

POINT OF VIEW / Robert Dujarric

# 'Comfort women' issue likely to haunt Japan

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On June 26, the House of Representatives' Foreign Affairs Committee voted by an overwhelming margin to support a resolution urging Japan to "formally acknowledge, apologize, and accept historical responsibility in a clear and unequivocal manner for its military's coercion of young women into sexual slavery" during World War II.

Though this document, which is likely to be approved by the House, is non-binding it has clearly displeased Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's administration while generating anxiety about the state of Japan-U.S. relations.

In many ways, it is understandable that Tokyo should feel unhappy. Since it recovered its independence in 1952, Japan has been a model citizen of the world. It has never even threatened a country with aggression while creating a free and prosperous society at home. Unlike Turkey, locked into denial of the Armenian genocide and Russia, whose KGB-trained ruler refuses to express regret for Soviet atrocities, Japan has publicly and frequently apologized for the evils of the Showa Era.

Moreover, Japanese can point at the hypocrisy of American politicians, who mostly sat silently while their government legitimized torture in the wake of 9/11, berating the Japanese for the sins of their ancestors.

Unfortunately, Japan's government

may have shown contrition for the war crimes, but frequent statements, including by the prime minister, either making obtuse differences between broad and narrow coercion, or minimizing the extent of war crimes seriously undermined the credibility of its apologies.

An advertisement entitled "The Facts" published on June 14 in *The Washington Post* and signed by lawmakers of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party and the opposition Minshuto (Democratic Party of Japan), as well as by former diplomat Hisahiko Okazaki, one of Abe's best-known advisers, had a particularly negative impact.

By denying the existence of organized comfort women and claiming that "many of the women" made more money thanks to prostitution than officers or even generals, it handed vital ammunition to the supporters of the resolution.

Some argue that America should not concern itself with Japan's history. But Tokyo's attitude toward the war affects its relations between Japan and China and South Korea.

Therefore, Japan's management of its past has important consequences for Washington. Anti-Japanese feelings, which are inflamed every time a Japanese politician denies the existence of the comfort women, make it harder for the United States to manage its difficult relationship with Seoul. America's "stakeholder" concept of China's

interaction with the world demands a good Sino-Japanese relationship, which is hampered by the "history issue" (including, to be fair, China's anti-Japanese textbooks).

Therefore, it is clear that Japan's handling of the "history issue" is relevant to American interests in Asia. The question is how the United States can best assist Japan in managing the politics of its past in ways that are most effective. There are broadly three possible courses of action.

The first one is to do nothing. According to this line of thought, the history issue and its symbols, such as the Yasukuni Shrine, are sensitive questions that touch the heart of Japanese national identity and the role of the imperial family. American pressure on Japan risks being counter-productive, by fueling anti-Americanism and fostering a nationalist reaction against kowtowing to American and Asian pressure.

The second one is for the United States to act behind the scenes. During the controversies over former Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi's pilgrimages at Yasukuni, senior American officials reportedly let their Japanese counterparts know that these visits were detrimental to U.S. and Japanese



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interests.

It may be that these warnings helped convince Abe to refrain from worshipping at Yasukuni but they do not seem to have prevented him from making self-destructive statements about comfort women.

The third option, illustrated by the proposed House Resolution, is to publicly censure Japan. Opponents of this strategy warn that it can only worsen the problem. Supporters, however, will point out that once the State Department listed Japan as a country that was not doing enough to fight human trafficking, the Japanese government started to enact stricter legislation to prevent this modern form of slavery (which is surely not unique to Japan).

At this point, it is too early to know what impact the House Resolution will have if Congress votes to adopt it. Optimists will argue that since other alternatives have failed, it is time to try a new one.

Pessimists, however, will fear that it will be ineffective and at worse will strengthen the negationist elements within Japanese society. Much will depend not only on the Japanese reaction but also on whether Congressman Mike Honda's initiative will increase awareness of this issue in the United States itself.

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