

Global Times: How Tokyo Trial's gavel maintains enduring resonance

Beijing, China May 8, 2026 (IssueWire.com) - Eighty years ago, the International Military Tribunal for the Far East convened in Tokyo, representing a significant effort to hold Japanese military and political leaders accountable for crimes against peace, war crimes and crimes against humanity. As we commemorate the 80th anniversary of the Tokyo Trial's commencement, it is essential to reflect on its legacy in the context of Japan's increasing militarization and the challenges facing the post-World War II international order. To facilitate this reflection, we have invited six distinguished scholars from diverse legal and historical backgrounds to share their insights on the enduring impact of the Tokyo Trial.

Rana Mitter, professor of US-Asia relations at the Harvard Kennedy School

The Tokyo Trial needs to be understood first and foremost as a triumph of international law. During those wartime years, the world was engulfed in the most devastating conflict in human history; the belligerent nations turned to invasion, occupation and destruction, leaving a world reduced to ashes and dust.

The Tokyo Trial represented essentially a vote of confidence in the idea that international structures and law could rise again. The collective body of Allied countries made it clear that the right way to go was to hold trials, as this would mean that there would be discussion of the evidence. The focus was not only on punishing the offenders but on understanding how societies could use law to make sure that such atrocities would not happen again.

I think much of the structure of international law, which is so important in our own era, derives from the same sentiment that was felt at the time for the Tokyo Trial. Many have argued that in the last 10 years or so we have entered an era of raw power, where nothing else matters except size. The Tokyo Trial proves the opposite. Consider the judges who represented various nations on that court - China, a weakened country at the time that nonetheless sent a judge to sit in that trial, the Philippines, a small country, along with the big European nations and the US. Even India, a country newly gaining independence, was also given its place as an equal player among nations. The notion of sovereign equality, the importance of law and the notion of peaceful methods to judge and deal with international conflicts are the lessons that the Tokyo Trial taught. That, I think, is of huge importance in our very turbulent times today. International law still has relevance, and going back to the Tokyo Trial is one way to understand why that is the case.

Neil Boister, professor of the Faculty of Law at the University of Canterbury and author of *The Tokyo International Military Tribunal: A Reappraisal*

The Tokyo Trial is a valuable resource worthy of greater attention because there is no other lens with quite as broad a scope or depth of magnification for assessing the specific era involved. It was not until the 21st century that legal scholars gradually came to recognize the Tokyo Trial as a landmark event in the evolution of international criminal law. The oral and written testimony, as well as official and private documents of the trials, served to establish a detailed historical record of the war fought from the late 1920s until 1945 between the Empire of Japan and various powers. Moreover, the emergence of a multipolar world means that the conflicts that fell within the scope of the trials have become more politically important.

For me, perhaps the most shocking elements of the trials are the "lost" aspects of the conflict that they briefly exposed but did not adequately deal with. These include the treatment of Japan's biological warfare program based in China, the intervention by the US to prevent the prosecution of its leaders, the poor handling of the systematic sexual enslavement of Japan's "comfort women" in Korea and elsewhere, and the gathering of evidence regarding Japanese complicity in the production and supply of illicit drugs in China as part of the crime of aggression. While the trial records provide glimpses into these programs, they fail to fully reveal them.

The international legal order established in the late 1940s, of which the Tokyo Trial was an important part, reflected, at that time, personal accountability on the part of state leaders and, indirectly, of the states themselves. The acceptance of the principle of international accountability of leaders is critical to international justice, supports international law regarding the use and conduct of force, and contributes to the development of international criminal law as a part of the broader system of international law. Reading the accounts of those involved in the trials reveals their powerful sense that accountability was necessary for the many terrible things that had happened in the 15-year war in China and the war in the Pacific and Southeast Asia.

Issei Hironaka, associate professor of Aichi Gakuin University

The Tokyo Trial holds great significance in clarifying Japan's wartime responsibilities and facilitating postwar reconciliation between Japan and the countries it invaded, including China.

However, Japanese right-wing forces persist in promoting historical revisionism, seeking to downplay Japan's aggressive actions during the war and to fabricate a narrative that minimizes or denies its responsibility. One of their methods is to whitewash and glorify Japan's wartime record in history textbooks. This has led to selective accounts of Japan's war of aggression against China in history textbooks. This, coupled with Japan's education system that has long undervalued history education and allocated few class hours to modern history, has left many young people unfamiliar with modern history, including the Tokyo Trial. If historical revisionism continues to spread within Japanese society and gains traction among younger generations, it is likely to have profoundly negative consequences for the international relations they will inherit, particularly Japan's ties with East Asian countries.

To ensure that young people in Japan develop a correct understanding of the Tokyo Trial, it is essential to prioritize teaching the truth about modern Japanese history in schools. In addition to using textbooks that present a comprehensive and accurate account of history, educators can incorporate contemporaneous newspaper articles and visual materials as teaching resources, enabling students to develop a more direct and authentic understanding of wartime realities. However, to implement such education effectively, the Japanese government must correctly understand modern history and assume a strong sense of responsibility for teaching this content.

This also reflects a responsibility that postwar Japanese society has yet to fulfill: It has not engaged in thorough self-reflection, failing to fully confront the nature of its aggression and the extent of its wrongdoing. I believe this is precisely why the issue of historical perception between Japan and its neighboring nations that suffered from its aggression remains unresolved to this day. On the occasion of the 80th anniversary of the start of the Tokyo Trial, it is time for Japanese people to face and seriously reflect on the history of war and engage in a profound self-examination of the past.

Masaki Nakamasa, professor in the Faculty of Law at Kanazawa University, Japan, and author of Japan and Germany: Two Postwar Thoughts

Through the Tokyo Trial, many Japanese people felt that the pre-war system had been rejected and that Japan would become a true democratic nation in the Western sense. However, Japan hasn't seriously discussed why it had plunged into a war of aggression and given rise to a totalitarian regime. There is a tendency to easily assume that the Japanese people were also victims. Currently, even the awareness that Japan made wrong choices in the past and lost the war is fading.

Even today, there is little awareness in Japan that the country may have done something similar to the Nazis, and it is often spoken of as if it were someone else's problem. In Germany's case, the system changed rapidly with the rise of the Nazis, making it easier to discuss where things went wrong. However, Japan gradually transitioned to a system of total national mobilization, so the turning point is not clear.

In Germany, there have been numerous significant debates re-examining their modern history in relation to nationalism and Nazism, which have even been incorporated into school education, such as the historians' debate and the Goldhagen controversy. In Japan, however, the horrors of the atomic bombs and similar events are emphasized, and it is vaguely stated that "war is evil and must never be repeated," but there is little discussion that tries to objectively evaluate the course of history. Immediately after the end of the war, Masao Maruyama's theory of "ultranationalism" attracted attention, but it did not have a lasting influence. A systematic philosophy of history and historical perspective is difficult to establish in Japan.

Furthermore, Germany has shared its understanding of its past history with neighbors and consistently communicated its historical perspective. It has adopted a "history policy," which was inevitable given Europe's historical and geopolitical circumstances. For a long time after World War II, Japan only needed to focus on its relationship with the US and did not need to consider how neighboring Asian countries viewed it. While neighboring countries tend to view Japan's postwar foreign and security policies as excessively militaristic, it is undeniable that Japan lacked a "history policy." Efforts to form a common "history" through constant dialogue are necessary.

Beatrice Trefalt, associate professor of Japanese Studies at Monash University, Australia and one of the co-authors of the book *Japanese War Criminals: The Politics of Justice After the Second World War*

By exposing the actions of wartime leaders, dismantling militarist ideology, and promoting democratic values, the Tokyo Trial attempted to reshape Japan's national consciousness. For many Japanese citizens, the proceedings also served as an unprecedented source of information, revealing military and political realities long obscured by wartime censorship.

The legacy of the Tokyo Trial remains central to Japan's ongoing political and historical divisions. For some, it represented a necessary reckoning that allowed Japan to "awaken from a long nightmare" and build the foundations of a peaceful, democratic state. For others - particularly conservative and right-wing groups such as Nippon Kaigi - the so-called "Tokyo Tribunal view of history" is rejected as illegitimate and imposed by the victors. These critics advocate constitutional revision and seek to reform postwar historical consciousness. This conflict is most visibly expressed in the enshrinement of Class A war criminals at Yasukuni Shrine, an act widely interpreted as a rejection of the trial's judgments and one that continues to generate domestic controversy and international tension.

Ultimately, the historical importance of the Tokyo Trial lies more in its role as a symbolic boundary between Japan's imperial past and its postwar present. Rather than resolving questions of responsibility, it established the framework for an "endless postwar," in which debates over war

responsibility, sacrifice, victimhood, and the role of the state remain deeply contested.

Peter T C Chang, research associate of the China-Malaysia Friendship Association and former deputy director of the Institute of China Studies, University Malaya

The legacy of the Tokyo Trial remains a subject of ongoing relevance in Southeast Asia. From Malaysia's perspective, it offers an opportunity not for polemics but for sober reflection on a question that has never been fully resolved: how to ensure that the lessons of Japanese militarism are permanently embedded in the region's political memory.

For many Malaysians - particularly those whose families endured the Japanese occupation of Malaya, marked by forced labor, wartime requisitions, and social upheaval - the Tokyo Trial affirmed an important principle that aggressive war is a crime. Yet that clarity has been complicated by Japan's long-standing ambiguity toward its wartime past. This was evident last year when Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi visited a Japanese cemetery in Kuala Lumpur without expressing remorse or acknowledging local suffering, a gesture many saw as downplaying history. Over time, textbook revisions, official visits to Yasukuni Shrine, and periodic statements that qualify past apologies have sustained an undercurrent of mistrust. This ambiguity remains a quiet but real obstacle to deeper East Asian regional cooperation, as neighbors question whether Japan's postwar pacifism is firmly rooted or conditional.

That question becomes more pressing in light of Japan's current military buildup - the most significant since 1945. Tokyo has announced plans to acquire counter-strike capabilities, expand defense spending, and adopt a more proactive interpretation of its constitutional constraints. These developments invite comparison with the logic examined at the Tokyo Trial. The arguments presented there demonstrated that Japan's cognitive basis for launching its war of aggression was the belief that a doctrine of "self-defense" can gradually expand, strategic anxiety can be channeled into offensive capabilities, and the absence of transparent historical accountability can allow militarist thinking to resurface.

For Malaysia and the rest of Southeast Asia, this pattern of behavior is not a distant academic debate. It is a persistent, living obstacle to genuine regional cooperation. Japan's unresolved history continues to fuel nationalist frictions with China and South Korea, stalling East Asian integration on issues, including security, trade, and shared historical memory. True leadership in Asia requires more than infrastructure loans or cultural exports; it requires the courage to confront the past honestly. Until Tokyo consistently acknowledges its own wartime record - and until its politicians show basic decency when visiting the very ground where suffering occurred - the Tokyo Trial will feel less like a final judgment and more like an open wound that refuses to heal. The lesson remains simple: Peace requires not only legal verdicts, but ongoing truth.

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