In Search of Japan's Place in the World

By Toshihiro Nakayama

On August 15th, Japan commemorated the 75th anniversary of the end of World War II in Nippon Budōkan Hall, which incidentally, is renowned as a venue where epic live rock albums were recorded. The Beatles were at the Budōkan in 1966. Deep Purple, Kiss, and Cheap Trick recorded live albums there at the height of their career. No less than 30 years after the Pacific War, western rock bands were routinely visiting Japan, performing to sold-out crowds. By then, Japan was considered to be a staunch member of Western democracies. Yet there were, and still are, outstanding issues regarding Japan's actions during the war.

This year's remembrance wasn't all that different from other—the effect of the coronavirus pandemic notwithstanding. Usually, around 6,000 people would attend the ceremony, but this year, there were only 540 attendees. After a minute of silent prayer at noon, the Emperor Naruhito delivered a solemn speech expressing his deep sense of remorse.

Since 1945, the month of August has been one of remembrance for the Japanese people. There are Peace Memorial Ceremonies at both Hiroshima and Nagasaki. On August 15th, we commemorate

the day the War ended, 75 years since Emperor Hirohito delivered his message of the acceptance of the unconditional surrender on the Jewel Voice Broadcast (Gyokuon-hōsō). The pre-recorded speech was aired at noon with Emperor delivering the message of surrender himself.

Some have cynically mocked the "August journalism," in which Japanese media would shower Japanese public with war-related stories, mainly focusing on how tragic the war experience was. The criticism against "August journalism" should not necessarily be seen as a rise in nationalist sentiment in Japan. It is more of a criticism towards its routineness. The reason why the Japanese media dare not break the mold is because many were complicit in the war effort. Liberal outlets such as Asahi Shinbun were no exception. The mindset which resulted in "August journalism" became the heart and soul of Japanese journalism in the period after 1945, with good reason. For many school-aged kids, "August journalism" was literally part of their summer break. Scenes from the ceremony aired live where adults would wear black suits in the heat of the summer is deeply engrained in our collective visual memory.

Yet this "August journalism," which has become almost synonymous to seasonal tradition, has been losing steam in recent years. After all, 75 years has led to generational change. According to the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, nearly 85 percent of the entire Japanese population was born after the war. The average age of those with first-hand war experience is about 82 years old.

For Japan, August 15th has been almost exclusively been about the past. It has not been about assessing history with an eye to the future, since August 15th is a day of remorse. By reflecting on its history with the mindset of "never again," Japan has actually prevented itself from thinking about the past rationally. August 15th and the weeks preceding it are a very emotional period in Japan. Sato Takukmi of Kyoto University has argued that it might be a good idea to consider August 15th as a day of remorse and prayer and alternatively establish a day, possibly September 2nd, a V-J Day, in which we might collectively converse and think about the past with a mindset of looking forward.

At the 70th anniversary of the end of the war five years ago, Prime Minister Abe Shinzo issued a statement making clear Japan's intention to remain a peaceful country with a deep understanding of the past wrongdoings, but also with a firm conviction of its democratic values. Abe's statement made clear that Japan does not accept historical revisionism in which the country tries to justify its past. At the same time, the statement made clear that Japan would define its role not simply by atoning from past wrongdoings, but that it would also actively pursue a constructive role.

This statement, which was formally adopted as a Cabinet decision, resonated well with the Japanese assessment of the war and what has happened since. Criticized by some quarters for not being remorseful enough compared to the Murayama Statement issued at the 50th anniversary, the Abe statement makes clear that Japan will be reminding itself of the suffering it caused as a result of Imperial Japan's aggressions.

The statement declares that "upon the innocent people did our country inflict immeasurable damage and suffering. History is harsh. What is done cannot be undone. Each and every one of them had his or her life, dream, and beloved

family. When I squarely contemplate this obvious fact, even now, I find myself speechless and my heart is rent with the utmost grief."

The 2015 statement has brought about a shift in Japanese thinking about its role in the region. It could also be argued that there were already shifts taking place in regard to Japan's role in the region, and what has been happening in the region in recent years. The Abe statement was an accurate reflection of that shift.

Japan is known to be a secular society. People may be spiritual in their own way, but they are areligious, by and large. In its place, post-war pacifism in Japan can arguably be seen as a civic religion of sorts. The sacred text upholding the quasi-religious belief has been the post-war constitution espousing pacifism, with constitutional scholars acting as guardians of the holy text. It is not an exaggeration to say that international relations scholars and national security experts expressing their views on the peace constitution have been seen as inappropriate, since they lack the expert knowledge of the canon. Some are beginning to challenge that structure. Academics such as Shinoda Hideaki, a peace building expert at the Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, have been ferocious in shaking the dominance of the constitutional scholars. Yet for others, the constitution remains a text that must not to be infringed upon. The debate regarding constitutional reform and Japan's geopolitical realities have resulted in the establishment of two irreconcilable worlds.

One position is centered on post-war pacifism, which has dominated the public discourse. The other stance reflects the realist approach by the government and a small group of security experts focused on the Japan-U.S. security alliance. The position in support of the security alliance was pushed through without sufficient public discussion. As a result, the narrative that the Japanese people's impassioned aspiration for peace sustained the peaceful reconstruction of postwar Japan through sheer will.

When the idealists were confronted with the realists supporting the esoteric Japan-U.S. alliance, their response was to question the existence of foreign troops in a sovereign nation. Granted, even at the height of the Cold War, there were negative consequence for framing the Japan-U.S. alliance as a 'military alliance.' In the lexicon of Japanese public discourse, a 'realist' meant supporting the alliance, which meant being a conservative.

By the 2010s, however, the divide between the idealists and realists began to merge to the advantage of the alliance. Prime Minster Hatoyama Yukio's government forced those questioning the alliance's need to realize that an alternative was fantasy, and that an equilateral triangle security relationship between Japan, the United States, and China was not possible. At the same time, China's hegemonic ambitions forced Japan to consider the fallacy of an "engagement-first" policy before the United States and others did. Constant threats posed by North Korea were alarming as well. But it was increasing signs of U.S. retrenchment that forced Japan to realize that there was actually no viable alternative. Instead, convincing the United States to remain a resident power in the Indo-Pacific has become Japan's priority.

This does not necessarily mean that Japan will go ahead and amend the constitution. However,

the constitution is no longer the sacred text as it had once been. For the first time in over seven decades, we may finally put an end to the decades of futile theological debates that have dominated the debates on the constitution. At the same time, it does not mean that Japan has totally given up on relations with China. Japan feels acute pressure from China's aggressive behavior, and yet Tokyo is not comfortable in joining the ideological crusade against China because of its geographic proximity.

Although Japan has no choice but to adapt to whomever Americans vote for as their president come November, neither the Obama presidency nor the Trump presidency bolstered the sense that United States is fully committed to remaining a Pacific power.

It is not a coincidence that a prime minster whose intention it is to pull Japan out of the shadows of its past is also intent on deepening the Japan-U.S. alliance further. The so-called "autonomous national defense (jishu bōei)," a manifestation of the desire to take the route of becoming a full-blown military power, is the polar opposite of the pacifist fantasy, while also being itself a fantasy. It took Japan some time to learn to live with the alliance. The irony is that it came at the moment when the world is becoming unsure about U.S. commitment.

Change in Japan is notoriously incremental. However, what has happened in recent years in the minds of the Japanese people is quite significant. A more assertive Japan is not an "Abe phenomenon," but it actually represents more of a structural shift in the understanding of Japan's role in the region and beyond. An important element in this shift is the change in Japan's relations to the past. Prime Minster Abe wanted to hand the next generation of young Japanese a future without being haunted by the past. It is something Japan as a nation must not forget and will force Japan to act responsibly. However, after 75 years, it should not be constrained by it either.

Understanding the past in the context of the present is an extremely difficult task. Many Japanese think the 70th anniversary statement has done that reasonably well. Hopefully, it will be an apt launching pad for Japan to leap into the future.

Toshihiro Nakayama is a former Japan Scholar at the Wilson Center and a professor at Keio University in Japan.