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The Revenge of History: Chomsky on Japan, China, the United States, and the Threat of Conflict in Asia歴史の復習　チョムスキー、日中米とアジアにおける対立の恐れを語る

Noam Chomsky

Between 2012 and 2014 we posted a number of articles on contemporary affairs without giving them volume and issue numbers or dates. Often the date can be determined from internal evidence in the article, but sometimes not. We have decided retrospectively to list all of them as Volume 10, Issue 54 with a date of 2012 with the understanding that all were published between 2012 and 2014.

Noam Chomsky

Interview by David McNeill

In the 1930s and 40s, a young, politically precocious Noam Chomsky was much affected by the Great Depression and the slow, seemingly inexorable slide toward world war. The jingoism, racism and brutality unleashed on all sides were appalling, but it seemed to him from his home in Philadelphia that America had reserved a special level of animosity for the Japanese. When Washington ended a campaign of mass civilian slaughter from the air with the atomic bombing of Hiroshima in the summer of 1945, the 16-year-old, deeply alienated by the celebrations around him, walked off into the local woods to mourn alone. “I could never talk to anyone about it and never understood anyone’s reaction,” he said. “I felt completely isolated.”

In the subsequent two decades, Chomsky built a glittering academic career, transforming the study of linguistics with a string of convention-shattering theories. During the Vietnam War, he reluctantly forged another identity – the one for which he is best known around the world – as an unrelenting critic of U.S. foreign policy. Much of his intellectual life since has been spent stripping away what he calls America’s “flattering self-image” and the layers of self-justification and propaganda he says it uses in its naked pursuit of power and profit around the planet. Unlike most mainstream commentators, Chomsky did not view the Vietnam quagmire as an aberration but as the inevitable product of imperial overreach.

In one of his most famous pronouncements, Chomsky once said that if the laws of the Allied postwar trials of war criminals in Tokyo and Nuremberg were fairly applied, “then every postwar American president would have been hanged.” The template for this presidential dispensation had been laid in his youth. The fire bombing of Tokyo, the A-bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki were war crimes; they just weren’t our war crimes, he noted. “A war crime is any war crime that you can condemn them for but they can't condemn us for.”

Now aged 85, and still in demand across the world as a public speaker, Chomsky has

returned to Japan at a time when the ghosts of World War II history have again returned to haunt the nation's dangerously unstable relationship with China. Prime Minister Abe Shinzo has signaled he intends to move ahead with the transformation of Japan's postwar political architecture. The attempt to reinterpret the pacifist constitution is aligned with a campaign of double-speak on the history of Japan's war crimes, infuriating Beijing, Seoul and other Asian nations. What was once unthinkable – the prospect of another war in East Asia – is now part of mainstream discussion. The prospect still seems remote, but as Chomsky notes in this interview before his departure for Tokyo: "History has taught us that playing with fire is not a wise course, particularly for states with an awesome capacity to destroy." He also reflects on the alternative: the development of a vibrant regional economy that could provide the foundation for a peaceful and prosperous Asia no longer so heavily dependent on a declining but still dangerous American military power.

Tell us about your connections to Japan.

I've been interested in Japan since the 1930s, when I read about Japan's vicious crimes in Manchuria and China. In the early 1940s, as a young teenager, I was utterly appalled by the racist and jingoist hysteria of the anti-Japanese propaganda. The Germans were evil, but treated with some respect: They were, after all, blond Aryan types, just like our imaginary self-image. Japanese were mere vermin, to be crushed like ants. Enough was reported about the firebombing of Japanese cities to recognize that major war crimes were underway, worse in many ways than the atom bombs.

I heard a story once that you were so appalled by the bombing of Hiroshima and the reaction of Americans that you had to go off and mourn alone…

Yes. On Aug. 6, 1945, I was at a summer camp for children when the atomic bombing of Hiroshima was announced over the public address system. Everyone listened, and then at once went on to their next activity: baseball, swimming, et cetera. Not a comment. I was practically speechless with shock, both at the horrifying events and at the null reaction. So what? More Japs incinerated. And since we have the bomb and no one else does, great; we can rule the world and everyone will be happy.

I followed the postwar settlement with considerable disgust as well. I didn't know then what I do now, of course, but enough information was available to undermine the patriotic fairy tale. My first trip to Japan was with my wife and children 50 years ago. It was linguistics, purely, though on my own I met with people from Beheiren (Citizen's League for Peace in Vietnam). I've returned a number of times since, always to study linguistics. I was quite struck by the fact that Japan is the only country I visited — and there were many — where talks and interviews focused solely on linguistics and related matters, even while the world was burning.

You arrive in Japan at a possibly defining moment: the government is preparing to launch a major challenge to the nation's six-decade pacifist stance, arguing that it must be "more flexible" in responding to external threats; relations with China and Korea have turned toxic; and there is even talk of war. Should we be concerned?

We should most definitely be concerned. Instead of abandoning its pacifist stance, Japan should take pride in it as an inspiring model for the world, and should take the lead in upholding the goals of the United Nations "to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war." The challenges in the region are real, but what is needed is steps toward political accommodation and establishing peaceful relations, not a return to policies that proved disastrous not so long ago.

How in concrete terms, though, can political accommodation be achieved? The historical precedents for the kind of situation we face in Asia — competing nationalisms; a rising undemocratic power with opaque military spending and something to prove in tandem with a declining power, increasingly fearful about what this means — are not good.

There is a real issue, but I think the question should be formulated a bit differently. Chinese military spending is carefully monitored by the United States. It is indeed growing, but it is a small fraction of U.S. expenditures, which are amplified by U.S. allies (China has none). China is indeed seeking to break out of the arc of containment in the Pacific that limits its control over the waters essential to its commerce and open access to the Pacific. That does set up possible conflicts, partly with regional powers that have their own interests, but mainly with the U.S., which of course would never even consider anything remotely comparable for itself and, furthermore, insists upon global control.

Although the U.S. is a "declining power," and has been since the late 1940s, it still has no remote competitor as a hegemonic power. Its military spending virtually matches the rest of the world combined, and it is far more technologically advanced. No other country could dream of having a network of hundreds of military bases all over the world, nor of carrying out the world's most expansive campaign of terror — and *that* is exactly what (President Barack) Obama's drone assassination campaign is. And the U.S., of course, has a brutal record of aggression and subversion.

These are the essential conditions within which political accommodation should be sought. In concrete terms, China's interests should be recognized along with those of others in the region. But there is no justification for accepting the domination of a global hegemon.

One of the perceived problems with Japan's "pacifist" Constitution is that it is so at odds with the facts. Japan operates under the U.S. nuclear umbrella and is host to dozens of bases and thousands of American soldiers. Is that an embodiment of the pacifist ideals of Article 9?

Insofar as Japan's behavior is inconsistent with the legitimate constitutional ideals, the behavior should be changed — not the ideals.

Are you following the political return of Prime Minister Abe Shinzo? His critics call him an ultranationalist. Supporters say he is merely trying to update Japan's three outdated charters — education, the 1947 pacifist Constitution and the security treaty with Washington — all products of the U.S. postwar occupation. What's your view?

It makes sense for Japan to pursue a more independent role in the world, following Latin America and others in freeing itself from U.S. domination. But it should do so in a manner that is virtually the opposite of Abe's ultranationalism, a term that seems to me accurate. The pacifist Constitution, in particular, is one legacy of the occupation that should be vigorously defended.

What do you make of comparisons between the rise of Nazi Germany and China? We hear such comparisons frequently from nationalists in Japan, and also recently from Benigno Aquino, the Philippine president. China's rise is often cited as a reason for Japan to stop pulling in its horns.

China is a rising power, casting off its "century of humiliation" in a bid to become a force in regional and world affairs. As always, there are negative and sometimes threatening aspects to such a development. But a comparison to Nazi Germany is absurd. We might note that in an international poll released at the end of 2013 on the question which country is "the greatest threat to world peace," the U.S. was ranked far higher than any other, receiving four times the votes of China. There are quite solid reasons for this judgment, some mentioned earlier. Nevertheless, to compare the U.S. to Nazi Germany would be completely absurd, and a fortiori that holds for China's far lesser resort to violence, subversion and other forms of intervention.

The comparison between China and Nazi Germany really is hysteria. I wonder whether Japanese readers have even the slightest idea of what the U.S. is doing throughout the world, and has been since it took over Britain's role of global dominance — and greatly expanded it — after World War II.

Some see the possible emergence of an Asian regionalism building on the dynamic of intertwined trade centered on China, Japan and South Korea but extending throughout Asia. Under what conditions could such an approach trump both U.S. hegemony and nationalism?

It is not just possible, it already exists. China's recent growth spurt is based very heavily on advanced parts, components, design and other high-tech contributions from the surrounding industrial powers. And the rest of Asia is becoming linked to this system, too. The U.S. is a crucial part of the system — Western Europe, too. The U.S. exports production, including high technology, to China, and imports finished goods, all on an enormous scale. The value added in China remains small, although it will increase as China moves up the technology ladder. These developments, if handled properly, can contribute to the general political accommodation that is imperative if serious conflict is to be avoided.

The recent tension over the Senkaku Islands has raised the threat of military conflict between China and Japan. Most commenters still think war is unlikely, given the enormous consequences and the deep finance and trade links that bind the two economies together. What's your view?

The confrontations taking place are extremely hazardous. The same is true of China's declaration of an air defense identification zone in a contested region, and Washington's

immediate violation of it. History has certainly taught us that playing with fire is not a wise course, particularly for states with an awesome capacity to destroy. Small incidents can rapidly escalate, overwhelming economic links.

What's the U.S. role in all this? It seems clear that Washington does not want to be pulled into a conflict with Beijing. We also understand that the Obama administration is upset at Abe's views on history, and his visits to Yasukuni Shrine, the linchpin of historical revisionism in Japan. However we can hardly call the U.S. an honest broker …

Hardly. The U.S. is surrounding China with military bases, not conversely. U.S. strategic analysts describe a "classic security dilemma" in the region, as the U.S. and China each perceive the other's stance as a threat to their basic interests. The issue is control of the seas off China's coasts, not the Caribbean or the waters off California. For the U.S., global control is a "vital interest."

We might also recall the fate of Prime Minister Hatoyama when he followed the will of the large majority of Okinawans, defying Washington. As The New York Times reported, "Apologizing for failing to fulfill a prominent campaign promise, Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama told outraged residents of Okinawa on Sunday that he has decided to relocate an American air base to the north side of the island as originally agreed upon with the United States." His "capitulation," as it was correctly described, resulted from strong U.S. pressure.

China is now embroiled in territorial conflicts with Japan and the Philippines and Vietnam in the South China Sea as well as the air defense identification zone on its contested borders. In all of these cases, the U.S. is directly or indirectly involved. Should these be understood as cases of Chinese expansionism?

China is seeking to expand its regional influence, which conflicts with the traditional U.S. demand to be recognized as the global hegemon, and conflicts as well with local interests of regional powers. The phrase "Chinese expansionism" is accurate, but rather misleading, in the light of overwhelming U.S. global dominance.

It is useful to think back to the early post-World War II period. U.S. global planning took for granted that Asia would be under U.S. control. China's independence was a serious blow to these intentions. In U.S. discourse, it is called "the loss of China," and the issue of who was responsible for "the loss of China" became a major domestic issue, including the rise of McCarthyism. The terminology itself is revealing. I can lose my wallet, but I cannot lose yours. The tacit assumption of U.S. discourse is that China was ours by right. One should be cautious about using the phrase "expansionism" without due attention to this hegemonic conception and its ugly history.

On Okinawa, the scene seems set for a major confrontation between the mainland and prefectural governments, which support the construction of a new U.S. military base in Henoko, and the local population, which last month overwhelmingly re-elected an anti-base mayor. Do you have any thoughts on how

this will play out?

One can only admire the courage of the people of Nago city and Mayor Inamine Susumu in rejecting the deplorable efforts of the Abe government to coerce them into accepting a military base to which the population was overwhelmingly opposed. And it was no less disgraceful that the central government instantly overrode their democratic decision. What the outcome will be, I cannot predict. It will, however, have considerable import for the fate of democracy and the prospects for peace.

The Abe government is trying to rekindle nuclear power and restart Japan's idling reactors. Supporters say the cost of keeping those reactors offline is a massive increase in energy costs and use of fossil fuels. Opponents say it is too dangerous …

The general question of nuclear power is not a simple one. It is hardly necessary to stress how dangerous it is after the Fukushima nuclear disaster, which has far from ended. Continued use of fossil fuels threatens global disaster, and not in the distant future. The sensible course would be to move as quickly as possible to sustainable energy sources, as Germany is now doing. The alternatives are too disastrous to contemplate.

You'll have followed the work of committed environmentalists such as James Lovelock and George Monbiot, who say nuclear power is the only way to save the planet from cooking. In the short term, that analysis seems to have some merit: One of the immediate consequences of Japan's nuclear disaster has been a massive expansion in imports of coal, gas and oil. They say there is no way for us to produce enough renewables in time to stop runaway climate change.

As I said, there is some merit in these views. More accurately, there *would* be if limited and short-term reliance on nuclear energy, with all of its extreme hazards and unsolved problems — like waste disposal — was taken as an opportunity for rapid and extensive development of sustainable energy. That should be the highest priority, and very quickly, because severe threats of environmental catastrophe are not remote.

Chomsky lectures at Sophia University (Tokyo)

"The Architecture of Language Reconsidered"
3:30 p.m., Wednesday, March 5

"Capitalist Democracy and the Prospects for Survival"
3:30 p.m., Thursday, March 6

(Tickets to both lectures have been sold out)

This is an expanded version of an article that ran in The Japan Times on February 22, 2014.

Noam Chomsky, the author, most recently, of Imperial Ambitions: Conversations on the Post-9/11 World, is a professor of linguistics at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. For a guide to Noam Chomsky's writings see www.chomsky.info - See more at:

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