



Trying to mitigate Japan's history dilemma

by Robert Dujarric

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"History" again raised its ugly head when Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzo failed to get even a brief session with South Korean President Park Geun-hye while they were both in Southeast Asia earlier in October.

By international standards, Japan's handling of its past is above average. Unlike Turkey with the Armenian Genocide, Japan is not in hysterical denial. Nor does Japan, as the Chinese Communist Party does, put a mass murderer (Mao) on its banknotes. Tojo's soul is inscribed in obscurity at Yasukuni, but the founding father of totalitarianism's mummy is worshiped in Moscow. Western democracies have often dealt with crimes against humanity, such as the slaughter of native peoples and slavery, with indifference or negation. A highway next to Washington DC is named after Jefferson Davis who presided over the Confederacy during its struggle to uphold slavery.

In the end, though, Japan is always judged based on how West Germany (and later a reunited Germany) has faced Nazism since the chancellorship of Willy Brandt (1969-1974). This makes Japan look like an underperformer. No Japanese leader has ever bowed in Nanjing to match Brandt kneeling in Warsaw. Tokyo takes a narrow legalistic approach to compensation, whereas Berlin is more forthcoming. Angela Merkel would never offer tokens of respect to shrines honoring men hanged as major Nazi criminals.

It may be illogical to benchmark Japan on Germany. Germany is an outlier when it comes to its relationship with its darkest era for many unique reasons. Moreover, Japan's perceptions of history are rooted in the legacy of US policy. The United States did not "purge" Japan with the same intensity as it denazified Germany. Albert Speer ran Germany's armaments industry (and its slaves). While he languished in prison in as a result of the US-led Nuremberg Trial, his Japanese counterpart, Kishi Nobusuke, rose to be prime minister when the CIA was funding his ruling Liberal Democratic Party. The Showa Emperor (Hirohito) not only escaped indictment, but was even spared testifying at the Tokyo Trials. These actions were logical, but they obviously sent Japanese the message that Japan's superpower protector was not particularly disturbed by the deeds of the Empire in 1931-45.

Nevertheless, Japan cannot escape this juxtaposition with Germany. Japan and Nazi Germany were Axis allies. This link will not go away. Posthumous divorces are not recognized

in the civil code. This may be unfair, but politics has never been about fairness.

What can Japan do to lessen the damage that "history" does to its national interest?

The key is China and South Korea. The United States matters enormously, but if Japan is seen by Asians as having made "progress" on this issue, it will be reflected in US perceptions.

In the case of China, there is much hypocrisy in Beijing's attitude given that the Communist Party itself has never apologized for slaughtering tens of millions of its own citizens nor has it expressed regret for the South Koreans who died as a result of the Chinese invasion of their country during the Korean War. Moreover, as Chinese Communist leaders know, they owe their victory in the Civil War to the Imperial Japanese Army's destruction of the KMT in 1937-45.

The logical choice for Tokyo is to ignore these contradictions and to focus on the need to convince the Chinese populace that postwar Japan is not an enemy. In this sense, unilateral apologies, symbolic acts, and compensation would be a long-term investment that could pay off after the demise of the Communist Party. This is very similar to the strategy West Germany pursued toward the Soviet Union and Soviet satellite states during the Cold War. Being "tough" against Chinese challenges to Japanese control over the Senkakus does not preclude being "soft" on history. On the contrary, it would help prevent Beijing from portraying Japan, at home and abroad, as a land of unrepentant chauvinists.

South Korea is a US ally with the same broad geostrategic objectives as Japan. Unfortunately, many South Korean politicians have used Japan as a political football at home. Some even give credence to the hoax that Japan poses a military threat to Dokdo. North Korea is a menace to the South; Japan is not.

In the end, however, the politics and psychology of Japan-Korea relations dictate that Japan will have to take unilateral steps before it can expect productive reciprocity from South Korea. Analysts point out to Franco-German reconciliation as a model, but the real European analogy to Korea is Poland. Like Poland, and unlike France, Korea has been used as a battlefield by rival powers, colonized, and divided. The South is now a successful modern society that has surpassed Japan in some areas. But this traumatic and humiliating past still casts a long shadow.

The first task for Japan is to pick up the work of the Noda administration and provide official direct government compensation along with an unequivocal letter of apology from the premier in the name of the Japanese state to the sex slaves. This must be done quickly. The last "comfort

woman” will die sooner than later. Once she dies, there will be no one left to pay amend to, leaving the wound unhealable.

The second task is the Liancourt Rocks. Tokyo has maneuvered itself into a dead-end. It has zero chance of obtaining anything from Korea when it comes to the islets. There is, however, an “exit strategy” if Japan and Russia reach a deal on the Northern Territories. Once a peace treaty is ratified with Moscow, Tokyo could declare that “history has ended.” It could then portray itself as a country that will uphold the status quo in the interest of peace, i.e., the Senkakus are Japanese, Dokdo is Korean, and the Northern Territories are settled. Since Japan will not get back all four islands from Russia, the “loss” of Takeshima would be less noticeable as it would be included with the land that Russia will keep as part of the unfortunate but unavoidable consequences of the Showa War.

These measures will not “solve” the history issue. As Germany’s relations with the rest of Europe demonstrate, even the most comprehensive atonement campaigns are never fully successful. But they could make an important contribution to a well-conceived national security policy.

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