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The Paradox of the Japanese Politics of Memory

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Introduction

Despite its primary focus on domestic affairs, politics of memory in any country is strongly influencing a global audience. States by authorizing either heroic, victimhood or war-crime narrative are able to shape their politics of memory in a certain way.

I argue that in the case of Japan building coherent narration is difficult and results in wars over history, mainly because of contradicting historical experiences. Focusing only on positive aspects of the history or selected victimhood creates controversies overseas, especially in both Korea and China. On the other hand, war crime narrative is unacceptable for the domestic audience, especially political right. This results in a paradox situation where it is impossible to achieve acceptable politics of memory for all the concerned parties. Such a situation is seriously damaging Japanese reputation abroad. I present two empirical cases to support my argument: Yasukuni shrine visit by PM Abe Shinzo and protest against comfort women statues.

1. The politics of memory

A great amount of research on the Japanese politics of memory can be found, especially after events which changed the understanding of the past, such as Kono statement or Murayama apology. Variety of empirical studies contrast with few examples of theoretical research related to the politics of memory. A definition which can be shared among various scholars argues that it is praxis of the actors of memory related to making narration about the past through media of memory (Luczewski, 2017). Such defined politics of memory is an integral part of the strategic concern of every nation-state. Just like in the past countries were fighting for territory or economic benefits, today another precious value is moral capital, such as reputation or prestige of a state.

In the simplified version of reality states can use three types of narrative, which constitute politics of memory: heroic, victimhood and war-guilt. Heroic narrative emphasizes positive aspects regarding members of a nation. It includes stories in which certain people played a positive role and brings positive moral value, such as pride and honor. Victimhood narrative describes members of a nation as victims of certain evil such as war. Victims are usually innocent and to emphasize this trait, images of women or children are often used. War guilt narrative describes historical figures as guilty of certain crimes or actions. This kind of narrative is often accompanied by various relativistic strategies, which in different ways tries to defend or justify such behavior.

2. The paradox

The states with a complex history, which brings a lot of material for several types of narrative are captured in a game without a satisfactory ending. Furthermore, balancing although rational in domestic politics, is usually seen as a relativist strategy from the perspective of the former enemy. As a result, making politics of memory by politicians brings more harm than good. I call this situation the paradox of the politics of memory, because no matter which way will be chosen by a state, it will always be met with harsh criticism.

3. Case study: Abe Shinzo and Yasukuni shrine

Among various controversies among the history recognition in Japan, Yasukuni shrine visit seems to be one of the most persistent and always involves a lot of emotions. Prime minister Abe Shinzo visited Yasukuni shrine in 2013. At that time in order to avoid critique, he also offered a visit to Chinreisha (鎮靈社) to pray for the souls of all the people who lost their lives in World War II. The above-mentioned paradox can explain why such a move failed and why balancing strategy in case of Yasukuni shrine is not a plausible choice.

4. Case study: Protest over comfort women statues

Although the comfort women issue is permanently present in politics, the commemoration of comfort women in the form of statue monument is rather new and started after 2011. The government of Japan for a long time demanded removal of the statue in Seoul and other places for several reasons. The result of the Japanese protest actually made things worse, as victims strongly rejected any demands. Moreover, the issue of the statue in San Francisco was extensively reported in the media and atmosphere that Japan wants to hide the problem was observable. The paradox of the Japanese politics of memory again can explain this failure.

5. Alternative?

I argue that rather than adopting a balancing strategy in the politics of memory, in the case of Japan because of a different attitude to historical experiences, building coherent narration of history is difficult. Therefore, it is better to consider whether there is a necessity to conduct the politics of history in the first place in its present shape. Depoliticization of current problems can resolve the most important issues, directly influencing Japanese reputation overseas.

6. References (partial list)

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