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Obama's Nuclear Legacy: Reconciliation and Nonproliferation in Asia after Hiroshima

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On August 6, 1945, the United States dropped the first nuclear weapon used in war on the Japanese city of Hiroshima, immediately killing an estimated 80,000 people. The death toll may have risen to 200,000, with many more injured, displaced and suffering the effects of radiation.² On August 9, the U.S. used a second weapon to bomb Nagasaki. On August 15, the Japanese Empire surrendered, ending World War II. After the nuclear arms race of the Cold War, and post-Cold War challenges of nuclear proliferation, the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki remain controversial as the only two cases of nuclear weapons used in conflict.

More than seven decades after Hiroshima's destruction, Barack Obama became the first sitting U.S. president to visit the city's war memorial on May 27, 2016. The visit was not without controversy, however. This issue brief addresses three related questions: what motivated objections to a presidential visit to Hiroshima, why did President Obama ultimately decide to go, and what are the implications? Different sets of objections in South Korea and China illustrate the trajectory of regional politics in East Asia, while the abatement of political opposition in the U.S. and Japan offered auspicious timing for a reconciliation event. The powerful symbolism at Hiroshima will help advance global nonproliferation efforts, but Obama's nuclear legacy is most seriously challenged by North Korea's nuclear weapons development.



President Obama delivers remarks with Prime Minister Abe at the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Park, May 27, 2016. Kimimasa Mayama ©REUTERS.

Objections to Obama's Hiroshima Visit

Various constituencies expressed concerns about or objections to Obama's visit. In the context of U.S. domestic politics in an election year, some commentators revived the trope about Obama's foreign policy of weakness, alleging that the president goes on "apology tours" and is soft on countries like Iran and Cuba.³ Meanwhile, many Americans believe that the use of the world's most destructive weapons saved lives by ending World War II as soon as possible.⁴ Some U.S. veterans (and their families) have expressed concern that progressive and revisionist scholars may rewrite history to read that the dropping of the bomb was morally wrong and operationally unnecessary, diminishing the role of American soldiers who risked or sacrificed their lives to defeat Japan. Such concerns drove the 1995 opposition by veterans groups against plans by the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, DC to display the Enola Gay—the airplane that dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima—in an exhibit detailing the destruction and suffering experienced on the ground.⁵ Veterans protested that the exhibit could cause the public to question President Harry S. Truman's decision to use atomic weapons. Two

decades later, some veterans groups—such as one representing former prisoners of war who survived the “Bataan Death March” in World War II—expressed similar concerns that an Obama visit to Hiroshima could be seen as an apology or admission of guilt, portraying U.S. soldiers as agents of destruction rather than victors in a just war.⁶

Chinese news media objected to a potential Obama visit to Hiroshima over concerns about the U.S. president validating revisionist historical views of Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe’s conservative supporters.⁷ Such historical revisionism considers the Tokyo War Crimes Tribunal to be “victor’s justice” and holds up the firebombing of Tokyo and other cities and the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki as symbols of Japanese victimization. Chinese media regularly criticize Japanese politicians who pay homage at Yasukuni Shrine for honoring the men who led Japan’s conquest of Asia and implemented brutal colonial policies. Before a U.S. president visits Hiroshima, Chinese observers suggested that the Japanese prime minister should first demonstrate a “correct” understanding of history, visit the war memorial at Nanjing, and “sincerely” apologize to the Chinese people.⁸

Policymakers in Beijing appear intent on painting China on the right side of history: as a victim of imperialism but a victor in World War II. This narrative draws a straight line between wartime and present-day Japan, portraying Tokyo as untrustworthy and prone to aggression.⁹ Chinese media often apply this historical lens to Abe’s policies of strengthening Japan’s defense posture, increasing military expenditures, and reinterpreting Article 9 of the pacifist constitution to allow for collective self-defense.

Beijing appears to play the history card against Tokyo for instrumental purposes.¹⁰ The official Chinese version of history, including anti-Japanese nationalism, is used for domestic consumption in service of the legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party. Beijing looks to counter so-called “China threat theories,” (including accusations that China is challenging the existing international order), by diverting attention to Japan’s historical atrocities and incomplete reconciliation with its neighbors. Beijing also attempts to employ history to build regional pressure and extract concessions from Tokyo.

Whereas Chinese objections to Obama’s potential visit to Hiroshima appeared motivated by state interests, South Korean objections focused on timing and process,

and were largely driven by civil society. Despite broad agreement that a “reconciliation event” can be an important political gesture for international cooperation, healing wartime wounds, and setting a cooperative tone for future generations, South Korean observers tended to see Obama’s potential visit to Hiroshima as premature. First, some objected to Obama’s visiting Hiroshima during Abe’s leadership, because Abe is associated with historical revisionists who called for a review of the 1993 Kono Statement apologizing to “comfort women,” and who advocate patriotic education in the revision of history textbooks.¹¹ Second, in light of how a Japanese prime minister has not yet visited Pearl Harbor (despite Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda “being in the neighborhood” for APEC in 2011), many Koreans consider a presidential visit to Hiroshima as a case of the U.S. being “too generous” to Japan.¹² Most importantly, the general sentiment in South Korea is that Japan should apologize fully for its wartime misdeeds in Asia before being on the receiving end of historical forgiveness.

Tokyo maintains that Imperial Japan’s war responsibilities were addressed via peace and normalization treaties, provision of economic aid, and apologies from the highest levels of the Japanese government. However, many South Koreans consider this insufficient, accusing Japan of failing to directly compensate victims, splitting hairs on historical statements rather than consistently showing remorse, and lacking historical coverage and contrition in Japanese textbooks.¹³ A December 28, 2015 agreement promising reconciliation for the “comfort women” facilitated a broad improvement in relations between the South Korean and Japanese governments, but Korean civil society remains cool to the agreement. While the 12.28 understanding has already realized the establishment of the Reconciliation and Healing Foundation, with approximately US\$9.5 million in Japanese taxpayer funds to support the aging “comfort women” survivors, Korean civil society groups remain unsatisfied with the extent of Japan’s acceptance of “legal responsibility” and compensation to victims of Japanese colonialism.¹⁴

In particular, as many as 140,000 Koreans were in Hiroshima and Nagasaki laboring under the Japanese imperial system at the time of the atomic bombings; possibly 30,000 of them perished, with survivors experiencing untold legal and health difficulties after the end of the war.¹⁵ Korean NGOs, including the Association of Korean Atomic Bomb Victims and the Hapcheon House of Peace, objected to

Obama's planned visit out of concern that Korean victims would be overlooked at an event focused on Japanese who experienced the nuclear attacks. Expressions of concern were frequently voiced in the Korean media, such as the assertion that "Japan has highlighted its image as a victim of the war, rather than aggressor, by underscoring that it is the sole atomic-bombed country in the world. We hope that President Obama will issue an indirect warning to Japan for its past by visiting the Monument in Memory of the Korean Victims of the A-Bomb."¹⁶

UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon paid his respects at the cenotaph dedicated to Korean victims of the atomic bombing during his visit to the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Park in August 2010.¹⁷ Even though a South Korean president has yet to make such a visit, current and former government officials in Seoul met with their American counterparts to suggest that Obama walk from the main monument in the park to the one dedicated to Koreans. Some South Korean survivors and related NGOs promised to travel to Hiroshima during Obama's visit to demand recognition, a more thorough historical accounting, and even compensation and written apologies from the Japanese and U.S. governments.¹⁸ These demands were not met by Tokyo and Washington, and despite the various objections by Americans, Chinese and Koreans outlined above, Obama made an unprecedented presidential visit to Hiroshima on May 27, 2016.

Obama's Visit to Hiroshima: Why Now?

A presidential visit to Hiroshima had been contemplated for many years. Richard Nixon went in 1964 before taking office, and Jimmy Carter paid respects in 1984 after leaving office. Other presidents, including Gerald Ford, considered visiting while in office, but ultimately opted against doing so. Obama's visit was the culmination of years of "testing the waters" for such a reconciliation event. U.S. Speaker of the House of Representatives Nancy Pelosi visited in 2008; Ambassador John Roos attended the August 6 memorial ceremony in 2010, as did current U.S. Ambassador to Japan Caroline Kennedy for the 2015 commemoration marking 70 years since the atomic bombing. Each of these officials apparently advised Obama to go, adding their voices to those of many American scholars and policymakers who have long encouraged a visit.¹⁹ Obama himself appeared interested in going to

Hiroshima since his first trip to Japan as president in November 2009, when he said he would be “honored” to have the opportunity to visit the atomic bombed cities in the future.²⁰ U.S. officials and Japanese counterparts quietly discussed the circumstances and timing of such a reconciliation event for some time.

The opportunity was ultimately provided by Japan’s turn to host the Group of Seven (G7) Summit. Before the leaders meeting would be hosted in Ise-shima, Mie Prefecture, the foreign ministers meeting was held in relatively nearby Hiroshima. Secretary of State John Kerry’s visit to the Hiroshima Peace Memorial and Museum in April 2016 intensified media speculation on whether Obama would go, and effectively paved the way for Obama’s trip a month later.²¹ At the foreign ministers meeting, the G7 countries reaffirmed their commitment to pursuing a world without nuclear weapons in a way that promotes international stability.²² Kerry emphasized that it was “critical” to apply historical lessons from Hiroshima.²³ Obama knew that the subsequent G7 Summit would be his last opportunity to visit Japan while in office and make a Hiroshima visit part of his legacy.

The U.S. and Japanese bureaucracies quietly managed political sensitivities in planning the visit. The Abe government had already shown itself to be a strong U.S. ally: upgrading bilateral defense guidelines, making unprecedented steps toward collective self-defense, and increasing security cooperation in and beyond Asia. In April 2015, Abe visited the World War II Memorial in Washington, DC and addressed a joint meeting of the U.S. House of Representatives and Senate to express remorse about Japan’s wartime past and outline a broad vision for future U.S.-Japan cooperation.²⁴ At the time, policymakers in Washington were concerned about the lack of historical reconciliation between Japan and South Korea as an obstacle to trilateral security cooperation.²⁵ Consequently, the 12.28 “comfort women” agreement and subsequent improvements in relations between Tokyo and Seoul also increased the chances of Obama’s visit to Hiroshima. U.S. officials were confident that Obama’s visit would not be seen as rewarding any revisionist politician, but rather as a symbol of strength and reconciliation in U.S.-Japan relations. Central to this assessment were domestic political considerations in Japan and the United States.

The major constituency with interest in Obama’s visit were nuclear bombing survivors in Japan, known as *hibakusha*. These individuals suffered the initial

bombing, unimaginable loss of family, friends and homes, and the life-long health challenges of radiation exposure. Many *hibakusha* experienced discrimination at school or work and were not able to marry or have children. *Nihon Hidankyo* (Japan Confederation of A- and H-Bomb Sufferers), an NGO formed by *hibakusha*, seeks greater support for victims while advocating for the abolition of nuclear weapons.²⁶ Some *hibakusha* implied that there was coordination with (or even pressure from) the Japanese government to support Obama's visit. They wanted the president to meet at length with *hibakusha* to hear their stories and apologize to them and their families. However, many if not most survivors as well as their government representatives appeared to be willing to forego calls for an explicit American apology over Hiroshima and Nagasaki in order to realize a symbolic reconciliation event and advance U.S.-Japan cooperation on nuclear nonproliferation and disarmament.²⁷ Some in the Nagasaki community understandably feel that their city's story does not receive adequate attention, but still supported Obama's Hiroshima visit.²⁸

Past U.S. administrations considered a Hiroshima visit risky given the lack of consensus in Japan and the United States about the atomic bombings. While many Japanese saw the attacks as atrocities, others considered them punishment for Japan's hostile acts, such as conquering Asia and the surprise attack on Pearl Harbor. During the Cold War, some Japanese nationalists asserted that the atomic bombs "evened out" Japan's wartime atrocities, while far-left groups used World War II history to portray communism as a force for peace and the Americans as warmongering imperialists.²⁹ As recently as 2009, some Japanese politicians worried that a presidential visit to Hiroshima would encourage anti-nuclear power plant and even anti-security alliance activists.³⁰ However, the politics changed after the 2010 nuclear disaster at Fukushima and with the assertiveness of a rising China, particularly in the East and South China Seas.

A confluence of historical memories, domestic politics, and international relations produced a previously unobtainable consensus in Japan about Hiroshima.³¹ Ahead of Obama's visit, Abe said it would be a great occasion for the U.S. and Japan to mourn all of the victims together, and would add momentum to the drive toward a world without nuclear weapons.³² National and local leaders said that it is more important to work toward achieving a nuclear-free world than to seek an explicit

apology 70 years after the war.³³ The Japanese public invited Obama to visit Hiroshima through the “Letters to Obama” campaign, suggesting that the president need not issue an apology but should instead focus on abolishing nuclear weapons. Many also hoped that the visit would help overcome war memories and further strengthen the U.S.-Japan alliance.³⁴

American public opinion on the bombing of Hiroshima had also evolved. Views of Japan as an enemy had all but disappeared, while a younger generation of Americans had come to believe that dropping the atomic bomb was morally wrong or militarily unnecessary.³⁵ U.S. veterans groups opposing gestures of apology toward Japan are not as numerous as in the 1990s, while the largest veterans organizations were neutral or cautiously supportive of Obama’s visit.³⁶ Nearing the end of his presidency, Obama could take responsibility for his visit to Hiroshima with little to no negative political implications for his preferred successor, Hillary Clinton. The timing was fortuitous for a Hiroshima visit to support U.S.-Japan reconciliation and the legacy of Obama’s nuclear policies without being prevented by domestic politics.

Implications of the Hiroshima Visit

In the event, Abe accompanied Obama in laying wreaths and offering remarks at the A-bomb memorial. Foreign Minister Fumio Kishida, whose hometown is Hiroshima, guided the two leaders through the peace museum where they signed the guestbook expressing hopes for a world free from nuclear weapons. Obama symbolically offered folded paper cranes at the memorial museum and had brief, unscripted chats with several A-bomb survivors. One *hibakusha* embraced the president, not in a show of forgiveness upon receiving an apology, but in remembrance and a shared sense of future purpose.



Obama embraces atomic bomb survivor Shigeaki Mori at the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Park, May 27, 2016. Carlos Barri ©REUTERS.

The White House press secretary was clear that the purpose of the visit would be to “highlight [the president’s] continued commitment to pursuing peace and security in a world without nuclear weapons,” implying that Obama’s remarks would focus on the future rather than the past.³⁷ Nonetheless, Obama recognized the weight of history in his speech:

Why do we come to this place, to Hiroshima? We come to ponder a terrible force unleashed...to mourn the dead, including over 100,000 Japanese men, women and children; thousands of Koreans; a dozen Americans held prisoner. [By the end of World War II], some 60 million people would die—men, women, children no different than us—shot, beaten, marched, bombed, jailed, starved, gassed to death...Hiroshima teaches this truth: technological progress without an equivalent progress in human institutions can doom us...we have a shared responsibility to look directly into the eye of history and ask what we must do differently to curb such suffering again.³⁸

Obama's remarks prompted debate over whether his visit to Hiroshima was appropriate for advancing historical reconciliation, U.S. diplomacy in Asia, and the nuclear nonproliferation agenda.

Reconciliation and U.S.-Japan Relations

Despite Obama's articulation of the evils of war and of a sentiment that such horrible losses should not reoccur, he did not offer a repudiation of U.S. policy or an historical apology. Given very different historical conduct and present circumstances between U.S. and German cases, Obama had no intention of pursuing what is perceived in Asia as the "gold standard" of apologies. Germany is praised in Asia for successfully rehabilitating its international reputation after World War II by reconciling with victims of the Nazis. Not only did the Germans apologize and pay compensation, they adjusted their national history textbooks and regional diplomatic profile in consideration of victims. Symbolism was important in this process. In 1970, German Chancellor Willy Brandt fell to his knees before a monument to the victims of the Warsaw ghetto uprising.³⁹ The gesture became an iconic example of German contrition and featured in neighboring countries' media, museums and textbooks.⁴⁰ German leaders now routinely appear side-by-side with their European counterparts at joint war memorial events. This is not to say the process of reconciliation in Europe was easy or is even complete, but such efforts have contributed to the relative peace and prosperity Germany and its neighbors have enjoyed since World War II.

Efforts at reconciliation between Japan and the United States have made great progress over the decades, but leave room for improvement. For example, in October 2013, Secretary of State Kerry and Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel laid a wreath at Chidorigafuchi, a cemetery in Tokyo for Japan's war dead. This gesture was generally welcomed by the Japanese public, but was not appreciated by some Abe supporters who interpreted the visit as implicit criticism of Japanese politicians visiting the Yasukuni Shrine next door. On other occasions, prime ministers Naoto Kan and Yoshihiko Noda delivered their respects at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier at Arlington National Cemetery, but these gestures were not widely reported in the United States.⁴¹

After Obama's Hiroshima visit, expectations will likely grow that Abe visit Pearl Harbor before he leaves office.⁴² December 7, 2016 will mark 75 years since the attack; Abe could possibly visit earlier during his travel in the Western Hemisphere for the November 2016 APEC Summit. A Japanese prime minister visiting Pearl Harbor would help demonstrate to the world that Japan is committed to promoting peace and reinforcing the U.S.-Japan alliance, setting a positive example for East Asia in terms of historical reconciliation and regional security.⁴³ Unfortunately, Abe may consider such a visit unnecessary or even excessive since he already visited the World War II Memorial in Washington, DC. Japan's first lady, Akie Abe offered flowers at the USS Arizona Memorial while on personal travel to Hawaii in August 2016, but it is unclear whether her gesture was a substitute or trial balloon for a visit by the prime minister.

National observances on August 15, 2016 presented a mixed outlook on Japan's reconciliation politics. Abe tactfully visited Chidorigafuchi rather than Yasukuni Shrine, but some members of his cabinet did visit Yasukuni, and Abe's memorial remarks again lacked the words of contrition toward Asian neighbors offered by previous prime ministers. Nonetheless, the May 2016 Hiroshima event provided visible testament to the strength of U.S.-Japan relations. At Hiroshima, Obama stated that "since that fateful day [in August 1945], we have made choices that give us hope. The United States and Japan forged not only an alliance, but a friendship that has won far more for our people than we could ever claim through war." Abe added to this by saying that Obama's remarks in Hiroshima encourage "people all around the world who have never given up their hope for a world without nuclear weapons," and that their joint visit to the hallowed spot opens "a new chapter to the reconciliation of Japan and the United States, and in our history of trust and friendship."⁴⁴

Obama and Abe's pledges of cooperation were intended to cement domestic public support for the bilateral alliance and set a trajectory in both countries' interests that will not be easily diverted by electoral politics. Obama's term is nearing its end, and while Abe's premiership may extend to 2018 owing to the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) victory in the July 2016 Upper House elections, both allies have to consider relations with future governments. In particular, U.S.-Japan relations could be damaged by a future U.S. administration that does not support the Trans-Pacific

Partnership (TPP), or a future Japanese government that does not implement base transformation and make good on Japan's contributions to international security. Also, the next Japanese prime minister may not be as pro-alliance as Abe or able to stay in office as long to provide policy continuity.⁴⁵

Various issues in U.S.-Japan relations require leadership attention and working-level efforts. Abe has personally engaged President Vladimir Putin regarding Japan's lingering territorial disputes with Russia, while other members of the G7 are focused on the crises in Syria and Ukraine.⁴⁶ Meanwhile, American frustrations have mounted over extreme delays in implementing the U.S.-Japan agreement for relocating the Futenma base and redeploying thousands of marines from Okinawa.⁴⁷ Plans have been stalled by anti-base protests in Okinawa, fueled in part by criminal incidents involving U.S. military personnel in Japan.⁴⁸ Obama and Abe held a joint press conference before the May 2016 G7 summit to address a recent murder incident on Okinawa. While the crime inflamed debate in Japan over the status of U.S. forces in the country, the manner in which leaders coordinated responses on a sensitive issue further attested to the strength of U.S.-Japan relations.

While some observers in China worried that Obama's visit to Hiroshima would empower Japanese conservative nationalists, other commentators offered a different criticism, arguing that associated media attention would "empower the pacifists and hinder the Japanese prime minister in his delicate project" of persuading his public about Japan's new security laws and strengthened defense posture.⁴⁹ South Korean scholars have observed tensions between Japan's pacifist ideals and policy practice, including how Japanese criticize U.S. bases as instruments of war and burdens on local communities while relying on those bases for security, focus on Japanese victimization at the hands of the Americans without full appreciation of the atrocities committed during Japan's historical aggression, and express abhorrence of nuclear weapons and call for their abolition while benefiting from the U.S. nuclear umbrella and extended deterrence.⁵⁰

In Japan, domestic political opposition mainly questioned the Abe cabinet's July 2014 reinterpretation of Article 9 of the pacifist constitution. The reinterpretation (it is important to note there has not yet been a constitutional revision) allows Japan's Self-Defense Forces to engage in collective self-defense: to come to the assistance of an ally or partner under limited circumstances.⁵¹ The Japanese debate

on this issue is inexorably tied up with the U.S.-Japan relationship, not only because it was the American occupation that pushed the pacifist constitution on Japan, but especially because if Japan gets involved in overseas military operations in the foreseeable future, it will almost certainly be in coordination with the United States. What regional observers of Japan tend to overlook is that the Japanese pacifist movement is not so much about apologies for the past or constraining Japan from again pursuing aggression against its neighbors (which is unthinkable for nearly all Japanese citizens). Rather, Japanese pacifism is critical of violence as a tool of international relations in general, and does not want Japan to support U.S. kinetic operations or allow Japanese citizens to die in “America’s wars.”⁵²

Amidst the historical and political controversies brought back into the spotlight because of Obama’s visit, it is clear that pacifism remains integral to Japanese national identity, and Japanese foreign policy remains intricately tied to a strong alliance with the United States.⁵³ These two conditions make the probability of Japan pursuing its own nuclear deterrent virtually zero, which should be reassuring to Japan’s neighbors. But these conditions also mean that a Japanese prime minister is charged with addressing history issues in a way that speaks to domestic pacifists often critical of the alliance with the United States. Abe’s statement upon offering flowers and a deep bow at a war memorial in Okinawa, one month after the Hiroshima event, is illustrative:

Seventy-one years ago, Okinawa was the scene of a dreadful ground battle. Some 200,000 people lost their precious lives, with innocent members of the general public and children with futures still ahead of them tragically becoming victims...The peace and prosperity we now enjoy exist atop those sacrifices that can never be undone and atop the history of hardship and suffering that Okinawa later endured...even to the present day, Okinawa has borne a heavy impact of U.S. military bases. We will continue to work as a nation on mitigating the impact of the bases...I will conclude my address by praying that the souls of those who lost their lives here may rest in peace and by offering my sincere wishes for the peace of the bereaved families of the war dead.⁵⁴

Both Hiroshima and Okinawa have long been the focus of political opposition groups in Japan, and hence points of potential friction between Washington and Tokyo. One implication of Obama’s Hiroshima visit for the relationship is that American policymakers have internalized the importance of not only getting along with pro-alliance conservatives in Japan, but also with progressive civil society as well. Abe will not always be prime minister, and when progressives feel vindicated and

recognized, they may become more supportive of Japan's international contributions and do more for reconciliation, such as supporting Japan's apologies to Asian neighbors.

Obama and Abe's joint visit to Hiroshima spoke to Japanese pacifism by committing U.S.-Japan security cooperation to respecting and advocating limits to the acceptable use of force. As Obama stated:

We must change our mindset about war itself—to prevent conflict through diplomacy, and strive to end conflicts after they've begun; to see our growing interdependence as a cause for peaceful cooperation and not violent competition; to define our nations not by our capacity to destroy, but by what we build...We can choose a future in which Hiroshima and Nagasaki are known not as the dawn of atomic warfare, but as the start of our own moral awakening.⁵⁵

The event in Hiroshima demonstrates how far U.S.-Japan relations have come since World War II and how Washington and Tokyo seek to strengthen international norms for protecting civilian populations.⁵⁶ This is a mainstream message that should reassure Japanese pacifists and Japan's neighbors about the role of the U.S.-Japan alliance. It is also a call to action as reconciliation can open the door to increased security cooperation. There are serious terrorist threats that are the antithesis of the international norms held up at Hiroshima, and there are states—North Korea chief among them—that actively disregard these norms. The question going forward is not whether Obama was right or wrong to visit Hiroshima, but rather how his successor will pick up and lead the nonproliferation agenda, and whether U.S.-Japan reconciliation can encourage a virtuous cycle whereby Japan makes progress overcoming historical disputes with its neighbors in Asia.

Regional Politics and Diplomacy

The history surrounding the decision to drop the bomb is immensely complex. There is no consensus among historians about motivations, process, counterfactuals or ethical considerations.⁵⁷ Many critics worried that no matter how the Obama administration framed the visit, it would be seen as an apology for the atomic bombings, affirming a Japanese "victim narrative." Concerns in China and South Korea included the idea that Tokyo prioritizes its relations with Washington, and upon receiving vindication from the Americans, Japanese would look down on

neighboring countries. Japanese conservatives could use reconciliation with the U.S. as evidence of Japan's righteousness, and then make the argument that tensions in Asia are a function of North Korean provocations, South Korean recalcitrance, and Chinese nationalism, lack of democracy, and territorial expansionism.

Chinese media looked to preempt such a narrative by arguing that Japan invited nuclear destruction upon itself in World War II, and predicting that Japanese elites would over-interpret Obama's words as an apology and use the visit as an occasion to whitewash Japan's historical atrocities.⁵⁸ Some analysts in South Korea blamed Obama for stirring up historical issues and bringing the U.S. role in the region into doubt: "Mr. Obama has reopened the deep wounds which other East Asian countries still carry...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...U.S.-Japan reconciliation appears to be incompatible with Sino-U.S. reconciliation and security cooperation between South Korea and the United States."⁵⁹

However, the U.S. has not reduced cooperation with South Korea or engagement with China. It is difficult to draw any connection between Obama's visit and even tacit American support for Japanese historical revisionism. A close inspection of the political statements and choreography in Hiroshima on May 27, 2016, as well as subsequent government and media responses in the U.S. and Japan, suggest that the most pessimistic predictions for regional dynamics have not materialized.

There is evidence that the visit politically helped Abe, who holds views and pursues policies that are controversial in the region.⁶⁰ According to an aggregation of Japanese media polls, public opinion of the Abe Cabinet improved from 43% approval / 33% disapproval before the G7 Summit and Hiroshima event to 51% approval / 33% disapproval afterwards.⁶¹ It appears that those opposed to the Abe Cabinet were unmoved by the international summit and reconciliation event, but many respondents who held a neutral view or expressed no opinion on Abe's leadership were persuaded to give him a 8-point boost in the polls. Such improvement was no doubt welcomed by the LDP and may have helped the ruling coalition prevail in Upper House elections in July 2016. But the electoral success of the coalition had more to do with the disorganized opposition's inability to present a

credible economic alternative to Abenomics, rather than recent developments on history issues or inter-party differences on foreign policy.

Nonetheless, the Japanese political landscape after the Upper House elections will be a source of concern for Chinese and South Korean observers in at least two respects. First, Abe reshuffled his cabinet to reinvigorate his policy team and also to shape the LDP and national leaderships to come after his premiership. His elevation of politicians with conservative historical views like Tomomi Inada, the new defense minister, could lead to a flare up of issues such as the Yasukuni Shrine, history textbooks, and disputed islands. Second, even though revising Japan's constitution—yet to be amended in the postwar period—remains procedurally and politically difficult, the Upper House elections yielded a two-thirds majority in parliament for politicians favoring constitutional reform. Political debate on whether to revise the pacifist Article 9 of the constitution can thus be expected before Japan's next national election in 2018.

In the meantime, the U.S.-Japan reconciliation event at Hiroshima may challenge the version of history implicit in Beijing's regional diplomacy. Chinese commemorations in 2015, marking 70 years since the end of World War II, painted Japan as the threat to global peace that China "defeated" on behalf of the world in 1945. Speeches and comments by Chinese officials suggested that a previously victimized, now militarily and economically powerful China is willing and able to stand up to contemporary Japan's revisionist tendencies.⁶² Beijing attempted to form an alliance with South Korea on history issues,⁶³ but such attempts at teaming up against Tokyo were rejected by Seoul.⁶⁴ Instead, South Korea reinitiated the Korea-Japan-China trilateral summit mechanism.⁶⁵ Moreover, the July 2016 South Korean decision to deploy the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) missile defense system in cooperation with the U.S. and against vociferous protests from Beijing demonstrates Seoul's prioritization of the North Korean threat over regional politics concerning history.

Beijing playing the history card against Japan can be seen as an effort to deflect attention from Chinese challenges to the existing order in the East and South China Seas. The G7 Statement from the summit in Ise-shima included explicit mention of the importance of freedom of navigation and overflight, respecting maritime norms, and the peaceful resolution of island disputes. Soon thereafter, the

Permanent Court of Arbitration at the Hague offered its ruling on a case brought by the Philippines regarding the South China Sea. Beijing refused to participate in the process and declared the case illegal, null and void, but the court's findings seriously delegitimized China's "nine-dashed line" claims, artificial island building, and aggressive behavior in the South China Sea from the standpoint of international law.⁶⁶

Just before the G7 summit, Obama visited Vietnam, one of China's rival claimants in the South China Sea, and promoted defense cooperation as well as reconciliation over the Vietnam War. Overtures to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), including with Myanmar, have also expanded U.S. relations in the region.⁶⁷ The inauguration of Tsai Ing-wen in Taipei marked the first time her pro-independence party has controlled both the presidency and legislature, and represents the elevation of not only the first female president of Taiwan, but also a leader focused on reconciliation for minority groups historically displaced and discriminated against by mainland Chinese. These developments will make it more difficult for Beijing to internationally promote its official version of history. While the Chinese government could largely control the optics of the G20 Summit in Hangzhou in September 2016, an indicator for how China relates history and diplomacy will be provided by the next Korea-Japan-China trilateral summit for which it is Japan's turn to host.⁶⁸

Compared to China, South Korea's regional diplomacy is less likely to be affected by Obama's visit to Hiroshima. Japanese organizers had considered inviting President Park Geun-hye to the G7 summit, but Park ultimately visited Africa at the time. The Japanese side expressed understanding that Park was unavailable and the Korean side suggested that no formal invitation was requested or received.⁶⁹ The South Korean leadership appeared to take a position of not wanting to be an observer at someone else's party, but expecting the meetings in Japan to respect Korean interests. In the event, Obama mentioned Korean A-bomb victims in his speech, but did not walk through the peace park to the memorial for Korean victims in Hiroshima. This did not satisfy Korean NGOs seeking further recognition and compensation for Korean survivors.⁷⁰ However, South Korean government officials seemed to appreciate that the Hiroshima event did not support a revisionist

Japanese historical narrative and that the G7 summit statement offered strong words against North Korea's nuclear and missile tests.⁷¹

Since Japan and South Korea have only recently reached a compromise on reconciliation for surviving "comfort women," the agreement remains fragile, and several other historical memory issues remain unresolved. The image of an American president in Hiroshima, grappling with the horrible consequences of war, could encourage future gestures on the part of Japan. Obama's visit may thus give the U.S. some "soft power" leverage for encouraging Japan to reconcile further with South Korea. Given Abe's personal views and how South Korean and Chinese public opinion are largely set against him,⁷² it is unlikely a Japanese prime minister will make an apology tour of war-related monuments in neighboring countries any time soon. However, it would be beneficial for Japanese foreign policy if current cabinet members abstain from visiting Yasukuni Shrine, and beneficial to the U.S.-Japan alliance and East Asian regional integration if the next Japanese prime minister cultivated a reputation for promoting historical reconciliation in Asia.

In the medium to long-term, Obama's visit will likely be seen less as a political victory for Abe than a victory for the city of Hiroshima and the survivors of the atomic bombings. To be sure, many observers of Obama's visit will see what they wish to see in it, but the president and his advisers made very clear that the trip was not about re-adjudicating the past or making an apology. The message was that nuclear weapons can take a horrible human toll, necessitating further policy efforts on nonproliferation and disarmament.

Symbolism and Nonproliferation

Reducing the risks associated with nuclear weapons and materials has been a centerpiece of the Obama foreign policy. At the beginning of Obama's presidency, he gave a speech in Prague stating that:

The threat of global nuclear war has gone down, but the risk of a nuclear attack has gone up. More nations have acquired these weapons. Testing has continued. Black market trade in nuclear secrets and nuclear materials abound. The technology to build a bomb has spread. Terrorists are determined to buy, build or steal one. Our efforts to contain these dangers are centered on a global nonproliferation regime, but as more people and nations break the rules, we could reach the point where the center cannot hold.⁷³

The visit to Hiroshima therefore bookends Obama's time in office with a nuclear nonproliferation and disarmament narrative. The administration achieved progress in these functional areas via the series of Nuclear Security Summits (NSS), where relevant states and international organizations coordinated policies to secure fissile and radiological materials, protect sensitive information, and improve the interface between safety and security at nuclear facilities.⁷⁴ The NSS process helped remove bomb-grade nuclear fuel from Ukraine and elsewhere, and reduced vulnerabilities to terrorist attack.

Progress was also made with Japan's post-Fukushima nuclear power safety measures against natural disasters,⁷⁵ and U.S.-South Korean civilian nuclear energy cooperation under a renewed "123 agreement" including research on nuclear disposal in a proliferation resistant manner.⁷⁶ The 2015 P5+1 deal with Iran limits Tehran's ability to make a nuclear weapon by having it give up portions of its nuclear material and placing its program under greater international surveillance. The 2010 New START agreement with Russia reduced the number of U.S. and Russian strategic warheads, representing incremental progress on nuclear disarmament.

Despite these achievements, the developments between Obama's Prague speech and Hiroshima visit paint a mixed picture on nonproliferation. Russia is increasingly accused of failing to meet its obligations under the 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces agreement and of undermining the 2010 New START treaty.⁷⁷ Meanwhile, China is the only P5 country expanding its nuclear arsenal. In addition to increasing its number of warheads, Beijing is modernizing its strategic capabilities, including delivery systems.

Pakistan is growing a nuclear arsenal that could exceed the stockpiles of India, Britain and France, including the possible deployment of tactical nuclear weapons.⁷⁸ China appears to continue its controversial support of Pakistan's nuclear program, both materially and diplomatically. At the June 2016 Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) meeting in Seoul, India's entry into the NSG was supported by the U.S., South Korea, Japan and some 30 other countries, but Beijing put up procedural hurdles along with other states objecting to India's candidacy as a non-signatory to the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT).⁷⁹ This case demonstrates the complicated interactions of geopolitics, nuclear safety, nonproliferation, and the

sustainable energy goals of the Paris Agreement on climate change.⁸⁰

North Korea arguably presents the greatest challenge to Obama's nuclear legacy. Immediately after Obama's 2009 "nuclear zero" Prague speech for which he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, North Korea tested a long-range missile, seeking the capability of hitting the United States with a nuclear weapon. Pyongyang is focused on miniaturizing a nuclear warhead to mount on top of its ballistic missiles of expanding range, which can already hit South Korea and Japan and U.S. forward-deployed bases. The 2016 G7 Leaders Declaration condemned North Korea's nuclear tests and ballistic missile launches, stating that they violate multiple UN Security Council resolutions and pose a grave threat to regional and international security.⁸¹

North Korea is currently the only state detonating nuclear devices, conducting its fourth nuclear test on January 6, and fifth on September 9, 2016. Pyongyang's nuclear cooperation with the Syrian regime and ballistic missile cooperation with Iran demonstrate that it cannot be trusted to simply develop its own deterrent without proliferating technologies to other states and even non-state actors.⁸² North Korea has recently conducted numerous and varied missile tests, with some landing provocatively close to Japan, while engaging in bellicose rhetoric including threatening nuclear attacks on South Korean and American cities. The U.S., South Korea and Japan have increased trilateral cooperation in response, but policymakers in Seoul are concerned that in retaliation to THAAD deployment, Beijing might obstruct additional UN resolutions or loosen implementation of UNSCR 2270 sanctions. South Koreans also worry that China may expand diplomatic engagement with Pyongyang, effectively increasing toleration of North Korea's nuclear weapons program.

Meanwhile, the governments of a number of countries not vulnerable to North Korea's nuclear threat—such as Austria, Brazil, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Guatemala, Mexico, and Norway—are actively pushing for global "nuclear zero" via an Open-ended Working Group (OEWG) on Nuclear Disarmament in Geneva that is exploring an international convention to outlaw nuclear weapons.⁸³ Obama's visit to Hiroshima perhaps provided some moral support to the "nuclear zero" movement, even as New Zealand, a state with a long-established nuclear allergy, responded to the strategic

situation in the Asia-Pacific by planning to welcome the first U.S. nuclear-capable vessels to port after a decades-long ban.⁸⁴ Disappointingly for the disarmament community, the Obama administration espouses an enduring need for maintaining a robust nuclear deterrent, as well as strong conventional military capabilities. Even in his Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech, Obama addressed this explicitly:

As a head of state sworn to protect and defend my nation, I cannot be guided by [Gandhi and King's peaceful] examples alone. I face the world as it is, and cannot stand idle in the face of threats to the American people. For make no mistake: evil does exist in the world. A non-violent movement could not have halted Hitler's armies. Negotiations cannot convince al Qaeda's leaders to lay down their arms. To say that force may sometimes be necessary is not a call to cynicism—it is a recognition of history; the imperfections of man and the limits of reason...The United States of America has helped underwrite global security for more than six decades with the blood of our citizens and the strength of our arms.⁸⁵

However, the Obama administration has looked to reduce the role of nuclear weapons in U.S. national security via the Nuclear Posture Review.⁸⁶ Obama has highlighted U.S. commitments under Article VI of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty to pursue nuclear disarmament negotiations, and to not deliberately target civilians ever again with nuclear weapons according to the principle of non-combatant immunity of the 1949 Geneva Conventions.⁸⁷ The Hiroshima event symbolized the desire of many Americans for eventually achieving a world without nuclear weapons, and an enduring preference among the Japanese people for their country's postwar pacifism.⁸⁸ Yet some in the disarmament community allege that Obama's words in Hiroshima ring hollow and criticize the U.S. for pursuing the maintenance and modernization of its nuclear arsenal (at a potential cost of a trillion dollars over thirty years).⁸⁹

Obama's Hiroshima visit has increased public attention for calls by the disarmament community for the president to make substantive progress toward "nuclear zero." These demands include ending hair trigger alert and launch on warning dangers by introducing more safeguards and veto players into launch procedures.⁹⁰ Others have called for mothballing U.S. tactical nuclear weapons in Europe and eventually decommissioning inter-continental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) in the U.S., retiring one leg of the nuclear triad.⁹¹ Still others have suggested the Obama administration cancel plans to procure a new, nuclear-capable cruise missile

and tighten budgets for U.S. strategic forces.⁹² There have also reportedly been discussions within the administration about declaring a No First Use (NFU) policy.⁹³

Some of these suggestions may eventually make good policy, but not as orders by a president just before he leaves the White House. There has not yet been sufficient consultation with Congress and U.S. allies, and rushed unilateral moves would secure little to nothing in return from other nuclear actors. Eleventh-hour declarations may not endure after a change in government, and would almost certainly produce unintended consequences for the credibility of U.S. nuclear doctrine and the deterrence and assurance functions of the U.S. strategic arsenal.

Obama will thus leave to a future administration the task of negotiating a multilateral agreement in which other states further improve safety, transparency, and disarmament progress in coordination with U.S. moves. Instead of making a unilateral change in nuclear policy, the Obama administration pushed for a UN Security Council resolution on occasion of the 20th anniversary of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT). UNSCR 2310 passed on September 23, 2016, recognizing a global norm against nuclear testing and calling for remaining states to ratify the CTBT so it can enter into force.⁹⁴ The resolution is a major piece of Obama's nuclear legacy, even though it does not impose a legally binding prohibition on testing, place any new demands on nuclear weapons states to disarm, or mandate any new reporting requirements.⁹⁵

While some in the disarmament community are disappointed with Obama's nuclear legacy, the United States should continue to refuse risking defense of the homeland or undermining extended deterrence for American allies in pursuit of global "nuclear zero."⁹⁶ Rather than criticize the U.S. maintenance of its nuclear arsenal or the allies under the American nuclear umbrella, the disarmament community's collective pressure would be better applied toward encouraging Russia to comply with existing agreements, China to strengthen its status quo credentials, and North Korea to denuclearize. Obama's successor will need to continue the balancing act of working with allies on mutual defense and extended deterrence on the one hand, and pursuing nonproliferation efforts with a commitment to nuclear disarmament on the other.⁹⁷ By maintaining alliance commitments while also expressing aspirations for a nuclear-free world, Obama not only made efforts for his

own legacy, he sought to make the deterrence-nonproliferation balancing act more manageable for the next U.S. president.

Conclusion

President Obama's visit to Hiroshima was a successful reconciliation event. The visit did not feature an American apology or focus on Japanese victimhood, but achieved the purposes outlined by U.S. and Japanese officials: humbly recalling the horrors of war and aspiring to a world without nuclear weapons. Obama's speech explicitly recognized the suffering of Korean victims, and Abe's remarks suggested that Japan's commitment to pacifism is enduring. With a meaningful display of how far U.S.-Japan cooperation has come since 1945, relations were somewhat fortified from the uncertainty of the U.S. presidential election.

Given a confluence of events—including the Hiroshima visit and China's dramatic loss in the South China Sea case brought before the Permanent Court of Arbitration at the Hague—it will be difficult for Beijing to effectively play the history card against Tokyo for some time.⁹⁸ However, Japan's ability to build upon recent progress on reconciliation depends on responsible management of sensitive historical issues and dates on the calendar. Meanwhile, the controversy over the Hiroshima event demonstrates that South Korean diplomats are under undue domestic pressure not to lose out to Japan on the international stage. Such pressure is potentially counterproductive and can be attenuated if officials and scholars discourage zero-sum thinking about Japan in the Korean media.⁹⁹

Obama's visit to Hiroshima will largely have a symbolic effect on global nonproliferation and disarmament agendas. The visit is unlikely to pressure Russia to do more on disarmament, encourage China to increase transparency of its strategic forces, expand international support for the Iran nuclear deal, or provide any added leverage over North Korea. However, the visit could offer some legacy effects for U.S. policy. The next occupant of the White House will face enduring challenges in maintaining deterrence and advancing nonproliferation, but will also find it difficult to make a hard turn away from Obama's policy of reducing the role of nuclear weapons in U.S. foreign policy.

The trajectories of national security policies are difficult to change, but high-level visits to a war memorial site can raise global awareness, and poignant

speeches can resonate for years to come.¹⁰⁰ Images and words from Obama's Hiroshima visit are likely to appear in museums and history textbooks in the Asia-Pacific, helping the next generation in the region move past the horrible suffering of World War II. In the meantime, it would behoove leaders in Washington and Tokyo to remind each other that the urgent policy priority is working with allies in South Korea and Europe to defend the nonproliferation regime from challenges posed by Russia and China, and especially from the threat of North Korea's nuclear and missile programs.

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⁹⁵ "Adopting Resolution 2310, Security Council Calls for Early Entry into Force of Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty, Ratification by Eight Annex 2 Hold-Out States," *United Nations*, <https://www.un.org/press/en/2016/sc12530.doc.htm>.

⁹⁶ For example, when the American and South Korean presidents met on the margins of the September 2016 East Asian Summit in Laos, Obama expressed an unwavering U.S. commitment to extended deterrence, and Park emphasized coordinated plans for THAAD deployment.

⁹⁷ For recent analysis of this balancing act in the U.S.-South Korea case, see Robert Einhorn and Duyeon Kim, "Will South Korea Go Nuclear?" *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, August 15, 2016; <http://thebulletin.org/will-south-korea-go-nuclear9778>.

⁹⁸ This is not to say instrumental uses of history will disappear. On the contrary, those who support reconciliation between South Korea and Japan should be watchful of state-backed local and academic groups in China looking to engage Korean NGOs on anti-Japanese historical research and efforts to petition UN bodies in a united front on history issues.

⁹⁹ A positive example was provided by President Park's forward-looking remarks regarding Seoul-Tokyo ties in her recent Liberation Day speech; Geun-hye Park, Commemorative Address on the 71st Anniversary of Liberation, Seoul, Korea, August 15, 2016. A negative example was provided the same day by a group of lawmakers visiting Dokdo (an islet under South Korean control but claimed by Japan as Takeshima); Editorial Board, "Stop 'Dokdo Populism,'" *JoongAng Daily*, August 15, 2016.

¹⁰⁰ Robin Wright, "What the Pope Saw at Hiroshima," *New Yorker*, May 12, 2016.