

# Japan's responsibility in the international community: Reflections on the Asia-Pacific War, 1931–1945<sup>\*,\*\*</sup>

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**W**ithout understanding and reflecting properly on the last war, Japan will never gain the trust of the international community. At the same time, history also teaches that Japan should make more of a contribution to international security.

In March 2015, I spoke at a symposium, where I said that Japan had clearly committed aggression against other countries before and during World War II and called on Prime Minister Abe Shinzō to acknowledge this fact by saying unambiguously that “Japan had committed aggression.” My remarks were widely reported in the press.

My comments came in for several criticisms. First, some people felt that as the acting chairman of an advisory committee convened to consider Prime Minister Abe's statement on the anniversary of the end of World War II, it was inappropriate for me to make personal remarks of this kind. But the Advisory Panel on the History of the 20th Century and on Japan's Role and the World Order in the 21st Century, of which I am a member, was established on the occasion of the seventieth anniversary of the end of World War II as a forum for specialists to review the history of the twentieth century and consider the international world order in the twenty-first century from that perspective. The purpose of the panel was not to consider the Abe Statement directly. I did not suggest that the word “aggression” should necessarily be included in the prime minister's statement. I merely said that I would like to see Mr. Abe speak clearly along these lines in one setting or another. Mr. Abe has said: “I have never said that Japan has not committed aggression, and have never denied the fact of its colonial rule.” Rather than a vague expression like this, a more direct statement would be better received by the international community. My hope when I spoke was that the prime minister would create an opportunity for a clear statement.

## Correcting fallacious arguments on the “aggression” issue

More problematic is the kind of criticism that claims there is no agreed definition of the term “aggression” in international law, and that the absence of such a definition would make it wrong to argue that Japan carried out aggression. That this kind of faulty reasoning still crops up repeatedly in the media is regrettable enough, but I was astonished to see this kind of argument leveled at me by a respected historian like Itō Takashi, professor emeritus at the University of Tokyo. (For Itō's criticisms, see: “Kitaoka-kun no oungōru hatsugen o shikaru” [A Critique of Kitaoka's Own-Goal Comments], *Rekishi-tsū*, May 2015.)

I fully understand that there are difficulties with the definition and legality of what constitutes an act of “aggression” in international law. No universally agreed definition exists that can be used in all circumstances to decide immediately whether a given military action is an act of

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\* The majority of Japanese historians now refer to the war from the Manchurian Incident through Sino-Japanese War to the Pacific War as the Asia-Pacific War.

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aggression. If Hezbollah carries out a terrorist attack on Israel from Lebanon, for example, and Israel responds with a counterattack, to what extent does this constitute self-defense and to what extent should it be considered aggression against Lebanese territory? Questions like this do not have quick-and-easy answers. Since in today's world defining a military action as "aggression" often means condemning it as illegal and imposing sanctions, these decisions call for care and precision. Naturally, a certain amount of time is required.

Another factor is that it is the United Nations Security Council that is responsible for deciding whether a given military action constitutes aggression, and whether to apply sanctions. Any permanent member of the Council can block a motion and ensure that the military action in question is not described as an act of aggression. This means there is a degree of arbitrariness to the definition and the decisions that flow from it. This much is certainly true.

But this does not imply that no such definition exists. And in any case, the argument that the lack of an effective definition in international law of "aggression" would rule the topic off-limits for academic discussion in history or political science is absurd. No strict definitions exist for the terms "war" and "peace" either. Does that mean we cannot discuss these subjects? Of course not. The Japanese word translated here as "aggression" is *shinryaku*. If we look this up in two widely used Japanese-language dictionaries, we find the following definitions. In the *Kōjien*, the word *shinryaku* is defined as: "Entering another country and seizing that country's territory and assets." In the *Daijirin*, the same word is defined as follows: "When one country uses military force to infringe on the sovereignty, territory, and political independence of another country." Almost no scholar of history or political science would argue that definitions like this are mistaken. Academic debate has proceeded for years along this kind of commonsense understanding of the term.

The "aggression" debate often focuses on the Manchurian Incident and the expansion of the Japanese presence in Manchuria that followed. Japan's recognized interests at the time were restricted to southern Manchuria and consisted of non-contiguous "dots and lines" centered on the Kwantung Leased Territory and the South Manchuria Railway. Despite this, Japan ended up controlling an area three times larger than mainland Japan, including the north of Manchuria where Japan had no interests whatsoever. To insist despite these facts that this did not constitute an act of "aggression" is absurd. It was clearly an aggression by any definition under international law.

If my critics contend that we should not use the term "aggression" because no clear and uncontroversial definition of the term exists, then how should we refer to the Soviet Union's incursions into Manchukuo in August 1945? Perhaps my critics believe that Hitler and Stalin never carried out aggression either.

In the article I have mentioned, Professor Itō says he feels "betrayed," since he says he advised me when I accepted the position as Japanese chairman for the Japan-China Joint History Research Committee that the Chinese wanted to press the Japanese side to use the term aggression (*shinryaku*), and that we should not submit to this demand at any cost. Professor Itō accuses me of being a "*kyokugaku asei no to*."<sup>1</sup> I was taken aback by his use of such language, which is more like a brazen insult than reasonable academic criticism. Even before the joint history research project, my position has always been that Japan's military actions during and following the Manchurian Incident constituted an act of aggression and led to an avoidable war that caused the deaths of millions of people, including some three million Japanese people. I said as much to Professor Itō and disagreed with his views when I accepted the position as chairman.

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<sup>1</sup> "*Kyokugaku asei no to*" means someone who twists academic learning to win the favor of certain people.

## **The political implications of the San Francisco Peace Treaty**

Professor Itō's arguments are not the only erroneous ones I would like to respond to here.

Some people believe that recognizing Japan as an aggressor nation would make it impossible for Japanese people to feel proud of their country's history. But this term "aggressor nation" is not one I have used. I merely say that Japan has committed aggression in the past. It is Professor Itō who has decided for his own purposes to use the expression "aggressor nation." In any case, almost every one of the world's major powers has committed aggression at some stage in the past. Merely admitting this fact does not make a country good or bad. Japan too has committed aggression in the past, but of course this does not alter the fact that Japan today is an admirable country in many respects.

Another view claims that if we admit that Japan committed aggression, this admission will be used to castigate and berate Japan forever. In fact, the opposite is more likely to be true. Once a country loses a war, international borders are redrawn, reparations are imposed, and war crimes are punished. These processes bring war issues to a conclusion. There are deep-rooted criticisms to be made of the Tokyo War Crimes Tribunals, for example. I also have reservations about many aspects of these tribunals. But it was by accepting the findings of the tribunals that the conditions for peace were put in place, and Japan has not faced further accusations or been required to shoulder additional responsibilities. Admitting the fact of committing aggression is part of accepting this legal and political process. To argue that Japan did not commit aggression is tantamount to challenge to the Tokyo Tribunals and the San Francisco Peace Treaty. The likely result would be to bring to the surface a whole host of arguments relating to the war, including, but not limited to issues of reparations, compensation, and apologies. Prime Minister Abe says that he has no intention of disputing the terms of the Peace Treaty.

Some people argue that Japan had no bad intentions when it established Manchukuo, and that Japan was responsible for good things too. But aggression is aggression, regardless of whether it was done maliciously or whether the aggressor country did good things. To argue this way is to fundamentally misunderstand the nature of the issue. It is not a question of feelings and intentions.

On a related note, some people argue that South Manchuria remained as Chinese territory at the time only because Japan had been victorious in the Russo-Japanese War. If Japan had not defeated Russia, Manchuria would have become Russian territory. This is probably true, but that does not provide a case for claiming that the territory was Japan's to do with as it pleased. In the closing years of the Edo shogunate, Russia tried to occupy the island of Tsushima by sending its warship *Posadnik*, only for Britain to come to Japan's aid by chasing the Russians from the island. Using this logic, these events would make Tsushima a British possession. It is a ludicrous argument.

Some people also argue that the Japanese effectively had run Manchuria before Manchurian Incident, but this gives too much credit to Japan. Around 200,000 Japanese had traveled to Manchuria as settlers and developers before the Manchurian Incident, and most of these were restricted to the Kwantung Leased Territory and areas along the South Manchuria Railway. By comparison, there were more than 15 million Chinese in Manchuria. It was only after Manchukuo was established that Japanese immigration increased substantially. Most of the Japanese arguments against the "aggression" position can only be described as immature and half-baked: a distorted mixture of emotional rhetoric and appeals to poorly understood points of law.

## **Why did the internationalist mood of the 1920s collapse?**

For professional historians, the question of whether the Manchurian Incident was an act of aggression is essentially settled. The questions we should be asking ourselves now, 70 years after the end of the war, are these. Why did the Manchurian Incident happen? Why did it lead to war

with the United States and Great Britain, despite numerous opportunities after the Incident to halt the slide into war? What lessons can we learn from this history that will serve us well in the present?

The main significance of the Manchurian Incident in international political history is that it marked a clear infringement of the Nine-Power Treaty (1922) and the General Treaty (1928) for the Renunciation of War as an Instrument of National Policy (or the Kellogg-Briand Pact), and was the initial blow struck against the international order that had developed in the 1920s.

The 1920s were a relatively stable period compared to those that came before and after. It was a decade in which, reflecting on the lessons of World War I, significant progress was made in international cooperation toward outlawing war and placing restraints on colonial policy. War was officially outlawed with the Kellogg-Briand Pact of 1928, the spirit of which lives on in Article 9.1 of the current Constitution of Japan. Changes also happened in attitudes to colonial rule. Although the principle of national self-determination was initially limited to Europe, it inspired the March First Movement in Korea and the May Fourth Movement in China. India and African countries also began to demand greater rights from their colonial rulers in return for the contributions they had made to the war effort. These demands eventually persuaded the colonial powers to take steps. The Nine-Power Treaty, signed at the Washington Naval Conference in 1922, included an agreement on the so-called Open Door Policy in China and guaranteed the territorial integrity of China. Even if these moves did not lead to independence, they represent clear evidence of a new international mood to end any further attempts to expand colonial empires or spheres of influence.

These developments also affected Japan. The Nine-Power Treaty and the Naval Limitation Treaty signed at the Washington Naval Conference had an impact on the way in which Japan administered its own colonies. Japan saw that it needed to move away from rule by the *kempeï* military police in Colonial Korea during the eras of Terauchi Masatake and Hasegawa Yoshimichi. Accordingly, the government decided to give the post of Governor-General of Korea, which had previously been reserved for a serving army general, to Saitō Makoto (in office 1919–27, 1929–31), who was then a naval reserve officer. When sending him off to his post, Saionji Kinmochi is supposed to have exhorted him with the words, “Civilized politics, please, Your Excellency.”

The job of Governor-General of Taiwan went to the civilian Den Kenjirō (1919–23). Japan had accepted the shift from a direct to a less heavy-handed style of colonial rule, and from military expansion to a pursuit of economic interests. In Japan, cabinets dominated by political parties became the norm, and internationally minded leaders with a focus on the economy, like Hara Takashi and Shidehara Kijūrō, became increasingly influential.

So why did the internationally minded Washington Treaty system of the 1920s collapse?

Domestically, there was growing distrust of the political party cabinets that came to dominate politics during the 1920s. The public became disillusioned by what it saw as the self-interested squabbling and competition among political parties. Another factor was that the Diet was not supreme under the Meiji Constitution. The armed forces maintained a large degree of autonomy, and the political parties sowed the seeds for a situation in which powers outside the Diet held substantial power, which was used by the Seiyūkai to criticize the Minseitō-led Hamaguchi cabinet for its acceptance of the London treaty on arms limitations.

Internationally, the Great Depression clearly had a decisive impact. The Great Depression caused a drastic fall in Japanese exports to the United States and led to the collapse of the trade-based development model. Even before this, the voting down of Japan's Racial Equality Proposal at the Paris Peace Conference, and the enactment of the “Japanese Exclusion Act” banning Japanese immigration to the United States also weakened the influence of the internationalists and economic-minded factions.

Their influence faded amidst a growing lust for land in Manchuria, as the focus shifted

from trade to acquiring new agricultural land. The threat to Japan's interests in Manchuria from an increasingly powerful Soviet Union led to a sense of crisis that was exacerbated by the radicalization of Chinese nationalism. These were the factors that led to the Manchurian Incident, a precipitous decision by Japan's Kwantung Army to seize Manchuria for Japan.

One other point I would make in this context is that between the Manchurian Incident and the full-blown outbreak of war with China, there were still several opportunities to halt the expansion of the fighting. After the Manchurian Incident, Finance Minister Takahashi Korekiyo successfully got Japan's economy back on its feet again, and the Tanggu Truce brought a lull in military hostilities in 1933. But Japan failed to use this respite to deescalate the situation. Instead, a series of foolish decisions, from the North China Buffer State Strategy of 1935 to the February 26 Incident of 1936, led to the full-fledged outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War in 1937.

It would have been possible to prevent war with the United States even after the submission of the Hull Note on November 26, 1941. Japan could have used the Hull Note as a starting point for negotiations on the lines behind which it would withdraw its troops. Although the United States would surely have insisted on a Japanese withdrawal from China, Japan could have made a case for the continued existence of Manchukuo. The Japanese cabinet might well have collapsed during these negotiations, but that would have been infinitely preferable to war with the United States. Right up until the final moment there were opportunities to change national policy. It is essential that we understand this fact correctly, as well as the circumstances that led to the repeated mistakes of those decisions (or lack of decisions) .

### **Lessons for the present**

What lessons can today's Japan learn from the history of the Manchurian Incident and the events that followed? I believe the main lessons should be these: first, that the international community must not allow any attempt to change the status quo by force. We must not remain silent in the face of what is happening in the South China Sea or Ukraine. Second, Japan should fully cooperate in imposing sanctions on any country that carries out illegal actions. Japan has regularly made contributions since the Gulf War in 1991, but these remain inadequate in some respects. It will be essential to ensure that the proposed security legislation is approved and comes into effect. Third, we should learn from the way in which the world increasingly turned inward after the Great Depression, as countries turned to policies that put their own national interests first. To prevent this from happening again, the maintenance and further development of an open and liberal free trade system will be essential. In the postwar era, Japan has benefited from these three points—the renunciation of war, the strengthening of international systems, and the establishment of a free trade system—and has demonstrated some commitment toward these developments. But there is room for Japan to be more active in this regard.

If I were to add one more thing, Japan should play an active role in eradicating the poverty that is the root cause of conflicts. In the postwar era, Japan has supported the economic development of Asian countries, chiefly through Official Development Assistance. As a result, Southeast Asia, which was as poor as Sub-Saharan African countries, has gradually become more prosperous. And Japan has taken its own approach, which prioritizes economic stability. Japan does not generally have a lot to say about political systems. Once economic stability is achieved, next comes economic development. As a result of economic development, democratization occurs. Japan has done well to encourage this kind of virtuous cycle.

For Western countries and the United Nations, human rights and political democratization inevitably come first. The case of sanctions against Myanmar is one good example. In other cases, UN peacekeeping missions might be sent into a conflict area, and elections might be held, but that is often the end of it. Sometimes, however, elections lead to further confusion and unrest, and it is after the elections that support is needed most.

Japan understands the conditions in developing countries as well as the universal values of the West. At least since the Fukuda Doctrine, Japan has worked to support countries in Asia not from a position of superiority but as a partner. Henry Kissinger said that an economic power inevitably becomes a political and a military power, but Japan has built a presence in the international community in a different way. I think we should value this unique approach as one of the accomplishments of the 70 years of the postwar era.

What then are the inadequacies in Japan's current policies? The biggest shortfall has to do with Japan's international contributions in the area of security. Japan prides itself on being a peace-loving nation that has renounced war and adopted a peace constitution. But for the most part, this consists merely of not doing anything bad. Even in the context of peacekeeping operations, countries with fewer national resources than Japan—including Scandinavian countries and Canada, among others—are more engaged in peacekeeping missions and have made larger sacrifices than Japan, which by comparison is bearing an insufficient share of the burden.

Even in the context of the proposed national security legislation currently being debated in the Diet, the arguments of the opposition parties tend to focus exclusively on the relationship between the constitution and collective security, as well as checks on the use of force. There has not been any deep discussion on the real issues.

If people contend that a single administration cannot be allowed to alter the interpretation of the constitution, does this imply that we should scrap the interpretation of 1954, which determined that the constitution permitted the minimum and necessary forces for self-defense? Should we return to the original interpretation of 1946, which held that Japan could not possess any war capability whatsoever?

Okada Katsuya, President of the Democratic Party of Japan, has insisted that if US naval ships operating alongside Japanese vessels came under attack, Japan would already be able to respond under the existing right to individual self-defense if the attack took place in waters adjacent to Japan. But this interpretation deviates from the understanding on individual self-defense of the Cabinet Legislation Bureau, which holds that Japan can use military force only if the country itself comes under attack. He is criticizing attempts to change interpretations in one area, while demanding separate changes in others. Surely double standards of this kind cannot be conducive to constructive debate.

The biggest check on the use of force is civilian control. The essence of civilian control is the support and trust placed by the people in civilians (politicians). In a democratic and pacifist country like Japan, any ill-considered decision by politicians that led to the loss of lives might easily lead to the government being voted out of office. This sense of trepidation is what acts as the greatest check. In any case, I hope that there will be realistic discussions, based on the starting point that the international situation is changing drastically from a national security perspective.

### **The historian's mission: Establishing the facts**

Finally, I would like a few words about the state of historical research. Toward the end of 2014, it was reported that the Japanese embassy in the United States asked for a correction when a textbook published by McGraw Hill claimed that Japan had forcibly recruited up to 200,000 young women to serve in military brothels during the Asia-Pacific War. The publisher refused to make a correction, criticizing the request as "interference in academic freedom." But is this really a question of academic freedom? Whatever the facts of the matter, 200,000 young women were not forcibly recruited.

Hata Ikuhiko and Ōnuma Yasuaki held a press conference to address the issue in Japan, during which Professor Ōnuma said, "If someone pointed out a mistake in something I had written, I would write that person a thank you letter." This is an admirable attitude to take.

The ideal stance, surely, would be to say: If you disagree, let's work on a joint research project together. To date, historical research of this kind has already been carried out between Japan and China, as well as Japan and South Korea. If possible, I would like to see more collaborative international research involving historians from the United States, Southeast Asia, Germany, France, and other countries. The aim of research should not be to assign blame but to establish the facts.