

The World and Japan 150 Years from Meiji

– Looking Back on History –*

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Abstract

We stand at a historical milestone that marks 150 years from the Meiji Restoration of 1868, during which Japan radically changed its national polity in the face of the advance of Western powers and set itself on the path to *dokuritsu jison* (independence and self-respect). After its defeat in the Second World War, Japan joined forces with Western countries in the construction of a liberal world order based on such values as freedom, democracy, and the rule of law. It is correct to say that an end to fighting signifies an end to war in that armed conflict between nations ceases, but a true end to war takes more than this. Peace must be established among the warring nations, and this requires the completion of certain processes of postwar settlement, without which the war is not over. Only now are we able to reflect on our past perception of history not for the purposes of self-criticism and apology, but to chart our future course. The phrase that comes to mind in describing Japan 150 years from the Meiji Restoration is “independence and self-respect,” the philosophy of the noted Meiji thinker Yukichi Fukuzawa. This slogan of Fukuzawa is as important to Japan 150 years from Meiji as it was to Meiji Japan. The critical difference with Meiji Japan is that this independence and self-respect is to be realized within the development of the liberal world order.

For a number of reasons, the year 2018 affords us an excellent opportunity to look back on the history of Japan’s diplomacy and national security. It also provides an appropriate vantage point for surveying the future.

I. Milestone in History

First and foremost, as the subject of this symposium notes, we stand at a historical milestone that marks 150 years from the Meiji Restoration of 1868, during which Japan radically changed its national polity in the face of the advance of Western powers and set itself on the path to *dokuritsu jison* (independence and self-respect). During these 150 years, Japan learned from the West to become a modern constitutional state, rebuilt itself as a modern industrialized nation, and eventually entered into war with the United States and Britain, the two leading powers of the West. After its defeat, Japan joined forces with Western countries in the construction of a liberal world order based on such values as freedom, democracy, and the rule of law.

You may object that this is far too general a presentation of history, but I would argue that it provides a meaningful platform for us to review the history of Japan’s diplomacy and national security and also to look forward to the future.

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As the framework of the Group of Seven (G7) clearly shows, Japan has today become one of the major proponents of the liberal world order. There is no question that its diplomatic and security policies are focused on contributing to maintaining and furthering this world order and working within it to preserve Japan's own security and prosperity and enhance Japan's political standing in the world.

Therefore, I believe that all examination of Japanese diplomacy and national security must be premised on these historical developments that have defined the history of Japan's relations with the West since the Meiji Restoration.

This year marks not only 150 years from the Meiji Restoration, but also the centenary of the end of the First World War in 1918. Exactly 50 years after the Meiji Restoration and seven years after the end of the Meiji period (1868 – 1912), Japan stood beside the United States and Britain as one of the war's victors. It became a permanent member in the postwar League of Nations and came to be known as one of the "Big Five" nations.

Japan adopted Western technologies, institutions, and thought in its effort to catch up with the Western powers and pursued its vision of a "*fukoku kyohei* (rich country and strong army)" by concentrating its energies on fostering modern industries and reinforcing its military. Japan fought two wars—the Sino-Japanese and Russo-Japanese Wars—and paid for them in blood, sweat, and tears. It then made herculean efforts to revise the unequal treaties entered into force at the close of the Edo period (1600 – 1868), and as a result of these endeavors achieved the major accomplishment of emerging from the First World War as a prosperous nation.

Although Japan stood with the United States and Britain among the victors at the end of the First World War, the situation changed thereafter as Japan increasingly came into conflict with these nations while working toward a new postwar world order. Eventually, this would develop into a world war with them (and China) over the establishment of a new order in the Asia-Pacific.

The question of why this happened has already been thoroughly examined and discussed. Still, it is worth revisiting it now, a century after those events. At the very least, such a re-examination would be extremely helpful in organizing our thoughts.

In addition to being 150 years from the Meiji Restoration and 100 years from the end of the First World War, this year also marks the 30th year of the Heisei period (the imperial era of Emperor Akihito's reign), and what is effectively its final year. We knew from a hundred years ago that the first two milestones would take place this year, but no one knew that these milestones would also coincide with the last year of the Heisei period. In Japan, where we use both the Western calendar and imperial eras, this coincidence adds profoundly to the significance of this milestone year.

The immense physical and mental shock that accompanied Japan's destruction and defeat in the Second World War against the United States, Britain, and China does not bear repeating here. Recovery from the physical shock was relatively quick, and Japan was able to recover during the Showa period. Indeed, it achieved more than mere recovery. Japan surprised the world with its emergence as a major economy, and its people came to enjoy a level of affluence that far exceeded anything experienced in the prewar years. What is more, Japan has become a country able to assist other countries in promoting their own economic development.

By contrast, recovery from the mental shock took much longer. Problems related to historical perception and contrition became enmeshed with diplomatic relations, and I believe it has taken the entire 30 years of the Heisei period to process that shock. In this context, the significance of the statement on the 70th anniversary of the end of the Second World War released by the government of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in 2015 should not be underestimated.

Next year will mark the start of a new imperial era. At that point, the Showa period will no longer be the previous era in the minds of the Japanese people, but will instead recede two eras into the past. What this means is that our historical understanding of the Second World War will

become less and less a question of apology and remorse, and increasingly a point of reflection from which to consider the future. The passage of the 30 years of the Heisei period and the start of a new imperial era will have a very significant impact on how we mentally process the Second World War. I believe this will lead to a change in our mindset.

II. The Abe Statement

Let us consider what it takes to end a war. It is correct to say that an end to fighting signifies an end to war in that armed conflict between nations ceases. But a true end to war takes more than this. Peace must be established among the warring nations, and this requires the completion of certain processes of postwar settlement, without which the war is not over. This brings us to the question of how these processes can be completed.

Although there are no well-defined rules here, common sense informs us that in order to bring the war to a true end, national borders must be redrawn, war criminals must be punished, issues of claims and compensation must be settled, and a peace treaty or its equivalent must be concluded. In Japan's case, postwar settlement with the United States and Britain was completed with the signing of the San Francisco Peace Treaty six years after the war ended in the summer of 1945. Its settlements with China were achieved through the Japan-Taiwan Peace Treaty signed with the Nationalist government of Taiwan seven years after the war, and the Japan-China Joint Communiqué concluded with the Beijing government 27 years later. Setting aside the Soviet Union and the matter of the Northern Territories, Japan's postwar settlements have therefore been completed with all nations.

It should be noted, however, that these are legal processes of settlement between nations. So, do they signify full postwar settlement? Perhaps in theory, but the reality is more complicated. Nations are ultimately collections of people, which means that some process of moral settlement must also be considered. It is unrealistic to think that the completion of legal processes will allow us to forget the past and return to normal relations. Actions have human and material costs and consequences, and there is a moral and ethical need to come to terms with these consequences. Remorse must be expressed concretely both in words and deeds, and long-term efforts must be made to heal the rift and rebuild relations.

The difficulty with a moral settlement is that established rules and norms are lacking even more than for the legal settlements. It is therefore not something that can be dealt with by following a prescribed course of action, and it also cannot be dealt with by simply acceding to the requests of another nation. If it were that straightforward, moral settlements would be no different from legal settlements.

Beginning in the 1980s, problems concerning historical perception emerged with China and South Korea, and they pertain to this moral settlement for the Second World War. The issue became very serious because of the Japanese people's divided response to the criticism of Japan's perception of history leveled by the Chinese and South Korean governments. Some inside Japan agreed with the criticism and admitted that part of the public did indeed subscribe to a faulty understanding of history. This group argued that failure to correct these misconceptions was evidence that moral obligations to make amends for the war had not been met, and that therefore the war had not truly come to an end. They felt that this omission needed to be rectified as the primary task in Japan's diplomatic relations with China and South Korea, and that the government needed to clearly refute the faulty perception of history that remained in places. However, others strongly opposed this position, and the entire nation was soon embroiled in an angry debate.

An examination of the problem reveals that the government itself did not have a faulty perception of history. The point is that the government has never subscribed to any specific historical interpretation, for example concerning the causes of the Second World War.

In this case, therefore, Japan should have done what it always had, which was to say that the

interpretation of history should be left to historians and not made a subject of debate between governments. However, there were many in Japan who felt that this approach would damage diplomatic relations with China and South Korea. Ultimately, therefore, it was concluded that the government should present an understanding of history that would satisfy both those countries. This led to the statement by Prime Minister Tomiichi Murayama in 1995 on the 50th anniversary of the end of the war.

Perhaps all would have been well if everyone had found the Murayama statement to be satisfactory. That would have put the question of historical perception to rest and ended the wrangling with China and South Korea. However, the problem with this short statement was that it made very facile use of such terms as “aggression” and “colonial rule” without giving any context. Japan had fought against many countries in the course of the Second World War and the war had many complex aspects to it. But the Murayama statement sounded as if Japan alone was in the wrong in all aspects of the war. This gave rise to a very strong reaction in Japan. Seeing this, China and South Korea redoubled their criticism and cited Japan’s domestic reaction as evidence that Japan was not adequately contrite. This further fed the debate that was raging in Japan—a debate that came to divide the nation on the question of whether to affirm or negate the Murayama statement.

The problem of historical perception is not about how we can close the gap in our mutual perceptions so that we can be friendly neighbors. The real question is how we can develop friendly relations notwithstanding the differences that may persist in our perceptions of history.

What distinguishes the Abe statement that was released twenty years after the Murayama statement is its recognition of this very point. Regardless of whether its historical perception would accord with those of the Chinese and South Korean governments, the Japanese government decided to indicate its historical understanding of the Second World War, limiting its statement to the bare minimum required. The Abe statement did not seek to refute the Murayama statement. Instead, it sought to “recast” the Murayama statement to provide historical context to such terms as aggression and colonial rule that had been used in the earlier statement. Having established the historical context, the Abe statement then proceeded to touch on apologies and expressions of remorse. It explained the path of peace that Japan has walked after the war and expressed gratitude to the countries that had worked to build peace with Japan in the postwar world. Finally, although no repeated apology was given for the damage done by Japan in the war, the document stated that Japan would continue to reflect upon its past actions.

The Abe statement was a success for a number of reasons. The first reason is the reaction of the great majority of Japanese people, who had no real objections to the statement. The other reason is that Shoichi Watanabe, the renowned conservative critic who died last year, praised the Abe statement highly and gave it a score of 120 points out of 100. If that is his appraisal, I would have to give the statement 100 points just for its efficacy. The most important thing about the Abe statement was that, unlike the Murayama statement, it did not ignite divisive debate at home. To achieve this outcome, the Abe statement had to satisfy both supporters of the Murayama statement and those who had criticized it. The solution was to avoid refuting the earlier statement and instead to simply recast it. This was very important in convincing those who, like Watanabe, had severely criticized the Murayama statement.

The governments of China and South Korea did not severely criticize the Abe statement. If they had done so, the government could have said, once the statement was released, that this was the Japanese government’s understanding of history and that it was widely supported by the people. Japanese government could have offered to explain further if there were any problems with this understanding and stated that, while it would not repeat the apologies that were made in the past, it was prepared to explain how it reflected on the past.

No other country in the world has issued a statement of its historical understanding of the

war like the one made by Prime Minister Abe. Should any country repeat the claim that Japan's perception of the war is unpardonable, we are now in a position to rebut that claim by asking which country Japan is being compared to.

Only now are we able to reflect on our past perception of history not for the purposes of self-criticism and apology, but to chart our future course. This brings to mind what E. H. Carr, the British historian, noted in his famous lecture entitled "What is History." To paraphrase his words, Carr said that history is an unending dialogue between the past and the present, and a dialogue between the present and the future. I believe we are now able to reflect on the Second World War in this context, and apart from any need to arrive at a moral settlement.

III. Three Points of Reflection

When we look back to the Second World War from within this framework, there are of course many reasons for reflection and remorse. But, standing at this milestone 150 years after the Meiji Restoration, I believe there are three points of reflection that deserve our special attention as we seek to contribute with renewed commitment to furthering the liberal world order that Japan worked with the West to build in the postwar period. These are the Manchurian Incident, the Tripartite Pact entered into by Japan, Germany, and Italy, and the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere. Due to time considerations, I will limit myself to the main points of the argument.

The Manchurian Incident

Let us start with the Manchurian Incident of 1931. Japan resorted to the use of military force to protect its imperialistic interests in China, an action taken notwithstanding the promise made three years earlier in the Kellogg–Briand Pact not to use war to resolve international disputes. This marked the first step toward deteriorating relations with the United States and Britain over the matter of China. Ultimately, Japan would tread the path to war. Japan will never do this again.

Japan is now committed to its renunciation of war not only by observing international law, but also by writing a pledge to renounce war into the Constitution. This solemn pledge has been upheld for more than 70 years, and Japan is determined to abide by its pledge in the future. Perhaps it can be argued that this in itself is evidence of appropriate reflection. But in order to deepen this reflection, we need to consider certain questions. If war and military force cannot be used as a means to resolving international disputes, then what means are available? What are we to do when talks and negotiation fail?

Suppose an international dispute arises over economic interests. Because Japan is already a major economic power, it can make a concession in order to arrive at a resolution, or it may simply give up on resolving the dispute. But can the same apply to an international dispute that affects Japan's national security? Japan can of course use military force to defend itself. The right of self-defense is recognized in the Kellogg–Briand Pact and the United Nations Charter. Moreover, it is protected by the Constitution of Japan (at least according to the interpretation of the government).

But the problem is how to define self-defense. In fact, in the Manchurian Incident, Japan justified it as an act of self-defense. Putting that question aside and looking back on Japan's diplomatic and security policies over the past 150 years, the most significant difference made in the first and second halves of this period was the treatment of the Korean Peninsula. In the first half Japan included the security of the peninsula in its scope of self-defense, but in the second half it did not. Aritomo Yamagata, an elder statesman in the Meiji period, divided self-defense into two lines to be guarded: the line of sovereignty, which pertains to defending the security of national territory, and the line of interest, which pertains to defending the security of places closely related to the security of national territory. Yamagata went on to argue that the Korean Peninsula was within Japan's line of interest. Even the Sino-Japanese War over the Korean Peninsula was

claimed by Munemitsu Mutsu, the then minister of foreign affairs, to be a war of self-defense. This claim was made in the context of Yamagata's framework of the meaning of self-defense.

In postwar Japan, self-defense has applied solely to the line of sovereignty. The line of interest, on the other hand, has been defended in cooperation with the United States, and later through what has come to be called the Japan-US Alliance, ever since the Korean War that began in 1950. Given that Japan cannot employ military force for the security of the Korean Peninsula, this alliance has been maintained on the understanding that Japan will cooperate through other available means.

I have two points to make on this matter. We often hear people say that a nation must be prepared to defend itself. That is quite understandable. However, discussions of self-defense must extend to the question of ensuring the security of the line of interest as well. Otherwise, what results is a half-baked discussion. It is important to remember that collective self-defense constitutes the basic principle of self-defense in the contemporary world, and that Japan needs the Japan-US Alliance for maintaining peace and security in the Far East.

My second point is that the Japan-US Alliance, together with NATO, provides a foundation for the security of the free world. In this sense, the defense of Japan is very deeply related to the defense of the free world and the preservation of the liberal world order.

Japan-Germany-Italy Tripartite Pact

The second matter that requires our reflection is the Tripartite Pact signed by Japan, Germany, and Italy in 1940. By allying itself with Germany, the enemy of the United States and Britain, Japan also established itself as an anti-Anglo-American nation. For Japan, it was a complete miscalculation to think that the Tripartite Pact would act as deterrence in preventing war with the United States. The very opposite turned out to be true. The mistaken assessment of the power of Germany was a huge error on the part of Japan.

This is probably the most important point for reflection concerning the Tripartite Pact. But I personally focus on Japan's critical error in allying itself with Nazi Germany, the world's worst racist nation. Due to this choice, postwar Japan was made to bear the stigma of having allied itself with the nation that perpetrated the Holocaust. While that is itself regrettable, what Japan should truly regret is that it allied itself with a country whose creed and values were the exact opposite of its own.

When the Paris Peace Conference convened to determine the settlement of the First World War, Japan advocated the inclusion of the principle of racial equality in the Covenant of the newly founded League of Nations. Although the Japanese proposal failed due to the obstruction of US president Woodrow Wilson, it won the support of many countries including China. At the end of the First World War, the world was still standing on the side of racism and racial discrimination with full impunity. Japan's call to share the principle of racial equality as a universal value constitutes a brilliant achievement in Japan's diplomatic history and is something we should be proud of. All of this was blotted out by Japan's alliance with Nazi Germany.

After the Second World War, the world accepted the principle of racial equality as proclaimed in the United Nations Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. If Japan had not allied itself with Germany, I believe Japan's contribution to the realization of this principle and value would have been more widely acknowledged.

As a member of the free world, Japan's diplomacy today is based squarely on espousing the principles and values of freedom, democracy, and the rule of law. In a sense, this is Japan's second attempt at the principle- and value-based diplomacy that became stalled halfway in the prewar years due to the alliance with Germany. As in the case of its advocacy for racial equality, I believe this also represents an important contribution by Japan to the world.

Freedom, democracy, and the rule of law are values born in the West. The very fact that Japan

is proclaiming their universality constitutes its contribution to establishing these as universal principles and values in the world today. For example, consider the framework of the G7. This is a gathering of the developed countries that are leading the free world with these principles and values. As Japan is a country with a history and culture totally different from those of the West, I believe that its presence in the G7 is critically important in proving the universality of liberal principles and values to the world. If the remaining six countries had created a framework, such a gathering would have been nothing more than a gathering of the leaders of the free “West” rather than the free “world.”

Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere

One more important point concerning the Second World War that demands our reflection is the concept of the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere. Japan withdrew from the League of Nations following its disputes with Europe and America over the Manchurian Incident and the founding of Manchukuo. Upon quitting the League of Nations, Japan issued an imperial rescript stating that the withdrawal from the League of Nations did not mean that Japan would henceforth stand aloof in Asia or isolate itself and neglect to maintain friendly ties with the nations of the West.

But this commitment began to change with the passage of time. First, it was argued that the importance of harmonious cooperation between Japan, Manchuria, and China was so great that the partial contravention of the interests of the West could not be helped. Next, once the Second World War had started, Japan took the position that Western imperialists had to be ejected from the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere.

It is true that the concept of the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere contained elements of sympathy for Asian masses suffering under Western colonial rule, as well as a reaction to Western racism. It also reflected Japan’s emotional response to the dissatisfaction it felt for Western attitudes toward it in several areas, notwithstanding the fact that Japan had been such an assiduous student of the West.

However, Japan basically began promoting the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere because it believed this concept would contribute to its own national security and economic prosperity, and believed it would raise Japan’s standing in the world. In other words, Japan concluded that the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere would serve its own national interests.

The truth was that Japan did not have the power to ensure the security of all the East Asian countries. Even supposing that the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere had succeeded, it would have been extremely difficult for Japan working within that bloc to become the major economic power that it did become after the war. In the postwar period, Japan achieved dramatic economic development within the framework of global economic development, or in other words, within a “global co-prosperity sphere.” The Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere was, I think, probably too narrow and restrictive in scope.

My problem with the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere would not be solved even if it had been accomplished through peaceful means. The fundamental problem that I find with this concept is that the very idea of creating an exclusive Asian region was deeply flawed.

The concept of a Greater East Asia underestimated the forces of globalization that were unleashed in the world in the latter half of the 19th century and continued unabated since around the Meiji Restoration. Globalization had reduced the size of the globe and transformed the world into a single entity. Not fully cognizant of these changes, Japan subscribed to a worldview oddly reminiscent of the three-cornered contest that prevailed during the Three States Period in Chinese history. Germany would triumph and lead Europe, the continents of North and South America would be led by the United States, and Japan would be the leader in Asia. However, regionalism is fundamentally unviable in a globalized world.

Therefore, if Japan wishes to be a leader—in many meanings of the word—among nations, it must not seek to become the leader of Asia. In an increasingly globalized world, Japan should make effective use of its unique characteristics and capabilities to help bring the world closer together, and to occupy an honored place in international society by standing as one leader among many leaders of the world.

IV. 150 Years from Meiji: Independence and Self-Respect

In light of all that I have said today, the phrase that comes to mind in describing Japan 150 years from the Meiji Restoration is “independence and self-respect,” the philosophy of the noted Meiji thinker Yukichi Fukuzawa. Meiji Japan sought to build a nation of independence and self-respect so that it could stand on a par with the West. I believe this slogan of Fukuzawa is as important to Japan 150 years from Meiji as it was to Meiji Japan. The critical difference with Meiji Japan is that this independence and self-respect is to be realized within the development of the liberal world order. The world is one, and Japan must cherish the values of the liberal world order and perfect the mechanisms of collective self-defense with its ally, the United States. Independence and self-respect is to be realized within this framework. And if Japan were to consider the path of a “rich country and strong army,” it must do so not solely for its own sake but for the sake of the entire free world.