

US role crucial in Northeast Asian reconciliation

This is the third in a five-part series exploring how best to realize an East Asian community of reconciliation and communication in the 21st century. —ED.

By Shin Gi-wook

On Aug. 6, the U.S. Ambassador to Japan, John Roos, attended a ceremony at Hiroshima's Peace Memorial Park to commemorate the first atomic attack in history. It was the first time that a U.S. representative had attended the annual event, 65 years after a U.S. bomb destroyed Hiroshima, killing roughly 140,000 people.

Although the ambassador remained silent, offering no remarks, his attendance itself renewed hopes that President Barack Obama might visit Hiroshima or Nagasaki, something no sitting U.S. president has done.

Without question, the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki are an important part of Japanese memories of the Asia-Pacific War. While most Americans feel they were a tragic but necessary measure to end the war and that they actually may have reduced the number of human casualties, the bombings fueled victim consciousness on the part of the Japanese, who clearly had been aggressors toward their Asian neighbors.

In this context, Japanese leaders, including the current mayors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, have called for the U.S. President to visit the cities so as to acknowledge the victims of the nuclear attacks.

In their view, many Japanese citizens feel uneasy about the lack of true "closure" between the two countries over the war, and this uneasiness could be addressed by such a presidential visit.

In this regard, the U.S. ambassador's presence at this year's ceremony was an encouraging step toward the closing of a chapter in the unfortunate past that exists between the two allies.

The question of a U.S. presidential visit to the site of the nuclear bombing raises the larger issue of the U.S. role in and responsibility for historical injustices and disputes in Northeast Asia.

The U.S. has been deeply involved in Northeast Asian affairs, especially since the start of the Pacific War in 1941. The U.S. played a crucial role, albeit not always intentionally so, in dealing with matters of historical importance in the immediate aftermath of the war; it was the undisputed leader in the Tokyo War Crimes Tribunal that failed to fully address the sufferings of Asians at the hands of the Japanese aggressors.

Also, the San Francisco Peace Treaty of 1951, in the drafting of which the U.S. played a key conceptual and leadership role, has been cited as legal grounds for preventing Asian victims from filing suits against the Japanese government and corporations for

wartime grievances. Then, too, the U.S. has not come to terms with actions of its own that have been seen as "crimes against humanity"—the firebombing and atomic bombing of Japanese cities toward the end of the war.

As we seek to understand the historical disputes of Northeast Asia, it is critical that we address the controversial question of U.S. responsibility for these disputes and its possible role in facilitating historical reconciliation in the region.

To be sure, there has been some debate in U.S. academic and policy-making circles about the role the U.S. might play in helping to resolve historical disputes in an effort to achieve reconciliation in Northeast Asia.

A predominant view has been that these disputes are primarily a matter for Asians and better left to historians. By taking a specific position, some fear the U.S. could be pulled into the Sino-Japanese rivalry or be compelled to take sides at the risk of alienating one of its key allies in the region, namely Japan or South Korea.

Yet despite its proclaimed neutrality, the record shows that the U.S. has not always maintained strict neutrality.

When former forced laborers filed claims against Japan, for instance, the U.S. took a position that was very different from the one that they had taken in the German case, where it had pressed hard to force the reluctant German government and corporations to admit responsibility, publicly apologize to the victims, and provide monetary compensation.

In recent years, there has been a growing view that the U.S. can hardly afford to stand outside these disputes, particularly when it was a major factor in their creation.

In contrast to the policy stance adopted by the U.S. executive branch, the U.S. Congress took up Asian history issues more proactively by introducing various bills regarding Japan's responsibility for wartime "comfort women."

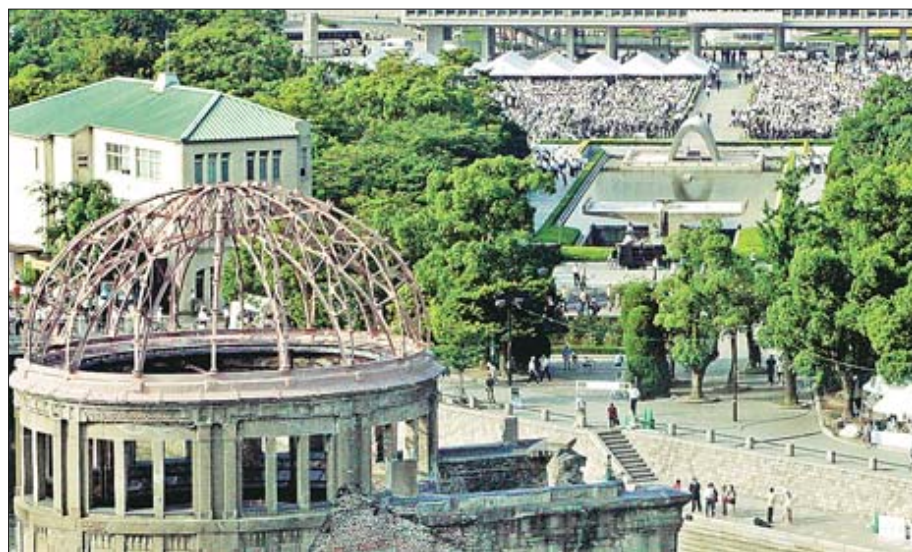
Understandably, there are objections to any reexamination of the U.S. "national myth" with respect to wartime atrocities that could open up a Pandora's Box of public debate, as it could easily become politicized. Still, the U.S. was deeply involved in the problems of history that we face today in Northeast Asia and would be remiss if it continued to adopt a "hands-off" stance toward these problems.

Against this backdrop, it is worth considering a U.S. presidential visit to Hiroshima or Nagasaki, especially given President Obama's Prague speech of last year. Such a visit would fit nicely with his stated vision for a nuclear-free world and could be seen as an important step toward demonstrating his leadership in the implementation of this new nuclear-free policy.

A presidential visit would also enhance the U.S.'s international image as a champion of human rights



U.S. President Barack Obama speaks before proposing a toast at a luncheon at the United Nations on Sept. 23, 2009. Facing camera, from left are then-Polish President Lech Kaczynski; U.N. Secretary General Ban Ki-moon; President Obama; Finnish President Tarja Halonen; Chinese President Hu Jintao; President Lee Myung-bak, and Russian President Dmitry Medvedev. AP-Yonhap



Relatives and survivors of the atomic bomb victims gather at the Hiroshima A-bomb memorial service behind the A-bomb Dome at the Peace Memorial Park in Hiroshima, Japan, in this file photo taken in 2003. In August this year, Hiroshima commemorated the 65th anniversary of the atomic bombing which killed more than 200,000 people in 1945. AFP-Yonhap

and peace, an image that has been tainted in the recent past, with a sharp rise in anti-American sentiment in many parts of the world as a consequence. It could certainly contribute to the removal of a "historical thorn" that exists between the U.S. and Japan.

Time appears opportune, as Japan's current relations with China and South Korea have become less contentious and the new Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) government in Japan is more receptive to addressing historical issues with its neighbors than was its

LDP predecessor.

Despite all the potential benefits and symbolism, there are reasons for great caution. There is the danger that an Obama visit would be viewed, or even used, as a vindication of Japan's victim identity or as support for rightist views that hold the U.S. responsible for wartime atrocities.

Accordingly, a visit to Hiroshima would need to be construed as an occasion to acknowledge human suffering in the larger context of President Obama's vision of a nuclear-free world.

If such a gesture were perceived as an official apology, it would draw strong resistance from U.S. conservatives and wind up being counterproductive in the effort to achieve reconciliation.

It could also intensify the Japanese "historical amnesia" that overlooks Japan's responsibility for wartime atrocities against its Asian neighbors.

In addition, President Obama must recognize the sufferings of not just Japanese victims but also other Asians, including those Koreans who were taken to Hiroshima as forced laborers and thus became victims of the bombing, while the Japanese need to take unequivocal responsibility for that aspect of the tragedy and offer an apology.

In the end, an Obama visit to Hiroshima should be only one step in an effort to activate a larger process of historical reconciliation that includes Japan's Northeast Asian nations.

Most Japanese who support his visit see its merit mainly in terms of the reconciliation of historical issues between the U.S. and Japan.

However, if Obama's visit were meant exclusively to reaffirm the U.S.-Japan alliance, it would create grave

concerns among Chinese and Koreans that the U.S. prioritizes its alliance with Japan over the rest of its East Asian relationships. In order for such a U.S. presidential visit to be successful, it should be followed by similar actions on the part of the Japanese toward their Asian neighbors.

A visit by the Japanese prime minister to Nanjing to pay tribute to the victims of the 1937 massacre is one possibility. Only when a U.S. presidential visit occurs in this larger regional context can the U.S. avoid alienating China and South Korea and play a constructive role in facilitating historical reconciliation in Northeast Asia.

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