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Japan: strategic isolation redux

Robyn Lim

Although Australia has been forced to intervene again in East Timor, we cannot afford to focus only on the immediate region's inner arc and ignore the importance to our security of the overall great-power balance in East Asia. Apart from the problems posed by North Korea's dangerous nuclear brinkmanship, the main challenge in East Asia is managing the peaceful rise of China. But is Japan too becoming a potential wild card?

It is hard to be optimistic about managing China's peaceful rise. Throughout history, at least before the development of nuclear weapons, the rise of a new great power has nearly always led to war. Germany's drive for a 'place in the sun' led into World War I and all its awful consequences in the twentieth century. Similar Japanese ambitions disrupted the Asia-Pacific region for two generations and ended only in Japan's utter defeat in World War II. Moreover, while China has conceded the victory of capitalism over socialism, in order to build up China's wealth and power, it has a Leninist government that has no intention of evolving into a democracy.

Although the current rise of China has many parallels with the rise of Germany in the late nineteenth century, analogies have their limits as well as their uses. Japan is present in the equations of power in East Asia as a potentially independent player — no parallel there in the case of Germany. Japan is unlikely to knuckle under to China. Its only other choices are to consolidate its alliance with the United States, or go it alone.

So will Japan become more part of the problem than the solution if extreme right-wing elements return to power in Tokyo? Prime-Minister Koizumi's appointment of an ultra-rightist, Taro Aso, as foreign minister last September, is a bad sign. Not least for Australia. That is because Aso's family company exploited Australian and British Prisoner-of-War (PW) labour in its Kyushu coal mines in 1945. In itself, this would not necessarily be a problem. But Aso is not only still in denial about it, he is moving into damage control and putting up the kind of smokescreen we have seen from rightists in Japan for decades. In mid June, Aso also threw his cap into the ring to succeed Koizumi as president of Japan's ruling Liberal Democratic Party and therefore

prime-minister. He has little chance of winning, but the move indicates his ambitions.

Aso's denial, prevarication and obfuscation about Japanese war crimes are merely the latest manifestations of the shameful cover-up that has been going on ever since the late 1940s. Indeed, our PWs were among the victims of the Cold War because few Australians even now know how many were taken to Japan in 'hellships' and forced to work as slaves in factories and mines.

Shinzo Abe – grandson of Nobusuke Kishi

Another bad sign in terms of Japan's future direction is the likelihood that Shinzo Abe, another rightist, will probably succeed Koizumi as prime-minister when he steps down in September as president of the Liberal Democratic Party. Abe, currently Chief Cabinet Secretary, is the grandson of the un-indicted war criminal Nobusuke Kishi, who became Japan's prime-minister from 1957 to 1960.

Abe, protected by Japan's notorious media cartels — the 'kisha' clubs — has refused to answer any questions about his views on history. And the continued existence and influence of the kisha clubs puts some question marks over the question of how 'democratic' Japan really is.

Moreover, Abe continues to pay homage at the controversial Yasukuni Shrine every 15 August. This is the most inflammatory date of all, because it commemorates the date Japan agreed to surrender in World War II. Koizumi, although he has visited Yasukuni each year, has not yet visited on 15 August but Abe has done nothing to distance himself from the extreme views of his grandfather. Thus it seems safe to assume that he shares them and believes that the only reason to regret the Pacific War is that Japan lost it.

A senior fellow at the Matsui Global Strategic Studies Institute, Tsuneo Watanabe, recently wrote that 'Mr Abe would rather be considered a proud grandson of Nobusuke Kishi rather than the son of the humble Shintaro Abe who failed in his bid for the premiership in the 1980s'. His grandfather, Kishi, who signed the declaration of war, was a leading member of the 'Manchurian Clique' that included wartime premier Hideki Tojo — executed after the war as

a war criminal. Among many other things, Kishi organised slave labour throughout the empire when he was responsible for the industrial development of Manchukuo, the puppet state that Japan set up after its invasion of Manchuria in 1931.

It is also hard to believe that Kishi and his associates knew nothing about the operations of the Japanese Army's notorious Unit 731 in Manchuria from 1933 onwards. This unit conducted large-scale chemical and biological warfare experiments on human captives with usually fatal results. In addition to large numbers of Chinese men, it included Chinese and Russian women, children and babies. Academic researchers are still following up credible reports that it included at least some allied PW. Tojo, when head of the *Kempeitai* for the Kwantung Army, helped provide a steady stream of victims for Unit 731, and the fact that prisoners were sent there was commonly disguised by using the codename 'logs' in the Japanese records.

But during the Cold War, in the interests of *raison d'état*, the United States was willing to turn a blind eye to the dubious past of Kishi and many others like him. For the war criminals who escaped retribution, it all went swimmingly — the onset of the Cold War in Europe even before the shooting stopped in 1945; the Chinese civil war; then the Korean War that changed everything. So our PWs in Japan itself have largely been victims of a cover-up that continues to this day.

General Willoughby and the cover up

The cover-up partly occurred in the first place because Major General Charles Willoughby, MacArthur's intelligence chief 1941-51, was such a right-wing extremist that he was putty in the hands of Japanese war criminals and historical revisionists. Worse, Willoughby was only too willing to deceive and stymie British and Australian war crimes investigators.

Until the age of 18, when he emigrated to the United States in 1910, Willoughby was known as Karl von Tscheppe-Weidenbach. Willoughby served as MacArthur's assistant Chief of Staff for Intelligence throughout the Pacific War and in occupied Japan until his retirement in 1951. Noted foreign correspondent and old Asia-hand, Ian Ward, in his biography of Colonel Masanobu Tsuji, perhaps the most notorious of the Japanese war criminals, says that 'the arrogant and autocratic Willoughby seized the communist bogey and ran with it. His right-wing militarist views began dictating entirely new policy directions in the sensitive intelligence gathering and counter-intelligence fields'. Willoughby was also notoriously anti-British.

Willoughby, once he discovered that Colonel Tsuji had escaped to China, and was working with Chiang Kai-shek in the Chinese civil war, was willing to aid and abet Tsuji's subsequent return to Japan. Tsuji even got to sit in the Diet, and run the Asia Diet-men's League. Yet he was instrumental in the Alexander Hospital massacre in Singapore, the Sook Ching massacre of thousands of Chinese men and boys in

Singapore and the Bataan Death March. Tsuji also openly boasted of having eaten the liver of a captured, tortured and executed US pilot in Burma.

In the interests of 'returning Japan to democracy', MacArthur and Willoughby were willing to turn a blind eye to such events. They were easy targets for manipulation, including by the Palace. So with the Australian public baying for Hirohito to be hanged as a war criminal, MacArthur and his 'Bataan gang' saw the need to stymie Australian war crimes investigations. Then the Korean War gave Japanese rightists even higher cards to play. After Stalin brought the Cold War to East Asia by giving the green light to Kim Il Sung's invasion of South Korea, the United States intervened in Korea in order to protect then prostrate Japan.

America needed access to bases in Japan in order to have the ability to credibly threaten Moscow's vulnerable eastern flank, and so threaten the Soviet Union that war in the west would also mean war in the east. In addition, Japan was the only industrialised country in Asia, and the only source of trained military manpower (after Indian independence in 1947). So the Japanese conservatives had some high cards to play, and played them well. Japan's policies during the Cold War were a complex mix of naïve pacifism, professed anti-militarism and cold calculus of interest. Thus when Kishi was forced to resign in 1960, after pushing the second security treaty with the US through the Diet, the United States became even less inclined to scrutinise his dark past.

Facing up to Japan's real historical record, and anti-militarism, were and are genuine enough beliefs in some Japanese quarters but are on the wane. Ironically, the winning of the Cold War, the rise of China and North Korean nuclear brinkmanship and missile tests, tended to discredit the Japanese Left and some of the anti-militarist and pacifist tendencies it championed. Moreover in Japan, more than in most places, a determined minority can get their way because the sensible majority are either passive or easily intimidated.

Taro Aso

Koizumi's appointment of Aso as foreign minister was as irresponsible as his appointment of the maverick female politician, Makiko Tanaka, as foreign minister in the first Koizumi government. While Tanaka is as pro-China as Aso is anti, they seem to share visceral anti-American instincts that come to the surface at unguarded moments.

Aso is well connected in Japan. His maternal grandfather was Shigeru Yoshida, Japan's first post-war prime minister. Taro Aso's sister, Nobuko, is Her Imperial Highness Princess Tomohito of Mikasa. Her husband, Prince Tomohito, is the son of Prince Mikasa, younger brother of the late Emperor Hirohito. Last year when some claimed that the Imperial succession was in jeopardy, because no male had been born into the family for four decades, Prince Tomohito of Mikasa caused a stir. He called for the Imperial concubine system to be restored, lest Japan be threatened with the prospect of an Empress. There seems little doubt that the Mikasa branch of the Imperial family is the most reactionary.

That should come as no surprise. In Japan's puppet colony of Manchukuo, established after Japan's invasion of Manchuria in 1931, Prince Mikasa was a visitor to the Unit 731 site at Pingfan. Indeed, as Sheldon Harris' book on Unit 731 observed, Prince Mikasa noted that he had seen films 'where large numbers of Chinese prisoners of war brought by cargo trains and lorries were made to march on the Manchurian plain for poison gas experiments on live subjects'. Is it really possible that Hirohito knew nothing of what his own brother had observed? Another close relative, Prince Tsuneyoshi Takeda, was extremely well known at Pingfan under the pseudonym 'Colonel Miata'.

Taro Aso, a proficient golfer, often tees off on the Aso company golf course (Aso Iizuka) on the southern island of Kyushu. A few hundred metres west of the course is where 197 Australian and 101 British PWs were forced to slave in hellish conditions in the Aso family coal mine in 1945. Indeed, two of them died there a week apart in mid July: NX71818 Signalman John Watson from NSW, aged 32, and QX2984 Private Leslie Edgar George Wilkie from Queensland, aged 28.

Yet the Aso family, like major Japanese companies such as Mitsui and Mitsubishi, has never admitted that they used Allied PW labour, much less paid any compensation to the victims. More than 12,000 Koreans were also enslaved at the Aso mine, but there are no available statistics on just how many died.

Although Aso was only four years old when World War II ended, he has maintained close connections with the 134-year old family firm, now called the Aso Group. After some failed business ventures on his own, he was brought into the firm and headed it from 1973 until 1979 before going into politics.

Taro Aso and Yasukuni

Aso, although a Roman Catholic, is not unknown at Yasukuni. He first visited there at the age of 11 on 18 April 1952 when the San Francisco Treaty came into effect. He did so in the company of his grandfather, Shigeru Yoshida. In recent years, Aso has stayed away from Yasukuni himself. That seems to be mere tactical restraint because Aso has even recommended that the Emperor should visit. No emperor has visited Yasukuni since 1978, when executed war criminals such as wartime prime-minister Hideki Tojo were enshrined there, in a deliberately political act by the shrine. In advocating that the Emperor should go to Yasukuni, Aso is unlikely to make himself popular with the current incumbent of the Chrysanthemum throne, who seems to be doing his best subtly to distance himself from such extremism. But Aso's position seems consistent with his family link to ultra-rightists in the imperial family.

Even before being appointed foreign minister, Aso was making provocative comments. For example, he defended Japan's brutal occupation of Korea, even to the point of absurdly claiming that Koreans voluntarily changed their names to Japanese ones. Since becoming foreign minister, he has also been unnecessarily provocative towards China, naming it publicly as a threat and referring to Taiwan as a country.

Aso feeling the heat?

But Aso is obviously feeling the heat from the revelations about PWs in the Aso family coal mines. In a transparent ploy, he has invited Australia's ambassador to Tokyo, Murray McLean, to join him in a commemoration ceremony for former PWs at a Buddhist temple at Yuganji outside Osaka on 03 July. Ambassadors from the United States, Britain, Canada and the Netherlands have also been invited.

Tom Schieffer, the US ambassador to Japan, and Aso's frequent golfing partner, will probably attend even though he should not. He may also put pressure on for our ambassador to attend. True, our strategic interests are highly congruent with those of the United States, not least in relation to managing the peaceful rise of China. But it is in the nature of things that the US does not always do what we want. And neither are we under any obligation to do everything the United States wants.

This temple, and the ceremony it will hold to commemorate the 1086 PWs who died in slave-labour camps in Osaka and Kobe, has no connection with the Camp 26 at Keisen which provided the slave labour for the Aso mine. At the time of writing, it was not clear whether or not the foreign governments concerned would fall for his blatant ploy. Given the history of successful manipulation by Japanese rightists since 1945, it is hard to be optimistic. Indeed, too many in the United States refuse to acknowledge the degree to which the United States has been manipulated by Japanese rightists since the end of the Pacific War. These include current Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld.

Rumsfeld in denial on Yasukuni

Donald Rumsfeld remains in denial about the importance of the Yasukuni issue, claiming there is no unresolved history between Japan and the United States. That is not so, and an illustration of the fact that Rumsfeld remains in denial about a lot of things, including the bungled occupation of Iraq.

If Rumsfeld were ever to visit the US embassy in Tokyo when it is in danger of being barricaded by ultra-rightist political groups and their trucks blaring out old wartime songs through loud-speakers, he might be less inclined to assert that there is no history problem between the United States and Japan. Indeed, the presence of those ubiquitous sound trucks in all major cities is an indication of the dark side of Japanese life. If Rumsfeld were to visit the Yushukan museum at Yasukuni, and have everything translated for him, perhaps he might wake up. A stroll past the shrine's monument to the Kempeitai paramilitary secret police might also help. The reference in the Yushukan to Roosevelt's having 'lured Japan into war' is in English, so he would not even need a translator for this particularly egregious and offensive piece of ahistoric posturing.

Despite what Rumsfeld seems to think, a 'normal' US-Japan alliance cannot be built on the basis of the Yasukuni Cult — which says that the United States tricked Japan into war, and in 1945 imposed 'victor's justice' on it. The Yushukan museum at Yasukuni is a particular affront. Renovated in 2002, it has a locomotive from the notorious

Burma railway as a star attraction in its main hall, adorned by another ahistoric plaque in Japanese and English that includes no mention of the numerous war crimes involved in the railway's construction. The other main features of the entrance hall are a Zero fighter and two howitzers used in the Battle of Okinawa.



Burma railway locomotive at Yasukuni

Yet it is slowly beginning to dawn in some quarters in the United States that there were around 860 American PWs forced to work in atrocious conditions on the Burma railway and 212 died there. Of the American PWs 200 or so were survivors from the sinking of the USS Houston and 668 were from a National Guard artillery regiment from Texas that was captured on Java — not an irrelevant matter since the US ambassador to Japan, Tom Schieffer (previously ambassador to Australia) is a Texan. Overall, of the 33,600 US PWs in Japanese captivity some 10,500 died (over a 37 per cent death rate compared to the 2 per cent death rate for US PWs in German captivity).

Memorialising in Japan and the myth of Japan as victim

There are very few memorials in Japan that commemorate any of Japan's victims. These include a small corner of the Hiroshima Peace Museum that commemorates the Nanjing massacre in China, one tiny monument in Niigata to allied PW and Asian slave labourers, and a small privately-built memorial to allied PWs in Chikuhō.

Apart from these, all the memorials in Japan commemorate 'Japan as the victim'. And for decades no memorial was allowed within the precincts of the Hiroshima Peace Park commemorating all the Koreans who died in the Hiroshima bombing. Moreover, apart from the recently renovated museum at Yasukuni, there is a new Showa museum in Tokyo which commemorates Hirohito's reign, and a new museum commemorating the 'fire bombing' of Tokyo by the

US Army Air Force in March 1945. Both have a distinctly nationalist tone.

Worse, there are memorials in Japan to those who committed some of the worst atrocities from 1937 onwards. For example, there is a 'gorinto' (traditional Japanese Buddhist stupa) dedicated to Unit 731 at the Tama Cemetery outside Tokyo. Ian Ward's book on Colonel Tsuji includes a picture of an elaborate memorial for him in his home prefecture of Ishikawa.



Unit 731 Memorial at Tama Reien Cemetery in Tokyo

Japan continues to have a bad case of selective historical amnesia. There are, for example, no memorials in Japan acknowledging the Sandakan death marches between March and July 1945 where 2428 Australian and British PWs were brutally murdered by their Japanese captors in what the Australian War Memorial notes was 'the single greatest atrocity committed against Australians in war'. The last 15 survivors were actually murdered in revenge on 27 August 1945, 12 days after Japan had formally announced its surrender. That was well after the Japanese garrison in Sandakan received its orders about the surrender, and five days after allied aircraft had dropped confirmatory leaflets in English and Japanese over the camp informing everyone that the war was over.

At Cowra in New South Wales there is a museum which records the violent mass breakout by Japanese PWs from a prison camp there in August 1944 and which honours the 234 Japanese and four Australians who died in the attempt. Australians and Japanese visiting this museum might wonder why there is no memorial of any kind in Japan to the 2815 Australian PWs who were killed building the Burma railway,

or indeed to the 8273 Australian PWs overall who did not survive brutal Japanese captivity (over one in three of the 22,000 captured).

The only monument to the ‘hellship’ transports, in which so many allied PWs died while being moved to slave-labour camps in Japan, is at Subic Bay in the Philippines. To my knowledge, the tiny monument in Niigata — a local initiative — and the private one in Chikuho are the only memorials of any kind in Japan to what Japan did to others. Public and private commemorations instead overwhelmingly concentrate on those bookends of the cult of ‘Japan as unique victim’ at Hiroshima and Yasukuni.

So it is high time for Australia’s Minister for Foreign Affairs, Alexander Downer, whose own father spent much of the war as a PW in Changi, diplomatically to warn Japan of the gravity of the situation. Australia is a longtime friend of Japan despite the numerous and enduring legacies in Australia from appalling Japanese war crimes against Australians, Papua-New Guineans and Nauruans in World War II.

We need to do more to help the Japanese government to understand that Japan’s perennial disputes with its neighbours about the history of Japanese aggression are not minor issues, or just local North Asia matters. Even sixty years after Japan’s wars of aggression in Asia ended, strong concerns about extremist Japanese historicism are still felt in Australia and many other countries in the wider region. Even more importantly, Japan’s disputes with so many Asia-Pacific countries about its past are manifestations of a continuing deep-seated political and cultural problem in Japan itself — and one that left unresolved will increasingly isolate Japan from its friends at a time when it will most need them.

In for a shock

But this is only the beginning of potential challenges to Japan’s relations with its current security partners such as the US and Australia.

Some Japanese approaches to international affairs can be puzzling at the best of times. Just consider Japan’s manipulation of the International Whaling Commission by buying enough votes, including from countries that lack a coastline, to water down or even repeal bans on whaling. And of course Japan’s claims about so-called scientific whaling are so blatantly false as to invite derision.

The Asia-Pacific region could be in for a rocky time if Japanese foreign policy becomes overly influenced by the type of ultra-rightist influences that have such sway in how Japan remembers World War II — and how such tainted history is still taught in Japanese schools. The Cold War strategic grip that Japan had on the United States has made such ultra-rightists complacent. It would appear that at least some influential Japanese rightists have come to believe that their history disputes are only with China and the Koreans, and that reminders of Japanese war crimes and other excesses from these traditional rivals are nothing more

than a negotiating stance. These Japanese rightists have forgotten that Australia, Singapore and the Philippines, for example, have also not forgotten, nor that the US might start remembering much of what it has chosen to forget since the Korean War.

In the 1930s, an isolated Japan became increasingly a menace to itself and others. Is it unthinkable that this could happen all over again, especially if there were a major downturn in the global economy? Many traditional Japanese conservatives have now become so alarmed at this danger that they are actively trying to prevent Shinzo Abe from becoming prime minister.

Some sense of the size of Japan’s problem might be gained from considering how US (and Western) relations with Germany might be very different if Germany had behaved as Japan continues to do — and if denazification had not been thorough and genuinely embraced by the post-war German political class and the German people in general. Imagine how the Western allies would feel if, scattered throughout modern Germany, there were memorials to the Gestapo, Himmler, Dr Mengele’s perverted medical experiments and various perpetrators of the massacres of allied PWs and innocent civilians.

Or how might the modern world react to a situation where there was not such a prominent and giant public memorial to holocaust victims in Berlin, but instead a national war memorial that honoured Hitler and all the German war criminals executed after trial by the International Military Tribunal at Nuremberg. Imagine too the international reaction if a modern German government were continually to claim that all Germans had really been the victims of World War II — and it rigged the education system to educate German children accordingly. Finally, ponder how we would all react if the militantly unrepentant and nostalgic grandchildren of leading Nazis were politically prominent in German society as well as government, and sought to take the reins again.

Indeed, Japan by averting its gaze from all this, is now playing into the hands of Beijing. China is set to exploit the Unit 731 issue in particular, and the resurgence of the ahistoric views of Japanese rightists in general. But if Japan wants to stop China from exploiting all this, it must stop dropping rocks on its own feet.

That is why Mr Downer must insist that our ambassador to Japan is instructed to stay away from the charade at the Yuganji temple that Japanese foreign minister Taro Aso is intending to preside over on 3 July. ♦

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