



## Clash of Memories and Clash of Dreams: The Legacy of the Pacific War and the Future of the East Asian Peace

By Zheng Wang

The number of soldiers who directly participated in the Pacific War grows smaller with each passing day, but the legacy of the war continues to affect the East Asian countries profoundly 75 years on. For many East Asian countries, the war has yet to end conclusively. Unrealized national reunification is after all not just a legacy of the Pacific War but a major problem remaining to be dealt with across the region. The Chinese Civil War had begun in 1927 but subsided between 1937 and 1945 as both the Communist and Nationalist forces focused primarily on fighting Japan. For Korea, the post-war division of the island

catalyzed a war between North and South. To some extent, both of these wars are still ongoing – Taiwan and China are *de facto* not unified, and North and South Korea remain divided near the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel. For Japan too, the loss of the islands of the Northern Territories to the Soviet Union after the war had ended remains for Tokyo a reunification issue.

A unique phenomenon within East Asia is that almost none of these countries consider themselves to be a “normal country.” Their view of their own normalization as a nation is directly related to the Pacific War. Both Koreas, for

example, do not believe they can be “normal” until reunification. In Taiwan, more and more people [view themselves](#) as “Taiwanese” rather than “Chinese,” and its purposefully ambiguous status remains an obstacle for Taiwan to be seen as a normal country. As for China, unification with Taiwan has always been one of its most important national objectives. Following the rise in China’s strength and power, more Chinese have become increasingly confident and wish to realize unification. For some in Japan, being a normal country refers to the abolition of its constitutional limits on military development and the ability to play a more systematic role within global politics and diplomacy.

The reunification issue clearly indicates that the post-war geopolitical structure that originated 75 years ago is still in effect in East Asia. The drive for normalcy within each country means that there are elements across the region that advocate undertaking massive efforts to change the post-war status quo, although China and North Korea have been far more aggressive in this regard. This motivation will thus continue being an important force shaping East Asia’s future.

At the same time, the history of the Pacific War has been utilized as an important resource for identity education and state mobilization by governments and elites across the region. All of these countries have paid great attention to teaching this particular part of their histories. In East Asia, history classes are no longer a normal educational subject. From the selection of textbooks to the teaching curriculum, all have become extremely important and sensitive for the state, and history has even become a source of dispute between countries. Although those who directly experienced the Pacific War have become fewer, it does not mean at all that the current generation has forgotten, will forget, or that time will heal all wounds.

Through education systems and domestic discourses, the Pacific War lives on today. The younger generations have come to know the details of the war through history classes, visits to museums and memory sites, and the viewing of popular culture, such as movies and literature. However, the same Pacific War history has been taught differently in China, the two Koreas, Japan, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. Different history education systems using divergent history textbooks with the selective telling of events and disparate interpretations has created a special phenomenon in this region where the younger generation holds a distinct understanding about the war and their country’s relationship with its regional counterparts. Such a clash of memories has been an important factor behind many regional and domestic tensions.

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has used the Pacific War as an important resource for conducting identity education and producing patriotic and loyal citizens. With tremendous effort, the ruling party has been trying to forge a strong, united, and collective memory of the Pacific War. These efforts have been passed on by each generation of CCP leaders. With the powerful role of education and domestic discourse, the connection that today’s youth have with the Pacific is often stronger than that of their parent’s generation.

In recent years, the Chinese government has stepped up efforts to institutionalize the memory of the Pacific War. For example, China’s top leader Xi Jinping decreed in 2014 the creation of two new public anniversaries, December 13 as the annual national Memory Day for the Nanjing Massacre and September 3 as the national anniversary of “Victory Day of the Chinese People’s War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression.” The government has held grand memorial activities, including military parades, on these two dates



every year since then. The current government has also devoted tremendous effort towards rebuilding and restoring many historic sites related with the Pacific War in different parts of China. These activities indicate that the administration intends to further institutionalize the war memory in China's social narratives and education systems. All these actions aim to ensure that what happened decades ago does not fade away from people's memory.

Most importantly, Xi Jinping has chosen to connect China's national objectives with this part of history. Since coming to power in 2012, he has put forth a new national goal called the "China Dream" as his administration's main policy platform. In his various public speeches, Xi has repeatedly emphasized that achieving the China Dream of a "great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation" is his government's main objective. What is this China Dream? The term rejuvenation refers to a special narrative in China, that of the so-called "century of national humiliation," that began with the First Opium War (1839–1842) and lasted through the end of the Pacific War in 1945. China's memory of this period as a time when it was attacked, bullied, and torn asunder by imperialists serves as the foundation for its modern identity and purpose. The use of that word "rejuvenation" underscores an important point: the Chinese view their fortunes as a return to greatness and not a rise from nothing. The CCP has promoted the China Dream narrative as the new leadership's "mission statement" and "political manifesto" for the Party and the country's future. The actual objectives of the Dream include many items, but the return of Taiwan as the realization of national reunification has always been the top priority on this list, and many Chinese consider it as the last missing piece of the puzzle needed to complete China's national rejuvenation.

This national objective has been used to justify any government action, present or future, towards achieving this goal. It is important to note that the CCP's legitimacy does not come from general elections but rather largely from a special narrative that it has created within China. This narrative stresses upon the fact that had it not been for the CCP, China would still be a weak, divided country suffering from bullying and foreign invasion. The CCP has been using this narrative as a major source of legitimacy for itself. Based upon this idea, it has become necessary for the government to act tough and assertive, especially on issues relating to sovereignty. It also explains the Chinese government's recent strong policies towards Hong Kong and Taiwan, both of which are closely tied to China's national humiliation narrative. The return of Hong Kong and Taiwan to China as part of its national reunification has been an essential part of the China Dream. For China, the next two decades will be extremely important. The Xi administration has already declared two important dates for the realization of the China Dream. The first is 2021, the 100th anniversary of the formation of the CCP and the second is 2049, the 100th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China. These two centenaries have been set up as a deadline of sorts for the realization of the China Dream.

Will China's dream come true? China, however, won't be able to answer this question alone, as it will need go through a complicated geopolitical game to find the answer. A special legacy of the Pacific War has been the so-called "fan structure" created at the end of the Pacific War. Within it, the United States plays the nodal, central part of the fan base and all other countries of the region are attached to it on the other end of the fan's blades. This translates into each country of the region maintaining a bilateral relation with



the United States but no relationship with one another. This post-war fan system has dictated the general structure of the East Asian geopolitical and security arrangements and remains in effect to this day. While United States still provides important security protection to many of these regional countries, there is no regional organization equivalent to the European Union or NATO.

With the continuing rise of China's power, an important question for the East Asian countries is whether the same post-war structure will be retained, or a new structure will emerge to replace it. In the event that a new post-war structure cannot be created through peaceful consultations, concerns regarding new conflicts and disputes within this region would surely arise. Moreover, changing perceptions and identities in this region make the geopolitical game more complicated. When a group of countries still strive towards being a "normal country" and have major internal disagreements regarding the evaluation of their past and their future objectives, it is an indication that these societies are still searching for their own identity. Even though the regional countries have achieved tremendous economic developments since the end of the Pacific War, they have not yet fully completed their nation building. This uncertainty in national identities and national dreams is a fundamental reason for the overall uncertainty regarding security in East Asia. When each country is striving to become a normal country, there might be a clash of dreams within the region.

Besides the reunification issues, a major legacy of the Pacific War is that the East Asian countries have never realized a real reconciliation even 75 years after the war has ended. This in turn has contributed towards difficulties in further integration and collaboration in East Asia. On the surface, many problems in East Asia appear as

territorial disputes, such as those between China and Japan, between South Korea and Japan, and in the South China Sea. More fundamentally, however, these disputes have their historical roots in contested meanings of national identity and divergent understandings of history. Over the last 75 years, countries in this region have realized a high level of success and integration in terms of economic cooperation and people's exchange. However, for a higher level of regional integration, a deeper reconciliation will be needed. With regional security currently undergoing a paradigm shift, and with the current terrible deterioration of the U.S.-China relations, people in this region have all the reason to be concerned about the regional peace and security in the new era of U.S.-China rivalry.

Unfortunately, even after 75 years since the end of the Pacific War, postwar reconciliation still has a long way to go and regional peace has yet again encountered grave challenges, from clash of memories to clash of dreams, we don't have the luxury of being optimistic.

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