

Japan and World War II: History Haunts Prime Minister Abe

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On August 6 “The Advisory Panel on the History of the 20th Century and on Japan’s Role and World Order in the 21st Century” submitted its [report](#) to Prime Minister Abe Shinzo. Abe established this panel in February to provide input for his forthcoming statement commemorating the 70th anniversary of Japan’s wartime defeat. At the Advisory Panel press conference, members insisted that it is entirely up to Abe whether or not to apologize as his predecessors did in 1995 and 2005. All signs are that Abe will not say what needs to be said because he seeks to end what revisionists deride as Japan’s apology diplomacy and masochistic history.

Much is riding on what Abe says, and doesn’t say, as South Korea and China are especially sensitive to any perceived backsliding on Japan’s war responsibility and contrition. Japan finds itself isolated in East Asia over this history of colonial rule and imperial aggression and there are concerns among Japan’s neighbors that Abe’s rigid revisionist agenda will lead him to downplay Japan’s misdeeds.

The Advisory Panel is unexpectedly critical of Japan’s conduct in the 1930s and 1940s, condemning Japan’s “reckless war” and concluding, “it is inaccurate to claim that Japan fought to liberate Asia as a matter of national policy.” It is an assessment that is bound to antagonize Abe and his supporters. Later in the report, however, there is homage to the unintentional consequences of the nation’s wartime regional rampage: “Whether or not Japan intended to liberate Asia, it did wind up promoting the independence of the colonies in Asia.”

Curiously, the panel could not come to a consensus about whether in fact Japan’s actions constituted aggression, and thus the report includes a footnote that states: 1) the definition of “aggression” has not been established under international law; 2) there is objection from a historical perspective to stating that the series of events from the Manchurian Incident onward constituted “aggression”; and 3) there is a sense of reluctance towards stating that only the actions of Japan constituted “aggression” while other countries were taking similar actions.

This caviling about Japanese military aggression may strike readers as bizarre, but as Akiko Hashimoto argues in her superb analysis of Japan’s history problem in *The Long Defeat* (2015), there are three main narratives about wartime Japan—heroes, victims and perpetrators—revisionists are keen to marginalize the latter. (See also her article “Something Dreadful Happened in the Past”: War Stories for Children in Japanese Popular Culture *The Asia-Pacific Journal*, Vol. 13, Issue. 30, No. 1, July 27, 2015,

After vaguely noting that Japan's reckless war "created many victims across wide areas", the report goes into greater detail about the US firebombing and atomic bombing of Japanese cities and the horrors inflicted in Okinawa. From these accounts of Japan's victimization, the report abruptly veers to discussion of Japanese colonial rule: "In the colonies, Japan acted counter to the tide of self-determination. Colonial rule became particularly harsh from the second half of the 1930s on. It must be said that the responsibilities of the Japanese government and military leaders from the 1930s and beyond are very serious indeed."

Seoul has the most to object to in this report. There is a churlishly condescending tone toward Korean criticism of Japan's desultory reckoning of colonial subjugation of the peninsula 1910-45, with repeated assertions that South Korean leaders have been too emotional and irrational. Japan emerges as blameless in provoking contemporary Korean antagonism over this shared past. President Park Geun-hye is lambasted for her hard-line views on history, but the panel shies from probing Abe's inflammatory views on history and how these have undermined Japan's regional relations. At the press conference, members argued that assessing Abe's views was not part of the panel's remit, but they did not hesitate to disparage current Chinese or Korean views on the shared past.

The Advisory Panel contends that Japan's failure to achieve reconciliation with regional victims is not really Tokyo's fault. Japan is often invidiously compared to Germany in terms of forthrightly facing the past and thereby achieving reconciliation, but the report contends that this was because Germany's victims magnanimously responded "with a heart of tolerance". But of course it is easier to be magnanimous, tolerant and future oriented when the perpetrator is not denying, downplaying, diluting, and otherwise shifting blame and responsibility, or glorifying and valorizing the wartime past, as well as resisting official compensation to victims, as Japan's revisionists continually do. The report asks what are the differences in how victims in Europe and Asia have embraced reconciliation without probing the differences between the perpetrators' stance on war responsibility, i.e. Germany's unequivocal acceptance versus Japan's incomplete, grudging approach.

In lavish understatement, the report concludes that, "it cannot be said that reconciliation with China and the Republic of Korea has been fully achieved." Going forward requires "remorse over the past and reclosing the buttons done up incorrectly in the past." But those buttons have proven quite tricky given the revisionists' fumbling fingers.

Although President Park is disparaged for "pushing ahead with emotion-based diplomacy", an allusion to her stress on the "comfort woman" issue, the report finds glimmers of hope in China's stance on the issues: "While the history issue remains a major concern in present Japan-China relations, incumbent President Xi Jinping has clearly committed himself to the continuation of mutually beneficial relations based on common strategic interests."

Abe will also find solace in the report's fulsome support for his efforts to strengthen security relations with the US. These efforts are nevertheless why Abe is imploding in public opinion polls; a recent Nikkei poll finds cabinet support down 9 % in a month, slumping to 38% with 50% now expressing disapproval. This nosedive is primarily due to widespread opposition to Abe's collective security legislation and the manner in which he is currently bulldozing it through the Diet. But the report reassures that such opposition is to be expected and that

“Japan must not halt in its path of proactive contribution to peace.”

The public, however, has deep reservations not only about Abe’s aggressive tactics in forcing it through the Diet but also about the fact that Abe has been evasive in explaining under what circumstances Japan’s Self-Defense Forces might be dispatched overseas. Many Japanese are fearful that Japan will be dragged into war at Washington’s behest, taking to the streets to voice their opposition and staging mass anti-Abe rallies. Moreover, there is a consensus among constitutional scholars that the laws are unconstitutional. The public worries that Abe is seeking to bypass Article 9 of the constitution that imposes constraints on Japan’s military, a key proviso that is embraced as a touchstone of national identity and symbol of pacifism. The release of the report on August 6 is curious since it coincided with ceremonies commemorating the atomic bombing of Hiroshima, a day that reminds Japanese about the folly of war and the disastrous consequences of reckless leaders operating without constraints.

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