



Abe's Comfort Women Remarks: What Was He Thinking? by Ralph A. Cossa and Brad Glosserman

What *was* he thinking? That is the question most thoughtful observers of the U.S.-Japan alliance grappled with last week as Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzo fumbled questions about the imperial Japanese government's role in recruiting "comfort women" during the Pacific War. His responses came close to undoing the progress he had made in restoring relations with China and South Korea and threatened to drive a wedge between Tokyo and Washington. They reveal uncomfortable truths about Japan – but facts that the U.S. must nonetheless acknowledge when dealing with its ally.

The controversy began March 1 when Abe was asked about an LDP group that wanted the government to revisit – rescind – the 1993 statement by then Chief Cabinet Secretary Kono Yohei. Kono's comment, put forth as official government policy, followed a multi-year study by the Japanese government into relations between the Imperial Japanese military and women forced to work as sex slaves (aka "comfort women") during WWII.

Kono declared "The then Japanese military was, directly or indirectly, involved in the establishment and management of the comfort stations and the transfer of comfort women. The Government study has revealed that in many cases they were recruited against their own will, through coaxing coercion, etc., and that, at times, administrative/military personnel directly took part in the recruitments."

Conservatives object to two (related) points: the role the military played in the comfort women operation and the degree to which it actually "coerced" women. Abe said then, as he had noted in Diet testimony several months earlier, that the meaning of coercion was unclear and the accuracy of the statement depended on how the word was defined. Ignored was his comment that either way, his government stood behind the 1993 statement. Four days later at the Diet, Abe reiterated support for the Kono statement.

The readiness to challenge the conclusion that the government had "coerced" the women rightfully unleashed a firestorm of controversy, not least because the U.S. House of Representatives – during hearings on a resolution that called on Japan to apologize for its actions – had days before heard testimony from former comfort women that seemed to confirm the charge. Abe's response sparked fierce condemnations from leading U.S. and foreign newspapers. It seriously undercut those arguing against the resolution, in at least one instance turning a Japan supporter into a bill co-signer.

Why did Abe fan the flames, especially when it threatened to undercut diplomacy that promised "a new start" for Japanese foreign policy and had offered such promise for the new administration?

First, it should be noted that the prime minister wasn't volunteering for controversy: He didn't chose to make this an issue. He was responding to questions triggered by the actions of others (the LDP group and the U.S. hearings). This does not excuse or fully explain the response, however, or the bumbling since it was originally uttered.

One explanation is that Abe, like many other conservatives, genuinely believes that the Kono statement was wrong. They challenge the factual basis for the conclusion that the government was involved in coercion. This argument rests on the definition of the word "coercion," a legal distinction that is jarring given the longstanding insistence that Japan is not a "legalistic culture" and operates according to more flexible principles. It also attempts to trump a moral argument with a legal one. Whether the army actually coerced the women or left that job to independent contractors (as one legalistic argument asserts), there is little doubt that women were forced into servitude at the army's behest.

This argument also rests on a sense of nationalism. Many conservatives chafe at the judgment of the Tokyo Tribunals and don't like to see their country singled out for criticism. The Kono statement implies that Japanese behavior was somehow different from that of other countries' and Tokyo must apologize for things that other governments have not.

Underlying that conclusion – and obliging Abe to defend it – is domestic politics (especially in light of this July's critical Upper House elections). The prime minister believes that Japan should be a more assertive country, one that is judged by its record of the last 60 years rather than for the sins of its forefathers. His domestic political base agrees, and they both resent being told what to do by any country – even (especially?) the U.S. (Interestingly, China's response to this flap has been low-key. This suggests that Beijing is committed to rapprochement with Tokyo and is smart enough to let other governments beat up Japan on this issue.)

Ironically, there are many in the U.S. and Asia who agree that it is time to stop dwelling on the past; today's Japan should be judged by its post-war history. Unfortunately, Abe's comments – like his predecessor Koizumi Junichiro's visits to Yasukuni Shrine – make it impossible for even Japan's supporters to move past the history debate.

The phenomenon drives home the rising significance of domestic politics in Northeast Asia and the transition that all countries are experiencing as the international environment evolves and a new generation comes to power. No country is immune to these pressures and no relationship inoculated from their effects. While the U.S.-Japan relationship has been strengthened in recent years, both countries must still be acutely sensitive to developments in the other and ready to challenge assumptions about how the relationship works.

For example, the presumption that a House of Representatives judgment on Japanese history would be above challenge in Tokyo is plainly wrong. Japan will give that vote the same deference it gives to any other country that seeks to interfere in its domestic politics. *Gaiatsu* (outside pressure) no longer works, even when it comes from Tokyo's closest ally.

Yet, the Japanese assumption that the alliance would counterbalance domestic politics in the U.S. – the increasing strength of Korean-American interest groups or growing unease with historical revisionism, for example – is equally mistaken. The usual group of alliance handlers didn't – or couldn't – quash this tempest. Moreover, this chain of events also suggests that Japan has to do more to reach across the aisle to Democrats.

Decision makers in both countries must recognize that the good relations of the last few years buy a limited amount of political capital. There is no resting on laurels. There is no substitute for continuing efforts to overcome increasingly powerful domestic political interests. That needs to be foremost in the minds of alliance supporters in both countries.

Prime Minister Abe is not the first politician to put the need to appeal to his domestic political base above his country's international image or long-term national interest, but it could not come at a worse time. As the first Japanese Prime Minister to be born after the war, Abe had an opportunity to pursue a forward-looking agenda. Instead he (and his more conservative colleagues) have forced us once again to dwell on the past. Does this really serve Abe's (or Japan's) interest?

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