

Enduring China-Japan Hatreds Risk Renewed Conflict Involving U.S.

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BEIJING--There are many obscure tourist sites in Beijing. One missed by many foreigners is the Chinese People's Anti-Japanese War Memorial Hall. The museum illustrates why China, America's most fearsome potential competitor, and Japan, Washington's most important Asian ally, often are at odds. The two are a conflict waiting to happen, which could draw the U.S. into war with a nuclear power.

Last month Chinese President Xi Jinping presided over a World War II victory parade in Beijing. The People's Republic of China didn't even exist 70 years ago when Tokyo surrendered. Most of the fighting against Japan was conducted by Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist government. But the PRC filled Tiananmen Square with military personnel and hardware to celebrate "its" victory over China's historic enemy.

Declared Xi: "The Chinese People's War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression and the World Anti-Fascist War were a decisive battle between justice and evil, between light and darkness, and between progress and reaction." The "unyielding Chinese people," he added, defeated the "Japanese militarist aggressors," thereby thwarting a plot "to colonize and enslave China." Equally important, he contended, the victory "put an end to China's national humiliation of suffering successive defeats at the hands of foreign aggressors in modern times."

However, the conflict continues in many people's minds. The Communist authorities regularly manipulate hostility toward Japan for their own purposes. But they didn't create those feelings. A 2014 BBC poll found that 90 percent of Chinese viewed Japan negatively (73 percent of Japanese returned the favor). When I recently visited, one of my Chinese companions commented that her grandparents suffered under the Japanese occupation. Her father made one request: don't marry a Japanese man. She thought little better of Japan, despite her minimal contact with that country and its people.

China and Japan were linked as early as the first century A.D. For most of history the Chinese Empire dominated East Asia. However, as Imperial China entered terminal decline, accelerated by the Western powers which carved out territorial concessions, Tokyo used Western tools to create a modern state and military. It won the 1894-95 Sino-Japanese war, taking the island of Formosa (Taiwan) as spoils, while establishing suzerainty over the Kingdom of Korea.

Liberal politics and democracy disappeared from Japan as the armed forces shoved aside civilian politicians. In 1931 Tokyo occupied Manchuria (creating the nominally independent kingdom of Manchukuo) and six years later initiated an aggressive war against the rest of China. Japan's cruel campaign was highlighted by the 1937 "Rape of Nanking," which resulted in the murder of perhaps

300,000 Chinese civilians plus mass rape and other horrors. By 1945 millions of civilians had died and tens of millions had become refugees. Yet Japanese forces found it impossible to conquer the country. The allied advance on Japan's home islands forced Tokyo's surrender, but China's resistance tied down millions of Japanese soldiers.

In the ensuing civil war Mao Zedong and the Chinese Communist Party defeated Chiang Kai-shek's Kuomintang, or Nationalists. Following Washington's lead, Tokyo did not recognize the PRC until 1972. At the time Mao indicated little interest in an apology since he believed, explained historian Ian Buruma, that "without the Japanese invasion, the Communist revolution would never have succeeded." Moreover, he had not eschewed extreme brutality in either war or peace.

Since reestablishing official ties the two countries' relationship has gyrated up and down. Relations tanked in 2012 and took two years to rebound, when the governments agreed to "gradually resume political, diplomatic and security dialogue through various multilateral and bilateral channels." Relations since have improved even further. Top Chinese official Yu Zhengsheng opined: "Under this kind of an environment, I am very pleased to hold dialogue." But more than talking is necessary to resolve four major disputes: history, trade, territory and security.

Although the Chinese Communist Party manipulates history for its own benefit -- young Chinese learn little about the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests -- the CCP has been quick to criticize Tokyo for failing to take responsibility for Imperial Japan's actions. Within a decade of the resumption of official relations the two governments were arguing over Japanese textbooks. Prime Minister Yasuhiro Nakasone's later sparked controversy when he visited the Yasukuni Shrine, which honors Japan's war dead, including 14 top convicted war criminals. The two governments also sparred over accounts of Nanking and apologies for Japanese wartime behavior.

While China's demand for remorse is understandable, everyone who planned the war and virtually everyone who fought in the war are dead. There are historical revisionists in Japan, but they are a small minority. More important, the vast majority of Japanese are horrified by the prospect of conflict. Even more nationalistic Japanese, such as Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, don't contemplate a new round of military aggression -- which would be impossible against nuclear-armed China.

Yet high Japanese officials continue to inflame Chinese sensibilities by disputing (out of personal conviction or for domestic political purposes) the criminality of the earlier regime and flaunting imperial symbols, such as the shrine. Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi recently argued: "Seventy years ago Japan lost the war. Seventy years afterwards, Japan must not lose its conscience. Will it continue to carry the baggage of history or will it make a clean break with past aggression? Ultimately, the choice is Japan's."

Commemorating World War II's end, Prime Minister Abe offered official regret for the conflict, reiterating the statements of previous premiers, expressed "deep repentance for the war," and pledged "never to wage a war again." The Japanese emperor made an unprecedented profession of "deep remorse." Yet Abe's remarks were dismissed by the leaders of China and other nations as "evasive" and not "sincere." Although he is thought to be personally skeptical as to the need for additional apologies, it is not clear any formulation would be accepted by those for whom the wrongs committed still loom large.

Indeed, Beijing has its own historical agenda. The regime initiated so-called "patriotic education" in 1991. Criticism of Japan is central: Robert Royle Hunwick wrote about almost pornographic anti-Japanese movies, which centered on the sexual abuse of women. The Xi government has been

battling Western influences and recently unleashed a veritable tsunami of documentaries, concerts, exhibitions, movies, television shows, musicals, children's programs, and more to promote nationalistic fervor. Vice Minister of Culture Dong Wei said: "By highlighting the spirit of patriotism, uprightness and heroism in their creations, artists can help the public to strengthen their values on history, nationalism and culture." And, not coincidentally, tighten the CCP's control.

Three months ago the regime opened a new exhibit at the anti-Japanese memorial, or Museum of the War of Chinese People's Resistance Against Japanese Aggression. In the first month some 500 top officials, including Politburo members and foreign diplomats, visited the display. The Museum is located at Lu Gou (Marco Polo) Bridge, where fighting broke out between Chinese and Japanese troops in 1937, triggering full-scale war. The government quoted visitors as calling the museum "a very good place to experience and see atrocities the Japanese imperialists committed."

The CCP used the victory parade for the same purpose. The Xi government invited Abe to attend if he was "sincere." After President Xi's remarks Japanese government spokesman Yoshihide Suga expressed disappointment: "Tokyo had requested that Beijing make sure that the event was not so anti-Japanese, but instead contain elements of rapprochement between Japan and China." No such luck.

Economics provides an area of both cooperation and tension. After the PRC's founding commercial ties developed slowly and were vulnerable to political disruption. Since establishing diplomatic relations in 1972 both trade and investment expanded greatly. However, problems remain. Before becoming an economic juggernaut China complained of large trade deficits with Japan, just as others have charged against Beijing. More recently Tokyo accused China of misusing control over the export of "rare earths." The two countries also have been competing through free trade agreements with neighboring states and ASEAN.

Politics continues to undermine the relationship. Chinese angered by Japanese policy toward the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands launched a boycott of Japanese products in 2012. The following year the two countries cancelled the annual China-Japan Finance Dialogue as relations deteriorated. Only in April did the meetings resume. Tokyo currently is negotiating to join the U.S. led Trans-Pacific Partnership, which pointedly excludes the PRC. Nevertheless, total bilateral trade ran about \$344 billion in 2014 and Japanese investment in China remains significant.

Territorial disputes have grown increasingly vitriolic. In 2008 the two governments agreed to joint development of a natural gas field in the East China Sea, but Tokyo's arrest of the captain of a Chinese fishing trawler two years later triggered a worsening conflict over the status of the unpopulated Senkakus/Diaoyus, claimed by both nations. The half dozen islets are controlled by Japan. In 2012 the Japanese government purchased three of them from their private owner, which Beijing viewed as a provocation. The PRC cancelled economic and political meetings; violent protests, with Beijing's obvious acquiescence, targeted the Japanese embassy as well as Japanese-owned stores and Japanese-made autos. The PRC initiated air and sea patrols around the contested lands, which were countered by Japan. Two years ago China imposed an Air Defense Identification Zone requiring identification by foreign aircraft even when flying outside of Chinese territory. In July the PRC conducted naval island assault exercises. In return, Tokyo has become more active in the South China Sea, effectively backing the claims of other nations, such as the Philippines, in their disputes with the PRC. Japan also pressed the U.S. for explicit defense assurances for the islands.

Security remains a top Chinese priority. Japan recently proposed its largest defense budget yet, about \$42 billion. Tokyo's outlays, while only a fraction of China's budget, have spawned a sizable and sophisticated military. Japan's recently revised military guidelines also envision a more active international role. China loudly denounces every such change, but the more the PRC plays the hate card, the more Japan likely will expand its military. The Abe government's most recent defense white paper noted the growth in Chinese military outlays and capabilities, and warned that "China's actions include dangerous acts that may invite unintended consequences, raising concerns over China's future direction." In July Japanese Admiral Katsutoshi Kawano predicted: "this trend will continue into the future where China will go beyond the island chain in the Pacific. So if anything, I believe the situation would worsen."

The Japan-U.S. alliance greatly magnifies Japanese military strength. Moreover, the American military presence creates additional challenges for the PRC. The U.S. not only has supported Tokyo in the controversy over the Senkakus/Diaoyus, but also has offered general backing for the Philippines and an ambiguous commitment to Taiwan's independence.

While the U.S. and Japan have no aggressive designs on China, Beijing understandably looks uneasily at the alliance of its old enemy with the globe's dominant power. Thus, China is developing a military capable of confronting American as well as Japanese military action, no easy task. Zhang Baohui of Hong Kong's Linang University argued that the victory parade was "mainly designed for strategic deterrence." Shen Dingli of Shanghai's Fudan University explained "We are telling Japan, 'Last time you invaded us, we fought you and we won. If you don't behave in the future, we will fight you again and win again.'" Moreover, "if the U.S. stands with Japan, China will fight both of them."

What of future relations between China and Japan? The anti-Japanese Museum illustrates the challenge. The memorial devotes 887 exhibits with 5000 documents and relics and 3800 photographs to sullyng Japan's reputation. No atrocity is spared description and illustration. Despite the predictable distortions to suit the CCP's objectives, the horror of Japan's war-time behavior was very real. When I visited the facility was filled with visitors, many children who will carry their memories well into the future.

Almost as an afterthought the Museum mentioned reconciliation on one wall in the final room--in the midst of attacks on Tokyo's current behavior. Japanese Cabinet Secretary Yoshide Suga may have had the facility in mind last year when he complained that "Attempts to take up history in vain and make it an international issue will not contribute at all to building peace and cooperation in the region."

It's no surprise that the hatreds created by war take time to abate. Especially the great conflicts of the 20th century, which covered much of the globe with death and destruction. Nevertheless, similar passions in Europe have much diminished, if not quite disappeared. In East Asia the animus remains alive, especially between China and Japan.

Which should scare the rest of the world. While war between the PRC and Tokyo seems--and should be--unthinkable, it could be just one drunk ship captain or careless fighter pilot away. Popular passions would make it difficult for even responsible governments to back down. A Chinese regime beset by economic turmoil and political dissension might be reluctant to yield to a historic enemy which never fully atoned for its sins. An increasingly assertive democracy with America's backing might be determined to stand against what it sees as a wannabe hegemon.

World War II mercifully ended 70 years ago. Man's greatest orgy of death and destruction ceased. The best way to honor that anniversary would be to ensure that the past will not become prologue, that never again will peoples and nations engage in mass slaughter.

For that reason, if no other, the people of China and Japan should work through their difficult histories. World War II is over. The politics of hatred benefits only ambitious politicians. The future belongs to those now living. They must find reconciliation and create a better world for those yet born.

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