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Historical lessons from Asian Cup

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During the Asian Cup soccer tournament, which was hosted by China, many Chinese fans were quite openly hostile toward the Japanese team and their fans. One could see the waving of political banners emblazoned with such slogans as "Apologize to the People of Asia" and "Return the Diaoyu Islands to Us."

As these messages suggest, many Chinese remain bitter over Japan's invasion and occupation of China, and the atrocities committed by Japanese troops during the Asia-Pacific War. The vocal and physical animosity of Chinese included jeering the Japanese players during the playing of Japan's national anthem, pelting Japanese fans with garbage, torching the Japanese flag, and forcefully preventing Japan's supporters from leaving the stadium for a couple of hours after China lost to Japan in the final championship match.

The behavior of the Chinese fans, while offensive, amounted to no more than rude, simple-minded actions. On the other hand, though disturbed by this display of animosity by Chinese fans, those on the Japanese side probably overreacted.

"When the national anthem of any country is played anywhere in the world, it should be respected," said Zico, the Brazilian soccer coach of the Japanese team. This was followed by a chorus of criticism from Japan's elite political establishment.

Foreign Minister Yoriko Kawaguchi, appearing before a committee in the Diet, said: "I want Chinese soccer fans to think a little more about their anti-Japanese moves. It is deplorable. It has no positive impact on advancing Japan-China relations."

Before the final match between China and Japan was played, Japan's Vice Foreign Minister, Yukio Takeuchi, met with Wu Dawei, China's Ambassador to Japan, to urge him to stop Chinese fans from booing Japan's national anthem. The Chief Cabinet Secretary in Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi's administration, Hiroyuki Hosoda, stated: "We want China to firmly deal with it as Japanese spectators are likely to go there. No trouble or violence should take place."

A slightly more obscure political figure, Mitoji Yabunaka, Director General of the Japanese Foreign Ministry's Asian and Oceanian Affairs Bureau, chimed in with perhaps the most stern statement, when he warned Cheng Yonghua, Minister at the Chinese Embassy in Tokyo, that lawmakers in Japan's ruling Liberal Democratic Party might consider boycotting the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing if China could not dampen the passions of its citizens.

Harsh criticism of the Chinese fans for their semi-violent outbursts undermines any attempt at a reasonable, dignified response by Japan.

What instead should have happened was a polite request by Japanese officials to the Chinese authorities

to protect the safety of the Japanese players and their supporters while in China. Next is the important (but always difficult) task of self reflection. People in Japan should ask themselves why such anti-Japanese behavior manifested itself, a necessary prelude to searching for ways to understand and hopefully defuse the obvious rancor exhibited in China.

Speaking again on behalf of his team, Zico said: "My players are young ... they have nothing to do with the political issues of the past." But if this is true, and Japanese youth can enjoy their soccer games but are never asked analyze their nation's past, the danger is that this will stimulate more anti-Japanese sentiment, possibly beyond China.

As some (especially historians) never tire of saying: "History is not bunk. We can still learn great lessons from history."

Immediately after the defeat of Japan in the Asia-Pacific War, Japanese civilian leaders, who had cooperated with the militarists to expand Japan's political and economic influence over China, were generally willing to demilitarize the country, both to lessen the possibility of a domestic social revolution and to cement their own hold on political power in the wake of defeat.

Throughout the war, the Japanese government's control over the flow of information allowed it to constantly mislead the Japanese people about reasons for the war and the war's progress. The government encouraged everyone to be willing to sacrifice their lives and well-being on behalf of the Emperor, and if necessary fight to the death. Given the intense propaganda, the suffering that ensued reached unimaginable levels.

Even after Japan's surrender and the end of militarism, huge numbers of Japanese continued to lead miserable lives, falling victim to hyper inflation, serious food shortages, and a general loss of hope. The Japanese people desperately needed someone to blame for their misfortunes.

Japan's civilian leaders held the militarists and ultra-nationalists wholly responsible for the war and its ravages, thus gratifying the nation's political and psychological need for scapegoats. Japan's civilian leadership defined the Asia-Pacific War as a great aberration, wrought by militarists and ultra nationalists who cared nothing about leading Japan toward destruction.

Demilitarization by the United States and the anti-military campaign by Japan's political leaders greatly contributed to the birth of pacifism in postwar Japan. Article Nine in the new Japanese constitution (crafted by a team put together by MacArthur) was the ultimate example of how power had shifted away from the clique of militarists and ultra-nationalists and into the hands civilians. As stated in the Article: "The Japanese people forever renounce war as a sovereign right of the nation and the threat or use of force as means of settling international disputes."

This process that led to this power shift created complex and peculiar legacies in postwar Japan. As the Japanese came to imagine themselves as helpless victims, betrayed by brutal leaders, their rejection of militarism was followed by an almost fatalistic pacifism. Since they had been "deceived," most Japanese felt they had to deny any personal association or endorsement of prewar and wartime militarism.

Although Japan's militaristic actions generated within Japan itself both victims and victimizers, Japan as a nation focused mainly on the former, ignoring the latter. Consequently, Article Nine had the perverse effect of sparing the Japanese people from taking responsibility for the Asia-Pacific War, especially the unprovoked attacks on other Asian countries.

Fatalistic pacifism and the denial of war responsibilities became mutually reinforcing tendencies in post-war Japan, without which Article Nine might have had a shorter constitutional life. Despite national security concerns, the growth of pacifism in Japan helped lock-in support for Article Nine.

From the point of view of Japan's civilian government leaders, Article Nine delegitimized the militarists and helped them secure control over the levers of political power. It also was indispensable in preserving Japan's Imperial institution. In the end, Article Nine became the capstone of pacifism in Japan, but it also inaugurated a distorted legacy of fatalistic pacifism and denial of war responsibility.

This distorted legacy remains in place today, which means that Japan has inherited the "political issues of the past."

Though perhaps not immediately recognizable to many, Japanese and Chinese alike, these "issues of the past" helped fuel the recent hostility of China's soccer fans toward Japan. Pacifism and denial of war responsibilities are two sides of the same coin.

The Japanese people should use the incident in China as a first step in the direction of separating these two sides, to clear the way to a more thoughtful embrace of pacifism and a sincere reexamination of the nation's still-existing wartime responsibilities.

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