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*Japan's Burden of History -  
Can it Be Lifted?*

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### **Japan's Burden of History -- Can It Be Lifted?**

Over half a century after the end of World War II, that conflict still casts shadows of resentment and suspicion over Japan's relations with its East Asian neighbors, particularly China and the two Koreas. The bitterness felt by these countries stems in part from memories of Imperial Japan's aggression, including its 1910-45 colonization of Korea; its 1937-45 attempt to conquer China; and its war crimes such as the 1937 Rape of Nanking. Japan's "history problem" is, however, less about the past than the present and future. The animosity of Koreans and Chinese arises primarily from their belief that contemporary Japan is unrepentant over its historical misdeeds and, indeed, is increasingly inclined to celebrate them. Not a few see in Japan's attitude the seeds of a menacing revival of Japanese militarism and chauvinism.

### **The History Quarrel**

During the past 20 years, China and South Korea (and to a lesser extent some Southeast Asian nations) have mounted a series of popular and diplomatic protests against both real and perceived attempts by Japan to deny or evade its "war responsibility." The first such protests were triggered by allegations in 1982 that the Japanese government was censoring school textbooks to "whitewash" Imperial Japan's record in Asia. The focus shifted in 1985 to then-prime minister Nakasone's visit to Yasukuni Shrine in Tokyo, which commemorates Japan's war dead, including, since 1978, a number of convicted war criminals. (Japanese leaders had previously paid private visits to this shrine but Nakasone was the first to describe his as "official.") Beginning in the mid-1980s protests were also provoked by inflammatory public statements by senior Japanese government officials asserting that Imperial Japan had done nothing particularly wrong and that allegations of Japanese war atrocities, such as the Rape of Nanking, were "fabrications."

A new front was opened in the early 1990s when the Japanese government balked at extending official apologies and compensation to former POWs, forced laborers, and other surviving victims of Imperial Japan's war machine. The most egregious such case involved so-called "comfort women" - mainly Korean women involuntarily recruited as military prostitutes. Also in the 1990s, the reluctance of Japanese leaders, with some notable exceptions, to offer more than perfunctory "regrets" for these and other injustices came to the fore as a major grievance. Resentment over this issue was heightened by the refusal of Japan's Diet to pass a resolution expressing an unequivocal national apology on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the war's end in 1995. Another round of protests in the spring and summer of 2001 was inspired by the Japanese government's approval of a textbook laudatory of Imperial Japan, and by Prime Minister Koizumi's "semi-official" visit to Yasukuni Shrine just before the symbolically-charged August 15 anniversary of Japan's 1945 surrender.

### **What Drives the Quarrel?**

The history quarrel between Japan and its neighbors has several roots, including national animosities and rivalries that extend far into the past. Korean resentment of their colonial subjugation by Japan, for example, is reinforced by memories of the devastation wrought by the Japanese invasions of the 1590s and the massacre of Korean residents in Japan during the 1923 Tokyo earthquake, as well as by anger over postwar discrimination against the Korean minority in Japan. However, the principal driver of the quarrel is nationalism or, more accurately, the clash of rival nationalisms. Koreans and Chinese see anything less than total contrition by Japan for its wartime and prewar behavior as a national affront and as evidence that the Japanese

remain a “dangerous people.” For many Japanese - proud of their national accomplishments and convinced that war issues were settled long ago - bowing to such demands is felt to be an humiliating surrender to “unreasonable” foreign pressure.

Why did Japanese and their neighbors begin colliding over war responsibility issues in the 1980s and not earlier? One might suppose that clashes over these issues would have been fiercest in the immediate post-war decades when memories of the war and Japanese atrocities were still fresh. There was, moreover, no lack of inflammatory Japanese actions during these decades. Japan's conservative government, for example, began censoring school textbooks in the 1950s to play down references to Imperial Japan's war guilt and atrocities. Japanese prime ministers and other prominent figures, including the emperor himself, paid numerous “private” visits to Yasukuni Shrine. And right-wing Japanese politicians made no secret of their unrepentant attitudes toward the war. Indeed, one - Nobusuke Kishi, an indicted war criminal - served as Japan's prime minister from 1957 to 1960. Japanese leftists protested these provocative moves, but few outside of Japan paid much attention at the time. For reasons discussed below, this situation changed in the 1980s as a new generation of Chinese and Koreans (and Japanese) emerged, which looked at Japan's handling of war-related issues more critically - in part because of Japan's growing economic power and political influence in the region.

### **Why Does the Quarrel Matter?**

The history quarrel might not appear especially dangerous or worrisome. It has, after all, been going on for 20 years. Fears that it reflects the resurgence of Japanese militarism and ultra-nationalism are clearly overblown - although they are widely held on the Japanese Left, and in China and Korea. So too are concerns that the quarrel poses a “serious” threat to Japan's relations with China and South Korea. As was underscored by the success of Koizumi's fence-mending trips to Beijing and Seoul in the fall of 2001, none of the governments concerned has any interest in allowing disputes over history issues to become too disruptive. (At the same time, however, they show little inclination to resolve or bury them, in large part because the “history card” serves useful domestic political and foreign policy purposes.)

The recurrent squabbling nevertheless generates some highly undesirable effects on international relationships in Northeast Asia. Perhaps most importantly, it poisons the atmosphere between Japan and its neighbors. Other issues, such as disputes over fishing rights, territorial claims, and trade matters, become inflamed and more difficult to manage. Cooperative efforts to address common environmental, economic and security concerns are also rendered more difficult. More significantly, the quarrel bolsters the influence of anti-Japanese hardliners in Seoul and Beijing, and pushes China and South Korea together into a common front against the perceived threat posed by Japan's “remilitarization” - trends that work against the longstanding U.S. objective of encouraging closer ROK-Japan security cooperation.

The history quarrel also acts as a brake on Japan's evolution into a “normal country” and a stronger, more self-confident ally of the United States. Chinese and Korean resentment and suspicion provide Japanese pacifists with potent ammunition to justify maintaining longstanding constitutional constraints on Japan's military, including the ban on its use in collective defense arrangements. As is underlined by Japan's unprecedented naval deployment in support of Operation Enduring Freedom, these constraints are gradually eroding. However, the ease with which Koizumi secured domestic and foreign acquiescence to this deployment arguably reflects special and perhaps temporary circumstances created by the global War on Terrorism and the determination of many Japanese to avoid a repeat of the 1990-91 Gulf War fiasco. (1)

### **Why Won't Japan Say Sorry?**

One might suppose that Japan would be eager to apologize to, and make amends with, its neighbors. After all, it has much for which to atone. The 1937-45 China War alone cost millions of Chinese lives, and

Japanese war crimes - ranging from the Rape of Nanking to the use of biological weapons -- are among the most horrific in modern times. (2) Beyond this, Japanese cultural norms put extraordinary emphasis on apologizing, even in situations where it does not seem to be called for. (These norms do not, of course, necessarily apply to non-Japanese.) Moreover, the Japanese people have since 1945 turned their backs on militarism and ultra-nationalism and embraced the values of pacifist internationalism and democracy. In addition, the East Asian leadership aspirations held by influential elements of Japan's elite would appear to dictate a maximum effort to win the trust and goodwill of its former victims.

A variety of explanations have been put forward to account for Japan's reluctance to face up to its "dark past." Some point to its "shame culture" which supposedly prevents Japanese from feeling moral guilt for their actions. Others argue that, despite their pacifist veneer, the Japanese remain at heart a "dangerous people," programmed, as it were, to dominate and oppress their neighbors. One popular school of thought maintains that they are afflicted with "collective amnesia" that involves the repression of memories of their past crimes and misdeeds. According to another view, Japan's unrepentant ruling elite - with the tacit cooperation and approval of the United States - has carried out a national "concealment" of these misdeeds. (3)

Considered in comparative perspective, however, Japan's evasive stance is not particularly unusual, and does not require resort to theories of national character flaws, collective amnesia, or elite cover-ups. While we may live in an "Age of Apology," most nations still hate to say "sorry" for their transgressions or, indeed, squarely confront them. (4) Doing so raises uncomfortable questions of individual and collective guilt; arouses the ire of nationalists for whom their country "can do no wrong;" brings to the fore vexing issues of compensation; and puts the apologizing nation in a morally invidious position. Saying sorry is even a tougher sell where the transgressions in question are "historical." Most people balk at applying current moral standards to past situations and taking responsibility for the misbehavior of previous generations, especially when similar offenses by other nations are passed over in silence.

Many of the above-mentioned attitudes are illustrated by the national debate in Japan leading up the Diet's passage of the watered-down "war apology" resolution of 1995. (5) Those who favored a straightforward acknowledgement of, and apology for, Japanese aggression were unable to prevail over those who insisted that the resolution should merely express Japan's sorrow for the human suffering that the war brought. The core issue in this debate was whether or not Imperial Japan was an "aggressor state." The anti-apology forces asserted that it was not, arguing that it behaved no worse than other nations (which have not apologized); that it had been backed into a corner by the hostility of the Western powers; and that its goal of "liberating Asia" was praiseworthy. They also warned that labeling Imperial Japan an aggressor would dishonor those who served it; undermine national self-respect; and open the door to unlimited compensation claims.

It might also be suggested that Japan is acting like a "normal country" in seeking to restrict its war responsibility. When nations offer apologies and compensation for damages, the terms and conditions are usually limited by negotiated agreements and international law, particularly the principle of sovereign immunity. (Japan, for example, contends that it has fulfilled its war obligations under the terms of the 1951 San Francisco Peace Treaty and subsequent reparation agreements.) Apologies and compensation are, moreover, often extraneous to international reconciliations. Nations arguably move from hostility to friendship, and vice versa, on the basis of considerations of pragmatic self-interest as defined by their governing elites. Both sides in such reconciliations commonly play down troublesome bilateral issues, including historical grievances and demands for redress. The recent U.S.-Vietnam rapprochement affords one example of how nations "overcome history by burying it," but there are others. (6)

### **Is the German Model Relevant?**

Another, increasingly influential approach to international reconciliation requires nations to confront

their historical wrongdoing and seek forgiveness from their erstwhile victims. (7) Although this approach subsumes pragmatic motives of national self-interest, it is primarily concerned with the moral and psychological dimensions of the reconciliation process, particularly the overcoming of anger and guilt through confession and the creation of “shared identities” between victim and victimizer. It is inspired in part by the ghastly consequences of ethnic and national hatreds run amok in places such as the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda. It is also informed by expanded conceptions of human rights and international morality, which trump (in the view of its proponents) older notions of national sovereignty and self-interest.

A leading exemplar of this moral or “confessional” approach to reconciliation is West (now united) Germany which arguably has gone further than any other major nation toward embracing collective guilt for its past offenses; accepting open-ended responsibility for compensating its victims; and pursuing “moral” reconciliation with its former adversaries. (This is not, of course, to suggest that pragmatic self-interest is lacking in German motivations, or that its willingness to compensate victims is unlimited.) For many, Germany offers a model, albeit an imperfect one, for the course Japan must take, and has so far not taken, in addressing its war responsibility. (8) But is the “German model” transferable to Japan?

The case for transferability is undermined by at least three critical differences between postwar Germany and Japan. Perhaps the most important of these is the Holocaust, which put Germany outside the pale of western civilization and, for many Germans, dictated a permanent posture of national contrition. (9) There was no counterpart to the Holocaust as a stimulus to Japanese guilt and repentance. Indeed, the unique horror of the atomic attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki implanted the notion among many Japanese that they were the war's principal victims, and that any crimes they or their leaders may have committed were “absolved” by these events. This “victims’ consciousness” was reinforced by the tendency of most Japanese to forget the East Asian dimensions of the war, including its atrocities - a tendency encouraged by the focus of Japan's American occupiers with the war in the Pacific. (10)

Second, the German Federal Republic made a relatively clean break with the Nazi regime. New leaders like Konrad Adenauer were dedicated to expiating Nazi crimes, and regaining the trust and goodwill of Germany's western neighbors. The situation was quite different in Japan, where there was much greater continuity in personnel, attitudes and institutions between the prewar and postwar regimes. Emperor Hirohito, although shorn of his divinity in 1946, continued to inspire enough reverence to inhibit reflection and debate on the morality of acts done in his name. Moreover, key political leaders like Shigeru Yoshida, who was prime minister for much of the period between 1948 and 1954 and is widely regarded as the architect of postwar Japan, were holdovers from the old regime, who considered it guilty of nothing more serious than errors of judgment or, as Yoshida put it, an “historic stumble.” (11)

Third, Germany had the good fortune to face former adversaries, notably France, who were amenable to reconciliation. (12) Japan did not. China, for example, was largely cut off by the communist victory in 1949 and by American disapproval of all but informal Sino-Japanese contacts. Furthermore, the forces that favored Western European integration - such as the common Soviet threat, American encouragement, and similar economic problems and political systems - operated only weakly or not at all in non-communist East Asia. Japan was willing to play the U.S.-designated role as “the workshop of Asia,” but wanted no part of NATO-style collective security arrangements, citing its “no war” constitution. Most of the newly-independent states in the region, their memories of the wartime “co-prosperity sphere” still vivid, were no less opposed to a regional Japanese security role and sought to keep Japan at arm's length.

### **Japan's Return to East Asia**

Notwithstanding the above differences in setting and attitude, the problem posed by the postwar revival of Germany and Japan was fundamentally the same: How could the growing power of these once and possi-

bly future regional hegemons be tamed and made acceptable to their neighbors? The course followed by Germany - moral reconciliation and integration into the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the European Community (EC) - was not open to Japan. Instead, it relied on its newfound commitment to pacifism and on pragmatic accommodations based on economic self-interest to disarm East Asian suspicions and regain a position of respect and - some Japanese hoped -- leadership in the region.

The first step in Japan's "return to Asia" was the negotiation between the 1950s and 1970s of a series of war reparations and normalization agreements. Such agreements were, for example, concluded with Burma (1955), the Philippines (1956), Indonesia (1958), Malaysia (1967), and Singapore (1967). For the East Asian countries concerned, they brought vitally needed Japanese capital goods, services, and credits. For Japan, they provided legal closure on war claims, enhanced international respectability, and commercial footholds for the exploitation of East Asian resources and markets. The agreements with South Korea (1965) and China (1972) were special cases. The former took more than a decade to negotiate and was finally pushed through in the face of strong popular opposition in South Korea. The agreement with the PRC involved the waiver of demands for formal reparations, Beijing instead insisting on Tokyo's rhetorical support against Soviet "hegemonism."

The Japanese bridgeheads in East Asia thus established were consolidated and expanded by burgeoning trade and investment ties; growing people-to-people contacts; and Japan's increasing aid (ODA) programs in the region. There were, to be sure, problems such as the eruption of anti-Japanese riots in several Southeast Asian capitals in 1974, which dramatized local resentment of the insensitive behavior of Japanese firms and tourists (particularly so-called "sex tourists"), and suspicion that Japan aspired to recreate the wartime "co-prosperity sphere," albeit a kinder, gentler version. However, Tokyo's announcement in 1977 of the Fukuda Doctrine, which emphasized Japan's commitment to pacifism and "heart-to-heart" dialogues, seemed likely to dissipate anti-Japanese feeling in Southeast Asia.

Many Japanese assumed that growing economic ties -- coupled with Good Neighbor policies, "cultural diplomacy," and the passing of the wartime generation -- would gradually extinguish war-inspired animosity and distrust toward Japan throughout East Asia. This process was well underway by the 1970s in Southeast Asia where the wartime encounter with Imperial Japan had been relatively brief and, in some cases, initially positive. (The latter's pose as liberator of colonial Southeast Asia had some resonance there, creating links that smoothed Japan's postwar re-entry into the region.) China and South Korea were tougher nuts to crack for reasons examined below. Even here, however, there were grounds for optimism. Deng Xiaoping's post-1979 economic modernization drive, for example, fed Japan's hopes that it would become an indispensable partner and benefactor of China, and inspired a massive inflow of Japanese ODA which became a critical source of funding for Chinese infrastructure development in the 1980s and 1990s. (13)

### **The Reemergence of War Issues**

Japanese expectations that war issues would fade away were dealt a rude shock by the wave of indignation that swept China, South Korea, and parts of Southeast Asia in 1982 in response to Japanese media allegations of government textbook censorship. The extent to which these allegations had any substance remains in dispute, but they were widely believed to be true and evoked highly emotional reactions among Japan's neighbors. Some argue that the textbook furor and the uproar provoked by PM Nakasone's Yasukuni visit three years later were deliberately contrived by Japanese leftists and their media allies in hopes of mobilizing foreign pressure to compensate for their diminishing influence in Japan. (14) There is something to this argument, but it begs the question of why Koreans, Chinese, and many Southeast Asians should have cared about the contents of Japanese textbooks or prime ministerial visits to Yasukuni Shrine.

Several developments combined in the 1980s to produce more critical scrutiny by East Asian publics of

the manner in which Japan was dealing with the legacy of the war. One of these was Japan's rise to global economic superpower status. As a struggling pariah state in the 1950s, totally dependent on the United States for its security and economic survival, how Japan felt about the war did not much matter to anyone but the Japanese themselves. As "Asia's new giant," however, Japanese intentions and attitudes assumed greater importance. It was arguably only a matter of time before the attention of Japan's neighbors would focus on the disconnect between its espousal of pacifist internationalism and its reluctance to disavow its imperialist past, as revealed in textbook censorship and Yasukuni visits by government leaders.

East Asians were also reacting against a nationalist revival in Japan -- much exaggerated by domestic and foreign critics -- in the 1970s and 1980s. One manifestation of this revival was the vogue of popular books celebrating Japan's uniqueness and superiority, a theme echoed in the American-authored 1979 bestseller, "Japan As Number One." Another was the decline of the Left, which championed pacifist internationalism, and the political resurgence of Japan's longtime conservative ruling party, the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP). Not surprisingly, right-wing nationalists within the LDP, who had gone into eclipse during the 1960s, were emboldened by these trends. Prime Minister Nakasone (1982-1987), for example, emphasized the buildup of Japan's Self Defense Forces and the restoration of patriotic education and observances, including official visits to Yasukuni Shrine.

Somewhat paradoxically in view of Japan's much-touted "war amnesia," the Japanese took the lead during this period in putting Imperial Japan's war crimes in the forefront of the East Asian consciousness. Japanese journalists, scholars, and old soldiers anxious to clear their consciences, uncovered and publicized hitherto buried details of these crimes, including the horrors committed during the Rape of Nanking; the Imperial Army's complicity in the enslavement of Asian "comfort women;" and the gruesome biological and chemical warfare experiments conducted on POWs by its infamous Unit 731. (Japanese lawyers and human rights activists also helped surviving victims file lawsuits and submit appeals for apologies and compensation.) A growing volume of books, articles and television documentaries presented these revelations to Japanese and East Asian audiences, and their visibility was raised by attacks on their veracity by Japanese rightists and their academic and journalistic supporters.

Exposes of Japanese war crimes fell upon a younger generation of East Asians that was, as previously noted, less disposed to let bygones be bygones than their elders. Having lived through the war, the latter were often sensitive to its complexities and nuances, including the necessity to collaborate with Imperial Japan and appreciation of its role in undermining European colonialism. (Ex-collaborators might, of course, be vehemently anti-Japanese.) The younger generation, oblivious to such nuances and nurtured on nationalist dogmas, was more inclined to condemn or even demonize the Japanese, past and present. Nowhere was this tendency stronger than in China and the two Koreas where idealized memories of the "anti-Japanese struggle" became the touchstone of regime legitimacy and national identity. In South Korea and China, moreover, anti-Japanese protests provided dissidents with a politically correct vehicle to criticize their own governments as "neo-colaborators."

### **Japanese, Korean, and Chinese Responses**

Although neither Beijing nor Seoul deliberately fomented the history quarrel - indeed, they seem to have been as surprised by the 1982 textbook flap as the Japanese government - both exploited popular indignation against Japan as a means of pressuring Tokyo on other issues and burnishing their nationalist credentials in the eyes of their own people. The latter objective was particularly important to the unpopular military-dominated regime of Chun Doo Hwan, which was locked in competition with the communist North for the mantle of nationalist legitimacy. But playing the "history card" was also useful to Deng Xiaoping as nationalism increasingly replaced communist ideology as the chief prop of the Chinese Communist Party's legitimacy.

Several factors, however, led Seoul and Beijing to restrain anti-Japanese nationalism. In the case of China, one motive for doing so was the fact that anti-Japanese demonstrations were often spearheaded by pro-democracy activists who sought to turn them against the government. Perhaps more importantly, the requirements of economic modernization and - until the end of the Cold War - Japan's usefulness as a strategic counter to the Soviet Union dictated the maintenance of friendly relations with Tokyo and the downplaying of history issues. The reemergence of these issues in the 1980s undercut "pro-Japanese" figures like party Secretary-General Hu Yaobang (who was sacked in 1987), but they were never allowed to seriously disrupt bilateral cooperation. Indeed, Sino-Japanese relations experienced a post-Tiananmen "second honeymoon" symbolized by Emperor Akihito's 1992 visit to China (15), which was prompted in part by Beijing's need for Tokyo's support in breaking out of the Tiananmen sanctions imposed by the U.S.,

South Korean President Chun Doo Hwan and his successors were no less averse to "riding the tiger" of anti-Japanese nationalism, especially if doing so imperiled cooperation with Japan deemed vital to ROK economic growth and - until the late 1990s - its overriding foreign policy objective of isolating and weakening North Korea. There was, however, a curious twist in Korean attitudes toward Japan that was largely missing among Chinese. While anti-Japanese posturing pleased Korean nationalists, moves toward reconciliation were also popular, suggesting an ambivalence - resentment of Japanese coupled with a desire for their respect - that has affinities with the "love-hate" relationship between other ex-colonial peoples and their former rulers. (16) Thus, at the same time that Chun publicly berated Tokyo over textbooks and the Yasukuni issue, he broke new ground in ROK-Japan relations by exchanging state visits with Nakasone and meeting with Emperor Hirohito (1984) from whom he elicited a carefully modulated statement of "regret" for the past.

Japan's response to the emergence of history issues was also complex. Hard-line nationalists urged stonewalling East Asian demands for concessions, but this was not a viable option for mainstream Japanese political and economic elites. Too much was at stake, including Japan's "special relationship" with China. Moreover, the Japanese people were divided on how far to go in meeting these demands. Revelations of Japan's war crimes inspired some support for a more forthcoming stance. But for many younger Japanese, the war was "ancient history" - of interest perhaps to their grandparents' generation which had lived through it, but unconnected to their own experience and concerns. In the event, a mix of conciliation and intransigence was adopted. On the one hand, efforts were made to appease East Asian sensitivities on nationalist censorship of textbooks (which was eased), provocative Yasukuni visits (few occurred after 1985), and offensive public statements by senior government figures (many were forced to resign). The line was, however, drawn at officially compensating war victims - partly because of the financial implications - and issuing an unequivocal national apology. Overall, Japan's ambivalent response dampened the quarrel, but it failed to satisfy either Japanese nationalists or their Korean and Chinese counterparts, sowing the seeds for future trouble.

### **Where is the Quarrel Headed?**

Until the 2001 textbook and Yasukuni brouhahas, it was reasonable to predict that the history quarrel might fade away. In the wake of President Jiang Zemin's contentious 1998 visit to Japan, China backed away from playing the "history card." ROK President Kim Dae Jung abandoned it altogether, opting instead for a serious try at reconciliation with Japan. Kim's historic 1998 summit agreement with then prime minister Obuchi was hailed by many observers as marking "closure" on the history problem between South Korea and Japan, and was widely popular in both countries. (17) In return for Obuchi's unprecedented written apology for Imperial Japan's colonization of Korea, Kim dropped demands for the official compensation of Korean "comfort women" and pledged to refrain from seeking further apologies. He also agreed to lift longstanding ROK restrictions on Japanese cultural imports and expand bilateral cooperation.

The textbook and Yasukuni affairs at least temporarily derailed this rapprochement and plunged Japan's relations with the PRC and ROK into a deep-freeze. Perhaps more significantly, they revealed the vulnerabili-

ty to nationalist pressures of any attempt at a comprehensive settlement of the history quarrel. In South Korea, the spontaneous upwelling of grass-roots outrage - expressed in nationwide anti-Japanese rallies, flag-burnings, and calls for boycotts against Japanese goods -- forced a reluctant Kim Dae Jung to take retaliatory steps against Japan, including the temporary recall of the ROK ambassador and the suspension of planned exchanges and meetings. Chinese diplomatic protests, on the other hand, were driven less by overt popular pressure on the government - which is frowned upon - than by the latter's apparent desire to preempt such pressure by taking a tough public stand against Japan's provocative moves.

Do Koizumi's Yasukuni visit and textbook decision reflect the rise of right-wing nationalism in Japan? Koizumi himself may be sympathetic to, or at least politically beholden to nationalists, but one should be cautious about attributing his extraordinary initial popularity to widespread support for the right-wing agenda. Few schools adopted the textbook in question, and Yasukuni Shrine is hardly a Mecca of mass nationalism. Although "state-oriented nationalism" is slowly reviving, it still holds little appeal for most Japanese, as is indicated by low levels of patriotism. (18) This does not mean, however, that they are indifferent to foreign insults or lacking in national pride. Koizumi's pose of standing firm against perceived Chinese and Korean "interference" on history issues tapped into this "formless and free-floating national pride" (19), much as had Obuchi's rebuff of Jiang Zemin's hectoring during their 1998 summit.

A nationalist backlash in Japan has been developing for some years against concessions on textbooks, Yasukuni visits and other history issues. At the forefront of this movement are so-called "revisionists" who decry what they see as Japan's "apology diplomacy" and "masochistic" acceptance of the "Tokyo War Crimes Trial View" of Japan's war guilt. (20) In contrast to old-school nationalists and ultra-nationalists, they are dominated by media-savvy intellectuals and populist politicians like Shintaro Ishihara, who pitch their message through films, cartoons, TV talk shows, and mainstream magazines. They play to a growing "apology fatigue" (manifest both in indifference to, and resentment of, foreign hectoring on history issues) as well as rising frustration over Japan's gridlocked politics, sputtering economy, and declining international status. While it is easy to exaggerate the political influence of such "neo-nationalists," they increasingly have the potential to tilt the domestic debate on history issues toward greater intransigence.

### **Can the Quarrel be Resolved?**

For many proponents of the "confessional" approach to reconciliation, the only acceptable basis for laying the history quarrel to rest is a change of heart by the Japanese. The latter must, as victimizers, cast aside their pride and qualms and embrace true national repentance, as Germany has largely done. This would involve not only a shift from pro forma to more heartfelt apologies, but also a national commitment to atonement and restitution. Visits to Yasukuni Shrine by government leaders, private or otherwise, would be curtailed, and textbooks rewritten to highlight Imperial Japan's aggression and accommodate other East Asian concerns. Furthermore, generous financial compensation would be provided to all of Japan's surviving victims on the model of the \$4.6 billion fund set up in 2001 by Germany to compensate Nazi-era slave laborers.

A second approach sees the key to resolving the history problem in greater efforts by the leaders of Japan, China, and Korea to seek a pragmatic or interest-based rapprochement. Apologies and compensation are secondary to a common determination to set the past aside in favor of building forward-looking, cooperative relations. Although the 1998 Kim-Obuchi accord was a major step in this direction, it did not go far enough and was oversold by the media. Neither Kim nor Obuchi, for example, was in a position to guarantee restraint on inflammatory issues such as textbooks and Yasukuni visits. What is needed (in this view) is a stronger commitment by the leaders concerned, including China's, to achieving a comprehensive settlement, which would command sufficient domestic support to marginalize those intent on using these issues to stir up nationalist passions.

A third view identifies long-term attitudinal change as the most promising solvent of history-inspired animosities between Japan and its neighbors. Negative national stereotypes are not immutable; they can, and sometimes do evolve into positive mutual images in response to common security interests; economic complementarities; and similar political institutions and values. Government-to-government agreements, lubricated by formal apologies and compensation, can facilitate this process, but it fundamentally “wells up” from the societies concerned. Some argue that such a process is already well underway between South Korea and Japan - propelled in part by the ROK's post-1987 democratization and growing South Korean self-confidence vis-à-vis Japan -- pointing toward a gradual fading of history squabbles between them. (21)

There are several difficulties with the above approaches. For one thing, it is not obvious that Japan and its neighbors share a common interest in resolving the history quarrel. Indeed, geopolitical rivalry - notably between China and Japan - arguably creates incentives to keep it alive. It is also doubtful that rival nationalisms can be set aside as easily as one might assume. Rising Japanese nationalism and “apology fatigue,” for example, seem to preclude the “change of heart” deemed necessary by advocates of moral reconciliation, and are likely to render attempts to pressure Japan on history issues increasingly counter-productive. Even if positive mutual images are growing between Japanese and South Koreans, moreover, the reverse is true of Chinese and Japanese perceptions of each other. In any case, given the continued socialization of young Koreans in “anti-Japanism,” it is difficult to see how such images will overcome grass-roots resentment and suspicion of Japan.

### **A Different Approach**

The starting point for any realistic attempt to deal with the history quarrel is recognition of the fact that it probably cannot be “resolved” and may continue to roil Japan's relations with its neighbors for years or even decades. This is not, of course, to suggest that nothing can, or should be done to reduce its intensity. Cultural and academic exchanges; the building of other institutional linkages; official apologies and goodwill gestures; and government-to-government dialogue and agreements, should all be continued and broadened. What is perhaps even more important, however, is devising a better strategy of containing the conflict, particularly on Japan's part, so that its disruptive effects can be reduced.

Japan's handling of the history quarrel over the past 20 years is not a success story for Japanese statesmanship and diplomacy. As pointed out above, Tokyo's attempts to combine defiance with appeasement have largely backfired, inflaming nationalist sentiment at home while failing to defuse resentment and suspicion abroad. Koizumi - emulating some of his predecessors -- employed this strategy last year by first bowing to nationalist demands on the textbook and Yasukuni issues and then relying on “apology diplomacy” to try to assuage Chinese and Korean indignation. His balancing act may have bought time, but only at the cost of paving the way for future flare-ups by feeding Chinese and Korean suspicions of Japan's duplicity and emboldening Japanese nationalists to press for further, more decisive victories.

A more promising approach to managing the history quarrel involves taking “red flag” issues out of the play as symbolic battlefields for rival nationalists. The most important such battlefield - Yasukuni Shrine - cannot be removed, but it could be replaced by another, less controversial war memorial as a focus of governmental observances and prime ministerial visits. Likewise, while the content of Japanese history textbooks cannot be eliminated as a source of controversy, greater efforts could be made to find mutually acceptable compromises through the establishment of an international panel of eminent scholars and educators. (22) Even the issue of compensating Imperial Japan's surviving victims - against which the Japanese government has so far stood firm - could be partially defused by closer government-private sector collaboration along the lines of the German compensation scheme noted above.

The latter approach falls short of the comprehensive settlement sought by many. It would also fail to satisfy Japanese nationalists and their Korean and Chinese counterparts. However, a comprehensive settlement is unattainable, largely because rival nationalists will never sign on. The history quarrel can only be contained, not resolved. The achievement of even this modest objective will not be easy. It requires depriving nationalist hardliners of high-visibility issues with which to fan popular indignation and perpetuate the self-reinforcing cycle of resentment and distrust that drives the quarrel. The measures proposed above - perhaps combined with a prime ministerial policy speech laying out the goals and parameters of this approach - would help do this, giving moderates in Tokyo, Seoul, and Beijing greater running room to try to prevent the quarrel from periodically boiling over.

### **Can the Quarrel be Alleviated?**

The foregoing approach is, of course, not new, but past efforts to implement it have been half-hearted and ineffectual. Proposals for a Yasukuni alternative were never seriously pursued, in part because of anticipated resistance from the powerful Association of War Bereaved Families. Innumerable academic exchanges with Korean and Chinese scholars served chiefly to underscore the impossibility of arriving at a "common view of history." (23) (What is needed, however, is not a common view but a "politically usable" one.) Governmental attempts to set up international history advisory bodies have fared no better, largely because the political will to make effective use of them has been missing. Moreover, the Japanese government's belated and mismanaged effort in 1995 to set up a private foundation to compensate "comfort women" was a public relations disaster that arguably exacerbated this problem.

Koizumi - perhaps spurred by the vehemence of Chinese and Korean protests last summer - seems to be trying to breathe new life into this approach. He has, for example, established an advisory body under the prime minister's office to look into the creation of a new national war memorial. (One possibility floated in the media is something similar to the Okinawa war cenotaph that commemorates all who perished in the 1945 battle there, civilian and military, Japanese and non-Japanese.) He has also agreed to the inauguration of an officially sponsored "Korea-Japan Joint History Research Group" composed of scholars and media figures from both countries. (24) Although Tokyo rejected ROK requests that the recommendations of this group be reflected in Japanese textbooks - an arrangement that Japanese nationalist opinion will not countenance - it will likely serve as a sounding board for informal textbook compromises.

What can be expected of these initiatives? Probably not much, at least in the immediate future. As of April 2002, the ROK-Japan history study group had not yet begun to function, and Koizumi's war memorial advisory body had not agreed on the need for a Yasukuni alternative, much less on the form it should take. (25) On the other hand, Koizumi's evident interest in seeking a modus vivendi on history issues earned him some goodwill in Seoul and Beijing. The Kim Dae Jung government publicly welcomed his moves and Beijing - while publicly noncommittal - saw fit to resume high-level exchanges and a naval ship visit to Japan that had been frozen last summer. Another sign of a more flexible Korean and Chinese stance was their relatively muted objections to the problematic aspects of a Japanese history textbook approved earlier this year.

Koizumi's surprise appearance at Yasukuni Shrine on April 21 put a damper on this budding goodwill. Beijing reacted angrily, again postponing the naval ship visit to Japan and calling off the scheduled visit of the Japanese defense minister. Seoul issued a statement of disappointment but took no retaliatory action. Koizumi's motives presumably included hopes of shoring up his support among nationalists in light of his declining popularity, and his expectation that an April Yasukuni visit would be less controversial than one closer to August 15. He also appears to have calculated (probably correctly) that Seoul and Beijing have too much riding on good relations with Japan this year - the former because of its co-hosting with Japan of the soccer World Cup, and the latter because of the 30th anniversary observances of Sino-Japanese normalization -- to risk another rupture over a relatively minor provocation.

It is too early to judge whether Koizumi's latest Yasukuni visit represents a reversion to the bankrupt balancing strategy noted above, or merely a temporary concession to nationalist opinion en route to the establishment of more durable "modus vivendi" on history issues. Much will depend on how vigorously Koizumi and his successors push his proposals for a Yasukuni alternative and textbook compromises. Perhaps even more will depend on their handling of the Yasukuni visit issue. Given Japan's apology fatigue and the rising influence of neo-nationalists, they will likely face increasing domestic political pressure to pay homage at the shrine. Doing so, however, will inflame Chinese and Korean suspicion, crippling any reconciliation process. How Japan's leaders navigate this Scylla and Charybdis may thus be a make-or-break proposition for hopes of better managing the history quarrel.

### **What Should the U.S. Do?**

For the reasons suggested at the beginning of this essay, it is clearly in the interests of the United States that the history quarrel be moderated, especially between Japan and South Korea, its most important treaty allies in the region. Since Washington's wishes are well understood, it has long maintained a relatively neutral public stance, partly to avoid the appearance of taking sides. Many commentators argue, however, that the U.S. should play a larger and more active role in pushing for a settlement, not least because it had a hand in creating the problem. In the view of some, this role should include publicly pressuring Japan to come to terms with its past and refrain from provocative acts such as prime ministerial visits to Yasukuni Shrine. (26)

The latter prescription is a recipe for trouble. Publicly pressuring Japan does not comport with the more equal alliance desired by both Washington and Tokyo. It would also invite resistance by Japanese nationalists against "American interference," rendering the history quarrel even more heated and intractable. In addition, interjecting the U.S. into the midst of this quarrel on the side of those who believe that Japan is shirking its legal and moral responsibilities on war issues might undermine Japanese confidence in the alliance and the agreements on which it is based. It would, for example, encourage efforts to abrogate the "no reparations" clause of the San Francisco Treaty, facilitating suits in American courts by those seeking compensation for their mistreatment during the war. (These efforts are likely to continue and perhaps intensify, making it even more urgent for the Japanese government and Japanese corporations to look seriously at working out proactive compromises with claimants.)

One might ask, moreover, why a U.S. leadership role is needed or desirable? Such a role might be justified if the principals were barely on speaking terms and Washington enjoyed strong leverage on both of them. This was, for example, the case in the negotiations culminating in the 1965 ROK-Japan normalization treaty, which the U.S. brokered and facilitated with a mixture of cajolery and pressure. (Even this might not have sufficed if Seoul and Tokyo had not wanted an agreement for reasons of their own.) The current situation is quite different. Japan and its neighbors have numerous official and unofficial channels for dialogue, and U.S. leverage is greatly diminished relative to what it was during the 1960s. American attempts to "force and pace" -- as opposed to offering counsel via "quiet diplomacy" -- are therefore unlikely to be welcomed and may even be regarded as meddling.

### **Conclusion**

The United States cannot lift Japan's "burden of history." Indeed, growing Japanese apology fatigue and the apparently ineradicable suspicion and hostility of its neighbors make it unlikely that Japan itself can do so. Japan can, however, aspire to lighten this burden, but this will require dispensing with wishful thinking. The history problem will not go away with generational change and the passage of time. It cannot be exorcised by claims that "Japan has faced its past." (27) It cannot be resolved through dialogue and goodwill gestures. It cannot be finessed by clever diplomacy and grandiloquent summit communiqués. And it cannot be overcome by more apologies and greater shows of contrition - even if Japan were inclined to move in this

direction, which it is not. The problem can, however, be reduced to more manageable proportions by limiting flash points exploitable by those intent on exacerbating the quarrel. Will Japan's leadership summon up the political will to do this, and will China and South Korea go along? One might hope so, but the jury is still out.

## Notes

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- (3) Ruth Benedict, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword: Patterns of Japanese Culture* (New York: Meridian, 1967), pp. 223-24; Kenneth Pyle, *The Japan Question: Power and Purpose in a New Era* (Washington: American Enterprise Institute Press, 1996), pp. 8 ff.; George Hicks, *Japan's War memoirs: Amnesia or Concealment* (Brookfield: Ashgate, 1997), pp viii-x.
- (4) Nicholas Kristoff, "The Problem of Memory," *Foreign Affairs* Vol. 77, No. 6 (November/December 1998), p. 41. Kristoff cites American resistance to apologizing for the Vietnam War, the Mexican-American War, the Philippine Insurrection, and the enslavement of Afro-Americans. There are, of course, many other examples, such as Britain's refusal to apologize to China for the Opium Wars and China's refusal to apologize to South Korea for its intervention in the Korean War.
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- (6) Stephen Rock, *Why Peace Breaks Out: Great Power Rapprochement in Historical Perspective* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989). Rock presents a number of case studies, including the Anglo-American rapprochement of the 1890s.
- (7) Elezar Barkan, *The Guilt of Nations: Restitution and Negotiating Historical Injustices* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), pp. xv-xli. Barkan describes a variety of apology and restitution movements, ranging from Hawaiian sovereigntists to Holocaust survivors.
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