



**Case for “enlightened realism”: reconciliation as an imperative task for regional peace and stability** by Seiko Mimaki

*Seiko Mimaki ([s-mimaki@kansai.ac.jp](mailto:s-mimaki@kansai.ac.jp)) is an assistant professor at Kansai Gaidai University. The Pacific Forum CSIS takes no position on the advisability of a presidential visit to Hiroshima and welcomes opposing views.*

“History problems” have become a thorny issue that generates suspicion among Northeast Asian countries. Debates over wartime history intertwined with territorial disputes have inflamed nationalistic sentiment and prevented pragmatic diplomatic solutions. Disputes over “comfort women” issues and the Nanjing Massacres have spread to multilateral fora such as the United Nations and UNESCO, and greatly damaged Japan’s image and its soft power. How can we move toward regional reconciliation?

Historical reconciliation has not always been a concern of security experts and international relations scholars. Self-claimed “realists” insist that national interests defined in terms of power guide the actions of nations, and ideological confrontations like history disputes cannot have serious influence on international relations. However, as was shown by the failure in 2012 to finalize a General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) between South Korea and Japan that would permit greater security cooperation, deep-rooted suspicion and antagonism over “history problems” have intruded even in the security realm. To bring peace and security to Northeast Asia, we should promote “enlightened realism,” with a broadened concept of security that includes historical reconciliation as an important regional goal.

Recent US-Japan rapprochement shows that historical reconciliation is vital to fostering mutual trust and strengthening our alliance. On April 29, 2015, Abe Shinzo became the first Japanese prime minister to deliver a speech to a joint session of the US Congress, and emphasized the necessity of strengthening the US-Japan alliance to meet today’s economic and security challenges. His address began with reflections on WWII and the postwar reconciliation process between the two countries. Abe expressed “deep repentance” for the last war, offering “eternal condolences to the souls of all American people that were lost.” In his statement marking the 70th anniversary of the end of World War II, President Obama called postwar US-Japan relations “a model of the power of reconciliation,” noting how the two adversaries have turned enmity into amity and become “steadfast allies,” which was “unimaginable” 70 years ago.

The US-Japan rapprochement does not mean that the two countries have overcome all the differences in their painful past – most notably the US atomic bombing of Japan. Seventy years after Hiroshima and Nagasaki, US opinions have shifted on use of the atomic bomb. A 2015 survey by the Pew

Research Center finds that the share of Americans who believe the use of nuclear weapons was justified is now 56 percent, with 34 percent saying it was not; this is a stark contrast to the 1945 Gallop poll which found that 85 percent of Americans approved of using the atomic weapon on Japanese cities.

Just as memory affects and shapes present and future international relations, current relations and future visions affect our views of the past. According to the 2015 Pew Research Center survey, World War II no longer dominates the memory of the two nations. When asked about the most significant periods in the US-Japan relationship during the modern era, 31 percent of Americans identify WWII, yet the same proportion of Americans identify the Great East Japan earthquake and tsunami which hit Japan in 2011. For Japanese, the most important aspect of US-Japan relations is the postwar US-Japan military alliance (36 percent); second is the Fukushima earthquake and tsunami, where 24,000 US service members were involved in humanitarian relief and Americans donated more than \$700 million to the victims. Only 17 percent of Japanese said WWII was the most significant incident for the two countries. The survey suggests that, while painful pasts do not vanish, it can fade as a result of accumulating good relations.

A growing anti-nuclear consensus has been a driving force in US-Japan reconciliation. In 1995, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) held oral hearings regarding the illegality of threat or use of nuclear weapons, at which the mayors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki were invited and made a presentation on the atrocious nature of atomic bombs. In July 1996, the ICJ pronounced the illegality of the threat or use of nuclear weapons and encouraged negotiations leading to complete nuclear disarmament under strict and effective international control. In 2009, Barack Obama opened his presidency with an historical speech in Prague declaring his commitment to creating “a world without nuclear weapons.” Though putting that ideal into practice has proved difficult, the idea of a nuclear-free world has been shared not only by the Japanese government, but by people in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and even US veterans including Theodore Van Kirk, the last surviving navigator of the Enola Gay: he firmly believed that the atomic bombings were necessary and justified, but realized through his experience that wars and atomic bombs do not settle anything, and that the world should struggle toward abolition of nuclear weapons.

On April 11, 2016, Secretary of State John Kerry became the highest-ranking US official to visit Hiroshima, where he laid a wreath at the city's atomic bomb memorial and explored the nearby atomic bomb museum. He emphasized that his trip should not be regarded as apology. Kerry made it clear by saying to Japanese Foreign Minister Kishida Fumio that his trip was “not about the past,” but “about the present and the future particularly, and the strength of the relationship that we

have built, the friendship that we share, the strength of our alliance, and the strong reminder of the imperative we all have to work for peace for peoples everywhere.”

Kerry’s visit to Hiroshima has triggered speculation that Obama might visit Hiroshima next month during the G7 summit at Ise. Here, we should note the gradual but steadfast changes in Japanese views of the US atomic bombing after Obama’s Prague speech. Though the vast majority of Japanese think US atomic bombings were not and can never be justified, and there is a strong body of opinion that demands a US apology, more people, including some atomic bomb survivors, have emphasized that they want Obama to visit atom-bombed cities not because they want an official US apology, but to breathe fresh life into the move toward “a world without nuclear weapons.”

There is a lesson here. When we think about historical reconciliation, the focus is naturally directed to the past. And, developing mutual understanding of the past through dialogues is an essential step toward reconciliation. Nevertheless, the US-Japan case shows us that historical reconciliation can also be promoted through accumulating cooperation to meet current challenges, and building a consensus on what the future world should be.

Frankly, the prospects for Northeast Asian historical reconciliation are not bright. The landslide defeat of the ruling Saenuri party in South Korea’s parliamentary election on April 13, 2016 will significantly weaken Park Geun-hye’s leadership, and inevitably affect the “comfort women” agreement that Tokyo and Seoul concluded late last year with the expectation of opening a new chapter in bilateral relations.

In adverse domestic circumstances, however, political leaders should be “enlightened realists” with a clear vision for greater bilateral cooperation. It is true that almost no significant progress on the “comfort women” issue has been made. Seoul has yet to set up a foundation to distribute the 1 billion yen compensation to the former “comfort women” that Tokyo promised. There has been no further talk on dealing with the “comfort women” statue in front of the Japanese Embassy in Seoul. It is important, however, for the Japanese government to show understanding of Park’s political plight and to be patient and adopt a conciliatory attitude. Tokyo has taken the right steps so far. Immediately after the ROK election, Chief Cabinet Secretary Suga Yoshihide stated that Tokyo believes that both the ruling and the opposition camps understand the importance of bilateral relations, emphasizing the necessity of continuous efforts to implement the “comfort women” agreement.

In the Asia-Pacific region, we are surrounded by increasingly complex security challenges, which cannot be effectively addressed with a fixed notion of security. This underscores the importance of efforts to promote “enlightened realism” among the next generation of security experts: they must not only understand and respond to these challenges, but must address them in ways that redefine and broaden the concept of security. With “enlightened realism,” this generation will continue to explore fresh concepts and new strategies for realizing further reconciliation, peace, and security in the region.

*PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed and encouraged.*