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PRIME MINISTER ABE'S STATEMENT ON THE 70TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE END OF WWII: THE CASE FOR JAPAN'S PUBLIC DIPLOMACY

Akio Watanabe

- Underlying the Abe Statement is the hope for a future in which the issues now confronting Asia can be overcome in the spirit of conciliation and tolerance.
- The Statement gained the acceptance of many people for the profound remorse expressed toward the number of innocent people who helplessly suffered countless hardships due to Japan's actions, and for the prime minister's adherence to the sincerely apologetic stance taken by his predecessors.
- The ultimate assessment of the Abe Statement will depend on whether it inspires positive feedback.

The views expressed in this piece are the author's own and should not be attributed to The Association of Japanese Institutes of Strategic Studies.

With the attention of the world on him, Prime Minister Abe presented a statement on the 70th anniversary of the end of World War II. It is extremely unusual for the remarks of a single politician to attract so many people's notice. From the perspective of public diplomacy, Prime Minister Abe was granted a rare and valuable opportunity. Did he ultimately make wise and effective use of this occasion?

The following are the impressions of one intellectual in Japan, organized around three key points:

1. An underlying theme of conciliation
2. Continuity
3. A new direction

Infusing the entire statement was a spirit of conciliation and tolerance. Prime Minister Abe expressed deep remorse for Japan having taken the wrong path and acted as a challenger to the new international order within the complex interweave of interests and power that constituted the world of international politics, and he looked back with gratitude at the spirit of conciliation and tolerance demonstrated by other countries over the past 70 years that afforded Japan the opportunity to return to its place in the international community, and at Japan's positive use of this opportunity to attain its current peace and prosperity.


This was an expression of commitment to cooperating in the spirit of conciliation and tolerance to overcome the issues now confronting the world, and especially Asia. This hope for the future will shape our attitudes as we look back at the paths that Japan and the world have taken over the past 70 years.

Whether the call for such a future will reach the ears of its intended audience will hinge first of all on Japan itself expressing profound remorse toward the number of innocent people who helplessly suffered countless hardships due to Japan's actions and offering sincere and heart-felt apologies. On this point, the Abe Statement stressed the continuity of Japan's official stance by referencing the Murayama Statement of 20 years ago and the Koizumi Statement from 10 years ago. This was likely met with relief by those concerned about Japan under the Abe administration veering off the road it has taken thus far in search of a higher profile. However, critics both inside and outside Japan

have denounced the Abe Statement as little more than a repetition of earlier statements and not the genuine sentiments of Prime Minister Abe himself. Those voicing this accusation seem to have lost sight of the overall gist of the Statement.

A look at the new direction set by the Abe Statement clearly illustrates that such disparagement of the Statement as nothing more than a rehashing of statements made by previous prime ministers is quite off the mark. The Statement concludes with a comment on “proactive contribution to peace.” At the root of this concept is the recognition that, just as Japan cannot be an island of prosperity in isolation, neither can it be an island of peace on its own.

An oft-heard criticism of Japanese diplomacy is that Japan does not know what it seeks to achieve. In that context, the unambiguous direction for Japan’s posture toward the rest of the world given in the Abe Statement is perhaps one of its defining features.

For all these reasons, my initial appraisal is that Prime Minister Abe has by no means wasted the “rare opportunity” mentioned above. Naturally, this all depends on whether the realities of international politics move closer to solid rapprochement. Hence, the ultimate assessment of the Abe Statement will be determined by whether it inspires positive feedback. 

Akio Watanabe is Vice-Chairman of the Research Institute for Peace and Security and a Professor Emeritus of the University of Tokyo. He was a leading member of the Former Prime Minister Hosokawa (1993.8-1994.4)’s Advisory Panel on Defense Issues and a major contributor to the so-called 1994 Higuchi report.