

RESPONSE TO STATEMENT BY PRIME MINISTER SHINZO ABE ON THE 70TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE END OF THE WAR

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Prime Minister Abe's statement should be judged, in my view, against two important criteria: does it show a genuine effort to reflect upon and draw lessons from Japan's wartime past; and does it contribute to the improvement of relations in Northeast Asia and create opportunities for reconciliation between Japan and China and Korea. The statement advances both of those goals, certainly beyond the worst expectations, though with some significant caveats, which I will explain.

By the standards of past statements, Prime Minister Abe offers a long rendition of the events leading up to the war. He portrays Japan as responding to the challenges of Western imperialism, as a champion of liberation from colonial rule. He sees Japan emerging from World War I as part of the international system, only to fall victim to the Great Depression and Western protectionism, deepening its isolation and undermining its political system.

Up to this point, Mr. Abe's version of events can be read as a justification for its own imperialism (which he neglects to mention began in the late 1800s with the seizure of Taiwan) and a denial of historical responsibility. But he goes on to acknowledge Japan's own decisions that led to war:

"With the Manchurian Incident, followed by the withdrawal from the League of Nations, Japan gradually transformed itself into a *challenger* to the *new international order* that the international community sought to establish after tremendous sacrifices. Japan took the wrong course and advanced along the road to war."

This version of history will not satisfy many people, including many historians, but it is a step away from the view held by Japanese revisionists, including Mr. Abe himself, that Japan waged a war of self-defense and not of aggression, or even more provocatively, that it was engaged in the noble cause of liberating Asia from colonial rule.

The Prime Minister's statement goes on to express condolences, "deep remorse and heart felt apology" and responsibility for the suffering that ensued as a result of Japan's decision to go to war. He uses the key words that were first uttered in the 50th anniversary statement of Prime Minister Murayama, acknowledging "aggression" as well as "colonial rule," though in both cases in a more indirect fashion than Murayama did.

The statement enumerates those who were Japan's victims – China, Southeast Asia, Taiwan and Korea, the innocent victims as well as the soldiers from both Japan and their foes who fell on the battlefield. And he speaks of the "women behind the

battlefields whose honor and dignity were severely injured,” a reference to the so-called “comfort women” coercively recruited to work in the brothels serving the Imperial Army, though again his reference is both indirect and without assignment of responsibility. He also pays homage to the expressions of toleration for Japan from former POWs and Chinese who gave a home to Japanese children left behind.

The Prime Minister stated more clearly than in the past that the previous statements issued by Prime Ministers Murayama and Koizumi “will remain unshakeable into the future.” But on the issue of apology, Abe expresses his long held belief that apologies must come to an end, that future generations cannot be held accountable for the past. That is not a view universally shared – including by myself. And it is already drawing the ire of people within and outside Japan.

But Abe did temper that insistence with this admonition which I found significant:

“Still, even so, we Japanese, across generations, must squarely face the history of the past. We have the responsibility to inherit the past, in all humbleness, and pass it on to the future.”

In some ways, this reflection on the past is an internal dialogue between Mr. Abe as an individual, one who has long held revisionist views of the wartime past, and Abe as the Prime Minister. One can see him still struggling to justify Japan’s wartime past, as equivalent in some sense to the actions of other imperial powers of the time. But Prime Minister Abe has faced powerful reminders in recent months of the limits of his ability to impose his personal views on the nation.

Abe has been under growing pressure from conservative realists in Japan’s establishment who warned against any attempt to deny Japan’s past aggression which they fear would worsen relations with its neighbors. Abe’s failure to convince the nation of the need to shift its security policy, the tremors that are reaching Japan from a weakening Chinese economy, and the knowledge that its most powerful ally, the United States, is urging repair of relations with the Republic of Korea – all may have combined to help shape this statement.

The key signs of the internal debate came in the final days before this statement was issued. The report of Abe’s advisory panel on the history of the 20th century, issued a week ago, was unyielding in its condemnation of Japan’s aggression, without any of the justifications that Mr. Abe weakly attempted. It was followed by an August 7 editorial in the Yomiuri newspaper, a bastion of Japanese conservatism, that began: “Prime Minister Shinzo Abe must send a clear message that Japan made a fresh start in the postwar period based on its reflection on the past misguided war.” It called on Abe to repeat the key words of the previous statements and cited the example of Germany, “a nation that has squarely reflected on its Nazi-era past” and thus “gained the confidence of France and other nearby countries by using heartfelt expressions, even if they did not use direct words of apology.”

Impact on relations in the region

Still, what remains is the crucial question – will this statement contribute to the easing of tensions over history issues between Japan and its Northeast Asian neighbors? Undoubtedly, the contents can be read as a glass half full or a glass half empty. And for Koreans in particular, for whom there are few gestures of contrition (interestingly, fewer than toward the Chinese), it will be tempting to focus on what is missing from this statement as more significant than what it contains. But that would be, in my view, both a strategic and tactical mistake.

Rather, there is reason to see this as the opening of a door, at least by avoiding what many feared would be the worst case – a severe departure from past statements and apologies in favor of a revisionist agenda. Thus, we may see the resumption of dialogue – the convening of a long delayed trilateral summit of the leaders of China, South Korea and Japan, perhaps this fall in Seoul, at which the Japanese and Korean leaders can meet separately for the first time in more than 3 years. Ideally, the two governments could seriously tackle key issues of compensation and apology for the “Comfort Women” and forced laborers, for which practical solutions are available and urgently needed before the victims are no longer alive to offer acceptance.

For progress to take hold, it is crucial that the inner Mr. Abe remain restrained – that there be no further expressions of denial from senior members of his government and party and that the Prime Minister embraces the spirit of his statement in full. The doubts about Mr. Abe’s sincerity will remain and anything that is done to fuel those doubts could again cause the situation to take a turn for the worse.