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Japan's Sixtieth

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By Gavan McCormack

How different the 60th anniversaries of the end of World War II in Europe and in Asia. In the former, German participation was taken for granted, and the defeat of Nazism celebrated on all sides as the dawn of liberation. In the latter, it would be inconceivable for the Japanese Government to be invited to participate in commemorative events in Beijing, Seoul, Pyongyang, or elsewhere, as debate over what the war was about continues.

There may be no other country in the world today so much at odds, on questions of history and territory, with all its neighbours as Japan. In South Korea, Asia's most vibrant democracy, 90 per cent of people do not trust Japan; in China, hostility and suspicion is widespread.

The Japanese Government's grand ambition of 2005, elevation to a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council, is opposed not only by all its neighbours but even by the 53-member African Union, despite the flow of aid funds from Japan to Africa, and by the United States, which views with distaste any expansion of the council. While Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro has shown his willingness to do almost anything to win favour in Washington, his requests for something in return tend to be brushed aside.

Looking back over the 60 years, two problems stand out: the question of war responsibility was never satisfactorily resolved, and the question of Japanese identity and direction has been bedevilled by the postwar settlement that locked Japan into a position of long-term subordination to the US and alienation from Asia.

The Tokyo Trial was a flawed resolution of the issue of war responsibility and has little legitimacy in Japan. It is commonly seen as "victor's justice". While the crimes of the defeated enemy were tried, those of the allies (Hiroshima, Nagasaki, etc) were ignored. Furthermore, crimes associated with colonialism (especially Japan's record in Korea and Manchukuo) were ignored; the indictment rested on a charge of conspiracy, dating from 1931 or even earlier. Whereas no historian today thinks there ever was such a conspiracy, the Japanese commander-in-chief, Emperor Hirohito, was given immunity and then imposed at the core of the postwar state (the objection of Australia in particular notwithstanding); the major Japanese crimes committed by unit 731 (Japan's bacteriological and chemical warfare unit) were deliberately covered up; and the justice meted out was exceedingly rough by any standard: one group of A-class prisoners was found guilty and seven of them executed on December 22, 1948, while others of the same batch were released the next morning and went on, some of them to play key roles, one as prime minister. While a token few at the top were thus sacrificed, and the rest freed, heavy punishment was meted out to the small fry, the B and C-class war criminals at the bottom of the system. More than 1000 of them were executed, and when the rest emerged from prison in 1957, A-class war criminal Kishi Nobusuke was prime minister.

Both because of these general deficiencies and because of the devastation of Tokyo and other cities, especially Hiroshima and Nagasaki,

Japan carried into the postwar era a deep sense of victimhood. No Japanese tribunal has ever indicted or punished anyone for any act committed by the Japanese armed forces in the name of the emperor between 1931 and 1945. Those responsible for carrying out countless atrocities in China and elsewhere are free today in Japan, while their equivalents in Europe or elsewhere are hunted to their dying day.

The sole attempt by groups within Japanese society to address questions of unresolved war responsibility, a citizen tribunal (addressing only crimes against women) in December 2000; caused a huge uproar when it returned a "guilty" verdict against the emperor and others. However flawed, the legal framework of admission of Japan's formal war guilt rests on the war crimes trials. The government of Japan accepted their binding character in the San Francisco Treaty of 1951. Some influential voices in Japan today call, however, for rejection of the treaty, insisting that the war was fought for the ideal of liberating Asia. These same forces also call for the rewriting of school texts on history, and revision of the constitution.

It was not until 1995, 50 years after the defeat, that the Japanese Diet, during a brief interlude under a socialist prime minister, accepted responsibility for colonialism and aggression against Asia. Even then, 200 Diet members protested angrily. Since then, opposition has grown steadily.

Just a few weeks ago, more than 300 Diet members called on the Prime Minister to brush aside international protests and continue to worship at the Yasukuni Shrine. (Yasukuni, dedicated to Japan's war dead, including its war leaders, is sometimes represented as an expression of a traditional Japanese religious sense, but is best seen as part of a late 19th-century, Prussian-style, cult of worship of the state, imposed to supplant the traditional religions of Buddhism and Shinto.)

It is not only the events of the 1930s and 1940s but also Japan's identity and role in the future of Asia that is sharply contested. Unlike Germany, the occupation authorities in Japan insisted on the continuity of the postwar with the prewar state, building the new state around the god worshipped by the old one: the emperor. With his retention, imperial Japan's pretensions of uniqueness and superiority lived on, and its separateness from Asia and therefore dependence on the US was structurally determined. The economic rewards for Japan in this arrangement have been huge, but the political costs slowly mount. Bureaucrats in Tokyo who have always given absolute priority to following the United States are today torn between that commitment and the wish to be actively involved in the emerging "Commonwealth of East Asia". Today, even one of Japan's most distinguished elder statesmen (Gotoda Masaharu) describes Japan as a "vassal state" (zokkoku) of the US.

How many more anniversaries of August 15 must pass before Japanese participation is taken for granted in commemorative events at Nanjing, Seoul, Pyongyang, Singapore? Only when it comes to share a common understanding of the past will Japan be able to play a full role, with its neighbours, in building the future of Asia.

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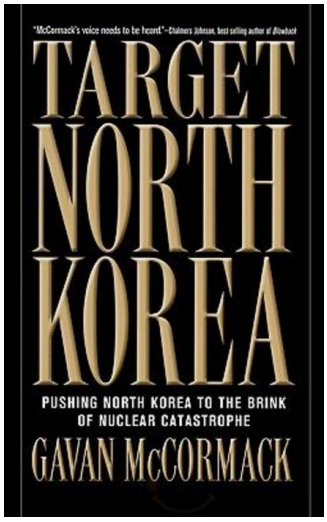

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