Beyond Abe’s Pearl Harbor visit

Prime Minister Shinzo Abe’s visit Tuesday to Pearl Harbor, where he paid tribute at the USS Arizona Memorial alongside U.S. President Barack Obama, may indeed serve to highlight the reconciliation between World War II enemies that have evolved into close allies and economic partners in the 75 years since the deadly attack by Japanese forces ignited the fierce war in the Pacific. It should also serve to remind us of the need for full reconciliation with Japan’s Asian neighbors that suffered from its past aggression and colonial rule — a goal that remains elusive seven decades after the war. That may not be easily achieved, but we must keep trying.

Abe became the first sitting leader of Japan to visit the memorial dedicated to victims of the Dec. 7, 1941 attack, although three other prime ministers — Shigeru Yoshida, Ichiro Hatoyama and Nobusuke Kishi, Abe’s grandfather — visited Pearl Harbor in the 1950s before the memorial was erected. Abe was reciprocating Obama’s visit to Hiroshima in May, the first by a sitting U.S. president to the city devastated by the 1945 U.S. atomic bombing. The tribute that Abe and Obama paid together at the Pearl Harbor memorial — with Abe likely to be the last foreign leader to meet with Obama before his eight-year presidency draws to an end next month — was also apparently aimed at demonstrating the deepening security alliance with the U.S. to the incoming administration of Donald Trump, whose views on the value of America’s relations with Japan remain unclear.

Given the close relations between Japan and the U.S. today, these acts by the top leaders of the two countries may have had only symbolic meaning in confirming the status quo. Despite the sensitivities that lingered on both sides over the historic visits, including the questions asked as to whether the two leaders should offer apologies — which they did not — and whether the 1941 attack and the 1945 atomic bombings were justified, the mutual visits were more an indication of how far the two nations have come since the war, rather than acts in pursuit of reconciliation for their past enmity. Abe may be justified in stating that the former enemies “have become allies with deep and strong ties.”

Whether the postwar ties between Japan and the U.S. are the product of “the power of reconciliation, made possible through the spirit of tolerance,” as Abe put it in his Pearl Harbor address, may be debatable. The two nations have needed each other for a variety of reasons, including strategic, defense and economic matters, over the past seven decades. Still, reconciliation is a key ingredient for two former wartime enemies to be able to sustain close relations.

Abe said he wants the whole world to remember Pearl Harbor as “a symbol of reconciliation.” He said he wants his tribute to the Pearl Harbor memorial alongside Obama to serve as the message...
of “the power of reconciliation.” He said Japan and the U.S., “which have eradicated hatred and cultivated friendship and trust on the basis of common values,” bear a responsibility for “appealing to the world about the importance of tolerance and the power of reconciliation.” The prime minister also said Japan will uphold its vow that “we must never repeat the horrors of war again.”

If those were indeed the messages that Abe wanted to send the world, he needs to realize that reconciliation should not be limited to close allies. For Japan, there clearly remains unfinished business with its East Asian neighbors, in particular China and South Korea, with whom issues from the wartime past continue to haunt bilateral ties seven decades on.

That may not mean that Abe, for example, has to repeat the “historic gesture” he made at Pearl Harbor in those countries. Such acts of reconciliation need to be preceded by constant efforts aimed at overcoming differences over the past, and that has to be a mutual process — since reconciliation cannot be achieved by one side acting alone. And such efforts may be complicated when a government uses issues of wartime history to unite the public at home or as leverage in diplomatic relations. Still, there will be things that Japan can and should do to help achieve reconciliation with these countries.
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