

The Abe Statement: Reading the Politics behind the 70th Anniversary of WW II



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Summary

The much awaited Shinzo Abe statement commemorating the 70th anniversary of the World War II was issued on August 14, 2015. Prime Minister Abe faced the challenge of drafting a statement for this momentous occasion bearing in mind that every word will be weighed in the coming decades. Abe attempted to consolidate his political future by creating space and balancing a range of complex national and regional expectations in the statement. While Prime Minister Abe very skillfully cited all the important expressions considered as the yardstick to measure Japanese intent by the regional neighbours, he refrained from offering a personal apology and instead articulated his "profound grief" and "sincere condolences" for the losses suffered by Japan's neighbours. As expected, the region has been fiercely critical of the Abe statement. While more could have been accomplished with a personal apology, the statement certainly presented sparks of sincerity in acknowledging the horrors of the War. As the region refused to accept Abe's view, East Asia continues to remain hostage to history even 70 years after the War. As Japan suffers from an "apology fatigue", regional perception regarding Japan's lack of sincerity in facing the history squarely continue to delay the reconciliation. The biggest responsibility for Japanese leadership today is to overcome the trust deficit prevailing in the region.

The much awaited and intensely deliberated Abe statement commemorating the 70th anniversary of the World War II was issued on August 14, 2015 a day marking Japan's acceptance of the Potsdam Declaration. The content and the spirit of the Abe statement was strictly measured against the landmark apology extended by former socialist Prime Minister of Japan, Tomiichi Murayama in 1995. While Prime Minister Abe very skillfully cited all the important expressions- aggression, deep remorse, colonial rule and heartfelt apology-considered as the yardstick to measure Japanese intent by the regional neighbours, he refrained from offering a personal apology and instead articulated his "profound grief" and "sincere condolences" for the losses suffered by Japan's neighbours¹. As expected, the region has been fiercely critical of the Abe statement which is interpreted as "being evasive on major issue of principle"² and "left much to be desired"³. Nevertheless, the Statement certainly presented sparks of sincerity in acknowledging the horrors of the War at a rather difficult time when the region is in the clasp of intensified nationalism and Japan is making efforts to mend ties with the regional powers.

The Abe Statement

Japan has offered a number of apologies over the years for its war related atrocities. However, the cabinet approved Abe statement marks a departure from the 1995 Murayama statement made during the 50th anniversary and the 2005 Junichiro Koizumi statement issued during the 60th anniversary of the war. Abe, unlike Murayama and Koizumi, spent considerable time in contextualizing Japan in the 20th century history including presenting a narrative on the role of the 'Western powers'. Furthermore, the statement reflects several instances of Abe's deep thought process involved in crafting the speech bearing in mind the regional audience when he argued that the "position articulated by the previous cabinets will remain unshakable into the future"⁴ and made specific reference to certain developments, for example, acknowledging the generosity of the Chinese who raised a few thousand Japanese children left behind after the war. The statement is much more elaborate compared to that of his predecessors and made reference to one of the most emotive issues of comfort women more than once. Considering the regional audience, he

¹ "Statement by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe", *Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet*, August 14, 2015 http://japan.kantei.go.jp/97_abe/statement/201508/0814statement.html, (accessed on August 15, 2015).

² "Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying's Remarks on Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's Statement on the 70th Anniversary of the End of the War", *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China*, August 15, 2015 http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/t1288969.shtml, (accessed on August 15, 2015).

³ "Park urges Japan to back up its pledge on history with actions", *The Korea Herald*, August 15, 2015 <http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20150815000075>, (accessed on August 15, 2015).

⁴ See n.1.

made a mention of the suffering of the “women behind the battlefields whose honour and dignity were severely injured”⁵.

It was a tight ropewalk for Prime Minister Abe to balance the expectations of regional neighbours including its most important ally, the US, which is apprehensive about deteriorating relations between Japan and South Korea, and catering to the domestic constituency especially the powerful right wing pressure. While focusing on the future, the most significant departure Abe made from Murayama and Koizumi, which is also the key takeaway, is that he articulated his uneasiness regarding subjecting the future generations of Japanese “who have nothing to do with that war, be predestined to apologize”, underscoring the apology fatigue which is well established in the Japanese discourse. He cited the case of repeated heartfelt apologies extended by Japan for war-related atrocities in the past. While this has certainly not been well-received by the neighbours, it will draw him support from the nationalists who question the endless cycle for apologies. Also, a section of the younger generation does not like to keep apologising. Moreover, considering the domestic critiques, Abe attempted to boost Japanese “pride” by underscoring post-war Japan’s achievements and role as a peaceful nation. He displayed pragmatism when he used the occasion to chart the future course of the nation within his concept of Japan as a *Proactive Contributor to Peace*, and prioritized several issues including women empowerment, developing free, fair and open international economic system and non-proliferation to create a better future.

The Domestic Debate

Intense domestic debate on history was witnessed ahead of the Abe statement. Comprehending the sensitivity involving the content of the statement, Prime Minister Abe instituted a 16-member *Advisory Panel on the History of the 20th Century and on Japan’s Role and World Order in the 21st Century*, also known as the Kitaoka Commission in February 2015. While the findings and recommendations of the Report, submitted on August 6, are argued to have shaped the Abe statement to a considerable extent, it refrained from recommending to Abe whether or not to apologise as done by Murayama and Koizumi in 1995 and 2005 respectively. Although some observations of the report are extremely critical of Japan’s “reckless wars” and argued that “it is inaccurate to claim that Japan fought to liberate Asia as a matter of national policy”⁶, the Panel members failed to arrive at an agreement whether Japanese actions constituted aggression and documented the diverging arguments in footnotes. Besides, a group of eminent scholars including Pulitzer Prize-

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ “Report of the Advisory Panel on the History of the 20th Century and on Japan’s Role and the World Order in the 21st Century”, *Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet*, August 6, 2015 pp-3. http://www.kantei.go.jp/jp/singi/21c_koso/pdf/report_en.pdf (accessed on August 15, 2015).

winning historian John Dower, Andrew Gordon and professor emeritus Ezra Vogel from the Harvard University wrote to Prime Minister Abe in May urging him to accurately address the history of colonial rule and present “as full and unbiased an accounting of past wrongs as possible” in this “important commemorative year”⁷.

Meanwhile the political class in Japan has also engaged in active debate which essentially revolved around the issue of whether Abe should make a reference to key expressions including “colonial rule” and “aggression” in his statement. Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) President Katsuya Okada articulated similar sentiments when he emphasized that Abe “should definitely include phrases such as colonial rule and aggression in the 70th anniversary statement” during the February Diet debate in the plenary session of the House of Representatives.⁸ Moreover, in June, former Prime Minister Tomiichi Murayama from the then Social Democratic Party of Japan and former chief Cabinet secretary Yohei Kono from Abe’s Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), during a press conference in Japan National Press Club in Tokyo urged Abe to resolve doubts and misunderstandings held by international society and honour the Murayama Statement.

The role of LDP’s junior coalition partner, the Buddhist-backed Komeito Party, in shaping Abe’s Statement should not be ignored. While Komeito was uncertain if Prime Minister Abe will refer to the phrases incorporated in the 1995 Murayama statement, Komeito leader Natsuo Yamaguchi continually pushed Abe to make reference to expressions including “colonial rule” and “aggression”⁹ to facilitate better relations with China and South Korea. Despite having reservations with regard to the word “aggression”, Abe skillfully accommodated the Komeito request since he required endorsement from the Cabinet, which also has ministers like Akihiro Ota affiliated to the Komeito Party. While Abe’s initial reservations to endorse the words of Murayama and Koizumi are well documented, he made an attempt to avoid additional controversy at a time when his support base is shaky following the Diet debate on national security legislations. It is important to note here that while Abe ambiguously cited the words “aggression” and “colonial rule”, he did not explain how he defines aggression and did not refer to Japanese colonial rule of the Korean Peninsula.

⁷ “Open letter in support of historians in Japan”, May 5, 2015 https://networks.h-net.org/system/files/contributed-files/japan-scholars-statement-2015.5.4-eng_0.pdf, (accessed on August 15, 2015).

⁸ “Okada stresses importance of encouraging economic growth together with the elimination of disparities”, *The Democratic Party of Japan*, February 16, 2015 <https://www.dpj.or.jp/english/news/?num=20911>, (accessed on August 17, 2015)

⁹ “Komeito urges Abe to retain remorse for ‘aggression’ in WWII statement”, *Bloomberg*, February 17, 2015 <http://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2015/02/17/national/politics-diplomacy/komeito-urges-abe-retain-remorse-aggression-wwii-statement/#.VdCROPIbhHR>, (accessed on August 15, 2015). Ko Hirano, “Influence of others set tone for Abe statement”, *Kyodo*, August 15, 2015 http://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2015/08/15/national/politics-diplomacy/influence-others-set-tone-abe-statement/#.Vc9Zb_lbhHT, (accessed on August 15, 2015).

Domestic Response

The domestic response to the Abe statement has been mixed. Abe garnered praise from many conservatives including Takeo Hiranuma from Jisedai no To (Party for Future Generations) and right-wing revisionists like Fujioka Nobukatsu. Abe's views regarding future generation's predestined obligation to apologise should cheered the nationalists. Meanwhile, one of the biggest critics of the Statement is former Prime Minister Murayama who highlighted the case of absence of clarity in the content and the generalised context in which Abe used the key expressions like "colonial rule" and "aggression".¹⁰ Moreover, the Director of Murayama Statement Association, Fujita Takakage, has raised objections to the Statement which, he argued, intentionally "blurred" important issues. Japan's Communist Party leader Shii Kazuo and DPJ chief Okada also expressed dissatisfaction with Abe's shrewd approach in addressing history.

The conservative centre-right media in Japan, *The Yomiuri Shimbun*, evaluated the Abe Statement favorably in presenting Japanese perception of history and urged the neighbours to accomplish genuine reconciliation by laying history to rest "with Abe's statement".¹¹ Meanwhile, the left-leaning national daily, *The Asahi Shimbun*, has been severely critical of the speech calling it a "flawed statement". Its editorial argued that in order to ease the burden of predestined apology, Prime Minister Abe needed to extend his own apology to stop the pessimistic attitude affecting Japan's relations with other Asian countries.¹² *The Mainichi Shimbun* has also criticised the statement which is in "sharp contrast" to the Murayama Statement and raised doubts regarding the objectives of the Abe statement.

The opinion poll conduct by *Kyodo* following the issuing of the statement suggests that while 44.2 per cent of the respondents regarded Prime Minister Abe's statement positively, 37 per cent had some reservations regarding it. Besides, support for the government increased to 43.2 per cent compared to 37.7 per cent in the July polls.¹³ The centre-right *Sankei Shimbun* and *Fuji News Network* survey suggested that 57 per cent of the respondents viewed the statement favorably in contrast to the 31 per cent who felt differently. Additionally, *The Yomiuri Shimbun* public opinion poll published on August 18, reflects

¹⁰ "Ex-PM Murayama lashes out at Abe's war statement as lacking clarity", *Kyodo*, August 14, 2015 <http://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2015/08/14/national/politics-diplomacy/ex-pm-murayama-lashes-out-at-abes-war-statement-as-lacking-clarity/#.VdC2rvIbhHT>, (accessed on August 15, 2015).

¹¹ Takayuki Tanaka, "Abe statement turns history's page", *The Yomiuri Shimbun*, August 16, 2015 <http://the-japan-news.com/news/article/0002358948>, (accessed on August 17, 2015).

¹² "EDITORIAL: Abe's war anniversary statement falls way short of the mark", *The Asahi Shimbun*, August 15, 2015 <http://ajw.asahi.com/article/views/editorial/AJ201508150035>, (accessed on August 15, 2015).

¹³ "Support for Japan's Abe bounces after 'utmost grief' for war statement: poll", *Reuters*, August 15, 2015 <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/08/16/us-ww2-anniversary-japan-idUSKCN0QK00L20150816>, (accessed on August 15, 2015).

that 48 per cent of those surveyed viewed the statement positively compared to 34 per cent who thought otherwise.¹⁴ Meanwhile, in a separate poll conducted by *The Mainichi Shimbun* just days before the August 14 statement indicated that 44 per cent of those surveyed thought Japanese apologies for its wartime atrocities offered many times so far are sufficient. Meanwhile 13 per cent thought apologies are needless in the first place.¹⁵

Regional Response

The region, particularly China and South Korea, anxiously awaited Prime Minister Abe's statement. In the last few months, the Chinese leadership, including President Xi Jinping, had repeatedly outlined their expectations, urging Japan to squarely face the history issue which affects the process of reconciliation. The Chinese foreign ministry expressed strong displeasure following the release of the statement arguing that Japan should have offered an unambiguous declaration regarding the nature of the war of militarism and aggression and categorically accepted its responsibility for the wars. To break free from the previous militarist aggression, China looked-for Abe's honest apology.¹⁶ Moreover, Executive Vice Foreign Minister, Zhang Yesui summoned the Japanese Ambassador Masato Kitera in Beijing to convey Chinese dissatisfaction. Before the release of the statement, the Chinese media made a systematic campaign urging Abe to offer his heartfelt apology for Japanese war time atrocities. The landmark 1995 Murayama apology which is considered as "the first time a Japanese has clearly apologized for Japan's aggression against China"¹⁷ has served as the yardstick to measure Abe's sincerity. In sharp contrast to the Murayama statement, which is well-received in China,¹⁸ the Abe statement is referred to as "revisionist-laden statement"¹⁹ which is lacking in sincerity in Chinese official outlet, *Xinhua*.²⁰ Abe

¹⁴ "Poll: Abe's statement gets favorable public response", *The Yomiuri Shimbun*, August 18, 2015 <http://www.the-japan-news.com/news/article/0002362415>, (accessed on August 19, 2015).

¹⁵ "Half of public see Article 9 as primary contributor to Japan's postwar peace", *The Mainichi Shimbun*, August 14, 2015 <http://mainichi.jp/english/english/perspectives/news/20150814p2a00m0na011000c.html>, (accessed on August 15, 2015).

¹⁶ "Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying's Remarks on Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's Statement on the 70th Anniversary of the End of the War", *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China*, August 15, 2015 http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/t1288969.shtml, (accessed on August 15, 2015).

¹⁷ Kazuhiko Togo (2013), "Japan and Reconciliation in Post-war Asia: The Murayama Statement and Its Implications", Palgrave Macmillan, p.29.

¹⁸ "China Voice: Absence of direct 'apology' reveals Abe's lip service", *Xinhua*, August 15, 2015 http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2015-08/15/c_134518719.htm, (accessed on August 15, 2015).

¹⁹ "Abe's revisionist war statement strongly questioned by experts", *Xinhua*, August 14, 2015 http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2015-08/14/c_134518582.htm, (accessed on August 15, 2015).

²⁰ "China Focus: Abe's apology widely seen as lacking sincerity", *Xinhua*, August 15, 2015 http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2015-08/15/c_134518712.htm, (accessed on August 15, 2015).

was criticised for his impatience “to shut out the past” by *China Daily* which cautioned that “it would be naive to think the tensions paralyzing East Asia will thus be gone”²¹.

The Republic of Korea (South Korea) offered a relatively cautious response. Foreign Minister Yun Byung-se noted that despite the fact that some section of the Abe statement “fell short of expectations”²², the ministry calls on the Abe administration to follow up on the previous cabinets’ “unshakable” historical views with concrete actions. Additionally, the official response called on Japan to promptly undertake “proactive efforts to resolve”²³ imminent historical questions including that of the victims of forced sexual slavery by the Imperial Army. The ruling Saenuri Party evaluated the Statement as “meaningful” even as there remained scope for improvement and called on Japan to demonstrate heartfelt repentance. In the meantime, the opposition party, New Politics Alliance for Democracy expressed deep disappointment regarding the lack of honesty in the statement and Abe’s “tactful” manner in sidestepping accountability. South Korean media, *Yonhap News Agency*, reported that the statement, which is an indicator of Abe’s resolve to mend relations with the region, did not match South Koreans’ expectations.²⁴ *The Korea Times* observed that the statement reflects that Abe brainstormed to displease the least instead of pleasing the most.²⁵ Meanwhile, The Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (North Korea) registered its discontent as Abe refused to offer a “sincere apology” and made an “intolerable mockery of the Korean people”.²⁶

One of the critical extra-regional powers and Japan’s most important ally, the US offered a mixed response. While the Obama administration has welcomed the Abe statement and his pledge to adhere to past statements on history, the media offered a critical response. The National Security Council Spokesperson Ned Price’s official response commended

²¹ “Crafty rhetoric, insincere politics”, *China Daily*, August 15, 2015 http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/opinion/2015-08/15/content_21606831.htm, (accessed on August 15, 2015).

²² “Seoul’s Foreign Minister urges ‘concrete actions’ from Tokyo”, *The Korea Herald*, August 16, 2015 <http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20150816000312>, (accessed on August 17, 2015)

²³ “MOFA Spokesperson’s Commentary on the Abe Statement Issued to Mark the 70th Anniversary of the End of World War II”, *Ministry of Foreign Affairs Republic of Korea*, August 15, 2015 http://www.mofa.go.kr/ENG/press/pressreleases/index.jsp?menu=m_10_20&sp=/webmodule/htsboard/template/read/engreadboard.jsp%3Fboardid=302%26typeID=12%26tableName=TYPE_ENGLISH%26seqno=315568, (accessed on August 15, 2015).

²⁴ “(2nd LD) Abe skips his own apology for Japan’s wartime past”, *Yonhap News Agency*, August 14, 2015 <http://english.yonhapnews.co.kr/national/2015/08/14/0301000000AEN20150814004852315.html>, (accessed on August 15, 2015)

²⁵ “Disappointing statement, Prepare for drawn-out battle against Japanese nationalists”, *The Korea Times*, August 14, 2015 http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/opinion/2015/08/202_184860.html, (accessed on August 15, 2015).

²⁶ “N. Korea Slams Abe Speech for Lacking Apology”, *KBS World Radio*, August 15, 2015 http://world.kbs.co.kr/english/news/news_IK_detail.htm?No=112665, (accessed on August 15, 2015).

Japanese commitment to peace and democracy, and stressed that Japan's record in the last seven decade serves "as a model for nations everywhere".²⁷ Meanwhile, *The Wall Street Journal* argued that the Abe statement has "mixed remorse with some defiant messages"²⁸. *The Washington Post's* evaluation of the statement suggested that it failed to fully satisfy anyone.²⁹ *The New York Times* read the statement as a "potentially contentious break" with earlier languages of remorse by the leaders of Japan.

The Way Ahead

As the region refused to accept Abe's views, East Asia continues to remain hostage to history even as it commemorates the 70th anniversary of the World War II. Prime Minister Abe faced the challenge of drafting a statement for this momentous occasion bearing in mind that each word will be weighed in the coming decades. He certainly made a worthy effort to navigate through the complex demands of the domestic politics while creating space for addressing regional expectations in his statement. Certainly more could have been achieved with a personal apology but Abe attempted to consolidate his political future by creating space and balancing a range of complex national and regional expectations in the statement. While Prime Minister Abe refused to offer personal apology which sparked aggressive responses in the neighbourhood, it should not be ignored that he did argue that "the position articulated by the previous cabinets will remain unshakable into the future".

The Abe statement will undoubtedly play a big role in shaping the future trajectory of Japan's relations with South Korea and China. The statement has come at a sensitive time when Japan is under severe pressure from the US to improve relations with the Park Geun-hye administration in South Korea to better serve its shared strategic interests and security cooperation in Northeast Asia. Japan-South Korea relations, since Abe and Park assumed their respective office, have remained tense over issues of history. However, this year Japan and South Korea are celebrating the 50th anniversary of their diplomatic ties. As Japanese bureaucrats are engaged in intense negotiations with their South Korean

²⁷ "Statement by NSC Spokesperson Ned Price on Japanese Prime Minister Abe's Statement on the 70th Anniversary of the End of World War II", *The White House, Office of the Press Secretary*, August 14, 2015 <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/08/14/statement-nsc-spokesperson-ned-price-japanese-prime-minister-abe%E2%80%99s>, (accessed on August 15, 2015).

²⁸ Japan's Abe Stops Short of Direct Apology Over World War II, *The Wall Street Journal*, August 15, 2015 <http://www.wsj.com/articles/japans-abe-expresses-condolences-on-war-anniversary-1439545449>, (accessed on August 15, 2015).

²⁹ "With WWII statement, Japan's Abe tried to offer something for everyone", *The Washington Post*, August 14, 2015 https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/with-wwii-statement-japans-abe-tries-to-offer-something-to-everyone/2015/08/14/f1db90e7-2888-46c6-a18c-688bf30a45e3_story.html, (accessed on August 15, 2015).

counterparts to facilitate the first Abe-Park summit, reportedly in September, Abe was careful to refer to the “women behind the battlefields whose honour and dignity were severely injured” in his statement. Besides, as Japan is negotiating a second summit meeting with Xi Jinping, Abe tried to maintain a positive tone regarding China in his statement. China is scheduled to have a military parade in Tiananmen Square on September 3 to celebrate the 70th anniversary of the end of the World War II. However, as Beijing is far from being pleased with the Abe statement, it will be interesting to observe if this will clip the progress in China-Japan relations following the Xi-Abe summit meeting of November 2014.

To this day, one of the critical variables shaping Japan’s relations with the important regional actors is the scar of the aggressive Imperial Japan. Even though Japan suffers from an “apology fatigue”, regional perception regarding Japan’s lack of sincerity in facing history squarely continue to delay the reconciliation. The biggest responsibility of Japanese leadership today is to overcome the trust deficit prevailing in the region. While it is Japan’s responsibility to pave the road to reconciliation, for any meaningful progress China and South Korea must reciprocate since reconciliation is a two-way process.