

Policy Forum 07-058: No Justice, No Peace



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No Justice, No Peace

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By Mindy L. Kotler

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I. Introduction

Mindy L. Kotler, Director of Asia Policy Point, a nonprofit membership research center that studies the U.S. policy relationship with Japan and Northeast Asia, writes, "Reconciliation and regional peace in Asia are at the heart of the Congressional Comfort Woman resolution. Long overdue apologies and respect for these victims of wartime violence are among the elements needed to achieve this peace. After 60 years of constructive, responsible, and resolutely peaceful membership in the world community, it is unfortunate that Japan must be reminded of the power of justice as a tool for peace."

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II. Article by Mindy L. Kotler

- "No Justice, No Peace"

By Mindy L. Kotler

On July 30th, the U.S. House of Representatives unanimously adopted a resolution asking the Government of Japan to formally and unequivocally acknowledge, apologize, and accept historical responsibility for the Imperial Armed Forces' system of sexual slavery from the 1930s until the end of World War II. The necessity of this resolution illustrates the challenges in the U.S. effort to secure peace in Asia.

What the House saw as an important step toward encouraging historical reconciliation in Asia, the Japanese government believed was affront to their national honor. The Bush Administration, although fearful the resolution would provoke right-wing anti-Americanism in Japan derailing alliance building, found itself unable to speak out against it. The Abe Administration's denial of the internationally-accepted comfort women history was simply too embarrassing to a White House intent on promoting the U.S.-Japan Alliance as based on shared values.

Most important, the failure of Japan to provide an adequate apology for a wartime injustice was viewed as modern problem. The victimization of women during war and the transnational crime of human trafficking are important bipartisan concerns on Capitol Hill. They are the "new" human rights issues. Today's foreign policy is less about managing confrontation than working at conflict resolution and peace-building. From South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission to the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia the focus is on ensuring justice and restoration of human dignity. It is about getting history right.

A February 15th hearing at the Asia, Pacific and Global Environment Subcommittee featuring three former Comfort Women—two Korean and one Dutch—provided an all too vivid a picture of what it was like to be a sex slave for Imperial Japan. Their accounts of their rapes echoed ones of those in contemporary Rwanda, Bosnia, and Burma. Their ordeal in Imperial Japan's state-sponsored system of rape camps resembled the degradations suffered by current victims of global human trafficking. As Virginia Republican Tom Davis observed on the House floor, "to deny this tragedy is to allow it to happen again."

In addition, the House believes in the importance of the U.S.-Japan alliance to help maintain stability in East Asia. With a wary eye on a rising China, a newly nuclear North Korea, and a growing terrorist threat in Southeast Asia, Congressmen on both sides of the aisle look to Japan to assume more regional security responsibilities. Yet, in this fast changing environment, unresolved historic injustices continue to keep Japan distant from other American Asian allies.

The current Japanese government wants a closer U.S.-Japan alliance, a strong Japanese military, and a constitutional change to allow involvement in overseas peacekeeping. Yet, it also holds a host of retrogressive notions of what it means to be Japanese, not the least being that the Pacific War was one of liberation against white colonialism. The latter, unreconstructed view does not engender trust in Japan by other countries in Asia or advance cooperation.

House Foreign Affairs Committee Chairman Tom Lantos of California said, "The true strength of a nation is tested when it is forced to confront the darkest chapters in its history. Will it have the

courage to face up to the truth of its past, or will it hide from those truths in the desperate and foolish hope they will fade with time?" The Comfort Women tragedy certainly has not. In Asia, as throughout the world, the history and justice issues need to be resolved before security can be advanced.

Reconciliation and regional peace in Asia are at the heart of the Congressional Comfort Woman resolution. Long overdue apologies and respect for these victims of wartime violence are among the elements needed to achieve this peace. After 60 years of constructive, responsible, and resolutely peaceful membership in the world community, it is unfortunate that Japan must be reminded of the power of justice as a tool for peace.

III. Nautilus invites your responses

The Northeast Asia Peace and Security Network invites your responses to this essay. Please send responses to: napsnet-reply@nautilus.org . Responses will be considered for redistribution to the network only if they include the author's name, affiliation, and explicit consent.

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Nautilus Institute

608 San Miguel Ave., Berkeley, CA 94707-1535 | Phone: (510) 423-0372 | Email:

nautilus@nautilus.org