

Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's Speech on World War II Riddled with Duplicity

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Last Friday's speech by Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe to mark 70 years since Japan's surrender in World War II was a carefully contrived exercise. It sought to maintain a veneer of pacifism and contrition for the past crimes of Japanese militarism even as his government expands the country's armed forces and ends constitutional constraints on Japanese participation in new US-led wars of aggression.

Every word and phrase in the speech was sifted and weighed for months by a government-appointed committee of academics, officials and political advisers. Abe's cabinet formally approved the statement before it was delivered and released in Japanese and English, followed several hours later by a Chinese translation.

Governments and the media around the world carefully scrutinised the speech for any hint that Abe retreated from the words pronounced in 1995 by then Prime Minister Tomiichi Murayama on the 50th anniversary of the war's end, and repeated a decade later by Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi in 2005. Murayama expressed "feelings of deep remorse" and a "heartfelt apology" for Japan's "colonial rule and aggression."

Since taking office in 2012, Abe has boosted the military budget, taken an aggressive stance toward China over disputed islets in the East China Sea, and sought to revise the historical record of Japanese aggression. As prime minister, he has visited the notorious Yasukuni shrine, a potent symbol of Japanese militarism, where class 'A' war criminals are interred. Abe has also denied the role of the Japanese military in forcing hundreds of thousands of women—so-called comfort women—into sexual slavery for its troops.

Abe's statement carefully included all the words and phrases uttered by Murayama and Koizumi, but pointedly included no direct apology of his own and made only an oblique reference to "women behind the battlefields whose honour and dignity were severely injured."

Having repeated the required phrases, Abe called for a halt to further apologies, reflecting the deep frustration in right-wing militarist circles over Japan's "masochistic" approach to history. "We must not let our children, grandchildren and even further generations to come, who have nothing to do with that war, be predestined to apologise," he declared.

Abe also took an indirect swipe at China, insisting that Japan in the 1930s and 1940s had been "a challenger to the international order" but would not do the same again. Following Washington, the Abe government has repeatedly accused Beijing of failing to adhere to the "international order" and pursuing expansionist policies in relation to maritime disputes in the South China and East China Seas. In reality, the US as part of its "pivot to Asia," has

provocatively inflamed these disputes and encouraged allies like Japan to take a more aggressive posture toward China.

Abe vowed that Japan would “firmly uphold basic values such as freedom, democracy and human rights as unyielding values and, by working hand in hand with countries that share such values, hoist the flag of ‘Proactive Contribution to Peace’ and contribute to the peace and prosperity of the world more than ever before.”

Every phrase was riddled with duplicity and lies. The banner of “democracy” and “human rights” is precisely the pretext that the US has used to wage its criminal wars of aggression in the Middle East and Afghanistan. Abe is currently seeking to ram widely unpopular legislation through the Japanese parliament to circumvent the country’s post-war constitution and engage in “collective self-defence”—that is, extend the participation of the Japanese military in US-led wars and interventions.

Abe paid tribute to a list of countries—the US, Australia and European nations—that Japan fought in World War II and are lining up against China.

Abe’s catch-phrase of “pro-active pacifism” was aimed at justifying his government’s military build-up, restarting of arms exports and increasingly provocative stance against China. These all contradict Article 9 of the country’s constitution, which renounced war forever and declared that land, air and sea forces would never be maintained.

However, the most significant aspect of Abe’s speech—on which the media barely commented—was the introduction, which briefly recounted Japan’s rise in the 19th and 20th centuries. While not overt, his remarks unmistakably defended Japanese imperialism. They echoed the war-time propaganda of the 1930s and 1940s—that Japan was waging a war for the liberation of Asia from the “Western powers.”

“More than one hundred years ago, vast colonies possessed mainly by the Western powers stretched out across the world,” Abe declared.

“With their overwhelming supremacy in technology, waves of colonial rule surged toward Asia in the 19th century. There is no doubt that the resultant sense of crisis drove Japan forward to achieve modernisation... The country preserved its independence throughout. The Japan-Russia war gave encouragement to many people under colonial rule, from Asia to Africa.”

While it is certainly true that the prospect of Western colonisation drove the Japanese ruling elites to build a modern capitalist economy, as well as a military machine, at breakneck speed, the result was not simply an “independent” country, but an imperialist power that sought to carve out its own colonial possessions. Japan’s defeat of Russia in 1905 led to the brutal colonial subjugation of Korea, just as its war against China in 1894–95 resulted in the takeover of Formosa, now Taiwan.

Abe presented Japan’s aggression against China—the seizure of Manchuria in 1931 and the invasion of the remainder of China from 1937—as an inadvertent mistake and the product of forces beyond its control. Again, the Western powers were to blame.

“With the Great Depression setting in and the Western countries launching

economic blocs by involving colonial economies, Japan's economy suffered a major blow. In such circumstances, Japan's sense of isolation deepened and it attempted to overcome its diplomatic and economic deadlock through the use of force... In this way, Japan lost sight of the overall trends in the world... Japan took the wrong course and advanced along the road to war."

Of course, Abe did not resurrect the slogan of a "Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere," which Japan's militarist regime used to justify its conquest and colonial rule of much of East Asia as it fought US imperialism and its allies for domination of the region. But his speech was laced with the sentiment that Japan tried to liberate Asia from the Western powers. While not openly expressed, this attitude still prevails within militarist sections of the Japanese ruling elite, who believe that the country's only misdeed was that it lost the war.

Abe's statement received muted criticism from the Chinese and South Korean governments, which routinely whip up anti-Japanese sentiment to divert attention from their social and economic crises at home. A Chinese foreign ministry statement described Abe's speech as "evasive" for failing to make an "explicit statement on the nature of the war." South Korean President Park Geun-hye said Abe's remarks "left much to be desired," but made no specific criticism.

The American and international media appear to have heaved a collective sigh of relief that Abe included all the stock phrases and did not antagonise South Korea, in particular. As part of its "pivot to Asia" aimed at encircling China militarily, the Obama administration has gone to great lengths to establish greater collaboration between Japan and South Korea, two US allies, on intelligence and military matters.

Abe's historical references, however, were no slip of the tongue. His rationalisation of Japanese aggression in World War II was an indication that "proactive pacifism" will be the banner, not simply for participating in US-led wars of aggression, but for prosecuting the independent interests of Japanese imperialism by military force, even if it again means conflict with rival powers such as the United States.

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