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OPINION

Why Ontario should steer clear of East Asia's identity politics

Let us hope that our politicians see the wisdom of avoiding this particular minefield before the damage is done.

By DAVID A. WELCH

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TORONTO—Recently, two legislative bodies in Ontario have waded into an historical minefield. On Dec. 5, 2016, Liberal MPP Soo Wong introduced a private member's bill (Bill 79) at Queen's Park to designate December 13 "Nanjing Massacre Commemoration Day." Four days later, Toronto City Councillor Jim Karygiannis asked his colleagues to "recognize the Nanjing Massacre as a crime against humanity and to honour the memory of the men, women and children who died."

The Nanjing Massacre was truly a ghastly event. On Dec. 13, 1937, the Imperial Japanese Army entered the city of Nanjing and, in clear violation of the laws of war, committed widespread atrocities against a defenceless civilian population, killing perhaps as many as 300,000 (the actual number will never be known).

Horrors such as this are certainly worthy of commemoration. But these two legislative initiatives are not about remembering innocent civilian victims: they are about demonizing Japan.

For three years, my colleagues and I at the Centre for International Governance Innovation (CIGI) have been engaged in a project titled "Confidence, Trust, and Empathy in Asia-Pacific Security," the goal of which has been to reduce the dangers of conflict in an economically vital but politically explosive part of the world by finding ways of reducing mutual misperceptions of threat. True security rests upon a foundation of trust, a special kind of confidence grounded in the knowledge that another means you no harm. This knowledge, in turn, requires empathy, or the capacity to see the world from another's perspective. In East Asia, empathy is in short supply.

In recent years, China has fanned the flames of anti-Japanese sentiment, partly for instrumental reasons (an external enemy enhances national cohesion and regime legitimacy), and partly because many Chinese honestly believe that Japan is nostalgic for its imperial, militarist past, and continues to pose a latent threat to the mainland. It is hardly surprising that they do. Their government keeps telling them so. Chinese citizens are fed a steady diet of anti-Japanese propaganda in the press and in the form of late-night television dramas depicting the heroic struggle of Chinese soldiers against barbaric wartime Japanese invaders. The Nanjing Massacre figures heavily in these anti-Japanese narratives.

In fact, the government of Japan has long ago—and many times—acknowledged and repented of the country's imperial sins. Only a handful of arch-nationalist cranks refuse to do so, and they speak only for themselves. Today, Japan is among the least militarist countries in the world. Most Japanese today see their own government as the primary source of their wartime suffering. Since 1945, Japan has been a responsible and constructive member of the international community.

One finds ample evidence of lack of empathy in Japan as well, where China's anti-Japanese propaganda is seen as part of a larger geopolitical project to impose Beijing's hegemony. With few exceptions, Japanese fail to appreciate the extent to which anti-Japanese sentiment in China can be attributed to a combination of ignorance and regime insecurity. But the Japanese government does not respond by demonizing China. Instead, it calls for greater cooperation and communication on issues of mutual interest, while hedging its bets through more-or-less-standard balance-of-power politics.

These two efforts to single out the Nanjing Massacre for commemoration effectively endorse and encourage Chinese misperceptions of Japan. They ask the people of Ontario and the people of Toronto to inflame and take sides in a dangerous clash of national egos. They work against, not for, stability in East Asia. This is not the Canadian way. Canadians are peacemakers and bridge-builders, not pawns in others' domestic and geopolitical games.

At the same time, and at least as importantly, these two efforts threaten to undermine harmony here at home. More than 100,000 Ontarians have roots in Japan, and more than 700,000 have roots in China. Nothing good can come from fanning the flames ethnic hatred—except, perhaps, for cynical politicians who care only about the relative number of their constituents in their districts with Chinese or Japanese ancestry.

Finally, these measures are dangerous precedents. By taking sides in one case, Queen's Park and Toronto City Council would effectively invite others to do the same. Ontario, in general, and Toronto, in particular, have more diverse populations than anywhere else in the world. There are not enough days in the calendar to commemorate every historical atrocity that drives an ethno-nationalist grievance.

Let us hope that our politicians see the wisdom of avoiding this particular minefield before the damage is done. No one could possibly object to commemorating the innocent victims of war; but if we are to do so, let us make the commemoration inclusive, in true Canadian fashion, rather than divisive.

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