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History’s Unfinished Business in East Asia

RANA MITTER

The world does not lack for trouble spots in 2014, when tragedies in Ukraine and the Middle East have dominated Western headlines. Less prominent in recent months has been the potential for clashes between China and its neighbors in the South and East China Seas.

Resurgent Nationalism

First in a series

Yet this is a region where a large proportion of the world’s population lives and the world’s second and third biggest economies (China and Japan) are located, with the single largest economy (the United States) also exercising a powerful regional role. A clash here would have global repercussions.

When the potential for regional strife is discussed, the topic that comes up over and over again is history. China and Japan come to rhetorical blows over whose understanding of World War II is the most accurate; Southeast Asian nations and Beijing dispute the accuracy of historical maps relating to present-day disputes over islands and sea-lanes. Why should the events of some seven decades ago hold such sway in today’s East Asia? To understand the answer, it is necessary to examine the reasons why the region today looks as it does, reflecting the unfinished business of the now long-distant end of World War II in 1945.

VISIONS OF POSTWAR ORDER

Soon after Adolf Hitler’s Germany surrendered in May 1945, the Cold War would freeze much of the European continent, but both Western and Eastern blocs came to agree on one shared aspect of their narratives: Nazi Germany had been a menace to European security and a state of immeasurably immoral policy, which meant

that it had to be defeated. In Western Europe, an American-dominated settlement ensured that the long-standing rivalry between France and Germany, and the legend of the “stab in the back” by domestic traitors that poisoned Germany’s view of its defeat in World War I, were finally subsumed into a shared understanding of the past and why it must not be allowed to recur.

No such realignment ever took place in East Asia. There was no Asian Yalta or Potsdam—no summit to work out a postwar order. There was still a sense that the region needed a new order. However, the realignment that seemed most likely in 1945 was quickly destroyed by unexpected developments: in particular, the emergence of the People’s Republic of China (PRC).

One of the primary war aims of Franklin D. Roosevelt’s America was to raise the status of China in the world order. This was by no means a wholly altruistic attempt. It became clear to the British that a key US aim was to end their imperial presence in Asia, which would boost American postwar commercial prospects. But during the war, America’s own actions on the ground in the region gave rise to doubts about its intentions. At the geostrategic level, China was made a secondary or even tertiary priority within the overall war command, and at the personal level, the United States sent an American commander-in-chief for the China theater, General Joseph “Vinegar Joe” Stilwell, who proved incapable of working effectively with the Chinese leader, Chiang Kai-shek. All of this was a great deal to load on the shoulders of China, a country that was much poorer and less industrialized than any of the other powers that fought in the war, and had been torn apart by bombing, refugee crises, and economic blockades.

All the same, the nomination of China as one of Roosevelt’s “Four Policemen” (with the United States, the Soviet Union, and Britain) was a major boost for a country that had still been subject to

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colonial rule in significant parts of its territory at the outbreak of war with Japan in 1937. The American position helped to define a vision of postwar Asia in which China would play a major regional role. Japan, of course, would be under American control, and in the immediate postwar period, Britain and France expected that they would regain control of the colonies that had been seized by Japan (including Malaya, Singapore, and Vietnam). In one sense, the proposed postwar settlement in Asia was much like that at the end of World War I in Europe, in that it created new spheres of influence and confiscated colonies from the powers that had lost the war.

But a major difference between the world of 1919 and that of 1945 was that one of the latter's major Allied belligerents was a strongly anti-imperialist non-European power: China. In 1945, the expectation of the world—including Soviet leader Joseph Stalin—was that Nationalist China (under Chiang's Kuomintang government) would remain a major power in the region for decades to come. This implied an Asia-Pacific where the United States would be dominant in some sense, allied to China, controlling Japan, and influencing South Korea. Much of the area not under American hegemony would find itself still tied to one European empire or another. The USSR would be confined to marginal presences in areas such as North Korea or Manchuria. This Asia would have been very different from what emerged in practice.

Those who planned the postwar order failed to realize that anti-imperialism was not simply something to be bestowed from above, that the forces that had been unleashed by the Japanese occupation (and the humiliation of the British and French in 1941) could not be reversed, and that within a decade, wars against colonialism would shape the region anew. But the factor that changed the region's whole dynamic was the fall of the Chinese Nationalists and the establishment of the PRC under Mao Zedong. The subsequent policy of nonrecognition between the PRC and the United States set the stage for a historical settlement that still affects Asia today.

ABSENT ARCHITECTURE

Unlike in Europe, 1945 left unfinished business in Asia. The idea of a common narrative

of reconciliation and mutual understanding in the region was admirable but hard to implement. Part of the necessary architecture—a series of treaties leading to robust regional institutions—was absent. Even the official end of the war in Asia was not mutually agreed to by the major actors. The formal treaty ending hostilities between the United States and Japan was signed at San Francisco in 1951. But the Chinese were not present, since the United States recognized the government of the Republic of China (ROC) on Taiwan, whereas Britain had recognized the PRC in 1950; the two major signatories could not agree which China to invite, with the result that neither one attended. (The ROC later signed the separate Treaty of Taipei.) The absence of the new PRC was significant. Although Cold War tensions between Moscow and Washington remained grave during much of this period, the two sides were always at least in diplomatic contact. The absence of contact between the United States and China made the establishment of shared norms, or even areas of mutually acknowledged differences, impossible.

The situation was complex but the results were clear. No mutually agreed system of institutions emerged in Asia; no equivalents of NATO and the European Community.

Instead, US influence in the region expanded, and became increasingly defined in opposition to a Chinese state growing in strength and importance. China was constrained not just by the American presence but also by the breakdown of Beijing's relations with Moscow after 1960. Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and South Vietnam became American Cold War allies, running the gamut from democracy (which provided support for the narrative of a liberal US-sponsored global order) to authoritarian developmental states (poor on human rights, helpful in terms of building the regional economy), to basket cases. Institutions such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations did not have the robust structure of NATO. Elsewhere in the region, the hopes that emerged at the 1955 Bandung Conference for a new nonaligned Afro-Asian bloc of postcolonial powers produced more rhetoric than substance.

The rapprochement between Beijing and Washington that culminated in Richard Nixon's visit to China in 1972 meant that in the 1970s and

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1980s the Chinese became reluctant to expand their influence in the region. This conviction was fueled by the desperate need for reconstruction at home after the Cultural Revolution, and by the fear that displacing the balance in Asia might assist the USSR (with which China's relations in the 1980s were peaceful but hardly warm).

The ending of the Cold War in 1989–91 became another turning point. In retrospect, it is clear that the near-collapse of the Chinese Communist Party in 1989, followed by the actual collapse of the USSR, hardened the determination of the Chinese leadership to find a new status for the country that would allow it to secure its position in the region. The extraordinary growth figures of the 1990s and 2000s provided the economic basis for this security strategy. The perception in the 2000s that the US administration of President George W. Bush was determined to create a unipolar world helped to boost Beijing's case that its rise was a necessary counterbalance to the world's only remaining superpower. The Cold War in Asia had never formally ended. But by the turn of the new century, it was clear that its remnants were thawing fast, and that it was the kind of thaw that brings not warm spring winds but rather the floods associated with climate change.

CHINESE REVISIONISM

One very noticeable effect of China's desire to reorder the region is that Beijing has returned repeatedly to the legacy of one transformative experience: World War II in Asia. For China, 1945 serves as a starting point for renegotiating the regional order. And this has become particularly clear in the past year or so, when reminders of World War II have emerged as an increasingly notable part of China's foreign policy rhetoric. In November 2013, there was widespread Chinese media reporting of the seventieth anniversary of the Cairo Conference—the only wartime Allied summit meeting where Chiang sat in equal status with Roosevelt and Winston Churchill. It was a contentious meeting at which China benefited from being treated in public as a full ally of the Western powers (though not of the USSR, which at that point remained neutral against Japan), but in practice was sidelined because the European theater and the opening of a second front against Germany received top priority. Nonetheless, at the end of the conference, a communiqué was issued that gave legitimacy to Chinese claims for the restoration of territories seized by Japan.

In February 2014, there was a diplomatic imbroglio when Chinese President Xi Jinping's advance team suggested ahead of his state visit to Germany that he wished to visit the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe in Berlin. German officials became concerned that Xi's intention was not to honor the victims of the Nazis so much as to make pointed comments about Japan's supposed inability to admit its war crimes in comparison with Germany's historical self-criticism, and the visit was not scheduled in the end. Yet the rumblings continued. In June 2014, in response to attempts by Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe to enact a constitutional change allowing an expansion of the role of Japan's military, the Chinese authorities publicly released a series of archival photographs of Japanese war atrocities. In July, Abe announced that he would proceed with the constitutional reinterpretation.

The American presence in Asia draws its justification, essentially, from the sacrifices made by US troops to recover the region from Japan during World War II. China has started to use a very similar justification for its own desire for greater influence: Some 14 million or more Chinese were killed during the eight years of its war against Japan, and without that sacrifice, China (and the rest of Asia) might have fallen to enduring Japanese imperialism. It is becoming more common among historians to acknowledge a greater role for China's contribution to World War II in Asia than had been the norm a generation ago. However, the political argument that China deserves more influence in Asia today because of its actions seven decades ago is not so widely held outside China itself. The Chinese leadership's overall aim has been to promote a particular set of ideas that seek to rewrite the narrative of World War II in Asia: first, that China made a contribution to the war that has never been acknowledged by the West; second, that China deserves a greater say in the political arrangement of the Asia-Pacific; and third, that Japan is an increasing menace that justifies greater wariness by China.

JAPAN'S DARK PAST

For years, the major powers of East Asia have failed to find a consensus on what happened during World War II in Asia, and why. One constant complaint in China is that Japan has never truly admitted its war guilt. The reasons for this belief

are several. First, there is an element of Chinese political showmanship in the charge thrown at the Japanese: Various Japanese prime ministers have indeed apologized profusely for the country's shameful war record in China, but when this is pointed out, the charge often changes to claims that the apologies were insincere or not fulsome enough. The implication that "Japan" as a body denies such crimes is also misleading since there are large and significant groups in Japanese public life that are very conscious of the burden of Japan's war crimes, including liberal academics, leftist teachers' unions, and parts of the press. However, it is politically useful to the Chinese to maintain the impression that there is a monolithic Japanese sense of denial when it comes to the record on World War II.

Furthermore, this stance is supported by the fact that there are uncomfortably large numbers of Japanese who do indeed seek to downplay the atrocities of the war years. The success of Kobayashi Yoshinori's graphic novels of the 1990s, which have sold hundreds of thousands of copies, shows the popularity of revisionism in the wider culture: For example, his *Senso-ron* (*On War*) attempted to rehabilitate the Asia-Pacific war as a war of liberation from Western imperialism.

The current Japanese administration under Abe has made a number of unwise gestures that have enabled the Chinese to claim the rhetorical high ground on occasion. In late 2013, the prime minister's visit to the Yasukuni Shrine in Tokyo, which contains memorials to convicted war criminals, led the Chinese ambassador to the United Kingdom to refer to the shrine as the Horcrux of Japanese politics (a reference to objects used by the evil wizard in the *Harry Potter* series, Lord Voldemort, to achieve immortality, with the clear implication that Abe was the new Voldemort). Ill-considered comments by Foreign Minister Taro Aso about the need to learn from the changing of the Weimar constitution as a way to think about revising the Japanese "peace" constitution of 1948 caused regional unease and Chinese fury. The replacement of a governor of NHK, the national Japanese broadcaster, with a figure who cast doubt on the massacre of civilians at Nanjing ("the Rape of Nanking") in 1937–38 did not inspire confidence in the government's judgment; the new

governor also claimed that Japan had actually been dragged into war by the actions of Chiang and his Nationalist government.

AMBIVALENT MEMORIES

One reason that there is public space for some Japanese to try to revise views about the wartime period is that there is more ambivalence about Japan's war record in Asia as a whole than in China specifically. Here once again there is a clear difference with Europe: While right-wing fringe politicians (even elected ones) occasionally speak with nostalgia about the era of the Third Reich, rehabilitation of Hitler's regime is not a project with serious advocates anywhere on the continent. However, Japanese occupation is remembered in different ways around Asia today.

In Taiwan, the colonial period under Japan (1895–1945) is regarded by many as a period of modernization rather than outright oppression, and many Taiwanese fought in World War II on the Japanese side. In Southeast Asia, including Myanmar and the Philippines, the Japanese period

is not remembered fondly, but is regarded as one in a series of imperialist incursions on the way to liberation, rather than as a uniquely heinous case. And even though millions of Indians fought for the British Empire against Japan, Tokyo's

wartime government has been absent from Indian demonology. One of the most notable (if controversial) figures of the independence movement, Subhas Chandra Bose, fought with Japan in the hope of liberating India from the British Empire. Today, he is regarded by many Indians as a hero in the liberation struggle, particularly in his native Bengal (Calcutta's airport is named after him). The anti-Japanese sentiment that unites China is not always easily exportable to the rest of Asia.

However, one country that certainly shares doubts about Japan is another important US ally in the region: South Korea. Koreans do not harbor friendly memories of the Japanese colonial period, which served to nurture a venomous hatred for Japan that lasted well into the Cold War period. Korean "comfort women," forced into sex work for the Japanese army, have remained an enormous point of contention. There are ironies in the antipathy between the two nations, though. The postwar South Korean state drew significantly on Japanese colonial models (Korean *chaebol*, or

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industrial conglomerates, bear an uncanny likeness to the *zaibatsu* of prewar Japan); during the colonial period, there were collaborationist groups that worked with the occupiers, as well as numerous Koreans who signed up for the Japanese armed forces.

South Korea is an intriguing bellwether for the changing affiliations in the region. A decade ago, there was a notable softening in the cultural relations between Japan and South Korea, as K-pop and Korean soap operas became big hits in Japan in a way that would have been unthinkable a generation earlier. Yet although it is an American ally, South Korea has in the past two decades grown increasingly close to China, with both trade and emotional affinities strengthening (if varying at times). In 2013, Chinese authorities supported the erection in Harbin of a statue commemorating the young Korean nationalist who in 1909 assassinated Ito Hirobumi, a former Japanese prime minister. China's backing for the statue played well in Seoul and very badly in Tokyo. South Korea has also supported China in objecting strongly to Abe's visits to the Yasukuni Shrine.

UNJUSTIFIED ALARM?

What does this mean for relations in the region? There is little prospect of fundamental political realignments in the immediate future. For instance, pique between Japan and South Korea over a statue would hardly be sufficient to

detach either of those countries from the American embrace. Nor would a warming between China and South Korea lead to a lessening of Beijing's desire to prop up the North Korean regime (China, unlike the United States, is far less worried about a nuclear North Korea than it is about a reunified American-oriented state on its borders).

The Japanese turn toward constitutional revision under Abe provides a rhetorical basis for China to claim alarm about Tokyo's intentions—and to cite the views of countries such as South Korea in defense of its own position. But there is no real cause for panic.

Even with constitutional change, there is no prospect of Japan once again becoming a power with aggressive military aims, and Chinese rhetoric about the rise of 1940s-style Japanese militarism uses a historical analogy that does not have real substance. Japanese political culture has changed fundamentally since 1945, and Japan's status as a US ally means that Washington has mechanisms to lower the temperature if Tokyo tries to raise it.

Abe's rhetoric, combined with an unfortunate rise in the prominence of the right wing in parts of Japan's public culture, gives more credence to the Chinese claims of Japanese aggression than the reality deserves. The problem is that perceptions have a way of becoming reality if they are not countered. The Chinese and Japanese fighter planes and warships skirmishing off the disputed Diaoyu/Senkaku islands demonstrate that point quite vividly.

USE AND ABUSE OF HISTORY

Historical analogies have been flowing as analysts seek to understand the nature of the tensions among the East Asian players. Is the situation analogous to Europe in 1914, as Abe himself recently suggested, or Asia in 1941? Neither analogy is really accurate. In both cases, there were powers (Germany in the first case, Japan in the second) that sought classic imperialist expansion on the mainland of their respective continents (both fueled by racial/Social Darwinist ideology). But China's rise and the pushback in the region need to be understood on their own terms rather than through unsatisfactory analogies.

In one sense, China appears part of a wider trend within Asia, each country reading its own history into contemporary geopolitics in a heavily blinkered way. Thus the current Japanese leadership (differently from some of its predecessors)

From the archives
of *Current History*...

"In many ways, every successive generation of reformers or revolutionaries has been dedicated to this same search. Methods have changed; objectives have remained about the same. The aim has been to rebuild the power and strength of the Chinese state; whether it was to be an empire, a republic, or a Communist regime was in reality secondary to this supreme purpose—a method, rather than a goal."

C.P. FitzGerald

"The Origin of the Chinese Revolution"
September 1966

HISTORY IN THE MAKING
100
years
1914 - 2014

seems to have little sense of how its rhetoric is received in the region. Even the common experience of the anti-imperialist struggle several decades ago has produced little shared historical understanding among East Asian countries.

Yet in some important ways China is different from its neighbors in its use of history. First, its sheer size, geographically and demographically, means that its policies and mindsets will create effects that smaller powers cannot hope to reproduce. Then there is the difference in regime types: The states with which China has to engage, and with which it is in dispute in many cases, are almost all democracies (South Korea, Taiwan, and the Philippines among them). In these polities, even when there is a historically dubious justification for national claims, there are significant voices in the press and policy world that can offer alternative views. This is harder to find in China. For a public speaker in Beijing to come out vocally in favor of Japan's claims to the Diaoyu/Senkaku islands could lead to anything from official condemnation to, in the worst scenario,

arrest. Academic and journalistic voices simply do not have leeway to speak out against fixed government positions regarding the national interest.

The one certainty is that the disputes over history in the region will grow in significance over the next few years. It is now almost beyond doubt that the world is facing serious attempts to realign the East Asian order. China has not yet worked out precisely what type of power it seeks in the region, but it is determined that it will have greater influence than it enjoys at present, and it will use historical justifications to make its case.

The American "pivot to Asia," even if it is often more rhetorical than substantive, indicates a clear determination on the part of the leading power in the region to maintain its position, along with its long-standing allies and some more recent and surprising ones such as Vietnam. Whether it is the memories of Japanese colonial officials and their assassins, or revisionist views of who was responsible for victory in World War II, Asia's turbulent twentieth-century history is unlikely to disappear from public view in the twenty-first. ■