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OPINION



Paying respect: Prime Minister Shinzo Abe leaves a bouquet of flowers during a visit to Chidorigafuchi National Cemetery for unknown war victims in Tokyo on Aug. 15. | AFP-JIJI

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Abe statement was vague in all the wrong places

BY [JEFF KINGSTON](#)

SPECIAL TO THE JAPAN TIMES

[ARTICLE HISTORY](#) | AUG 15, 2015

Prime Minister Shinzo Abe made a hash of his long-anticipated statement on Friday commemorating the 70th anniversary of the end of World War II.

He was vague where he needed to be forthright — on colonialism, aggression and the “comfort women” system — and came up short in expressing contrition by outsourcing his apology to his predecessors. As a result, the Abe statement represents significant backsliding

from those issued by former prime ministers Tomiichi Murayama and Junichiro Koizumi in 1995 and 2005 that helped Japan and its victims regain some dignity.

Furthermore, Abe expressed perpetrator's fatigue, calling for an end to apology diplomacy. But a recent NHK poll suggests that only 15 percent of the country oppose apology while 42 percent support such gestures, so, yet again, Abe is out of touch with Japanese sentiment.

By ducking history, Abe reinforces doubts about his vague security laws that ease constitutional constraints on Japan's armed forces. Those constraints were written into the 1947 Constitution to prevent another runaway government dragging the nation into war. As the prime minister beefs up security ties with the United States, Japanese people are worried that his deterrence strategy will backfire and facilitate the country's involvement in military conflict at Washington's behest. Despite low public support for the new security legislation, the neoconservatives won't concede because they think they know best and don't trust the public to act responsibly. Americans know all about the hubris of know it all neocons and the disasters they sow.

Perhaps this is why Emperor Akihito has spent 2015 repudiating "Abenesia," making pointed comments about the need to address wartime history with humility. Constitutional constraints require him to avoid intervening politically, but he has been adept at navigating the gray area of the ineffable in ways that have enabled him to become an influential advocate for reconciliation.

And so on Saturday, the Emperor offered a personal and heartfelt expression of deep remorse that resonates all the more loudly in the aftermath of Abe's omissions. It serves as a veiled rebuke and highlights yet again how much the nation has benefitted from the Emperor's tireless reconciliation diplomacy.

Seventy years on, some Japanese conservatives are still fighting World War II, seeking to convince the world that there are significant misconceptions about Japanese wartime misdeeds. A panel constituted by the ruling Liberal Democratic Party advocates aggressive efforts to debunk allegations against Japan over the "comfort women" system that is often described as sexual slavery. In late July, LDP policy chief Tomomi Inada requested that the prime minister take a leading role in this campaign to "restore Japan's honor and trust," targeting the apology about the comfort women system in the 1993 Kono statement and reporting by the Asahi newspaper about these women's coercive recruitment.

While trying to set the record straight about the comfort women system, the "honor and trust" panel acknowledged, "There is no argument that (the system) seriously violated those women's human rights and impaired their dignity." But if that is true, what does Inada want Abe to correct? Is there any dignity to be gained in quibbling about the degree of blame that can be shifted onto private recruiters acting on Japanese orders? Coercion, direct and

structural, was inherent in the recruitment, transportation and close military monitoring of the comfort women kept in the base brothels who had no freedom to leave or decide their own fates. Moreover, frontline military troops dispatched all over Asia abducted local women wherever they were.

Apologists ask for official documents detailing orders to do so, ignoring or dismissing the extensive oral history painfully recounted by comfort women subject to this nightmare. They also argue, disingenuously, that every other nation has done the same, but in the 20th century there are no similar instances of institutionalized, systematic enslavement of women for sexual degradation operated at the behest and under close supervision of military authorities. Bosnian Serb forces operated rape centers from 1992 to 1995 as a weapon of war, but nothing on the scale of Japanese comfort stations between 1932 and 1945.

So what is it exactly that Inada hopes to gain by quibbling over the details of a disgraceful system? Does she imagine that this will contribute to restoring Japan's honor and trust in the global community? David McNeill, who teaches media and politics at Sophia University (and occasionally writes for The Japan Times), suggests that Inada's panel "sounds like an Orwellian joke."

"It is hard to think of anyone less qualified. She is a member of the right-wing lobby group Nippon Kaigi (Japan Conference) and has consistently been on the side of those who want to beautify Japan's wartime past," McNeill says with regards to Inada's efforts. "She was a supporter of a 2007 revisionist movie that denied the Nanking Massacre took place and the same year led a smear campaign against a documentary critical of Yasukuni Shrine.

"As a lawyer, she fought (and lost) a campaign to disprove that Japanese soldiers had engaged in war crimes in China, and in Okinawa."

In her book "The Long Defeat: Cultural Trauma, Memory and Identity in Japan," Akiko Hashimoto eloquently analyzes the fierce contestation between three main wartime narratives featuring heroes, victims and perpetrators. It is the latter perspective that revisionists seek to expunge.

While Inada now seeks to "correct" foreign views on the comfort women issue, McNeill explains that "her political career has in fact helped spread distrust of Japan, and dishonors all those here who fought for the country's rehabilitation in Asia."

Exactly, but if that is so obvious, why the misbegotten crusade?

"Many in the LDP lack the sophistication to understand that regardless of what they believe in, this stuff hurts Japan," says Robert Dujarric, director of the Institute for Contemporary Asian Studies at Temple University Japan. This cluelessness, he argues, can be traced to the

U.S. Occupation (1945-52), when American authorities made common cause with the Japanese conservatives that launched the nation into the war. Thus, “the message Japan got about the war wasn’t the same as the one the Germans got.” As a result, in the postwar era Japanese conservatives have “failed to understand how others in Asia perceived Imperial Japan.” And now, they are inadvertently stoking negative perceptions of their country in the West.

Apology is certainly not the magic wand of regional reconciliation, but it is naïve to think it doesn’t matter. Revisionists complain that Japan has already apologized numerous times, but they overlook the fact that prominent conservatives always publicly repudiate every apology, thereby keeping Japan behind the eight ball of history.

“The obvious strategy to ‘restore Japan’s honor and trust’ is to acknowledge past wrongdoings and figure out what to do from there,” says Akiko Takenaka, author of “Yasukuni Shrine: History, Memory and Japan’s Unending Postwar.” “The panel is doing just the opposite.”

Regrettably, such revisionists are trying to nurture self-righteous nationalism from an airbrushed past, oblivious to the damage they are inflicting on Japan’s reputation. Whose trust do they imagine they are winning? What honor is gained by shirking responsibility?

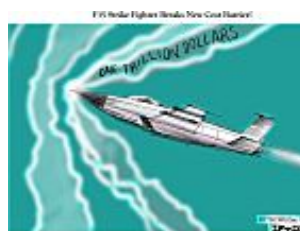
Jeff Kingston is the director of Asian Studies, Temple University Japan.

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