

Rethinking Asia's Postwar Settlement

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Imperial Japan's defeat in 1945 ended Tokyo's effort to create a new Asian order under its leadership. Yet in the aftermath of World War II, Japan rebuilt its nation, reorganized its polity into a democracy and in time, emerged as an economic superpower with global influence. Now, amid commemorations on the seventieth anniversary of the war's end, renewed efforts abound throughout Northeast Asia to recall the brutal twentieth century war that laid the foundations of today's Asia, including growing demand from South Korea and China to hold Japan accountable for its wartime actions.

The leaders of Japan, China, and South Korea each seek to transform their nations' identities, and in their visions for the future, all seek to adjust the legacies of the end of that cataclysmic war. But there is another dimension to this year's political focus on World War II. Within each society, as the wartime generation gradually passes away, citizens are increasingly active in demanding attention to the personal suffering of their families.



Japanese representative General Yoshijiro signs the instrument of unconditional surrender on the U.S.S. Missouri,

September 2, 1945. (Photo: Harry S. Truman Library & Museum)

Remembering the Devastation of 1945

Two decades after the Cold War ended, a new debate is unfolding in Northeast Asia over the terms of the postwar peace settlement that laid the basis for the geostrategic balance in Asia for half a century. Demands for a Japanese apology continue from the two neighbors absent in the comprehensive settlement negotiated in San Francisco in 1951: the People's Republic of China, which took control in 1949, and the two Koreas, divided since the 1953 armistice that ended the Korean War. China and South Korea would later negotiate bilateral treaties with Tokyo, the first by Seoul in 1965 and the second by Beijing in 1978. Both would follow the basic premise of the San Francisco Peace Treaty in abandoning pursuit of reparations as part of their formal diplomatic reconciliation, and instead concluded trade and investment treaties with Japan, enlisting support for their own economic development plans. Twenty years after the Japanese colonial administration on the Korean Peninsula was dismantled, President Park Chung-hee [normalized the relations](#) with Prime Minister Eisaku Sato, opening the way for deep economic ties between the two U.S. allies.

It would take almost another decade for Japanese and Chinese leaders to outline the [terms of their postwar reconciliation](#), prompted by Beijing's decision to turn away from Moscow and toward Washington as it sought to chart a new, market-oriented national development plan. From aggressor and occupier, Japan transformed its relationships in postwar Asia by leading regional economic growth and building wealth and prosperity that eluded the newly independent nations of Asia.

U.S. alliances in Asia have been the foundation of the postwar regional security order, and yet wartime actions of the United States are also part of the seventieth anniversary commemoration. The firebombing of Japanese cities in the waning months of war and the use of the atomic bombs in Hiroshima and Nagasaki are remembered by generations of Japanese. The Japanese emperor's decision to end his country's war with the United States was prompted by the use of nuclear weapons, and each year, Japanese stop for a moment of silence to commemorate the moment that the largely civilian populations of Hiroshima and Nagasaki were obliterated.

U.S. Ambassador John Roos began the process of recognizing this legacy in the U.S.-Japan alliance by visiting Hiroshima's commemoration of the bombing on [August 6, 2010](#), and his successor, Ambassador Caroline Kennedy, followed suit in 2014. In 2015, she attended the commemoration of the firebombing of Tokyo on March 9–10 and is expected again to visit a site of the U.S. atomic bombing, accompanied by U.S. Under Secretary for Arms Control Rose Gottemoeller. At home, a new Pew Center poll indicates American citizens are increasingly [questioning](#) their government's decision to use nuclear weapons against Japan.

Asia's Politics of War Memory

Postwar Japanese leaders have sought to convey to their once subjugated neighbors their sincere remorse and their intention to never again “[use force to settle international disputes.](#)” But Japanese themselves have been divided over the war and its legacies. The politics of war memory in Japan emerged early in the years after occupation, when many of Japan's political leaders wanted to shake off the stigma of defeat. Allied to the United States, the Liberal Democrats who emerged to lead Japan for over four decades were deeply committed to rebuilding their nation's economy and restoring its place in an Asia struggling to emerge from colonialism but deeply suspicious of the Cold War rivalry that had spread across the globe.

Some of Japan's political parties took issue with their government's choice of alliance with the United States. Those on the progressive left opposed the remilitarization of their nation, while the ruling conservatives sought to rebuild a defense force with no offensive ambition. On the issue of war memory, however, progressives were devoted to the “peace constitution” adopted under U.S. occupation, while conservatives chafed at being governed by what they termed “MacArthur's constitution.” Across Asia, Japan's democratic reorientation was welcomed, but so too was the reassurance offered by the U.S. military's continued presence on Japanese soil. No region-wide security treaty emerged along the lines of Europe's NATO alliance, but a network of bilateral alliances formed the security architecture for over half a century. At its center was the U.S.-Japan alliance.

For much of the early decades of the postwar era, the citizens of China and South Korea were cut off from the citizens of Japan. Only in the mid-1960s were Korean leaders ready to consider reconciliation, and then it was largely out of economic necessity. South Korea was also a U.S. ally, and Washington brokered the process. During the initial postwar decades, authoritarian governments in the South continued to keep their citizens under a state of war, unable to voice protest or advocate on the terms of the postwar settlement with Tokyo. Citizens in China remained under Communist rule through the Great Leap Forward and then the Cultural Revolution. The U.S. opening to China brought the prospect of a new relationship also with Japan. It was the aim of economic modernization that drove Deng Xiaoping and his contemporaries to seek a partnership with a new postwar generation of Japanese leaders. Businesses led the opening of relationships between Japan and its neighbors, but with government support, youth and citizen exchange programs followed.

This new generation of leaders all share a desire to remove what they see as the limits of their nation's postwar identity, and instead advocate for a new, unfettered vision of their nation's aspirations.

Today, the leaders of Japan, South Korea, and China have all inherited those postwar settlements from parents who sought to implement them. Abe's grandfather lived through the war and negotiated the

terms of [Japan's security treaty with Washington](#) in the decade after Japan regained sovereignty. His father served as Japan's foreign minister and was a longtime advocate of Japan's regional and global leadership. [Park Geun-hye's father](#), General Park Chung-hee, negotiated the peace treaty with Japan in the mid-1960s, building strong ties between Japanese and Korean corporate leaders and the conservative politicians who guided South Korea out of poverty. Xi Jinping's father, Xi Zhongxun, accompanied Mao Zedong on the Chinese Communist Party's formative Long March, but was purged and imprisoned like many senior party leaders during the Cultural Revolution. Today's Xi has articulated his vision of "[Chinese Dream](#)," a vision that transforms the quality of life for the Chinese people but also restores their global status after a hundred years of humiliation. This new generation of leaders all share a desire to remove what they see as the limits of their nation's postwar identity, and instead advocate for a new, unfettered vision of their nation's aspirations.

There are visible signs of new efforts to memorialize World War II across Northeast Asian societies. The youngest survivors of that period are now entering their final years. Childhood memories of bloody destruction and victimization are resurfacing as many hope to pass on the costs of those years to those Japanese, Koreans, or Chinese who know little of their experience. Even Japan's Emperor Akihito spoke out last year on his eighty-first birthday about the need to teach Japan's new generation of children about the wartime era. Emperor Hirohito presided over Japan's imperial expansion as well as its surrender to Allied Forces in 1945, but in the postwar he also became an emissary of reconciliation for Japan across Asia, traveling to China and beyond to express the remorse of the Japanese people. This February, Akihito's son, Crown Prince Naruhito, used his birthday as an occasion to repeat the injunction for educating Japanese children on the "[correct](#)" history of the war.

Increasingly, in South Korea and China, there is new political opportunity to advocate for those victims of war whose experiences went unacknowledged in formal peace negotiations with Japan. In Seoul, Korea's Constitutional Court has become a venue for adjudicating grievances over the Korean government's handling of peace negotiations with Japan. In 2011, the Court ruled that the Korean government must reopen the question of responsibility and atonement for Korean women forced to work in Japanese military brothels. Similar cases have been brought to the court by prisoners of war forced to work in Japanese companies.

Likewise, in Beijing, citizens forced to labor for Japanese companies during the war are taking similar court action. This summer it was [reported](#) that Mitsubishi Materials Corporation would present remuneration for 3,765 workers, including Chinese forced laborers. War memory and the quest for justice for those who suffered is no longer perceived as solely a matter for governments to resolve, it has become deeply embedded in the domestic politics of both South Korea and increasingly China.

Battling for Moral Authority in Asia?

In the next several weeks, two commemorations of the end of World War II will draw particular attention. The first is the much-anticipated statement by Prime Minister Abe on August 15, the day commemorating the end of the war in Japan. [The Murayama Statement](#), based on a Cabinet decision and issued on the fiftieth anniversary, is the most comprehensive statement of Japan's remorse for its imperial conquest of Asia. Sitting prime ministers have chosen to issue their own statements every ten years and in 2005, former Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi issued his personal statement on the sixtieth anniversary. Abe, who has argued that his country must move beyond a postwar mentality and define a new proud future for its youth, has raised concerns across the region that his seventieth anniversary statement will abandon Murayama's explicit acknowledgement of Japan's misdeeds in favor of a more unapologetic expression of Japanese ambitions. Even within Japan, there have been concerns over the direction the prime minister might set and the potential damage that might result in Japanese regional diplomacy.

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The second commemoration of note will be in Beijing on September 3, the [first national celebration](#) of China's V-J (Victory over Japan) Day. President Xi Jinping has invited leaders from around the globe, including Japan's prime minister, and his military has been practicing for a massive display of China's newfound national power. Like the World War II celebration hosted in May by President Vladimir Putin in Moscow, however, there is considerable caution about endorsing this celebration of China's liberation from Japan's imperial forces. For much of the past several years, Chinese government officials have waged a global effort to condemn Japanese wartime behavior in China, and regional and global leaders are wary of appearing to condone the denigration of Japan by its neighbor.

The United States, too, is increasingly drawn into the geopolitics of Asia. Chinese [military behavior](#) in the East and South China Seas challenges U.S. allies and friends in the region, as well as the norms that have governed maritime behavior since the end of World War II. The diplomatic estrangement between Tokyo and Seoul has been a particularly difficult hurdle for U.S. policymakers, especially during this year of war commemoration.

Beyond the United States, these differences over the past century have also carried over into United Nations deliberations. The Chinese government has protested Japan's proposal this year to designate Hiroshima and Nagasaki as UN-sponsored sites for educating the world on the consequences of nuclear weapons, claiming Tokyo was only presenting a one-sided victim narrative of its wartime

behavior. Seoul and Tokyo differed on the nomination of UNESCO world heritage sites where Korean laborers were forced to work. A compromise was finally worked out, but media coverage highlighted the deep sensitivities over how to memorialize the past in both countries.

For all of the high politics of dueling narratives over World War II, the devastation of that war in Asia was complete. Across Asia, millions had died over years of war, and even more were further impoverished by the civil war and contest that followed. Ending that war also began the process of constructing a postwar peace, a global order that introduced a balance of power dependent on the tremendous power of nuclear weapons. As new strategic tensions surface today in a rapidly changing Asia, the costs and the consequences of 1945 cannot be understated, and the dangers of turning away from a shared sense of responsibility for the peace must not be ignored.

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