

Contemporary Political Dynamics of Japanese Nationalism

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This essay examines why nationalism seems to be on the rise in Asia and beyond at a time when globalization is also becoming more salient, by focusing on the political dynamics that propelled both changes in Japan in the post-Cold War era. The more open and liberal type of nationalism that appeared in Japan in the 1980s to the mid-1990s was followed by an abrupt revisionist backlash beginning in the late 1990s. This illiberal, authoritarian turn in contemporary nationalism was confirmed and accelerated during the premiership of Koizumi Jun'ichiro (2001-06), when further neoliberal reforms were simultaneously implemented. I argue that the New Right transformation of Japanese politics—the combined ascendancy of economic liberalism and political illiberalism—is the driving force of contemporary nationalism in Japan.

Jingoism and Revisionism

According to annual surveys conducted by the Cabinet Office, in recent years negative sentiments vis-à-vis China and South Korea have risen sharply in Japan. The 2014 survey revealed that 93% per cent of the Japanese respondents have negative sentiments towards China, as it appears to be a growing threat to Japan. The rise took place in two stages, first in the mid-2000s, during the government of Koizumi, when he made annual pilgrimages to Yasukuni Shrine that derailed bilateral relations, and then further in the early 2010s as tensions rose over the Senkaku/Diaoyu territorial dispute in the East China Sea.

Regarding Japanese sentiments vis-à-vis South Korea, there was a sharp drop in positive feelings in 2012 as bilateral relations

deteriorated following President Lee Myung-bak's visit to Takeshima/Dokdo islets also subject to competing claims of sovereignty similar to the standoff with China, allegedly out of frustration with the lack of progress in dealing with the "comfort women" (the women who were subjected to sexual slavery in wartime military brothels at the behest of Japanese military authorities) issue. The same 2014 Cabinet Office survey indicates that 66.4 per cent of Japanese harbor negative sentiments towards South Korea.

Considering the fact that negative sentiments against China were consistently around 20 per cent until the June 4th Incident in 1989, while those against South Korea less than 40 per cent until as recently as 2011, these are worrisome developments that raise concerns about the future of Northeast Asia.

Moreover, a study of influential conservative monthly magazines, *Shokun!* and *Seiron*, also confirms similar trends of growing antipathy in the media. Articles with titles that include such words as *han-nichi* (anti-Japan), invariably in relation to China and Korea, dramatically increased in the late 1990s, and continued to rise sharply through the 2000s (Jomaru, 2011, 390-392). The popular Manga *Ken Kanryu* (*Hating the Korean Wave Manga*) published in 2005 broke the hate-mongering taboo, and spawned a countless number of similar publications, whose principal message was hatred of Korea and China. Today, sensationalist books and magazines that fan anti-China and/or anti-Korea sentiments have become an alarmingly ubiquitous feature of Japanese bookstores, and indeed, commuter trains, where the adverts of populist weeklies

persistently exhibit hate messages targeting these two nations.



Zaitokukai Demonstrations Target ethnic Koreans in Japan

While there has been no violence or riots against the Chinese or the Koreans in Japan in recent years, hate demonstrations against the Zainichi Korean population have become a prominent social issue, particularly since the establishment of Zaitokukai (short hand for Zainichi Tokken o Yurusanai Shimin no Kai, Citizens' Group Against Special Rights for Koreans in Japan in 2007. "Ordinary" Japanese, who previously were content to consume hate-mongering publications and spread jingoistic messages on the Internet against the Zainichi population subsequently took to the streets and spewed invective while terrorizing ethnic Korean permanent residents of Japan (Noma 2013; Sakamoto 2011). Zainichi are targeted based on groundless beliefs that they are accorded special privileges and because they are the collateral damage of worsening relations with South Korea over unresolved historical grievances and clashing territorial claims, anger over North Korea's abduction of Japanese nationals, and anxieties generated by Pyongyang's missile and nuclear weapons program.

Secondly, there has been a spectacular ascent

of historical revisionism in mainstream politics and media. The sharp rise in hate-mongering articles in conservative media mentioned above was directly triggered by reports in 1996 that all Ministry of Education approved history textbooks for use in junior high schools from 1997 included references to "comfort women." In a virulent reaction to this development, revisionist nationalists in politics and in the media launched an organized revisionist counterattack. Revisionists champion an exculpatory and valorizing narrative of Japan's wartime actions and seek to revise the prevailing mainstream consensus that they condemn as 'masochistic' for being too critical of Japan's conduct.

Thus, in January 1997, Tsukurukai (short hand name for Atarashii Rekishi Kyōkasho o Tsukurukai, Japan Society for History Textbook Reform) was launched by rightwing media figures and academics, while in February, the late Nakagawa Shoichi and Abe Shinzo led a group of junior revisionist politicians to launch the Young Parliamentarians Association that Consider Japan's Future and History Education, and in May, Japan Conference (Nippon Kaigi) was established as a powerful lobby group that brought together neonationalist intellectuals and business leaders with the religious right (Shintoist groups as well as new religions). Nippon Kaigi also has a parliamentary arm with members mostly hailing from the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), the party that has dominated Japanese politics since it was established in 1955. This flowering of the revisionist movement on multiple fronts came to a head in 1997. From the very beginning, such rightwing/conservative media conglomerates as Fuji-Sankei group (that publishes Seiron as well as Sankei newspaper) and Bungei Shunju (that used to publish Shokun! among others) provided a media platform for these concerted efforts (Tawara 1997; Sasagase et al 2015; McNeill 2015).

Although serious scholars in the late 1990s

dismissed revisionist claims as baseless, and in conflict with available evidence, by the time Abe succeeded Koizumi as Prime Minister in 2006, all reference to the “comfort women” disappeared from the main texts of the government-approved textbooks.

One key point that needs to be made at this juncture is that these two phenomena—jingoism and revisionism—are essentially elite-driven processes rather than reflecting grassroots sentiments or public opinion. Political and media elites took the lead in fanning negative sentiments against Japan’s neighbors, often, of course, in response to what they considered to be provocations by their Chinese and Korean counterparts. However, when we look at the chronology of these developments, it is evident that xenophobia among the Japanese people was instigated by the political and media elites

While it is entirely appropriate to ask in what sense the “top-down” xenophobia (anti-China and anti-Korea sentiments in particular) and historical revisionism discussed here constitute “nationalism,” these are clearly worrisome trends that stoke risings tension between Japan and its East Asian neighbors, where anti-Japanese sentiments are a touchstone of “nationalism.”



Revisionists seek to rehabilitate the inglorious wartime past

Neo/liberal Path to Nationalism

The rise of contemporary nationalism since the late 1990s is all the more curious once we consider how it all came about in the first place. After all, Japan was seemingly set on a steady path to neoliberal internationalism since the 1980s.

When the Basic Treaty with South Korea was signed in 1965, the Joint Communiqué noted the “regrets” (ikan) and “deep remorse” (fukaku hansei) expressed by the Japanese side and similarly, when diplomatic ties between the People’s Republic of China and Japan were established in 1972, the Joint Communiqué stated that, “The Japanese side is keenly conscious of the responsibility for the serious damage that Japan caused in the past to the Chinese people through war, and deeply reproaches itself” (sekinin wo tsukanshi, fukaku hansei suru) (Hattori 2015, 9-10; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 1972).

While leaders of the countries at the time

considered these expressions sufficient and appropriate, the issue of war memory gained in salience and became a diplomatic issue in the shape of the history textbook controversy that erupted in 1982 over alleged changes in the wording of Japanese descriptions of its invasion of China (that turned out to be incorrect). In response, Japan issued the 1982 Miyazawa Statement on History Textbooks by Chief Cabinet Secretary Miyazawa Kiichi noting that the “spirit in the Japan-ROK Joint Communiqué and the Japan-China Joint Communiqué naturally should also be respected in Japan’s school education and government textbook authorization. Recently, however, the Republic of Korea, China, and others have been criticizing some descriptions in Japanese textbooks. From the perspective of building friendship and goodwill with neighboring countries, Japan will pay due attention to these criticisms and make corrections at the Government’s responsibility” (Chief Cabinet Secretary of Japan 1982).

This led to the adoption of the so-called “neighboring countries” clause in the Ministry of Education criteria for textbook approval that stipulates that “due consideration should be made from the point of view of international understanding and international cooperation when dealing with modern history issues that involve neighboring Asian countries.” Improvements have since been made in history textbooks, but in contemporary Japan this clause is hotly contested by the revisionist right; by 2015 PM Abe has all but abandoned it.

On August 15, 1985, marking the 40th anniversary of the end of the Second World War, then Prime Minister Nakasone Yasuhiro paid an official visit to the Yasukuni Shrine. The Chinese government protested his visit, noting that the Class-A war criminals that were found guilty of orchestrating Japan’s rampage in Asia are enshrined there. By 1986, Nakasone decided to suspend future visits to the shrine in consideration of the Chinese criticisms and

subsequently admonished Prime Minister Koizumi not to visit, arguing that doing so undermines national interests.

What is crucial to understand here is that Northeast Asia, and indeed, the whole world, was going through a period of liberal opening in the 1980s as the Cold War was nearing its end. China embarked on its extensive economic reforms in 1978, and they were further accelerated by the mid-1980s. This led to a somewhat more pluralistic society and political leadership—a country that was now rather different from the time when Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai held power. Similarly, the democratization movement was flaring up in Korea throughout the 1980s, resulting in the June 29 Declaration of democratization in 1987, as the military dictators lost their grip on power. Even in the Soviet Union, Mikhail Gorbachev came to power in 1985 and began the process of perestroika (restructuring) and glasnost (opening, transparency) that ushered in the dissolution of the Soviet Union. China, however, crushed the Tiananmen Square pro-democracy movement in 1989 as its leaders resorted to violence in a bid to prevent a Soviet-type scenario, deny popular demands for representative government and preserve the communist party’s monopoly of power. These developments indicate that even in authoritarian regimes, the government was no longer able to fully control popular demands and address public concerns, and that their polities were becoming more pluralistic, and thus, less stable.

It was in this context that Japan under Nakasone was also pushing through neoliberal reforms with the professed ambition to play a stronger leadership role in the liberal economic order. Japan was part of the 1985 Plaza Accord that triggered the rapid appreciation of the yen (which in turn unleashed the bubble economy in Japan), and a key participant in the Uruguay Round of multinational trade negotiations since 1986. Following the June 4th Incident, Japan

joined the western sanctions against China, but it also became the first country to lift them, with Prime Minister Kaifu Toshiki visiting Beijing in 1991, followed by the Emperor's visit in 1992.

Beyond the economy, the 1990-91 Persian Gulf Crisis tested Japan's liberal internationalist orientation as Iraq invaded Kuwait. Japan's "checkbook diplomacy," contributing \$13 billion towards the coalition campaign but committing no troops, drew U.S. criticism for ducking the risks of combat due to constitutional constraints on its military forces. As the Cold War was coming to an end, there was growing pressure from the U.S. and its European allies for Japan to play a leadership role not merely in the global economy, but also in the security arena. Overcoming strong political opposition, the government succeeded in enacting the Peacekeeping Operation Law in 1992 allowing the dispatch of military forces in UN-sanctioned peacekeeping efforts.

Japanese political leaders at the time, including the nationalist Nakasone, thought that Japan's prestige would benefit significantly from military normalization. They also understood that reconciliation with the former victims of Japan's militarist past, most particularly, China and South Korea, was an absolute prerequisite to realize those ambitions. This is why they were prepared to go a long way in trying to come to grips with the past. It is possible to say that even ardent nationalist sentiments during this period displayed distinctly liberal characteristics.

Thus, when the first victim of Japan's comfort women system appeared in front of the TV cameras in 1991 calling for the Japanese state to assume its responsibility, the government conducted an investigation including interviews with former comfort women that led to the 1993 Kono Statement (Kono Yohei was Chief Cabinet Secretary of Japan in 1993) and subsequently established the Asian Women's

Fund in 1995 to provide redress to these aging victims. Also in 1993, Prime Minister Hosokawa Morihiro became the first Japanese prime minister to publicly acknowledge that Japan was engaged in a "war of aggression" in the Second World War (Hosokawa 2010, pp. 30-31). This liberal trends regarding war responsibility culminated in the Murayama Statement of 1995 acknowledging and apologizing for Japanese wartime aggression (Murayama Tomiichi was the socialist Prime Minister in 1995 in a coalition government with the LDP).

Illiberal, Revisionist Turn

The liberal opening up of societies around the world continued in the post-Cold War era, and it seemed as if the vexing history issues that emerged were going to be resolved by the same liberal political elites. Liberalization of political systems, however, also meant that liberal elites were no longer in full control of social demands, or in fact, even of government policies. The quest for international reconciliation over history issues turned into an unpredictable process involving multiple actors that are not neatly divided across national lines. As mentioned in section 1 above, certain political and media elites manipulated anti-China/anti-Korea sentiments and historical revisionism for their own purposes from the late 1990s. Indeed, nationalists' grandstanding in the late 1990s onward has intensified tensions across borders, reinforcing nationalist discourse in their respective countries at the expense of moderates.

Several different factors coalesced to further the illiberal, revisionist turn. First, after more than fifty years since WWII, the late 1990s saw a rapid generational turnover among political elites, with those with direct personal experience of the war replaced by younger politicians with no such experience who were building political careers in the post-Cold War era in which there was no apparent rival

ideology to neoliberalism. In many cases, they were also born and raised in privilege as hereditary scions of political dynasties. These new elites often opposed expressions of war guilt and contrition, and disavowed the reconciliation initiatives of previous generations. They are also prone to exhibit a rather more cynical, neoliberal worldview, according to which self-interested actors vie to get ahead at the expense of each other in domestic politics as well as international relations.

Tellingly, while Miyazawa in 1991 was the first postwar prime minister to hail from a political dynasty (he had also served as an elite bureaucrat like many of his predecessors), since 1996 to date no less than seven of the ten prime ministers came from political dynasties. The oligarchic tendency becomes even more striking when one considers the fact that of these hereditary prime ministers, Abe, Fukuda Yasuo, Asō Tarō, and Hatoyama Yukio are, in fact, sons or grandsons of postwar prime ministers. While not all of the hereditary politicians share a revisionist outlook, their predominance, particularly at the very top, does point to the emergence of a privileged ruling class. In fact, it is highly ironic that in Northeast Asia, where “nationalism” has raised regional tensions to unprecedented levels, Japan and its neighbors, China, South Korea, and North Korea, are all currently led by hereditary politicians.

Significantly, the rightward political shift in Japan in the 21st century coincides with economic decline, creating a volatile context for a rising tide of nationalism. Japan faces prolonged economic stagnation, relative decline, and mushrooming public debt, in addition to growing disparities between rich and poor that undermine the norms and values that have been a foundation of postwar national cohesion. In other words, the oligarchic political tendency is also evident in the economic sphere, in a country known for, and

proud of, its egalitarian society. Insecurity and precarity hit the lower strata of society and youth especially hard, leading to increased suicide, divorce, non-marriage, deflation and lower productivity because firms no longer invest in training disposable workers. In this acute social crisis, political leaders sought to divert attention to “external enemies.”



A poster for the Rally Against Precarity

Again, on this front Japan was not alone or unique, as the predominance of neoliberal economic policies everywhere meant that the social fabric was torn apart as oligarchic governments often lacked the fiscal resources, or indeed political will, to ensure minimum standards of national wellbeing. “Nationalism” or xenophobic campaigns provided a “no-cost” alternative to provision of adequate social security, enabling the ruling elites to dodge their responsibilities and offer a false sense of national unity that elided the marginalization and expansion of the “have-nots.” As Dr. Samuel Johnson famously remarked as early as 1775, patriotism is ‘the last refuge of a scoundrel’ while in contemporary Japan it constitutes conservatives’ palliative for what ails the nation.

Last, but not least, these processes were accelerated by neoliberal internationalist policy orientation that we noted earlier. There are four key elements in this process. First, since

the First-Past-The-Post (FPTP) electoral system was introduced in 1994, the LDP became a much more centralized party. Diversity of internal opinions that used to moderate (or dilute, depending on one's point of view) the overall party stance, and thus, offered a thriving environment for consensus-seeking moderates, was replaced by the predominance of uncompromising conservatives with extreme views. Second, electoral system reform was soon followed by administrative reform that centralized power in the prime minister's office. This confluence of developments facilitated the emergence of a "top-down" style of governance that was inspired by the neoliberal, corporate model. Third, electoral system reform and the party realignment that ensued brought about the demise of the Left, namely the Japan Socialist Party, that used to provide effective opposition and served as a check on the reactionary inclinations of LDP governments. When Murayama, the Socialist prime minister, stepped down in 1996, moderates in the LDP also lost their pivotal position in the evolving coalition politics. Fourth, by 1998, it became evident that the new main rival for the LDP-led government was the neoliberal Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ); overall, these rivals for power occupy the same ideological niche. After Prime Minister Obuchi Keizō failed to spend his way out of economic stagnation, a new neoliberal consensus emerged between the DPJ and Koizumi's LDP that signaled the beginning of an era of ideational politics. This marked the end of the era of interest politics in Japan, when the government had ample resources to satisfy its supporters and silence opponents. The ideas, ideologies, and identities that the LDP would effectively mobilize in the new era were nationalistic, revisionist, and even xenophobic to a degree.

The late 1990s thus served as a transition period when these changes in the illiberal, revisionist direction were emerging, but it was not until the 2000s under Koizumi that these

changes accelerated.

Xenophobia, Revisionism, and Authoritarianism under Koizumi and Abe

While there is no denying Koizumi's strong charisma and mastery of political theatrics, it would be a mistake to overlook the institutional underpinning that was put into place by his predecessors in analyzing the sources of his effectiveness as a political leader. Koizumi was fortunate in being able to make use of the newly concentrated power afforded him as the leader of the LDP and as prime minister to marginalize critics, promote loyal followers, and propel his agenda. His neoliberal agenda of "structural reform with no sacred cows" was not always popular within the party, but he shrewdly made up for it by fanning and exploiting "nationalistic" sentiments. His annual visits to the Yasukuni Shrine were a case in point. There is no record of interest on his part in Yasukuni before or after he served as prime minister (unlike Abe, who deeply cares about it). Koizumi nevertheless claimed that the visits were a matter of his "heart" and dismissed Chinese and Korean criticisms as domestic interference. He thus shrewdly invoked nationalist symbols to appear as a resolute leader and advance his economic program, a marked contrast to PM Abe who invokes economic reform to divert criticism from his revisionist agenda targeting wartime history and the constitution along with ramping up Japan's security profile.



Koizumi’s “Children”-1st time elected politicians-obediently follow him to Yasukuni Shrine

The hardcore nationalists, who disliked Koizumi’s privatization and deregulation reforms that they viewed as a sellout to U.S. corporate interests, nevertheless cheered him as he stubbornly refused to cave in to Chinese and Korean criticisms and continued to visit Yasukuni (Nakano 2006, 403). The New Right technique Koizumi employed replicates Margaret Thatcher’s mobilization of nationalist support for the Falklands War when her monetarist economic policies were proving deeply unpopular in the early 1980s. Ultimately, as Koizumi’s signature reform project of postal privatization encountered stiff opposition from within the LDP, he took the unusually authoritarian route of firing uncooperative ministers from the cabinet, expelling from the party Diet members opposed to his scheme, and called a snap election for the lower house to counter the upper house’s rejection of his bill. Such a move on his part would not have been possible without the centralized power conferred on him by the political and administrative reforms of the 1990s.

One should note here also that under Koizumi there was a decisive shift away from the internationalist foreign policy orientation that Japan adopted since the 1980s. The Koizumi

premiership in Japan overlapped with the presidency of George W. Bush in the U.S. In a striking departure from prevailing assumptions that Japan needs to reconcile with China and Korea as a pre-condition for military normalization, Koizumi even went so far as to claim that “There is no such thing as U.S.-Japan relationship that is too close. Some people maintain that maybe we should pay more attention to other issues and that it would probably be better to strengthen relations with other countries. I do not share such views. The U.S.-Japan relationship, the closer, more intimate it is, the easier it is for us to establish better relations with China, with South Korea, and other nations in Asia” (Prime Minister of Japan 2005). The Bush Administration perceived Koizumi’s instrumental use of revisionism as “healthy nationalism” allowing Japan to assume a greater, if subordinate, military role in the alliance framework, damaging the prospects for reconciliation with its former victims.

Given the loss of economic opportunities, however, the Japanese business community ensured that when Koizumi finally stepped down, his successor, Abe, would work to rebuild Japan’s ties with China by refraining from visiting Yasukuni Shrine. Abe duly acted pragmatically at the time (though he later said that he regretted not having visited Yasukuni as prime minister), and in any case, his first stint at the premiership lasted only for a year as he suffered a humiliating upper house election defeat in 2007 at the hands of the then ascendant DPJ. Within that year, however, Abe changed the Basic Law on Education to include “love of country” as a goal of education, upgraded the Defense Agency to a full-fledged ministry, and set the rules for conducting an eventual referendum for constitutional revision.

When Abe returned to power in December 2012, he faced a rather different set of political conditions. The rival DPJ suffered a catastrophic defeat, while there were a couple

of new parties that were positioning themselves even further to the right of the LDP on many issues and were indeed willing to collaborate to advance this agenda. Abe also successfully silenced potential dissent from big business by giving a boost to stock prices with the reflationary policies of “Abenomics,” devaluing the yen to make Japanese exports more competitive, and advocating restarts of Japan’s idled nuclear reactors.

Abe also gained the enthusiastic backing of the Sankei and Yomiuri newspapers, which acted as media cheerleaders for his policies and pit bulls for his critics. Having suffered from negative media coverage in his first premiership, Abe sought to tighten his grip on the media, placing a trusted henchman with no media experience as the head of Japan’s flagship public broadcaster, NHK.

Once the upper house election of summer 2013 was out of the way, with a handsome victory for Abe’s ruling coalition, he revealed his true colors by setting up the National Security Council, pushing through the highly controversial Designated Secrets Law that gave largely unchecked discretionary power to government officials to designate documents as state secrets, and visiting Yasukuni Shrine on the first year anniversary of his second premiership. In July 2014, he further revised the official government interpretation of the constitution to enable Japan to exercise the right of collective self-defense by a mere cabinet decision – something that successive postwar LDP governments had repeatedly acknowledged would require constitutional amendment.

The prospects for revision have been strengthened by Abe’s 2016 electoral victory, but there are no longer doubts about Abe’s real agenda as Abenomics increasingly seems to have promised more than it has delivered and, because its main success is boosting stock market prices, critics dismiss it as welfare for

the wealthy. Abe has also tried to position himself as an advocate for womenomics, but here again the rhetoric exceeds the reality. He reshuffled his cabinet in September 2014 with his media spin masters emphasizing the record number of five women ministers (plus a woman policy chief for the LDP), but nearly all of these women politicians were better known for their far-right revisionist views than for their feminist policy orientation. Indeed, Yamatani Eriko (National Police and Disaster Management Minister), Takaichi Sanae (Internal Affairs and Communications Minister), and Inada Tomomi (LDP Policy Chief), in particular, were notorious for their anti-feminist and extreme revisionist views, in addition to dubious ties to Neo-Nazi and/or xenophobic activists.

The revisionists launched orchestrated, vitriolic attacks in 2014 against the liberal-leaning Asahi newspaper after it retracted a handful of articles on the “comfort women” from the 1990s that were based in part on false testimony. Abe also seized the opportunity to attack the critical newspaper and served as cheerleader-in-chief even as emboldened extremists issued death threats against a university that employed one of the former Asahi journalists who wrote some of the “comfort women” stories that were not in fact based on the false testimony. This McCarthyism-style campaign by reactionary nationalists threatens press and academic freedoms in Japan while intimidating moderates. (Uemura with Yamaguchi 2015).

When Abe called a snap election in December 2014 to consolidate his hold on power, the LDP’s official campaign pledge included a passage that said, “We shall act to restore Japan’s honor and national interest by presenting firm counterarguments against groundless accusations based on falsehood through external communication to the international community,” a thinly veiled reference to its plan to use the Asahi retraction

to challenge the consensus that the “comfort women” were sex slaves (Liberal Democratic Party 2014). This revisionist campaign aims to convey the misleading impression that the whole of the sex slave system was an Asahi fabrication, and rewrite Japan’s shared history with Asia in ways that imperil Japan’s regional interests.

Moreover, Abe pursues this revisionist agenda internationally, as Japanese diplomats in New York sought unsuccessfully to have McGraw-Hill revise its description of the comfort women in an American history textbook (Fackler 2015). This provoked a public relations disaster for Japan and publication of a letter by a group of US-based historians (including eminent scholars such as Carol Gluck and Sheldon Garon) expressing “dismay at recent attempts by the Japanese government to suppress statements in history textbooks both in Japan and elsewhere about the euphemistically named ‘comfort women’ who suffered under a brutal system of sexual exploitation in the service of the Japanese imperial army during World War II” in the newsmagazine of the American Historical Association (Dudden et al. 2015, 33). Since the U.S. government remains firmly opposed to revision of the Kono Statement, Abe and his supporters have conducted hit-and-run attacks against it in the Diet to discredit this mea culpa while denouncing the 1996 UN Coomaraswamy Report on “comfort women” (UN Commission of Human Rights 1996). Revisionists are thus waging a campaign to deny that Japan was responsible for forced recruitment of young women and that the “comfort women” system constituted sexual slavery, again tarnishing the dignity of the nation and its victims.



Choreographing Closer US-Japan Security Ties 2015

Abe’s self-righteous nationalism and strong revisionist streak has alienated neighbors and made Washington increasingly abashed. Even if the Pentagon thinks of Abe as their man in Japan because he has delivered more on America’s longstanding security requests than the rest of Japan’s post-WWII prime ministers combined, he is making himself an awkward partner because nobody can pretend that shirking the burdens of the past is anything but narrow-minded and counterproductive nationalism.

This article is adapted from Nakano Koichi, “Political Dynamics of Contemporary Japanese Nationalism” in Jeff Kingston, ed., *Asian Nationalisms Reconsidered* (Routledge, 2016).

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SPECIAL FEATURE

Nationalism in Japan

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Notes

¹ Neoliberalism refers to a set of “small government” policies, including privatization, deregulation, elimination of trade barriers, and cuts in public expenditure, that generally result in a widening gap between the rich and the poor.

² Only Mori Yoshirō (who comes from a family of local politicians) in the LDP, and Kan Naoto and Noda Yoshihiko from the Democratic Party of Japan served as prime ministers despite lacking family connections in national politics. Abe is counted once even though he served on two separate occasions, 2006-07 and 2012- present.

³ Koizumi’s first cabinet also had five women ministers.