

Japan needs to rethink its Asian ‘diplomacy’

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There were many reasons behind Meiji Japan’s (1868–1912) astonishing rise from a feudal backwater to the only non-Western industrial and imperial power within the space of a few short decades. One indisputable reason was the quality of Japanese diplomacy.

After a relatively short period of heated debate as Western gunships threatened, Japan decided to abandon its two-century-old ‘closed country’ policy of isolation and to learn from and join the West. Japanese foreign policy developed two faces: an accommodating, smiling face towards the West and a threatening, scolding face towards Asia. This was encapsulated in the title of an 1885 publication — *Datsu-A, Ny?-O* (‘exit Asia, enter Europe’) — by the leading intellectual of Meiji Japan, Yukichi Fukuzawa. By the turn of the century, Japan had defeated China in war (1894–95) and become an equal ally of the greatest world power, Britain, when it signed the Anglo–Japanese Alliance in 1902.



In the 1930s, Japanese foreign policy erred in that it chose the wrong (that is, losing) Western ally, Nazi Germany. Both Germany and Japan committed atrocities at opposite ends of the Eurasian continent. But while Germany was severely punished and purged, Japan [managed to escape](#) ^[1] both severe punishment and purges due to major geopolitical developments in East Asia, namely Chinese ‘liberation’ in 1949 and the Korean War of 1950–53.

Within a few short years following the devastating defeat of World War II, Japan experienced a phoenix-like recovery. This was due in part to skilful diplomacy, especially that of the highly capable and shrewd statesman Shigeru Yoshida.

Japan hitched its sail to the American mast and it was smooth sailing for decades after. The American-imposed constitution, in which ‘the Japanese people forever renounce war as a sovereign right of the nation’, and the US–Japan Security Treaty (1952) allowed Japan to focus on economic growth throughout the Cold War years. Diplomacy was not needed beyond occasionally assuaging hot American tempers when Japan’s trade surplus got ‘too big’.

But this century has proved turbulent as the centre of global geopolitical gravity has moved from the North Atlantic to the Western Pacific. Europe is in decline, the US is confused and Asia is back, especially with China rising as a great global power. The situation is complex, unpredictable and potentially explosive.

Japan proved diplomatically skilful in the past in managing and establishing alliances with Western powers, but it has never had an Asian ally. Furthermore, there is a racist undercurrent among some sections of Japanese society who tend to look down on ‘other’ Asians, as seen in the plight of the Korean minority in Japan.

Yet, with China’s meteoric rise there are understandable jitters among some of its neighbours, especially those in the South China Sea. For example, the Philippines sees its former conqueror, Japan, as less of a threat and more of a potential bulwark in its stand-off with China. The US is also keen to receive more robust military support from Japan. Thus, while the Abe government’s decision to ‘reinterpret’ the Constitution has been condemned by China and South Korea, it has been welcomed by some of the ASEAN countries and by the US.

In light of regional geopolitical conditions, Tokyo’s adoption of a [more assertive military policy](#) ^[2] might seem justified, but it is occurring in a context of insensitive and aggressive rhetoric. Having ‘exited’ Asia in 1885, Japan has never ‘re-entered’. In contrast with Germany, the emotions and hatreds of World War II are kept at boiling point and [repeatedly reignited](#) ^[3] by Japanese public figures.

For example, the recently appointed director general of NHK, Katsuto Momii, [at his first press conference](#) ^[4] in January, remarked that ‘comfort women’ were nothing special as [all countries](#) ^[5] resorted to the practice of military prostitution in times of war. And, in February, NHK board member Naoki Hyakuta [denied the Nanjing massacre](#) ^[6], saying it ‘never happened’. More recently in late June, the chairman of the Japanese company Alps, Masataka Kataoka, stated that Japan’s incursion into China in the 1930s was [not an invasion](#) ^[7], but intended to help the country rid itself of US and other colonial powers. These regular outpourings reflect something truly uniquely bizarre in the Japanese post-war national psyche.

Japanese officials complain that they have apologised enough for World War II — and it is true that there have been apologies over the years. But frequent provocative remarks by prominent public figures, such as those by Momii, Hyakuta and Kataoka, not to mention Prime Minister Abe’s [visit to the Yasukuni Shrine](#) ^[8], cast doubt on the sincerity of official apologies.

Japanese business, government and media leaders should learn that effective diplomacy means knowing when to speak and when to remain silent. If there were fewer incendiary statements about World War II, East Asia would be less of a tinder-box, the prospect of war

would rescind and the world might feel like a safer place.

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[4] at his first press conference:

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[5] all countries: http://ajw.asahi.com/article/behind_news/politics/AJ201401260018

[6] denied the Nanjing massacre:

<http://thediplomat.com/2014/02/nhk-governor-nanjing-massacre-never-happened/>

[7] not an invasion:

<http://www.scmp.com/news/china/article/1544575/japanese-factory-manager-apologises-workers-after-war-remarks-spark>

[8] visit to the Yasukuni Shrine:

<http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2013/12/29/abes-yasukuni-visit-isolates-japan/>