the international community towards Japan. However, it is questionable whether people making such claims have actually read the report. The report does refer to Yoshida's book, but immediately afterwards states that doubts have also been presented with regards to his testimony. Further, the main evidence upon which the report is based is not Yoshida's testimony, but the interviews that Coomaraswamy herself carried out in different countries with former comfort women. Some people argue that there is no evidence that the comfort women were "coerced" in the sense of being "kidnapped," but it is not typical for abductions to be accompanied by documentary evidence (as can be seen in the cases of Japanese victims of abductions by the DPRK), so victim testimony carries a particular importance in this kind of crime. While Japanese courts have rejected claims for redress made by former comfort women since 1990 in nearly all instances, the reasons for the claims being rejected have been legal, not factual (the central legal reason being that Japan has already fulfilled its legal responsibilities through bilateral treaties; although it should be pointed out that doubts can be raised about this position in light of current international law). In most cases the courts recognized that the victims had been taken away by violence or threats and had been stripped of their physical liberty, as facts that were not in dispute in the case (for example, the March 26, 2009, judgment of the Tokyo High Court in the Hainan Island comfort women case; examples of factual findings by Japanese courts in cases brought by former comfort women are collected in the 2011 booklet "Shihou ga Nintei Shita Nihon Gun 'Ianfu': Higai · Kagai Jijitsu wa Kesenai [Japanese Military 'Comfort Women' Recognized by the Courts: Facts of Victimization and Perpetration Cannot Be Erased]" by Tsubokawa Hiroko and Oomori Noriko).

In the commotion over the misreporting by the Asahi Shimbun, some have advocated carrying out a PR effort to try to persuade the international community that Japan did not forcibly recruit comfort women, and huge amounts of government funds have in fact been used for this purpose. However, so long as the government continues to carry out futile and meaningless activities of this kind, which do not address the crux of the issue, the question of the comfort women will never become an issue of the past, as people will continue to point out that even if the comfort women were not "coerced" in the sense of being "kidnapped," this does not change the fact that the victims were confined and raped, and that Japan established and ran comfort stations as a national policy. So long as the Abe administration continues to try to minimize the fact that women's rights were trampled on by Japan in the past and to claim that Japan is not to blame, the administration's slogan of promoting "a society in which women can shine" will ring hollow.

While Japan can justifiably be proud of its record as a peaceful country in the postwar period, its current conduct with regard to the comfort women issue is unbecoming and unproductive. It may be difficult to confront the past of one's country, but learning from and overcoming the past is necessary for Japan to fully reconcile with Asian countries and their people and make it possible to move forward together.

On the occasion of the 70th anniversary of the end of World War II, a number of programs focusing on the history of the Nazi Holocaust, such as programs presenting testimony from survivors of Auschwitz, have been shown on Japanese television. However, there have been virtually no programs dealing squarely with crimes committed by Japan during the war, such as the Nanjing Massacre. Films dealing with the facts of Japanese crimes (such as, recently, the movie "Unbroken," directed by Angelina Jolie) have been branded "anti-Japanese," and in many cases it has been difficult to show them in Japan. Modern history has never received much emphasis in Japanese school education, and given various problems such as references to the comfort women being deleted from school textbooks, if it is not possible for Japanese people to learn about the past from television programs and movies, the current situation in which Japanese are the only ones who know nothing about their own country's history will only continue to worsen.

Prime Minister Abe visited the Holocaust History Museum on his recent trip to Israel, and reportedly felt the reality of the terrible results that come from racial discrimination. However, Japan also has a history in which Koreans and Chinese were massacred after the Great Kanto Earthquake in 1923 and people of other ethnicities were massacred during Japan's war of aggression. The fact that this history is not properly taught or discussed in Japan is a cause of the hate speech that is rampant these days, in which people declare things such as "Kill Koreans." Prime Minister Abe should communicate the historical realization he apparently gained from visiting the Holocaust History Museum to the countries and people of Asia on which Japan inflicted such terrible harm in the past. In 1970, when the then West German Chancellor Willy Brandt visited Warsaw in Poland, he knelt before a memorial to victims of the Nazis and apologized, vowing that Germany would not repeat its past crimes, and was praised for carrying out this symbolic act. It is my hope that the Japanese Prime Minister will carry out a similarly courageous act, such as visiting the Nanjing Massacre Memorial Hall in China and making a sincere apology. A Japanese prime minister who could carry out such an act would receive acclaim that would go down in history. I also call on Prime Minister Abe to recognize once again that the positive reputation as a pacifist nation that Japan has so assiduously built up in the postwar period is what will serve Japan's national interests best, and to carry out realistic and wise economic and diplomatic policies that make it clear that Japan is not a country that relies on military force or weapons exports.

(Translated by Stephanie Coop, Associate Professor at Aoyama Gakuin University)