



August 20, 2001

Moving Beyond the Yasukuni Visit

by Brad Glosserman

Last week was rough for Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro. The last thing he wants to do now is revisit the Yasukuni Shrine question, but there is unfinished business that he must attend to.

The prime minister was in a corner; no matter what he decided to do, someone was going to be angry on Aug. 15. The eventual compromise only ensured that everyone was displeased. The right complained that visiting the Shrine two days early was equivalent to appeasing foreign governments and tolerating "interference in Japan's domestic affairs." Those governments and members of the Japanese left complained that Mr. Koizumi went to Shrine at all.

Mr. Koizumi deserves credit for his forthright statements after the visit and on the 15th at the ceremony marking Japan's surrender. "Japan caused tremendous sufferings to many people of the world, including its own. ... Japan imposed, through its colonial rule and aggression, immeasurable ravages and suffering particularly to the people of neighboring countries in Asia." But he, like his predecessors, came up short. "Representing the people of Japan, I once again express deep remorse and offer sincere condolences to the victims." He should have connected the two thoughts - the pain that occurred and Japan's responsibility for it - and said "we are sorry and we apologize."

Those words will never come easily, but Mr. Koizumi styles himself as a maverick and mavericks are supposed to be bold. Living up to that reputation - and fulfilling his responsibility as prime minister - requires more than offering a genuine apology. The focus on the details of the Yasukuni visit - what capacity he visited, the precise words he used, how many times he bowed and clapped his hands - misses the point entirely. Even the reported plan to build a nondenominational war cenotaph, and sidestep the question of visiting Yasukuni Shrine completely, will not resolve the problem. The real questions concern Japan's understanding of the past and how it will incorporate that understanding in policy. Mr. Koizumi's task is moving beyond words and building a real foundation for peace and mutual understanding in East Asia.

Most of the complaints about Japanese behavior do not go beyond the call to put substance behind those words of peace; they never explain how that can be done. Critics call for Tokyo to distance itself from its militarist past - although they don't want so much distance that the lessons fade. Even South Korean President Kim Dae-jung, who has gone farther than any other Korean leader in offering to build a new relationship with Japan, failed to provide specifics in his Aug. 15 speech commemorating the 56th anniversary of the liberation of Korea when he expressed the hope that "Korea-Japan relations will run on a right course on the basis of a firm historical consciousness."

Mr. Koizumi spoke to that larger issue on Aug. 15 saying it is Japan's responsibility to "establish a lasting peace as a way to atone for its past and mourn for the victims." But he stopped there: Ensuring that lasting peace is his unfinished business.

The prime minister has another chance to complete that assignment. On Sept. 8, the U.S. and Japan will celebrate the 50th anniversary of the signing of the peace treaty that ended World War II. He should seize that opportunity and commemorate a half-century of peaceful relations by launching an initiative to overcome the mistrust and hostility that damage relations in Asia.

He should begin with a forthright, unambiguous declaration of Japan's responsibility for the harm it inflicted on Asia nations and an apology for the pain that was caused. Then, to ensure that such actions will never occur again, he should establish parameters for Japan's future security policy. Just as Prime Minister Sato Eisaku laid out three nonnuclear principles that have served as benchmarks for Japan - and won him the Nobel Peace Prize - so should Mr. Koizumi lay down principles that will guide his country's security policy. Declaring that Japan will never initiate hostilities and will only act within the framework of its commitments under the Japan-U.S. Mutual Security Treaty or when authorized by the United Nations would go a long way toward assuring regional governments of Japanese intentions.

Building real peace will require cooperation with Japan's neighbors. As the events of last week proved peace can only be built on a shared understanding of the past and what better way is there to create an understanding of the past than in a history text? The nations of East Asia have different textbook policies so a single text is not possible. The creation of a set of guidelines that spell out views of history and ensure that all sides' views are aired is possible, however. A multinational commission that would establish those guidelines would help instill the "historical consciousness" that President Kim seeks. Moreover, Japan is not the only nation whose views of history could stand some scrutiny. A genuinely multinational effort would correct the shortcomings that are found throughout the region.

Calling for the creation of such a commission is a concrete step that would ensure that the lessons of the past are learned. The timing - the commemoration of a document that ended a horrific war - would be auspicious. It would complete the work Mr. Koizumi started last week and allow him, his nation, and its friends and allies to link the past and the future in a truly meaningful way.

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