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Revisionists damaging Japan

By **HUGH CORTAZZI**

LONDON -- Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has the reputation of being a tough nationalist. So far, however, he has shown himself to be a pragmatist in foreign-policy issues. His early visits to China and South Korea demonstrated that he wants to improve bilateral relations, which have soured in recent years. He has wisely eschewed mention of the Yasukuni issue. He realizes the vital importance of the U.S. relationship and understandably takes a tough line on North Korea.

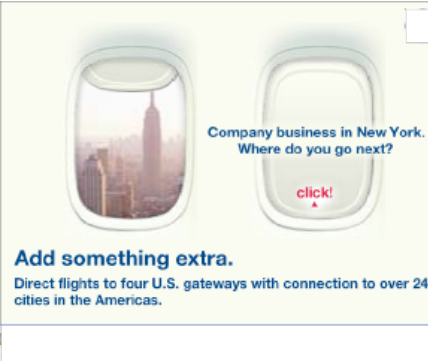
But there have recently been some developments, apparently reflecting a recrudescence of rightwing nationalism, that are potentially damaging to Japan's world image. I was disturbed to see recently a report of a discussion between Sophia University professor emeritus Shoichi Watanabe and Foreign Minister Taro Aso in which the foreign minister and his conservative interlocutor made remarks that suggest that they take a revisionist view of Japanese history.

Watanabe once again attempted to deny known facts about the Nanjing Massacre and urged the foreign minister to promote his revisionist theories of history. The foreign minister's failure to reject Watanabe's proposals and his general line in the interview suggests that he is also a historical revisionist. The emphasis on Japanese uniqueness and on the Shinto view of life and death read very oddly.

The publication of this interview and its republication in Japan Echo, a Japanese government publication, in English is unhelpful to Japan's international image. Unfortunately the attitudes displayed in this interview have been echoed in other developments that indicate a growing sensitivity in Japanese official circles about any criticism, Japanese or foreign, of Japanese policies and increasing signs that elements in the Japanese government favor the revisionists' view of history.

A Washington correspondent for Sankei Shimbun, Yoshihisa Komori, who also denies the Nanjing Massacre and is renowned for his nationalist if not rightist views, recently criticized the Japanese Institute of International Affairs (JIIA) for publishing on its Web site articles critical of aspects of Japanese foreign policy and of politicians visiting Yasukuni Shrine. He was especially scathing about anything being published that suggested that the deterioration in relations between Japan and China might in part be due to actions taken by Japanese politicians.

JIIA President Ambassador Yukio Sato, presumably under pressure from his paymasters in the Foreign Ministry, wrote an article for Sankei in which he apologized for publishing such articles and said that he had deleted critical articles from his association's Web site.



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I have great respect for Sato and know him to be an honorable man. I cannot believe that he would have allowed material on his Web site that was critical of Japan unless he felt that the issues raised in these articles deserved to be openly discussed. If serious issues cannot be debated in a reasonable way and if critical opinions are suppressed, the organization responsible for censoring such opinions will inevitably be seen as another Japanese government mouthpiece and its articles are likely to be disregarded as mere propaganda.

In an Aug. 27 Washington Post article titled "The Rise of Japan's Thought Police," writer Steven Clemons, director of the American Strategy Program at the New America Foundation and cofounder of the Japan Policy Research Institute, referred to "an increasingly militant group of rightwing activists who yearn for a return to 1930s style militarism, emperor-worship and 'thought-control.' "

My immediate reaction when I read this sentence was that Clemons was surely exaggerating the dangers, but I began to wonder whether my reaction was correct when I read further about actions, allegedly taken by Japanese rightists, against Japanese critics of Koizumi's visits to Yasukuni Shrine. Clemons mentioned, in particular, attacks on Koichi Kato, a senior member of the governing Liberal Democratic Party, and Yotaro Kobayashi, chairman of Fuji Xerox and a leading internationalist businessman. Both apparently received death threats from rightists and had been targeted by arsonists and fire bombs. I was also concerned to learn that Sumiko Iwao, a leading Japanese feminist, had been threatened by Japanese rightists for suggesting sensibly that it was time for Japan to endorse female succession in the Imperial line.

I don't think that Japan will revert to what prewar British journalist Hugh Byas termed "government by assassination," but the Japanese authorities if only to demonstrate that they believe firmly in free speech and human rights should crack down hard on such threats and ensure that they allow and encourage a proper debate on serious issues. The right way to deal with historical controversies is to carry out objective studies of history such as those promoted by former Prime Minister Tomoichi Murayama.

Japanese politicians and journalists make a mistake if they think that the Yasukuni issue only concerns China and Korea. There are many friends of Japan in both Britain and the United States who are deeply troubled by the way Japanese politicians have paid official visits to this shrine. In Article 11 of the Treaty of Peace with Japan signed at San Francisco in 1951, Japan accepted the judgments of the International Military Tribunal for the Far East. This means that the Japanese government accepted that the leaders who were condemned by the court had committed serious crimes.

Official visits to Yasukuni, where these criminals are enshrined, suggest that the Japanese government no longer upholds this provision in the Treaty of Peace and implicitly condones the actions for which they were condemned. In the view of many observers such visits are also contrary to Article 20 of the Constitution on the separation of state and religion.

More important is the existence of Yasukuni Shrine's Yushukan Museum, which seems to glorify war and ignores the sufferings caused by war to Japanese and foreign peoples alike, contrary to the spirit of Article 9 of the Constitution and to Japan's aspirations for world peace.

I write as a friend of Japan and an admirer of Japanese culture. I do not want to see Japan dominated by extremists or old-fashioned nationalists. I hope that this will not happen, but Japanese need to be on their guard.

Hugh Cortazzi, a former British career diplomat, served as ambassador to Japan from 1980 to 1984.

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