

**Leif-Eric Easley, "Devils in the Details: Effective Policy, not Disputed History, Should be Focus of National Leaders," *JoongAng Daily* (with *International Herald Tribune*), April 9, 2007, page 7; printed in Japan as "Leaders Need to Make History, Not Revise It," *IHT-Asahi Shimbun*, April 18, 2007; also appeared in *OMNI*, April 20, 2007.**

Prime Minister Shinzo Abe recently waded into muddy waters regarding the extent to which Imperial Japan coerced "comfort women" into sexual servitude during World War II. Some international media have decried the statement as a sort of holocaust denial. This is an exaggeration considering Abe's reaffirmation of the so-called Kono statement. In 1993, then Cabinet Secretary Yohei Kono recognized Japan's historical responsibility for the suffering of the comfort women. Abe has also issued his own apologies. But by splitting hairs on historical details and appearing to whitewash wartime atrocities, Abe has put Tokyo on the defensive once again about whether Japan has come to terms with its past.

Speculation has been widespread about what motivated Abe's statement. No doubt, the prime minister's personal views were in play, given his past efforts with other conservative lawmakers to defend the honor of wartime Japanese soldiers and leaders (including Abe's own grandfather). Another explanation is that declining poll numbers ahead of this summer's Upper House election pressed Abe to rally his conservative base, a constituency dissatisfied with the prime minister's strategic ambiguity over not visiting Yasukuni Shrine. Still another theory is that Abe was signaling Japan would not bow to external pressure from the U.S. Congress, which is currently considering a resolution calling on Japan to "formally acknowledge, apologize, and accept historical responsibility" for the comfort women.

Despite uncertainty over Abe's motivations, it is clear that in a single conversation with the press on March 1, the prime minister set back efforts at historical reconciliation made during visits to Beijing and Seoul at the beginning of his term. Japan simply cannot win by splitting hairs on history. Doing so for domestic political reasons is irresponsible, not only from the perspective of Japan's neighbors, but also in light of Japan's own national interests. Mismanagement of history causes Tokyo to lose the moral high ground for its new assertive diplomacy, complicates the abduction issue with North Korea, and may even isolate Japan from the process of East Asia's regionalization.

So how might the Japanese prime minister improve his government's handling of history? First, he should follow his own advice (employed during his 2006 campaign) about leaving the business of historical details to historians. He should not quibble with past Japanese apologies or add qualifications that make the Japanese government look insincere. Second, he should not allow his government to micromanage history education or endorse politically motivated changes to textbooks. Third, he should increase cabinet

and party discipline on historically sensitive issues. Japanese politicians should avoid providing international media with sound bites that make Japan appear unrepentant and nationalistic. Tokyo needs to offer an international vision based on 60 years of productive peace, untainted by old grievances. Only then can Japan be a "beautiful country," both respected at home and trusted in the world.

It is important to remember, however, that the "history problem" belongs to the region, not to Japan alone. Beijing's official history, for example, has yet to come to terms with China's role in the Korean War and does not recognize Japan's significant contributions to Chinese economic development. Responsible management of history by Tokyo is a necessary but not sufficient condition for reconciliation. Other governments must also rein in nationalist distortions of history.

At the regional level, continuing trends of economic integration and cultural exchange should prove helpful. Joint history projects offer promise. But East Asia may require key symbolic steps, similar to those undertaken in Europe, to provide shared formative experiences for historical reconciliation.

One possibility is issuing a regional declaration on "Mutual Understanding of Historical Events Never to be Repeated." The accord would be the foundation for a common history by recognizing atrocities committed by all sides. It would commit all signatories to respect the fact that these events occurred and declare reoccurrence of such events unthinkable. It would leave disputed details (degree of coercion of comfort women, number killed at Nanjing, extent of Korean collaboration with Japanese imperialism, number of Koreans killed at the hands of Chinese soldiers, etc.) to discussion among civil society groups. Governments would pledge to stay above the fray on these issues in the interest of regional cooperation. Ministries of Education would recommend inclusion of the history accord in textbooks with a photo of national leaders together at the signing ceremony.

The United States can facilitate, but cannot force reconciliation. It is not the U.S. role to give history lessons in East Asia. U.S. interests are at stake, however. Historical animosities are bad for business and detract from regional stability. They strain U.S. alliance relations with Japan and South Korea, and complicate building a constructive partnership with China. This is why the U.S. Deputy Secretary of State, Ambassador to Japan, and State Department Deputy Spokesman have all expressed concern about recent handling of history.

This month is proving an excellent time to step up efforts for historical reconciliation. Seventy years after the Nanjing incident, Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao made the first visit to Japan by a top Chinese leader in seven years. Mr. Abe will soon make his first visit to the United States as prime minister. The foreign ministers of Japan and South Korea recently met, and a trilateral meeting with the Chinese foreign minister is upcoming.

Japanese leaders will likely argue that today's Japan has made a permanent break with its imperial past and is looking forward. But for Japan to be a "normal" country, truly respected and active in international affairs, all parties must fully recognize both Japan's wartime atrocities, and its postwar peaceful contributions. As there are still many eager to criticize Japan for the former while ignoring the latter, Japanese leaders would be wise to avoid supplying them with ammunition.

The controversy of the last month reminds us that national leaders should make history by advancing regional stability and the economic livelihoods of their people. As for looking to the past, sometimes leadership means saying the right things and leaving the details to someone else.

*Leif-Eric Easley is a Ph.D. candidate in Government and International Relations at Harvard University, a visiting scholar at UCLA, and a member of the Pacific Forum CSIS Young Leaders Program.*