

Legacies of World War II in South and East Asia

**edited by
David Koh Wee Hock**



Institute of Southeast Asian Studies
Singapore

Chapter Eleven

How to Assess World War II in World History: One Japanese Perspective

Takashi Inoguchi

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF WORLD WAR II IN MODERN HISTORY

This chapter assesses the impact of World War II through the following lenses: (1) World War II as a fight between democracy and Fascism; (2) winning World War II meant independence from colonial powers for many countries; and (3) World War II as another fight by democracy against tyranny. The chapter assesses the legacies of World War II especially as they relate to East and Southeast Asia. Lastly, it attempts to make a combined assessment from all these three lenses.

THREE FACES OF WORLD WAR II

Democracy against Fascism

That the United States played a leading role in defeating Fascist allies in World War II is the standard narrative about the significance of World War II (Butow 1954, 1961; Gaddis 1987; Leffler 1992; Ikenberry 2000).

According to this version, World War II was the war of democracy against Fascism embodied by Germany and Japan. All the Allied Powers fought against them, and the Soviet Union ruled by the Communist Party contributed no less immensely to the defeat of Fascism. Hence democracy was taken in a broad sense of the word. In other words, any kind of anti-Fascism was democracy, including anti-Fascism by people's democracy, which was actually totalitarian rule. That was the broad understanding on the basis of which the United States, the Soviet Union, Great Britain, France and China were convened at Yalta in 1945 (Yergin, 1978). They were all also victors in World War II. France and China were not as strong as they wished in fighting this war in the first place. Yet to bring the semblance of unity and solidarity of all Allied Powers to the fore, the United States wanted to include all these five as parties to the Yalta accord. All five became the permanent members of the Security Council of the United Nations, which was founded in 1945. The United Nations Charter requires its members to uphold the spirit of democracy against Fascism. All newly independent countries were naturally mostly welcomed to enter the United Nations, because part of the struggle of democracy against Fascism was the struggle of an emerging Third World to gain independence after World War II.

Yet the competition between the United States and the Soviet Union about who should be credited for defeating Fascism most effectively continued to take place even before the war ended. At Yalta, Franklin D. Roosevelt was able to keep the anti-Fascist coalition united. But beneath the amicable conversation was a discord that led to the Cold War after 1945. Immediately after President Roosevelt's death, President Harry Truman, along with Secretary of State James Burns, was most conscious of this competition (Alperovitch 1995; Torii 2005). Truman's idea was to take dramatic and decisive action *vis-à-vis* Japan before the Soviet armed forces, pulled from the European front and assigned to the Far Eastern front, could defeat Japan. Truman wanted to drop newly developed atomic bombs on Japan before the Soviet Union violated the Non-Aggression Treaty with Japan and occupied Manchuria, Sakhalin, the Kuriles and northern Korea. Truman had barely finished dropping bombs on Hiroshima on 6 August 1945, when two days later Stalin ordered the Soviet Army to occupy the Japanese imperial territories in the Far East. At stake in Truman's mind was hegemonic leadership of the post-World War II world. He thought this leader should not be the Soviet Union,

and he was worried; the Soviet Union looked most effective in getting Germany defeated in Europe. Further, at Yalta, Stalin expressed his intention to bring his army from the Western front (because the anti-German war was over in June 1945) to the Far Eastern front to defeat Japan. Truman consequently gave an ambiguous message to Japan as to the terms of surrender so that Japan would procrastinate over the terms of surrender and not surrender too fast. It was strange to discuss the terms of surrender when the Allied Powers led by the United States government issued the message calling for an unconditional surrender. But the Japanese government was in no mood to allow Emperor Hirohito to be executed. The United States government decided therefore to keep Emperor Hirohito alive and to let the Japanese bureaucracy run the country under the auspices of the Supreme Commander of Allied Powers (Torii 1985–2003; Iokibe 1985). While negotiations on these terms were going on, atomic bombs were dropped on 6 and 9 August. The Soviet Army was not ready to invade the Japanese imperial territory before 8 August. What was critical in getting Japanese leaders to make their surrender decision was not atomic bombs but the Soviet invasion of Manchuria and threat to bring troops into China (Hasegawa 2005). Their calculations went as follows: First, the Soviet Army had devastated the Japanese Guandong army in Manchuria. Second, if the Soviet Union had brought troops further south into China, that would have facilitated the Chinese Communists' accession to power since the Japanese Imperial Army's troops stationed in China had already given a devastating blow to the Chinese Army under Chiang Kai-shek in 1944, after the complete defeat of the Japanese Imperial Navy had become obvious by mid-1944. Japan's aim was to prepare what it envisaged as a decisive war against the United States over the Japanese archipelagoes by recalling the Japanese Army in China without worrying about being driven out by Chinese troops, whether Kuomintang or Communist.

Therefore, pursuing hegemonic ambitions, the United States demonstrated its unprecedented power to the world through its nuclear bombs. This lens of history still wields strong influence today. One possible manifestation of this lens is the United States government rejection of the Group of Four's (Japan, Germany, India and Brazil) push for permanent membership in the United Nations Security Council. Japan and Germany are two countries whose sins have not been fully accommodated by the West (Maier 1988).

Anti-Colonialism against Colonialism

The second significance of World War II is the victory of anti-colonialism. The United States and the Soviet Union had already heralded the era of anti-imperialism in the wake of World War I (Iriye 1968). The spirit was not lost in the wake of World War II. The United States persuaded old European powers to decolonize their imperial territories after the war. Germany and Italy were forced to do so because of their defeat. Great Britain and France did so somewhat begrudgingly. Japan's defeat effectively liberated its colonies. The United States proceeded to decolonize its colonies in the Caribbean and the Pacific. The struggle of anti-colonialism started to produce the massive concrete results of independence after World War II. The architect of the United Nations Headquarters on the Hudson River bank in New York in 1945 thought that the maximum number of members of the United Nations would be fifty. His prediction and thus space design of the headquarters failed utterly. By the end of the 1950s the number of members easily exceeded fifty. By the end of the 1960s it exceeded 100. By 2005 it had become 191. History registers this disappearance of colonialism in the mid-twentieth century like the disappearance of slavery institutions in the mid-nineteenth century.

Without fully reflecting on the disappearance of colonialism and its post-colonial development after World War II, any discussion on the impact of World War II on contemporary society would be amiss. Freedom and equality of peoples, nations and states were achieved, at least in international law and the United Nations Charter. In Asia, for instance, the dream of Rabindranath Tagore, Jose Rizal, Sun Yat-sen and Okakura Tenshin was at long last achieved. The struggle by Mahatma Gandhi, Mao Zedong, Ho Chi Minh, Sukarno, Aung San won its final victory. The United Nations Charter registers the equality of nations in the form of one member, one vote in the General Assembly. Members' efforts at empowering themselves took various forms of getting together and voicing dissents on issues that were unfavourable to the Third World or former colonial countries.

The question yet to be fully answered is: who ignited the dismemberment of colonialism? It is important to recall that while Germany attacked old Europe itself at home, Japan attacked old Europe in its colonies or semi-colonies as well as the United States. Japan attacked Hawaii and Southeast Asia almost simultaneously. Christopher Thorne (1985) attributed the dismemberment of colonialism especially in the Far

East to the Japanese attack of old Europe through its colonies or semi-colonies although Japan did not intend the genuine liberation of the colonies including those of its own.

Democracy against Tyranny

The third way to assess World War II is to frame it in terms of a fight against tyranny. It began with the legacy of the “new diplomacy” of Woodrow Wilson and Vladimir Lenin in the wake of World War I, and the legacy of the Yalta compromise between Franklin Roosevelt and Joseph Stalin. In other words, when Wilson and Lenin were decrying old European power politics, they were hiding their profound differences. In a similar vein, when Roosevelt and Stalin reached the accord at Yalta, they were hiding their fundamental divergences. All four actors did so for the sake of fighting tyranny. Their discord erupted soon after, when Harry Truman became U.S. president. He tried to demonstrate the United State’s post-war hegemonic leadership role in the form of dropping atomic bombs in 1945 when the Soviet entry into the anti-Japanese war was imminent. By pre-empting the Soviet Union’s likely-to-be-decisive victory against the Japanese Imperial Army in Manchuria and possibly further into China, Truman achieved his dream of giving devastating blows to the Japanese government, which had been procrastinating about when to surrender “unconditionally”. The Japanese government negotiated for preservation of the “national polity” and a constitutional monarch.

The legacy of the “new diplomacy” is inherited by ideological reformulations of a new line of thinking about the world in the wake of 9/11. These were attempted in several ways. Simplistic yet powerful is the formulation by George W. Bush in his speech in Riga, Latvia (Bush 2005), commemorating the sixtieth anniversary of the victory of the anti-Nazi war:

Sixty years ago, on the 7th of May, the world reacted with joy and relief at the defeat of fascism in Europe. The next day, General Dwight D. Eisenhower announced that “history’s mightiest machine of conquest has been utterly destroyed.” Yet the great democracies soon found that a new mission had come to us — not merely to defeat a single dictator, but to defeat the idea of dictatorship on this continent. Through the decades of that struggle, some endured the rule of tyrants; all lived in the frightening shadow of war. Yet because we lifted our sights and held firm to our principles, freedom prevailed.

Now, ladies and gentlemen, the freedom of Europe, won by courage, must be secured by effort and goodwill. In our time, as well, we must raise our sights. In the distance we can see another great goal — not merely the absence of tyranny on this continent, but the end of tyranny in our world. Once again, we're asked to hold firm to our principles, and to value the liberty of others. And once again, if we do our part, freedom will prevail.

It is a picture of democracy against all sorts of tyranny. Attracted immensely by the simplicity and clarity of the democracy message that strikes a chord with his “fundamentalist” Christian faith, George W. Bush is advancing his strategy of democracy promotion on all fronts: in failed states such as Afghanistan, Iraq, North Korea and Sudan, in former and currently communist states such as Ukraine, Kyrgistan, Georgia, Russia and China, and in resiliently authoritarian states like Myanmar and Iran. The thrust of the Bush speech at Riga was simple and forceful; it addressed what Bush regarded as the key common denominator — tyranny — shared by Osama bin Laden, Saddam Hussain, Kim Jong Il, and the rest. Early in April 2005 Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice delivered a speech in Tokyo, calling for an Asian league of democracies (Rice 2005).

Because one day, an American President and a Japanese Prime Minister will sit across from democratic allies in Iraq and Afghanistan and Palestine. And they, too, will chart a better future for our children and for the children of the world. They will do so on the basis of democratic values and they will do so because there is no stronger friendship than that that is born of a common commitment to democratic values, to liberty and to freedom.

The Rice speech is consistent with the Bush speech that came after. The immediate post-Cold War euphoria over the end of ideology (Francis Fukuyama 1992) was substantially toned down. Rather, a post-Cold War and post-9/11 ideology has placed the United States at the centre of the world in an intermittent struggle against the deniers of freedom and democracy. This ideology was no doubt influenced by Natan Sharansky, who portrayed the vision of a future always beset with struggles against tyranny, which is bound to triumph unless freedom and democracy intermittently fight their way forward (Natan Sharansky 2004). The events of 9/11 gave George W. Bush a well-defined enemy against which he would direct his nation and all the peoples in the world to fight against. In his first term of 2001–04, he concentrated on the anti-terrorist war. In

the second term, he continued his anti-terrorist war, and found himself facing two other fronts as well: (1) the rise of China (Kokubun and Wang 2004; Lardy 2003) and (2) ever-rising anti-Americanism (*The Economist* 2005; Goldsmith, Horiuchi and Inoguchi 2005). These led him all the more to sweeping slogans and messianic messages.

EAST AND SOUTHEAST ASIA SEEN FROM THREE LENSES

We have examined the picture of the legacies and impacts of World War II, as seen from three global angles. This section takes a closer look at East and Southeast Asia through the three lenses or perspectives just sketched above. The question here is: who are our enemies? Who are our friends? The answers differ when the lenses change.

Democracy against Fascism

What is democracy? What is Fascism? In 1945 when the Yalta conference was held, China was governed, albeit tenuously, by Chiang Kai-shek. Through this lens, the U.S. government preferred to work with the Kuomintang over the Communist Party. Chiang Kai-shek represented democracy in their eyes, and Kuomintang China was the beacon of democracy in the East when in American eyes, Japan was clearly Fascist. That was why the United States assisted Chiang despite great difficulties. That was why it dropped the bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki before the Soviet Union could march into Manchuria (Hasegawa 2005). An alternative to Kuomintang China was Communist China, an alternative attractive to some but clearly not acceptable to the mainstream in the U.S. government at that time. Yet China under the Kuomintang was arguably a *quasi*-Fascist, quasi-Leninist regime (Eastman 1991). The Communist Party portrayed the Kuomintang regime in a similar fashion.

On the other hand, Japan was clearly Fascist in 1945 in the eyes of the United States. Japan had to be dealt a fatal blow. It had to be literally flattened by incessant bombings on cities and military facilities. It had to transform itself into a Switzerland of the Far East, by which General Douglas MacArthur meant Japan becoming a geographically small, politically quiet and militarily insignificant entity. But Japan transformed itself into a democracy, thanks to the American intervention. Japan has nothing to be ashamed of this, as Lawrence Whitehead tells us that only three countries before it had developed democracy endogenously — Great Britain, Switzerland and Sweden (Whitehead 2002). Japan has registered

a record of mature democracy for sixty years, thanks again to the American largesse as well as to the Japanese strategy called the Yoshida Doctrine, which instructed Japan to keep a low profile diplomatically, rely on the United States for security, while working hard to excel economically. The combination of the Peace Constitution (forbidding Japan from using force for the settlement of international disputes) and the Japan-United States Security Treaty (enabling the United States to use facilities and services in Japan almost as freely as it wishes) helped to engender this transformation (Dower 1999; Swenson-Wright 2005).

Anti-Colonialism against Colonialism

Most colonies in East and Southeast Asia, among them Japanese and German ones, had decolonized by the end of the 1950s. The United States played a positive role in persuading or forcing otherwise reluctant European colonial powers to give up their colonies. By 1955 the spirit of anti-colonialism was greatly hailed, as the Afro-Asian conference at Bandung had demonstrated. Sukarno, Jawaharlal Nehru, Zhou Enlai and their contemporaries demonstrated outstandingly that colonialism represented the past whereas anti-colonialism was the future.

Yet as time passed, what came to be called neo-colonialism was on the rise as the United States competed with the Soviet Union, each trying to help their “client” regimes consolidate themselves in East and Southeast Asia as well (Gurtov 1974). South Korea and South Vietnam were cases in point (Cumings 1981 and 1989; Kahin 1986). As a reaction to the Cold War, the Non-Aligned Movement asserted itself *vis-à-vis* the United States and the Soviet Union for many decades. At present, anti-colonialism is not vehemently expressed in East and Southeast Asia. Rather, countries in the region have been riding high on a developmental momentum that caught on to globalization’s virtuous cycle. In view, however, of the allegedly neo-colonialist role that the United States played on the Korean Peninsula and in Vietnam, the United States has been accepted only in a lukewarm fashion in the region (Inoguchi, et al. 2006, *The Economist* 2005).

Democracy against Tyranny

The third wave of democratization (Huntington 1993) and the terrorism of 9/11 set the stage for democracy against tyranny in East and Southeast Asia as well. Virtually every country rode on the bandwagon of anti-terrorism in the wake of the 9/11 terrorism. This bandwagoning behaviour

is due to the way in which terrorism can be defined to serve the regimes' purposes. Among these bandwagoning countries are authoritarian or authoritarian-leaning regimes, enthusiastic in using anti-terrorism as an excellent cover for suppressing what they defined as terrorist groups. Outwardly, these regimes also wanted to be on friendly terms with the United States in a unipolar world. Shortly after 9/11, however, the course of anti-terrorism started to go hand-in-hand with anti-tyranny ideas, concomitant with the rejection and eradication of weapons of mass destruction. The ideological shift of the U.S. government towards issuing a *quasi*-messianic call for freedom and democracy, backed up with super-high-tech weapons in dealing with rogue states, has added momentum to the promotion of democracy in the Third World.

The question is: in East and Southeast Asia, where is the tyranny? In Tokyo in April 2005, when United States Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice called for a league of democracies in East and Southeast Asia, she had this question in mind. The Human Rights Report by the United States State Department, Human Rights Report by Amnesty International and Freedom House's Freedom in the World Report all point to a similar set of countries that suffer from a shortage of freedom and democracy. Condoleezza Rice's conspicuous absence at the annual Association of South East Nations meeting in mid-2005 demonstrates the clear discomfort the United States feels with the ASEAN policy of allowing what it regards as a tyrannical country to preside the meeting. Subsequently, Myanmar gave up its chairmanship of ASEAN. It is not at all clear whether recent events that took place in Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgistan have anything to do with democratic promotion from outside. But those leaders of regimes of a tyrannical bent must be at least mildly apprehensive of the possibility of their regimes being subverted from within with help from afar, in the cause of freedom and democracy.

CONCLUSION

Using the three lenses to look at World War II, its impact on Japanese foreign policy and domestic politics is not difficult to identify. It is not an exaggeration to say that the first lens of democracy fighting against Fascism remoulded Japanese foreign policy and domestic politics since 1945. Japan itself was democratized and disarmed. It has become the longest-standing democracy outside the West, along with India. Japan has not waged any war with any country since 1945. Furthermore, thanks in part to the

arrangements of the Peace Constitution and the Japan-United States Security Treaty, Japan has become a very wealthy country.

Yet, while a substantial number of Japanese find it agreeable to view World War II as a struggle by democracy against Fascism, beneath this agreement lurks, no matter how weakly, the view that what World War II boiled down to was a fight among imperialist powers. While one may argue that Japan was one of these powers, ultimately a vanquished Japan disarmed, democratized and became allied with the United States. The Japan-United States Security Treaty has been performing most effectively in East and Southeast Asia its role as the regional linchpin of stability and prosperity (Inoguchi and Bacon 2006).

Through the second lens of anti-colonialism, we have seen decolonization materialize since 1945. Most Japanese agree with the view that World War II effectively prepared the death of colonialism, the freedom of nations and liberation of Asia. Yet a footnote that is usually inserted is Japanese pride in daring to Westernize itself thus avoiding falling prey to Western colonialism and imperialism. A further footnote that is also usually added, says that it was the Japanese who dared to destroy the Achilles heel of Western colonialism and imperialism — their colonies and semi-colonies. The first footnote is probably easy to accept. It is the beautiful story of a non-Western country in East Asia learning ideas, institutions and industrialization from the West and even outperforming the original masters. The second footnote, however, is more troublesome. The reasons are as follows.

First, Japan was itself imperialist and colonialist, causing havoc and calamities in East and Southeast Asia. Second, equating Japan and the Allied Powers is problematic. This equation contradicts the first lens that all the Allied Powers and thus all the United Nations' member countries adhere to till today. Maintaining that Japan was brave and should be lauded is a silly view. Inserting this footnote bespeaks the ambivalence of the Japanese identity. In the minds of the majority of Japanese, their modern history is a success story of Westernization, beginning from the coerced opening of the country by Commodore Perry of the United States Navy in 1853 through to the Meiji Restoration in 1868. Since then, the Japanese worked industriously and ingenuously at the task of civilization and enlightenment to achieve "rich country and strong army" status. Although the digression and derailment from the course took place in the 1930s and 1940s, Japan has gotten back on track, and has succeeded as a nation. In the minds of the Japanese therefore, there is a historical continuity

well kept and alive dating from the mid-nineteenth century until the twenty-first century (Inoguchi 2005). Thus, Japanese modern identity is formed through their focused memory of their assiduous Westernization without losing their Japanese-ness. This line of identity construction has historical continuity justifying what Japan had done wrong during the war — that of aggression and seeking its own colonies. It thus cannot sit well with how World War II is interpreted outside Japan.

The third lens seems at a glance to go down well with the Japanese. After all, the democratic and peaceful credentials of Japan abound — no authoritarian rule for six decades since 1945; none killed in war combat since 1945. The Japanese worry is, rather, that the fight against tyranny in the twenty-first century could ignite clashes surrounding Japan, dragging it into these conflicts and posing to it difficult choices in view of its steadfast alliance with the United States. In a permissive environment of unipolarity, the United States' promotion of democracy in China, North Korea and Myanmar has seen it take a vindicationist rather than an exemplarist strategy, following the characterization of Jonathan Monten (2005). This strategy is militarily aggressive; it is also politically inadequately contextualized and therefore imprudently unilateralist. This strategy aimed to alter the politics and economics of many target countries all at once by overwhelming military strikes. More alarming was the fact that since late 2005, U.S.-Japan political and defence cooperation has linked Japan far more tightly to the United States than before. In situations of dilemma, such as military confrontation over the Taiwan Straits or the Korean Peninsula, Japan might well procrastinate. No more wars in Asia must be one of the principles that Japan should strive for. It should not want to further aggravate the relationship with China or North Korea. Yet its alliance with the United States must be kept steadfast. Until it has to choose sides in the future, Japan is pursuing democracy as the way for the future in Asia, under which Asians should live with each other peacefully and prosperously. The Japanese preference for “shared values” rather than “diversity of values” in such places as the Network of East Asian Think Tanks unmistakably points to this goal.

When asked about the impact of the French Revolution, Zhou Enlai answered that it was too early to assess its impact (Schama 1997). This could well be true for the impact of World War II on Japan and East Asia. All in all, the significance of World War II is great and complex to Japan. Its current foreign policy and domestic politics cannot be discussed without even a most cursory reference to World War II. The three lenses that have

been influential to varying degrees in time and space often pose difficulties to the Japanese government and people. Life would be much easier for the Japanese if one, or two, or all three lenses fit nicely with their construction of their memory, history and identity. When 15 August approaches every year, emotions and private histories about the wartime period, thoughts about the state and war burst forth among Japanese in newspapers, magazines, televisions and radios, and more recently, on blogs. Within this outpouring, one can see the struggle among the three lenses laid bare in the relentlessly hot mid-summer sunlight, as they did on 15 August 1945. And no less relentlessly does summer stomp in every year.

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