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Japan's History Problem

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Japan has a serious geopolitical problem -- and increasingly it is an American problem as well.

Essentially, the problem is that Japan has not been able to eliminate the suspicions and grievances that still linger in China and Korea about Japan's militarist past. While postwar Germany has somehow been able to put the "history issue" to rest, postwar Japan has not. The result is that Japan -- 61 years after its surrender and the inauguration of its long, peaceful return to the international community -- remains isolated and incapable of providing leadership in a region that is quickly transforming in the shadow of a rising China.

The most visible manifestation of Japan's history problem is the controversy that erupts each year when the Japanese prime minister visits the Yasukuni Shrine in central Tokyo -- the Shinto memorial where the names of 14 World War II-era Class A war criminals are listed among the honored dead. In China and Korea these visits evoke the memory of Japanese war and imperial aggression, trigger popular protests and official condemnation, and provide a readily available tool to push Japan on the defensive and shrink its regional influence and appeal.

This problem was again on display Tuesday -- the anniversary of the end of the Pacific War -- when Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi made his expected pilgrimage, covered live on Japanese television, to the Yasukuni Shrine.

Complicating matters, the United States has urged Tokyo along the course of great power "normalization." Indeed, some Washington strategists envisage Japan as America's "Britain in the East" -- a normalized and militarily capable ally that can stand should-to-shoulder with the United States as it operates around the world. This is in essence the vision of the very influential Armitage Report of October 2000 (named for former deputy secretary of state Richard Armitage), issued by a bipartisan group of American security specialists, and it is the dominant view today among both Democratic and Republican thinkers concerned with Japanese security.

The problem is that "normalization" and "historical reconciliation" are working at cross-purposes. Normalization requires amending the constitution, acquiring new sorts of military capabilities and breaking longstanding pacifist norms against the use of force. Historical reconciliation requires symbolic gestures of apology and redoubled commitments to restraint and peaceful intent. This will be a tricky game to play. It is certainly going to take more enlightened and imaginative thinking than Tokyo has yet exhibited. And the United States will need to rethink its own vision of East Asia and the U.S.-Japan alliance.

There is a grand irony in the geopolitical hole that Japan has dug for itself.

The irony is that Japan has actually been remarkably successful in defining a postwar identity for itself. Turning a necessity into a virtue, Japan celebrated its "peace constitution" and defined itself as a "civilian" great power that would invest in international peace and security under the auspices of the United Nations. It provided funding for the United Nations, supported international commitments to human security and became a generous provider of official development assistance. But while the wider world admires and respects Japan -- and its distinctive civilian-style great power role -- its neighbors do not.

Koizumi's term as prime minister will end after next month's elections -- and this will be a moment when

both Japan and the United States might rethink their policies.

Japan needs to find an honorable way to end the visits by prime ministers to Yasukuni -- or quietly encourage the Shinto officials who run the shrine to remove the 14 names. But more than this, the next prime minister should try to make historical reconciliation a hallmark of his time in office. Japan's ability to exert leadership in the region depends on it. Symbolic politics must be part of this strategy of reconciliation. So, too, must be Japan's approach to "normalization."

Germany should be a model. Germany has normalized, but it has done so by redoubling its commitments to European unification and institutionalized cooperation with neighbors. This dual-track approach -- normalization plus regional integration and order-building -- has helped reassure neighbors and strengthen Germany's leadership position.

Japan does not have a regional organization like the European Union to tie itself to and reassure neighbors as it normalizes. In this sense, its path forward is more fraught and complicated than Germany's. What Japan can do is pursue reconciliation through regional diplomacy, offering a vision of a future East Asian security community. It would be a brilliant masterstroke if the next Japanese prime minister announced the end of visits to Yasukuni and invited Chinese and South Korean leaders to a summit in Tokyo.

Japan should make itself the regional leader in defining the parameters of a new cooperative East Asian order -- one that includes a growing Chinese role but also a central Japanese and American role. The alternative is to do what it is doing now, which is to normalize, antagonize and grow increasingly isolated.

The United States also needs to rethink its vision of the U.S.-Japan alliance. The Armitage Report idea of turning Japan into a British-style alliance partner is not the answer because it would inflame regional antagonisms. Washington should encourage Japan to pursue the German path, tying "normalization" to redoubled commitments to regional security cooperation. What is missing in East Asia, of course, is a regional organization that can be used to embody strengthened commitments -- by Japan but also China and Korea -- to peaceful regional order. The United States should work with Japan to help lay the groundwork for such a regional order.

Today the Middle East burns -- but East Asia simmers. Tokyo and Washington should use the coming months to turn down the heat and add some new ingredients to the pot.

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