

Divisive Messages from President Obama's Visit to Hiroshima

June 9, 2016

Dong-Joon Jo

The choreography of Mr. Obama's visit to Hiroshima was elegant. The movements of President Obama and Prime Minister Abe were well coordinated from the moment when they walked out from the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum to their small talk near the statue of Sadaka Sasaki. The two leaders' wreath-laying and remarks at the cenotaph were infused with symbols of the relationship between the United States and Japan since the Pearl Harbor attack. Mr. Obama's meeting with the two A-bomb survivors and the donation of the two origami cranes to the Museum were moving scenes. The finely tuned event drew a rousing applause from spectators around the world as well as at the ceremony.

What messages did the two leaders try to deliver during the dramatic event in Hiroshima? Considering that there have been a series of under-the-table negotiations on the protocol of Mr. Obama's visit to Hiroshima since 2009, the event seems to be related with Mr. Obama's pledge for the nuclear weapons-free world. Also, considering that there were only Japan and Vietnam in his tenth presidential trip to Asia, Mr. Obama's visit must be related to the reconciliation between the United States and its two former enemies in Asia. China's strong objection and South Korea's disregard to the event foretell some changes in the East Asian alignment. The event was loaded with too much symbolism and too many messages.

Another Call for Nuclear Weapons-Free World

The first and obvious message in the event is the call for the nuclear weapons-free world. Mr. Obama mentioned a moral revolution to resolve the contradiction between the two faces of nuclear power, a good material for civilization and a means to destroy the mankind, after pointing to the gap between technological progresses and the slow development of human institutions as the cause of violent conflicts among human collectivities. Meanwhile, Mr. Abe diplomatically asked his counterpart to witness the reality of the nuclear bombings and stand for the nuclear disarmament in the world, while highlighting the sufferings that people in Hiroshima have been enduring. Though there was still a delicate difference in opinions on the atomic bombings of 1945, the two leaders shared the goal of phasing out nuclear weapons.

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"Divisive Messages from President Obama's Visit to Hiroshima" 979-11-86226-94-0 95340

Edit and Typeset: Benjamin A. Engel, Hyejung Suh

The East Asia Institute
 #909 Sampoong B/D, Eulji-ro 158, Jung-gu,
 Seoul 04548, South Korea
 Phone 82 2 2277 1683 Fax 82 2 2277 1697
 Email eai@eai.or.kr Website www.eai.or.kr



Regretfully, Mr. Obama's nuclear scorecard appears too humble in front of the legacies of the atomic bombing in Hiroshima. There have been some progresses in nuclear disarmament including the agreement between the United States and Russia to reduce each side's nuclear stockpile, the Iranian nuclear reversal, the phase out of nuclear materials from black markets, and the four rounds of nuclear security summit. On the other hand, North Korea's nuclear challenge increases the risk of another catastrophe; the reduction of nuclear stockpile over the last 7 years is poorest since the end of the Cold War; the United States is still one of 19 countries that has signed but not ratified the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty; several countries keep conducting sub-critical tests to improve their nuclear capabilities and de facto nuclear weapons states continue to increase their nuclear stockpiles.

Hiroshima is not a good place for Mr. Obama to reiterate the vision of the nuclear weapons-free world in the last year of his presidency, though it would have been the best place for him to launch his vision during the first year of his presidency. It is the place where an atomic bomb destroyed more than 140,000 lives and left indelible prints in the history of mankind. Mr. Obama's achievements in the nuclear issue-area are too modest to bring about strong reverberations for denuclearization. He has not lived up to his bold vision. The two origami cranes that Mr. Obama personally offered appear too little to bear the heavy legacies of the atomic bombing in Hiroshima.

Mr. Obama's One More Step for Reconciliation

The second message is related with how to interpret the Pacific War. Mr. Obama changed the frame of the debate on the Pacific War from 'who to blame' to 'what to blame.' Also, he provided a view on the atomic bombings different from what most Americans still believe and American conservatives strongly hold.

President Truman and his top aides justified the use of the atomic weapons to end the war quickly and save Japanese people as well as American soldiers. They considered the dropping of the two nuclear weapons as "the only way" to lead "fanatic" Japanese leaders to surrender quickly. In contrast, Mr. Obama blamed the circumstances that led to the two countries to be entangled in the violent conflict but not those who were accused of being warmongers. He made one more step toward Mr. Abe's position that the autocracy in Japan and the disruption in interstate trade were responsible for the outbreak of the Pacific War and the atomic bombing was an extension of the war logic for victory.

The statistical information on the casualties in the Pacific theater indicates that the number of wounded and killed Japanese in World War II was much greater than what the United States had. Japan lost over 1.7 million soldiers in the Asian and Pacific theater, while the United States lost about 112,000. Furthermore, American bombings against major cities in Japan claimed hundreds of thousands civilians; Hiroshima and Nagasaki suffered from the atomic bombings. Also, the American occupation is still an uncomfortable memory to the Japanese people. Most Japanese survivors of World War II have a deep-rooted bitterness toward the United States, though many of them are not outspoken in expressing their resentments. There have been deep wounds and emotional baggage in the Japanese side, though Japan reluctantly takes the responsibility to initiate the war.

Mr. Obama's remarks at the cenotaph relieved most Japanese who have had difficulty in pointing their fingers at their former leaders responsible for the sufferings that their compatriots endured. Referring to the surviving victims of the atomic bombings as *hibakusha* (被爆者), Mr. Obama tried to show his empathy for the sufferings that the atomic bombings have brought. Especially, the two origami cranes that Mr. Obama brought were helpful in warming some Japanese hearts. Mr. Obama's interpretation of World War II in general and the atomic bombings specifically has



eased the bitter feelings that the Japanese people would not reveal, eventually contributing to the reconciliation between the United States and Japan.

Ripples into the Regional Alignment in East Asia

The two leaders emphasized that the two countries were not mere allies but friends. Referring to the European Union which has grown out of fierce battles, Mr. Obama implied that the United States and Japan have already deepened their integration with bonds of commerce and democracy. Mr. Abe described the two countries as being “bonded in spirit” and “bound in trust.” The two leaders’ praise of the Japan-U.S. alliance in Hiroshima showed that the two countries might have already reached a new chapter in their relationship. The two countries may have overcome the most challenging obstacle against deepening their mutual goodwill.

The repercussion of Mr. Obama’s visit to Hiroshima has pressed on the deep wounds in East Asia. North Korea accused Japan of using Mr. Obama’s visit to overlook the atrocities that Japan committed during the war. China made it clear that the Nanjing incident should deserve just as much international attention as Hiroshima and Japan should not be free from its responsibilities for aggression and atrocities in World War II. South Korea tried to turn away from the event in Hiroshima and even the G-7 summit which discussed issues related with North Korea. South Korea, given its fear of losing the American security commitments, seems to control its discomfort with the Japan-U.S. reconciliation. Southeast Asian states kept watchful eyes on the event. Though he might have put his finger on what most Japanese inwardly want, Mr. Obama has reopened the deep wounds which other East Asian countries still carry.

Mr. Obama’s visit to Hiroshima has caused some ripples in the regional alignment in East Asia. The event clearly indicates that Japan has won the favor of

the United States. Faced with the rise of China and its own defense budget cuts, the United States would like Japan to become a more active and reliable partner in handling issues in East Asia. At least the United States seems ready to benignly neglect Japan’s increased activities in the region. In contrast, the Sino-U.S. rift widened. The sufferings that Chinese have been bearing as a result of World War II are so much that China’s animosity toward Japan may easily spill over toward its rivalry with the United States. South Korea will be caught in the middle of a delicate and precarious game among the three major powers. It is better for South Korea not to consider the United States as its supporter, when it comes to issues with Japan. In sum, the event in Hiroshima implies that the United States may not work as an offshore broker in handling regional issues in East Asia but an offshore supporter of Japan.

Mr. Obama’s visit to Hiroshima shows how fragile cooperative initiatives are in East Asia, when it comes to history issues. The deep wounds which have come from unpleasant history issues in the twentieth century still haunt East Asia in the twenty-first century. The U.S.-Japan reconciliation appears to be incompatible with the Sino-U.S. reconciliation and the security cooperation between South Korea and the United States. The messages from Hiroshima reconfirm the need for regional dialogues at history issues in East Asia. East Asian countries would be better off handling history issues by themselves rather than bringing offshore brokers as their supporters. ■

——— *Dong-Joon Jo* is a professor at the Department of Political Science and International Relations, Seoul National University. His research interests lie in international organization, interstate conflict, and nuclear proliferation.

