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A Three-Part Series:

Remembering WWII's End - Apologies That Only Hurt

By Yang Xiangfeng

Synopsis

Instead of seeking the forgiveness of Japan's neighbours, Abe recast his war apology largely in the context of current Sino-Japanese relations that shed unfavourable light on China. His no-more-apologies caveat bodes ill for reconciliation as Japanese revisionists unwind past apologies and repentance.

Commentary

IN THE intense anticipation of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's speech commemorating the 70th anniversary of Japan's World War II surrender, the question was whether he would apologise. It turned out that he raised the Japanese art of apology a notch. In the unusually lengthy statement, he sketched out a broad tapestry of history in which Japan "took the wrong course and advanced along the road to war". He touched on the key words of aggression, repentance, remorse and apology that are deemed indispensable for historical and political correctness.

Those looking for something uniquely "Abe-esque," however, are immediately drawn to his caution that "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". To the untrained Western ear, that Japan has a limited supply of apologies makes sense – not only because they have been repeatedly offered but also because Abe pledged to "inherit the past" and "pass it on to the future". So profuse are the regrets that China's refusal to let bygones be bygones would only prove how vengeful the Chinese still are towards the Japanese.

Blaming the victims

Targeting the Chinese but speaking to the international audience at large was what Abe had done; the speech made direct reference to China or the Chinese four times (but not including the Manchurian Incident), mentioned South Korea only once while North Korea and Japan's annexation of the whole Peninsular were conveniently neglected. Still, Abe did recount the good deeds of the

Chinese toward the Japanese after the war, “How much emotional struggle must have existed and what great efforts must have been necessary for the Chinese people,” he said.

While Abe may be faulted for using the passive voice, with his vagueness bordering on evasiveness, the mix of repentance and gratitude put him in a blame-proof position as judged by a non-Chinese audience. By framing his reflections in light of the currently contentious Sino-Japanese relations, he had kicked the can down the road to Beijing.

This must be the kind of “generosity” predicted by Dartmouth College’s Jennifer Lind back in April in *The Wall Street Journal*, so magnanimous that if the Chinese continued to whine, as she was quoted as saying in *The Washington Post* after the statement came out, “it will show that China is utterly disinterested in improving relations”.

That the Western press largely took the bait is no surprise. To the pundits, China’s flexing of its muscle is a far more present danger to dwell on. Besides, “Japan had acknowledged past wrongdoing more frequently and candidly than any other country,” asserted the ubiquitous Lind in *The New York Times*.

How deep was the apology?

Sadly, apologies alone are only skin-deep. Even a million Japanese apologies “engraved” – a word Abe is clearly fond of using – in stone slabs would have been overridden by the repeated denial and whitewashing by Japanese ultranationalists in and out of government over the years.

To this day, a majority of victims of sexual slavery, forced labour and bacterial warfare have yet to be compensated. Countless number of looted cultural artifacts are yet to be repatriated. And there have been such outrageous provocations as repudiation of the Nanjing massacre and comfort women, history textbook rewrites, as well as Yasukuni visits, all of which make a mockery of Japan’s apology.

One must note, however, that those controversies are primarily of moral and political nature. Mixing them up with the ongoing territorial dispute over the Diaoyu/Senkakus, which has its origin in history but nonetheless has a lot more to do with international law, has the deleterious effects of muddying the picture and obscuring the truth.

Using the Chinese against the Chinese

Further apologies are to no avail, wrote *The Wall Street Journal*’s Andrew Browne, because drumming up anti-Japanese feelings “has become a vital crutch for the regime” in Beijing. But to attribute that solely to China’s politicising of history risks conflating cause and effect. Too often, it is the provocative words and acts that have given Chinese officials (again, not just the Chinese) the opening to begin with.

Even in the honeymoon era of Sino-Japanese relations in the 1980s, Yasuhiro Nakasone became the first incumbent prime minister to visit the Yasukuni shrine. Soon, in a short span of a decade, a succession of Koizumis, Asos, and Abes made their names endeavouring to restore pride to Japan that they claimed was stripped by the masochistic repetition of apologies.

All have their own political bases, family pedigree, and unshakable personal convictions that have made them right-wing standouts of Japan’s own making. Did they really need Chinese criticisms to justify paying respect to the war criminals in Yasukuni, as Abe did most recently in 2013, and calling those sex slaves “whores”?

Japan’s lack of repentance pales in comparison with the Chinese Communist Party’s own record. Howard French noted in *The New York Times* that Maoist rule “took far more Chinese lives than the Japanese did, but this and many other fraught episodes of Chinese history remain all but off limits”. But does this justify Japan’s half-hearted atonement?

The right thing to do

Japan should own up to its dark history and make it right. Those defending Japan’s action by invoking

and exposing Beijing's own hypocrisy run the peril of logical inconsistency and double standards: China is rife with human rights violations because it is not a democracy; whereas Japan's handling of history leaves much to be desired in spite of it being a full-fledged democracy.

Seventy years is a long time for wounds to heal but only if the aggressor makes a genuine effort, even at the cost of overcompensating. Yet here is what Japan's struggle with history essentially boils down to: When one raises questions such as compensation to the victims, Japanese officials invariably pull out the big gun of international law, citing that those issues have been resolved at the establishment of formal diplomatic relations between Tokyo and Beijing.

When someone rebukes Japanese officials' insensitive words or action, they say: "The Chinese and Koreans like to beat up Japan in order to divert attention from their own domestic problems. Therefore, it's not our problem!"

Unfortunately, this is a problem that has everything to do with Japan. Under Abe's we-can-not-apologise-forever cover, there undoubtedly will be more shenanigans to come. The World War II generation will soon exit the stage, but the ghosts will continue to haunt Abe's "beautiful country".

Yang Xiangfeng is Assistant Professor of International Affairs at the University of North Georgia. This is the first in a series commemorating the 70th anniversary of the conclusion of WWII, contributed specially to RSIS Commentary. Part II tomorrow: A Japanese View.

Nanyang Technological University
Block S4, Level B4, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798
Tel: +65 6790 6982 | Fax: +65 6794 0617 | www.rsis.edu.sg