



How to remember the Pacific War by Denny Roy

Denny Roy (RoyD@EastWestCenter.org) is a Senior Fellow at the East-West Center. Among his many works is *The Pacific War and Its Political Legacies* (Praeger, 2009).

The 70th anniversary of the end of the Pacific War later this year is an opportunity to review what we learned from the war and why lingering bitterness continues to perturb regional politics. It is an occasion for a complex combination of mourning the victims, celebrating the 70 years of peace with Japan that followed the war, and searching for ways to reduce current tensions. A few points might guide our thinking about this commemoration.

The historical importance of the war can hardly be overstated. It re-set Asia. The Japanese invasion of China probably saved the Chinese Communist Party from annihilation. Imagine postwar China under Kuomintang instead of Communist rule, a giant Taiwan. Imagine also a united Korea and the absence of the North Korea problem. The war caused Japan to change from a traditional great power (with a strong and unshackled military) to a “civilian” or economic great power. The European powers lost their colonies in Southeast Asia. The war made deep US involvement in Asia a permanent and bipartisan US policy, to the extent that the United States now describes itself as a “resident power” in Asia. The war also produced grievances that remain unrequited: Okinawan complaints about hosting a disproportionate number of US military bases, foreign plaintiffs stonewalled in their attempts to sue the Japanese government for compensation, the controversy of the atomic bombings, and the “history issue.”

Commemoration is necessary. Important though the war was to the world we live in, general knowledge among both Americans and Japanese about World War II is both thin and unbalanced. The typical American believes several self-serving myths about the war: (1) that the United States won the war and D-Day was the climactic battle; actually, while the US did most of the work in the Pacific, in Europe it was the Soviets who ground down the Nazi armies; (2) that it was a war of good v. evil, even though America’s main allies on the “good” side were imperialist Britain and brutal dictatorships in Russia and China; (3) that the US entered the war to defeat fascist tyranny, despite the fact that Americans opposed sending troops to fight the Nazis and entered the war in Europe only because Hitler declared war on the US; and (4) that the Pearl Harbor attack was a bolt from the blue, overlooking the US policy of protecting European colonies in Southeast Asia by cutting off supplies of oil to Japan. Knowledge is similarly weak among Japanese. Many Japanese school teachers have avoided the subject because it’s uncomfortable. Most of what the typical Japanese knows emphasizes Japan’s victimhood: the US oil embargo, the

atomic bombings and the Tokyo War Crimes Tribunal (which many Japanese see as a case of victor’s justice). Japanese tourists who visit the *USS Arizona* Memorial at Pearl Harbor are often shocked to see Japan pictured in the role of aggressor, something many had never considered. Memory of the war is slipping away, and with it are going the valuable lessons it can teach us and future generations.

We should have humility when we defend our view of history as right and contending views as wrong. It is almost inevitable that memories and histories of major world events get distorted. This happens in all communities. Part of it is unintentional. Any story-teller emphasizes certain parts of a story over other parts and offers interpretations that not everyone would agree with. People are naturally inclined to deliver what their own group wants to hear, whether the group is distinguished by ethnicity, nationality, religion, country, gender, age, or what have you. It’s human nature. Some distortions, however, are intentional. Governments, for example, are prone to trotting out historical examples and “lessons” carefully crafted to support the ruling party’s immediate agenda. Another example is commercial cinema, which routinely dramatizes “true” stories but unapologetically embellishes or re-routes these stories to make them more saleable. Koreans and Chinese might keep in mind that if they were born as Japanese, they might have a different view of the war, and vice-versa. Perhaps the discussion should be about each side acknowledging that its side’s version has flaws and the opposing side makes some good points that they should incorporate into their view.

An unusually bitter war produced an unusually strong alliance between Tokyo and Washington. This demands an explanation. First, the US has been a relatively magnanimous hegemon. Americans were able to accept Japan as a rehabilitated country relatively quickly because of American faith in liberal institutions. In this case the United States’ often-alleged ahistoricism was an advantage. But most importantly, the alliance is built on shared self-interest. The Cold War quickly made Soviet/Chinese communism the main threat perceived by both the US and Japanese governments. Furthermore, the Japanese government wanted to concentrate on economic growth and needed help getting its business re-established in the region. Washington needed a vehicle for double containment: forestalling a “war of national revenge” by Japan, while at the same time ensuring a Japanese contribution to US Cold War strategy. The alliance well suited both sides. Remembering this helps us understand that the alliance needs constant care and feeding. It will not survive either country’s determination that national self-interest is better served by going in a different direction.

The Pacific War reminds us, lest we forget, that war is even worse than we think. The war between Japan and the United States exposed serious miscalculations on both sides.

The US government underestimated Japan's military prowess. Consequently, its forces were poorly prepared for Japanese attacks on US bases in Hawaii and the Philippines. Japan's decision to attack was premised on the hope that Washington would react to the sharp military reversal by suing for peace and acceding to Japanese supremacy in the Western and South Pacific. Instead, Congress voted 470-1 to embark on what became a total war against Japan. Going into the war, Japan had a modest empire (Manchuria, Korea, and Taiwan) and sought a bigger one, but the actual result was the Japanese government lost everything. Other unanticipated consequences stem from the tendency of governments to go at least a little crazy during wartime. Before the war, the United States officially proscribed itself against unrestricted submarine warfare, aerial bombing of civilian areas of cities, and shooting enemy soldiers trying to surrender. US forces discarded all these principles in the Pacific War. At home, the US government also set aside the Constitution when it interned US citizens. As for the Japanese government, in addition to the atrocities committed abroad, officials prepared the nation for mass suicide by instructing all able-bodied citizens to meet the invading American armies with sharpened bamboo sticks.

It is a serious and extremely difficult problem that some groups in Japan deny atrocities by the wartime government when the outside world accepts these atrocities as historical fact. This atrocity denial is simply wrong, and its effects are destructive. Admitting to official atrocities in the past should not prevent the building of Japanese national pride today. No one of working age or younger in Japan today is personally responsible for Pacific War crimes. They are part of the new, postwar Japan, characterized by economic and technological prowess and admirable international citizenship. These accomplishments are not canceled out by events from the middle of the last century. As many commentators have pointed out, atrocity-denial is not in Japan's self-interest because it restricts Japan's opportunities for cooperation with its neighbors and generally damages the otherwise favorable Japan "brand" internationally. Japan and South Korea are both democracies that fear Chinese domination, yet the animosity between the two societies restricts what should be natural strategic partnering.

Outside critics often exaggerate the danger of atrocity-denial in Japan. Justice for victims such as the surviving "comfort women" is certainly at stake. The claim, however, that an unrepentant Japan is prone to return to military aggression against its neighbors is spurious. Japan has had a democratic government based on liberal values for nearly seven decades. A new political culture has replaced that of the wartime era. Peoples are not innately warlike. This trait is environmental, not genetic. Despite harboring atrocity-deniers, Japan is certainly no more likely to start a war of aggression than any other country of comparable size and economic capacity in the international community, and probably less so because of lingering anti-militarism stemming from Japan's disastrous experience in the Pacific War. If we recognize that the stakes are lower, the discussion can be less hysterical. Critics of Japan should also acknowledge the Japanese complaint that as a loser of the war, Japan is unfairly

singled out for negative attention. Personnel wearing the uniforms of the victorious Allied Powers also committed acts that broke their own rules of conduct, but these are lesser known or discussed. This is not to argue moral equivalency between the Rape of Nanjing and the murder of Japanese POWs and suspected Chinese collaborators by Chinese soldiers, or between the Bataan Death March and the routine refusal of US troops to accept Japanese surrenders. Rather, it is to point out that the distance between the two arguing sides may not be as great as they imagine.

Revisiting the Pacific War threatens to worsen the strains in Japan-China relations and Japan-ROK relations as some groups have an interest in exploiting discussions of history to serve narrow political ends. For the rest of us, however, the commemoration is an opportunity to work for reconciliation and a future of shared prosperity and security.

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