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Abe's Avoidance of the Past

By **HOWARD W. FRENCH** AUG. 18, 2015

TOKYO — For months, speculation built in East Asia in the lead-up to the 70th anniversary of Japan's surrender, which ended World War II.

Would the new, conservative prime minister, Shinzo Abe, who wants Japan to play a more assertive role on the world stage, address questions of wartime responsibility and guilt in a different way than his predecessors had?

In the end, Mr. Abe said little on Friday that was new. He prevaricated on the causes of the war and on the exact nature of the worst of Japan's atrocities — from the forced recruitment of thousands of so-called comfort women, or sex slaves, from Korea and China, to the devastating military tactics employed to subjugate the country's neighbors. Rather than apologize in personal terms, Mr. Abe was content to cite the apologies of his predecessors, before stating that it was unreasonable either for today's young, or for future generations of Japanese, to have to feel guilty about events that took place long before their birth.

It's no surprise that Mr. Abe's speech elicited strong and immediate criticism from China and South Korea. What is more interesting were the rebukes he drew from important segments of Japanese society. At a peace ceremony on Saturday, with Mr. Abe in attendance, the 81-year-old emperor, Akihito — whose father, Hirohito, prosecuted Japan's conquest of Asia beginning in the 1930s — broke new ground for himself by expressing “profound remorse” over the war. Tomiichi Murayama, the 91-year-old former

prime minister, was more direct in his criticism of Mr. Abe: “Fine phrases were written, but the statement does not say what the apology is for and what to do from now on.”

It was Mr. Murayama who in 1995 — on the 50th anniversary of the war’s end — offered Japan’s strongest official apology, when he spoke of the “tremendous damage and suffering to the people of many countries, particularly those in Asia,” caused by Japanese colonialism and aggression, and personally expressed his “feelings of deep remorse and heartfelt apology.”

During its peak economic boom years, in the 1980s, Japan was also the world’s largest provider of development assistance, and concentrated most of its grants and loans on Asia. Japan played a particularly instrumental role in midwifing China’s economic surge, providing billions of dollars in investment, critical new technologies, and even political support to its communist neighbor, for example, after the Tiananmen Square massacre in 1989.

Time and again, however, good-will initiatives like this have foundered on the basis of equivocal language, and on the provocative actions of Japanese leaders themselves, often taken to mollify conservative constituents. The most notorious of these actions have been their repeated visits to Tokyo’s Yasukuni Shrine, a Shinto monument to the country’s modern war dead, including numerous officers who were tried after Japan’s defeat as so-called Class-A war criminals.

Mr. Abe occupies a singular and complex place in this narrative. The maternal grandfather he often reminisces about fondly, Nobusuke Kishi, oversaw industrial development in Japanese-occupied Manchuria in the 1930s, during a time of rampant sex slavery, prostitution and narcotics dealing. A far-right politician with fascist leanings, Kishi was later minister of munitions in the war cabinet of Hideki Tojo, and was imprisoned on suspicion of war crimes, although never tried, helping position him to later become an important, early postwar prime minister. Mr. Abe himself pursued rapprochement with China during his brief, first tour as prime minister, a decade ago, after a period of heightened tensions between the two countries under his boss and predecessor, Junichiro Koizumi, over his visits to Yasukuni.

In 2013, on the first anniversary of his second stint as prime minister, however, Mr. Abe inflamed relations with China and Korea by visiting Yasukuni himself. Since then, in the face of stiffening domestic opposition, Mr. Abe has inflamed mistrust by revising laws to allow Japan to sidestep restrictions in its pacifist Constitution and to take on more responsibility for its own defense and enhance military collaboration with its allies, especially the United States.

Why have deep divisions lingered so much longer in East Asia than they did in Europe — where Germany was much more willing to accept its responsibility for the war, and its neighbors therefore far more willing to get on with things?

Part of it, no doubt, is because of calculations by Beijing that having a historical antagonist readily at hand is politically useful, especially as the country's ideological mainstays of Maoism and Marxism-Leninism have lost their relevance. This has left the Chinese Communist Party with only two pillars upon which to stake its legitimacy, strident nationalism and dwindling economic growth.

According to William A. Callahan, a China scholar at the University of Manchester, in 2012 fully 60 percent of the movies and TV programs produced by the leading production company, Hengdian World Studios, involved anti-Japanese plots. In that year alone, he estimated that 700 million Japanese were shown being killed in these programs, or more than five times the actual population of Japan.

In China's case, nearly the entire history of the 20th century awaits rewriting, because of the extreme manipulations and censorship of the narrative by the Communist Party. One of the biggest myths there, which is just now beginning to fade, is that Mao's forces heroically defeated the Japanese, as depicted in almost all of the Hengdian World Studios war films. In reality, it was Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalists who did the overwhelming bulk of the fighting. Maoist China's self-inflicted famine during the Great Leap Forward killed 30 to 40 million people between 1958 and 1962. That took far more Chinese lives than the Japanese did, but this and many other fraught episodes of Chinese history remain all but off limits.

For its part, modern South Korea was built to a significant degree by

wartime collaborators of the Japanese, most famously including Park Chung-hee, the father of the current president, Mrs. Park. Indeed, the elder Park adopted a Japanese name and served as an officer in the Japanese Imperial Army, and was a close ally of Abe's grandfather, Kishi. But the treatment of this history remains anything but forthright in South Korea.

As the uncontested instigator of world war in Asia in the 1930s, it is incumbent on Japan to keep trying to nudge its neighbors toward greater conciliation in the future. Mr. Abe's evasions have unnecessarily made things worse.

Speaking to a joint session of Congress in April, he did two things that any Japanese leader's statements toward Asia should be judged by. By evoking famous battles of World War II, like Pearl Harbor, Bataan and Iwo Jima, as he proclaimed "deep repentance" over the past, Mr. Abe put a name to some of the worst chapters of an awful past, rather than resting on vague and evasive formulations, as he did in speaking to Asia last week.

He also spoke movingly in Washington about the friendship that blossomed between a defeated Japan and a victorious United States. This vital element has been largely missing from the speeches of recent Japanese leaders to Asians about their shared history.

Mr. Abe is correct that future generations of Japanese may tire of constantly being told to take responsibility for long-past events. Where he is wrong is in conveying a grudging attitude. There is no quick and neat way to neutralize the venoms of the past, but the shortest path toward reconciliation is one that replaces denial and self-justification with an acceptance of responsibility and a hand extended in friendship.

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