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Dispelling Discord between Japan and the U.S. Is an Urgent Task

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Now's the right time for Prime Minister Abe to make his move by making a floral tribute at the USS Arizona Memorial

President Obama has just completed a two-day visit to Japan for high-level meetings, including an unprecedented "three-star sushi shop conference" with Prime Minister Shinzo Abe. Now that the two nations have reaffirmed their longstanding alliance, including a commitment by the U.S. to Japan's defense of the Senkaku Islands, I would like even more strongly to press for my suggestion that Mr. Abe to pay his respects at the U.S.S. Arizona Memorial in Hawaii. This is because the gap in understanding between Japan and the U.S. remains a deep one, despite Mr. Obama's visit.

It's not the first time for me to make this suggestion. Starting from August 2005, on the 60th anniversary of the end of the War in East Asia, when I ran an op-ed in the *Wall Street Journal*, I have continued to propose that the president of the United States and the prime minister of Japan take part in mutual gestures of reconciliation, with the former visiting the Hiroshima Peace Park and the latter visiting the USS Arizona Memorial, to lay commemorative wreaths. Such acts would serve to bring historical closure to memories of that tragic war.

But this time, I've reached my wit's end, and here's why: Last December Prime Minister Abe, in disregard of warnings from the U.S., went to worship at the Yasukuni Shrine. The American Embassy in Tokyo promptly issued a statement expressing its "disappointment," and that was followed by similar remarks from the State Department and White House -- an extraordinary response toward an allied country. Since that time, the sense of discord between the U.S. and Japan has gradually increased.

It's ironic that while the Abe government has been pushing for a revision of its interpretation of collective self-defense in order to solidify the U.S.-Japan alliance, Abe's Yasukuni visit worked to destabilize it.

Certainly in the United States, some voices were raised in objection to the Obama Administration's actions, asserting that they constituted "interference in the matter of Yasukuni, which is a Japanese domestic problem." Nonetheless, the nonpartisan Congressional Research Service issued a report on February 20, 2014, which remarked ". . . the fact that Abe chose to ignore U.S. advice with the surprise visit may have breached a degree of trust between the capitals." A majority of leaders and the media were critical of Abe's move, irrespective of their party affiliations.

To break this deadlock, I would now once again propose that the time is more ripe than ever for Mr. Abe to engage in "breakthrough diplomacy" by visiting the USS Arizona Memorial and making a floral offering -- an act that has yet to be performed by any of Abe's predecessors as currently serving prime minister in the 69 years since the war ended. Mr. Obama himself has said on several occasions that he would "like to visit Hiroshima." Presently that won't be realized this time as his itinerary has been shortened to make time to visit South Korea, so I would suggest Prime Minister Abe make the initial move and break the ice toward achieving a fundamental reconciliation.

Despite the situation in which the concept and wording of the term "Japan-U.S. alliance" continues to be waved as the accepted standard in both Japanese and American public opinion, if we were to scratch the surface, serious concerns and discord can be found on the U.S. side.

* Chinese and Koreans might become angered

In particular, from the start of this year, Mr. Abe's appointments of the new NHK chairman and members of board of governors, as well as aides and advisors, have also led to the "disappointment" by the U.S. government. And repeated remarks espousing the view by right wingers, to the effect that the International Military Tribunal for the Far East "enabled the U.S. to downplay such terrible massacres as the firebombing of Tokyo or the dropping of two atomic bombs" has had the effect of further alienating even Republicans and other conservatives in the U.S. Mr. Abe, moreover, has downplayed the problems that such

remarks have created by brushing them off as having been "personal viewpoints," and while in a few cases the offending statements were retracted, no one was asked to resign, resulting in further discord.

One of my American friends made the rather caustic comment to the effect that, for a member of the NHK board of governors to completely repudiate the judgments of the Tokyo tribunal struck him as reflecting a desire by the Abe government to rewrite the postwar relationship between Japan and the U.S. from the ground up.

The biggest test was the assertion that worshipping at Yasukuni (in Abe's words) was a pledge "never to wage war again," and that "mourning for war dead is an act performed by the leaders of all the world's nations." But the reality is that Mr. Abe's logic failed to convince not only China and South Korea, but even the U.S.

The reason for this is deeply rooted. Despite Japan's agreement to accept the rulings of the Tokyo Tribunal in accordance with Article 11 of the San Francisco Peace Treaty of 1952, the Yasukuni Shrine consecrated 14 war criminals convicted by the tribunal. In addition at the "Yushukan" historical museum adjacent to the Yasukuni shrine, displays uphold the argument that the Pacific War was fought in self defense; glorify the Shimpu Tokkotai (Kamikaze pilots); and make scant references to the destruction wrought by Japan in China and other Asian nations. This would invalidate any claims that worship there is akin to acts "shared around the world" for the purpose of mourning those killed in wars.

About 10 years ago, at the time the Bush administration launched the second Gulf War, a well-known neoconservative columnist requested me to show him the Yushukan museum, and I recall his remarks: "I can see why Chinese and Koreans would be upset. It's unpleasant for me as well," he said.

At the end of January, while meeting the press at the World Economic Forum held in Davos, Switzerland, Mr. Abe was asked a question regarding the possibility of a clash between Japan and China over the disputed Senkaku Islands, and he arbitrarily used the analogy of relations between Great Britain and Germany on the eve of World War I. Abe's response was conspicuous in its singularity. In response to the media's reaction to his comments the prime minister's Office brushed off it off by insisting it was the "fault of the simultaneous interpreter, who had added words that Abe did not actually say."

But this year, on the 100th anniversary of the beginning of World War I, for the prime minister to stand before a podium in the center of Europe and attempt to trace a line between the current Sino-Japan relationship and the scars of Europe made many people raise their eyebrows in doubt, and had the result of pushing aside the successes of "Abenomics" that Abe had come to flaunt as the main speaker at this year's event.

Dr. Henry Kissinger was the first American leader to point out the similarities between the current relationship between the US and China and that of Great Britain and Germany on the eve of World War I. In particular he expressed deep concern over the possibility of a clash, and to prevent that from occurring, as part of his analysis he took up the theme of policies aimed at prevention. For such a concern to be raised in terms of Sino-Japanese relations led one American scholar to raise the alarm by ironically noting, "Doesn't it seem that Abe's diplomacy vis-a-vis China has the aim of making Japan the lead contender in Asia?"

At the very least, one result of Abe's diplomatic posture had led China to launch a vehement worldwide campaign criticizing the positions of the Abe government, to the effect that Japan "Has yet to repent for its past incursions." Meanwhile South Korea's president Park Geun-hye has not budged on her hard positions concerning the "comfort women" and other issues, with China and South Korea strengthening their ties to foster a joint anti-Japan policy, making it one of the greatest concerns for the Obama administration.

After the inauguration of the second Abe cabinet, Japan has yet to hold even a single summit meeting with neighboring China or South Korea, and the tension in their relations continues. Following this to its logical conclusion, China and South Korea have detected a cold draft flowing between the U.S. and Japan, which has resulted in their adopting a harder stance toward Japan. In the U.S. as well, Japanese seem to have scant awareness of the reality that Americans of Chinese and Korean origin, both of which contributed to Mr. Obama's reelection in 2012, have gained more influence in political circles.

* Even if the Kono Statement is maintained, Japan-Korean relations will not recover

On March 25 in The Hague, Netherlands, a U.S.-sponsored summit between the leaders of the U.S., Japan and South Korea, held to discuss the "threat from North Korea," proved an illustrative event. President Obama sat in the center of the table, flanked on each side by President Park and Prime Minister Abe, the faces of each showing cold, formal expressions. This impasse was due to the corner into which Mr. Abe has painted himself.

Since the forming of his new government Abe had avoided any mention of acknowledging the "Kono Statement" of 1993 that apologized for various transgressions against South Korea. Then on March 14, just 10 days before flying to The Hague, he only acceded to it under pressure, as South Korea had made it a condition for its attending the joint talks. Immediately afterwards, however, people close to the prime minister's office were making remarks to the effect that "As investigations proceed, [the statement] might be revised."

Despite the two having shaken hands, and Mr. Abe greeting Korea's president in her own

language, the meeting so far has had no effect whatsoever in mending fences between Japan and South Korea. Whether or not Mr. Obama's planned visit to the two countries, to commence from April 24, will succeed in finding a way to break this impasse will proceed with the double irony that the situation was once again dependent on American intervention.

If Japan can achieve "breakthrough diplomacy" in its relations with the United States, such as by a visit to Hiroshima by President Obama -- without necessarily depending on it being a "state visit" with a tight itinerary -- I suppose it's possible this will be supported by calls to Mr. Obama for such a visit from the U.S. side as well.

Next year will mark the 70th anniversary of the end of the war. Thanks to the measured success of Abenomics, the Abe administration is beginning to exhibit the potential to stay in power for an extended period. I think what should now be sought is broadminded diplomacy that will conclusively bring about reconciliation, with ceremonies involving offering of floral tributes at the USS Arizona Memorial and in Hiroshima. Before long those repercussions would also spread to Beijing, Nanjing, Seoul and finally all the way to Pyongyang. For Abe diplomacy, I believe it would also lead to an opportunity to break out from constantly being on the defensive and set the stage for a situation in which "slow and steady wins the race."

In 2009, I published a book by Shogakkan 101 Shinsho titled "The day President Obama offers flowers at Hiroshima -- the opening up the way to historical reconciliation via the diplomacy of mutual floral offerings." Based on my travels to Dresden, Coventry, Cologne, Guernica, Auschwitz and other places, that book closely examines the differences between how Germany achieved reconciliation with European countries and the differences between that country's approach and Japan's. I would be honored if you'd read it.