Abe offers ‘everlasting condolences’ at Pearl Harbor as Obama praises partnership in peace

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HONOLULU - Prime Minister Shinzo Abe’s historic visit to Pearl Harbor wrapped up Tuesday with addresses from the Japanese leader and U.S. President Barack Obama on the power of reconciliation and its ability to transform once-hated enemies into close friends and strategic partners.

Seventy five years after the “day of infamy,” on Dec. 7, 1941, when Japan attacked U.S. forces at Pearl Harbor, Abe and Obama recalled the past but also focused on the importance of the present postwar U.S.-Japan strategic alliance. Abe’s visit and meeting with Obama, who leaves office in less than a month, was an attempt to gird the legacies of both leaders in the Asia-Pacific region in the face of uncertainties surrounding the fate of bilateral relations under
President-elect Donald Trump.

In a meeting between the two leaders, Abe thanked Obama for his efforts to work with Japan on a number of issues ranging from dealing with North Korea’s nuclear program to his support for the Trans-Pacific Partnership free trade agreement, despite opposition by congress and large portions of the American public, as well as Trump, who has announced he will cancel the TPP on his first day in office.

For Abe, the hope is that his trip to Pearl Harbor also sends a message to the U.S., and especially to Trump, that the long-standing postwar relationship should continue, and that the military alliance in particular needs to be strengthened in order to deal with a host of challenges relating to regional security.

While U.S. veterans of Pearl Harbor invited to attend Tuesday’s ceremony appreciated Abe’s visit, how it will be received by the larger American public remains uncertain. Some groups expressed disappointment that Abe offered no apology for the attack, or suggested his administration needs to make similar efforts at reconciliation with not only the U.S. but also other nations victimized by Japan during the 1930s and 1940s.

In a carefully worded address that avoided an apology for Japan’s decision to go to war with the U.S., Abe spoke about the necessity of never repeating the horrors of war.

“As prime minister of Japan, I offer my sincere and everlasting condolences to the souls of those who lost their lives here, as well as to the spirits of all the brave men and women whose lives were taken by a war that commenced in this very place, and also to the souls of the countless innocent people who became victims of the war,” he said.

Abe, who favors revising Japan’s postwar pacifist Constitution to allow for a more proactive military, added that since World War II, Japan has resolutely upheld its vow to never again wage war.

“To the souls of the servicemen who lie in eternal rest aboard the USS Arizona, to the American people, and to all peoples around the world, I pledge that unwavering vow as the prime minister of Japan,” he said.

Obama, who hosted the prime minister in Pearl Harbor seven months after Abe hosted him at Hiroshima, called the visit a historic gesture and also spoke of reconciliation and Pearl Harbor’s historical legacy.

“We cannot choose the history that we inherit. But we can choose what lessons to draw from it. The fruits of peace always outweigh the plunder of war. This is the enduring truth of this hallowed harbor,” Obama said in his remarks following Abe’s address.

In a veiled reference to concerns both in and outside the U.S. created by Trump’s election, Obama also referenced the Japanese phrase *otagai no tame ni* — doing things with and for each other — as words to follow when resisting the urge to demonize others or turn inwards.

“Over the decades, our alliance has made both of our nations more successful. It has helped to underwrite an international order that has prevented another world war and that has lifted more than a billion people out of extreme poverty. And today, the alliance between the United States
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and Japan — bound not only by shared interests, but also rooted in common values — stands as the cornerstone of peace and stability in the Asia Pacific and a force for progress around the globe. Our alliance has never been stronger,” Obama said.

Following their statements, Abe and Obama shook hands and exchanged greetings with three survivors of the Pearl Harbor attack, who are now in their 90s. All three welcomed Abe’s visit.

“Apologetic for the attack on Pearl Harbor? What for? There’s nothing to apologize for. The U.S. and Japan are friends now,” said Everett Hyland, who was on board the USS Pennsylvania when the attack began and was severely injured by a bomb.

Total U.S. casualties for the Pearl Harbor attack were 2,403 dead and 1,178 wounded.

Abe received a brief tour of the Pearl Harbor Visitors Center before proceeding to the Arizona memorial and holding a separate meeting with Obama. He then addressed a crowd that included large numbers of U.S. military personnel and Japanese-American residents of Hawaii.

The visitors center includes displays and explanations of the political situation in the U.S. and in Japan in the 1930s, describing the decisions, especially by Japan, that led to the attack as well as details of the attack itself. It also describes the impact it had in the U.S. as a whole and on Hawaii’s Japanese-American community.

The center’s chief historian, Daniel Martinez, told Abe that “The exhibits reflect the voices and views of people who were involved in the attack or the war, not the opinions of academics.” Abe was accompanied by Defense Minister Tomomi Inada — who in the past has espoused revisionist views of Japan’s wartime history — and Foreign Minister Fumio Kishida.

Abe’s gesture was widely welcomed in Hawaii and among Americans and Japanese who deal directly with each other. Its impact in the U.S. as a whole, three-quarters of a century after the attack, is less clear. For most Americans, Pearl Harbor was a long time ago — a different century.

However, for those concerned about historical reconciliation issues in the Asia-Pacific region, there were calls to continue the reconciliation process, especially with Japan’s Asian neighbors.

In an open letter released on Christmas Day, over 50 international historians, filmmakers — including director Oliver Stone — and others asked the prime minister about his views on Japan’s history and about previous public statements he’d made.

“You state that you are going to visit Pearl Harbor to ‘mourn’ the 2,400 Americans who perished in the attack. If that is the case, will you also be visiting China, Korea, other Asia-Pacific nations, or the other Allied nations for the purpose of ‘mourning’ war victims in those countries who number in the tens of millions?” the group asked.

They added that in Diet questioning on April 23, 2013, Abe, as prime minister, indicated that the definition of what constitutes “aggression” has yet to be established in academia or in the international community.

“Does that mean that you do not recognize Japan’s war against the Allied and Asia-Pacific nations and the preceding war against China as wars of aggression?” the scholars asked.
Jan Thompson, president of the American Defenders of Bataan and Corregidor Memorial Society, said she was impressed by the sincerity of Abe’s speech, saying it took moral courage. She said she knew that he would not apologize for the Pearl Harbor attack but encouraged him to visit other Asian countries as well.

“It’s taken 75 years for us to get to this point where a Japanese prime minister can come to Pearl Harbor and make that kind of a speech. However, while some people are saying that his visit means reconciliation with the wartime past is over, it’s actually only one step on the road. Reconciliation is cross-generational,” she said.
In Hawaii, Abe looks to remember war, reinforce U.S.

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