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Deeds of Cooperation over Words of Contrition:

How Germany achieved reconciliation with neighbors while Japan did not

Walter HATCH

Abstract

Germany has managed to achieve reconciliation with European neighbors it brutalized in the past, while Japan remains mired in tense relations with neighbors it once invaded or colonized in Northeast Asia. Why? I study paired cases: relations between Germany and France, along with those between Japan and South Korea (Cold War allies now enjoying similarly high levels of economic development); and relations between Germany and Poland, along with those between Japan and China (Cold War rivals with different levels of development). Based on the case study results, I reject the conventional wisdom, which suggests that Germany apologized sufficiently while Japan has not. Instead, I argue that Germany showed a credible commitment to cooperate with its neighbors by nesting itself in regional institutions of economic and security collaboration. Japan has demonstrated no such commitment, in part due to the constraints of its bilateral alliance with the United States.

Keywords

reconciliation, memory, contrition, cooperation, institutions

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Both Japan and Germany behaved very poorly in the past–stealing nearby lands or annexing them outright, violently conquering and abusing neighbors. But Germany today is less haunted by the ghosts of its past. Unlike Japan, which is despised by many citizens in the rest of Northeast Asia, it appears to have achieved reconciliation, more or less, with other countries in Europe.

How do we explain these different outcomes?

The most common answer is that Germany has apologized to its neighbors while Japan has not. Those who adopt this position tend to focus on culture, suggesting that contrition comes more naturally to Germans than Japanese. I reject this conventional wisdom, and offer an alternative based on the power of deeds (institution–building) rather than words. Germany, I argue, has achieved reconciliation by demonstrating a credible commitment to cooperation. Unlike Japan, hindered by a bilateral alliance with the United States that renders it a subordinate power, it has nested itself in strong, regional institutions, principally the European Union (EU) but also the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), allowing it to show neighbors that it can be trusted.

In 2023, University of Michigan Press published my latest book, Ghosts in the *Neighborhood: Why Japan is Haunted by its Past and Germany is Not.*[1] It examines the effect of three variables (apologies, economic interdependence, and political cooperation) on interstate relations in two pairs of cases: Germany–France and Japan–South Korea; plus Germany–Poland and Japan–China. Case selection is always challenging. I chose these because they represent brutalizing, lopsided conflict between two distinct nations over a long period of time. Germany–France and Japan–South Korea are examined as one pair of cases because they share important commonalities: They became allies in the Cold War and have attained similarly high levels of economic development. Likewise, Germany–Poland and Japan–China are examined as another pair for their commonalities: They were rivals in the Cold War with

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[1] The book is open access. See here: https://www.fulcrum.org/concern/monographs/0c483m75k

different levels of economic development. In this way, my methodology relies on Mill's (1848, 455) method of difference, isolating causal factors that help explain different outcomes by controlling for other factors that do not.

This paper is based on that book, but dramatically abbreviated. For example, I do not explore the effect of economic interdependence, except to note here that it does not explain different levels of reconciliation. Japan and China, for example, are especially close trading partners that nonetheless continue to have a strained relationship.[2]

I also skip here an extended analysis of an important follow-up question: Why is Europe characterized by a relatively high level of multilateralism, which has helped Germany achieve reconciliation with its neighbors, while Asia is characterized instead by U.S.-led bilateralism and a noodle soup of relatively weak, mini-lateral organizations. The short answer (spelled out in chapter 7 of my book) is that the United States enjoyed overwhelming power in East Asia, until recently, and generally did not identify with Asian counterparts as kindred spirits or equal partners. While U.S. leaders viewed Europeans as brothers and sisters in a joint project of maintaining and advancing "Western civilization," they tended to look down on Asians as inferior and untrustworthy. So they built a hub-and-spokes pattern of relationships across the Pacific. (Izumikawa 2020) that they could dominate[3]

In this paper, I outline the theory and logic behind the leading explanations (apologies versus political cooperation) used to solve the puzzle of Germany's relative success and Japan's relative failure in achiev-

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[2] In 2023, China–Japan trade rose to $266.4 billion, making them the leading bilateral trading partners in the world. China was the number one destination for Japanese exports that year.

[3] A smart reviewer wonders if the hub-and-spokes pattern with the U.S. at the center constitutes an "institution," thus undermining my claim that East Asia has not enjoyed political cooperation. I don't think so. That pattern is an informal one-the sum of two bilateral ties. Dominated by the U.S., the informal triangle has relieved Japan and South Korea of the responsibility to collaborate directly with one another. The reviewer also asks about a proposed Northeast Asia Treaty Organization, a corollary to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. But a NEATO was never seriously pursued.

ing reconciliation with neighbors brutalized in the past. I then use four case studies to test these competing hypotheses before acknowledging caveats and wrapping up with concluding thoughts.

LEADING EXPLANATIONS

When I talk with intelligent lay people about my research question, they invariably offer some version of the same answer: The Japanese are "different"–insular, not cosmopolitan, maybe even more racist than Germans. Those familiar with the work of Ruth Benedict (1946), the anthropologist commissioned by the U.S. to elucidate Japanese culture for Occupation authorities, even though she never visited the country, routinely invoke her distinction between Japan's "shame culture," ostensibly a function of Shinto, and the West's "guilt culture," influenced by Christianity. If you are saddled with shame, writes Benedict, you care only about your reputation; but if you are haunted by guilt, you seek to repair relations.

I also heard this line of thinking from a prominent historian. Rudolf von Thadden was not only a German intellectual but an adviser to the German chancellor who had longstanding personal ties to both Poland and France. Before he died in 2015, I had the opportunity to interview him (von Thadden, interview by author, April 22, 2006). Von Thadden highlighted cultural or even spiritual orientation. Japan, he told me, cannot escape its own bloody history with China and Korea as easily as Germany did with both Poland and France because East Asia is not Christian, and thus lacks not only the political prerequisites but also the necessary moral foundation. "Reconciliation requires a belief in forgiveness."

The underlying belief is that Japan is culturally deficient.

Thomas Berger (2012) advances this hypothesis in a more sophisticated way that still manages to draw from the Bible. He concludes that Germany was a "model penitent," while Japan was a "model impenitent." For a variety of reasons, he argues, the former managed to apolo-

gize while the latter did not.[4]

Likewise, Greg Rienzi (2015) suggests that Japan should follow Germany's example by getting down on its knees. It should stop insisting on its own righteousness and instead show contrition. "While Japan has largely forgone reconciliation, Germany has used its policy to claim a moral high ground and become a trusted power."[5]

I dispute not only the grand (and perhaps racist) notion that Japan is a cultural dwarf, compared to Germany; I also reject the empirical claim that Japan has not apologized for its past misbehavior. Japanese apologies are well documented by Yamazaki (2006), as well as others. I will share some of this evidence in my case studies.

Rather than words of contrition, I argue that Japan has fallen short on deeds of cooperation. It has not regained the trust of its neighbors because it has not nested itself in regional institutions that lengthen the shadow of the future by creating norms of collaboration. Game theory helps illustrate how this works. In a single game, such as the prisoners' dilemma, players are inclined to act selfishly because they know that another player will take advantage of any unilateral move to drop one's guard and "play nice" (cooperate). But in an iterated game, Axelrod and Hamilton (1981) have shown that players learn how to "play nice" and cooperate over time, and without a central authority. They acquire stable expectations, which in turn foster durable rules and patterns of behavior (institutions) that facilitate information-sharing and trust.

This analysis is complicated, of course, by the reality of traumatic history. States subjected to extreme or protracted violence or humiliation are unlikely to take a chance and collaborate in the present with a state that has victimized them in the past. But they can. What's necessary is a

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[4] There are many other sophisticated analyses suggesting that Japan has not been sufficiently apologetic. See, for example, Alexis Dudden (2008). She notes that the U.S. never fully apologized for the atrocities (such as My Lai) it committed in Vietnam, but fails to note that Hanoi doesn't seem to care anymore. It has moved on.

[5] Rienzi here is channeling Lily Gardner Feldman, who has argued in different publications and interviews that Japan should take a lesson from Germany, which she claims is a master apologist. See, for example, Feldman (2014).

credible commitment to cooperation by the former perpetrator. Such a commitment becomes credible when it is difficult or costly to reverse. When a former perpetrator-state not only pledges to cooperate over time, but actually makes that pledge credible by embedding itself in a broader set of rules and patterns of behavior (institutions), it eventually gains the trust of even a former victim state.

As we shall see, Germany gained the trust of its past victims in Europe by embedding itself in European and trans-Atlantic institutions that promoted economic and military collaboration. With the Treaty of Paris in 1951 and NATO in 1955, and later with the Treaties of Maastricht (1992) and Nice (2001), Germany demonstrated a credible commitment to cooperation with its neighbors. Japan, by contrast, has done no such thing. While it has economic partnership agreements with several countries in Southeast Asia, and it has participated in some collaborative efforts, such as the Trilateral Cooperation Secretariat (TCS), with South Korea and China, it has not invested much political capital in building strong regional institutions (Gao 2025).[6] Tokyo's major commitment has been to the United States, which insists on fealty through the bilateral security alliance.

GERMANY-FRANCE

If our definition of "Germany" includes Prussia, the leading republic in the pre-unification confederation, this European powerhouse invaded France three times over a century-in 1870, 1914, and finally 1940. German troops were especially brutal during World War I, crushing French resistance and murdering civilians in towns like Bandonviller, Nomeny, Fresnois-la Montagne, and Senlis.

During the interwar years, the French came to detest the Germans. History textbooks described them as bloodthirsty militarists, "veritable

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[6] This could change, of course, especially with an "America First" regime back in the White House.

barbarians … despicable, detestable and dangerous" (Siegel 2002, 781).[7] These hard feelings only hardened further after World War II, when (for example) Nazi stormtroopers machine-gunned or burned 642 residents of Oradour-sur-Glane. At the end of the war, General Charles DeGaulle became head of the provisional government and proclaimed that he would block the re-establishment of a centralized Reich that had served as "the instrument of Bismarck, William II and Hitler."[8]

But that hostility didn't last. Grosser (1967, 6), then the leading scholar of Franco-German relations, writes that, at the end of WWII, the French looked out and saw "no enemy but Germany;" just a decade and a

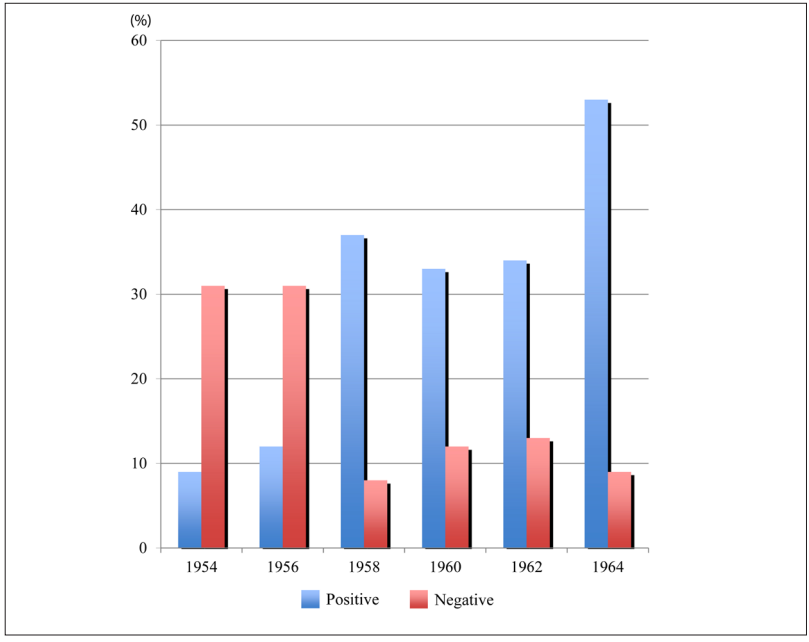

Figure 1. French Views of West Germany
Source: Author (https://www.fulcrum.org/concern/file_sets/8c97ks955?locale=en#info)

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[7] "Conférences pédagogiques du canton de Montpon: Registre des procès-verbaux, 1880-1925," *Archives departmementales de la Dordogne* (ADD) 4/T/107, quoted in Siegel (2002, 781).

[8] Speech at Bar-le-Duc, July 28, 1946, quoted in Gildea (2002, 66).

half later, he writes, they saw "no friend but Germany." Figure 1 shows the remarkable transformation in French public opinion.

By 1958, French views of Germany went from being overwhelmingly negative to overwhelmingly positive. What drove this change?

In this case, the conventional wisdom cannot even begin to answer the question. During his tenure as chancellor (1949–1963), Konrad Adenauer offered no apologies for German militarism. Indeed, like most Germans, he had little interest in dwelling on the past, choosing instead to focus on the country's effort to re-industrialize.[9] Germany eventually did discover its past–but that came much later, in the 1970s, when the younger generation of Social Democrats came to power.

Something else was happening in the 1950s, and that something was European multilateral cooperation, especially on trade and investment. In 1951, Germany promised to work with France to co-develop the Ruhr Valley and build a European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC), the precursor to what eventually became the European Union (EU). Then, in 1955, it agreed to French conditions on its entry into NATO (no German nukes, long-range missiles, or battleships). In 1957, it led efforts to forge even closer ties by creating the European Economic Community (EEC) and collaborate on the construction and operation of peaceful nuclear reactors through the European Atomic Energy Community (Euratom).

Regional institutions made the difference. They served as the "glue" to cement Franco-German ties and foster rapprochement, according to Nicolas Jabko, a French political scientist affiliated with Johns Hopkins University and Sciences Po (interview by author, July 8, 2009). Claire Demesmay, a French scholar at the German Council on Foreign Relations in Berlin, says the two countries today live in a "post-reconciliation time" (interview by author, September 2, 2009). War between the two powers is now unimaginable, thanks to the regional institutions they have forged together.

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[9] Adenauer encouraged fellow Germans to "put the past behind us." Quoted in Herf (1997, 271).

JAPAN–SOUTH KOREA

When Japan established a protectorate over the Korean peninsula in 1905, and then annexed it outright in 1910, it didn't just try to extract economic gains. It ruled directly and brutally, replacing Korean officials, censoring the media and violently suppressing dissent. Japanese merchants moved into major cities, while Japanese farmers took over agricultural land. And the new overlords tried to "Japanize" Korean society, insisting on the use of their own language in public schools and pressing families to adopt Japanese names.

With the outbreak of the Pacific War, colonial rule became even more arbitrary and cruel. Japan deported two million Koreans, forcing them to work in Japan–based factories.[10] And the Japanese military conscripted thousands of Korean men, requiring them to serve on the front lines, while luring, deceiving, and even coercing as many as 100,000 Korean women into sexual slavery at so–called "comfort stations" (or military brothels).[11]

Japan's defeat in 1945 brought an end to its empire but not the start of goodwill. Although they were politically aligned during the Cold War, Japan and South Korea negotiated for 14 years before reaching a normalization treaty, and they have continued to squabble over myriad issues, especially history. Fierce resentment toward Japan lingers. Why?

The conventional wisdom is that Japan has failed to acknowledge and atone for its past misdeeds. But this claim is not supported by evidence. Over time, Japanese leaders, including the emperor, have issued increasingly strong and sincere apologies to Koreans. Instead of merely expressing "regret" for unspecified misdeeds, as Foreign Minister Shiina Etsusaburo did in 1965, Prime Minister Miyazawa Kiichi openly apologized in 1992 for the "unbearable suffering and grief" inflicted upon the

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10 From Kim, Sang–hyon, Chae–il Hanguk–in (Korean Residents in Japan), Dankuk Research Institute Press, 1969, p. 38. Quoted in Lee (1990, 64)

11 Historians estimate that there were as many as 200,000 "comfort women" throughout Japanese–occupied Asia, and that about half of them were Korean.

peninsula during colonial rule, and for the "inexcusable treatment" of Korean women who served as sex slaves for the Japanese military during World War II (Wakamiya 1998, 194). As the decade ripened, other leaders issued even stronger statements of contrition. One might expect this rhetorical evolution to warm hearts in Korea; indeed, Yamazaki (2006, 38) tells us that, to be effective, apologies must be heartfelt and specific. In fact, though, Korean views of Japan turned more negative just as Japanese apologies grew "better." See Figure 2.

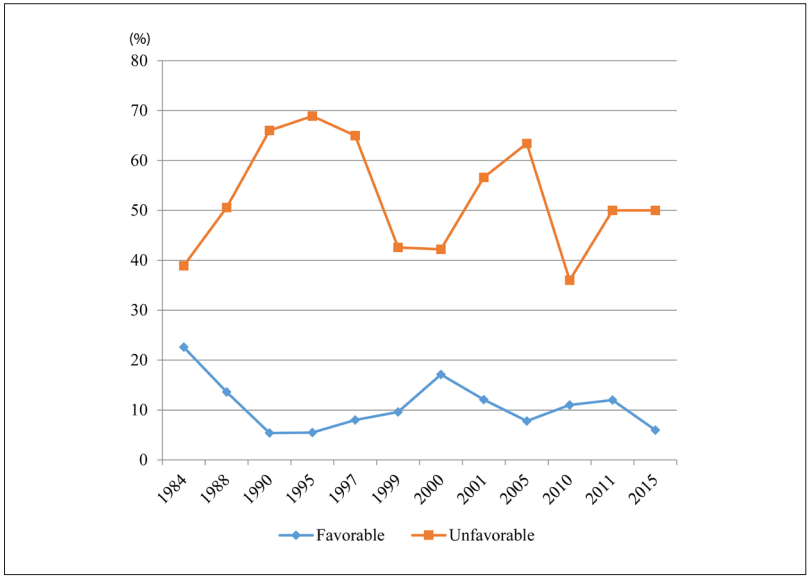

Figure 2. Korean Views of Japan
Source: Author (https://www.fulcrum.org/concern/file_sets/xk81jp02h?locale=en)

A better explanation for this ongoing hostility is that Japan failed to show any real commitment to cooperation during this period. It deepened its relationship with the United States, but not with its Asian neighbors, including South Korea. Although Prime Minister Hatoyama Yukio called in 2009 for an East Asian Community, modeled on the European Union, his proposal went nowhere (Hatoyama 2009).

The otherwise stubborn status quo did shift a little in 2015 and 2016, when Japan forged two significant agreements with South Korea. Under the first, Prime Minister Abe Shinzo agreed that his government would provide compensation to Korean "comfort women." Under the second, Tokyo agreed to share defense information with Seoul (Heginbotham and Samuels 2018). These concessions did move the dial–for a time. See Figure 3.

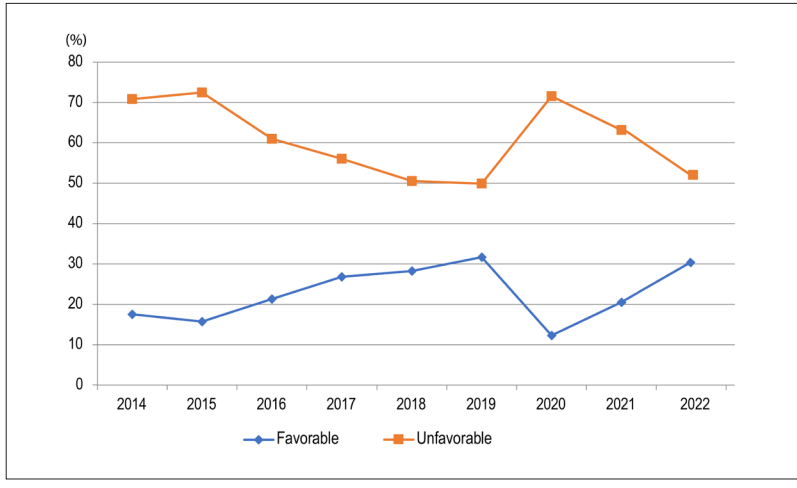

Figure 3. Korean Views of Japan
Source: Author (https://www.fulcrum.org/concern/file_sets/v692t8717?locale=en)

In 2017, a center–left president, Moon Jae–in, claimed the Blue House, and slowly began to raise doubts about the two pacts. Korean public opinion soon soured again (Park 2024).

GERMANY–POLAND

Prussia, the leader of the German confederation before unification, carved up Poland three times during the 18th century. It conspired with

imperial Austria and imperial Russia to grab valuable land, pushed out the Polish gentry, and treated remaining residents as "slovenly trash," likening them to Native Americans facing "civilization" or extinction at the hands of white settlers (Ritter 1968, 180). This engendered bitter resentment, which only worsened over time.

In 1939, Nazi Germany invaded its eastern neighbor in what Poles came to call the Fourth Partition. In just the first month of the invasion, stormtroopers massacred the residents of more than 30 Polish towns and villages. In the end, they killed one out of every five Polish citizens during their occupation. And in 1944, after Poland staged a quixotic uprising, Hitler ordered the complete destruction of Warsaw, where only a quarter of the buildings survived his fury (Kulski 1976).

It shouldn't be surprising, then, to learn that Poles viewed Germany rather darkly in the early 1990s, when Soviet-backed communism collapsed in that country and public opinion suddenly mattered. What warrants explanation is the significant uptick in views toward Germany in the second decade of the 21st century. See Figure 4.

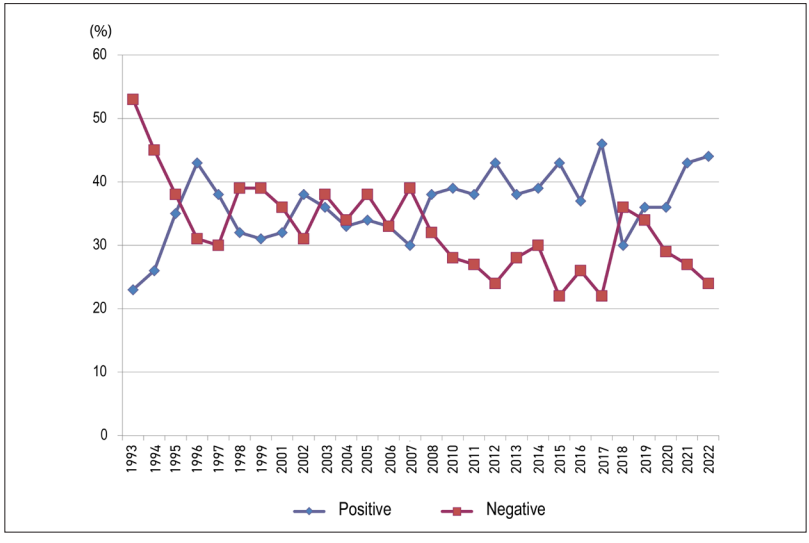

Figure 4. Polish Views of Germany
Source: Author (https://www.fulcrum.org/concern/file_sets/k3569711n?locale=en)

Germany did display some contrition after Poland emerged from communist rule. In 1994, German president Roman Herzog apologized to the Poles–with minimal effect. A year later, only 35% of Poles expressed a positive view of Germany. When the Social Democrats returned to power in 1998, they rededicated themselves to a project of contrition. German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder not only delivered two dramatic statements of apology to Poland, he teamed up with German industry in 2000 to create a foundation to compensate European individuals, including Poles, who had been victims of forced labor (Renner 2015). But, as the poll results show, this did not move the needle.

German chancellor Angela Merkel did, of course, travel to Gdansk in 2009 to apologize for her country's invasion of Poland 70 years earlier. But her speech was not pivotal. A year earlier, Poles already had come to have relatively positive feelings about Germany–a polling bump that remained high for a fairly long time. What made the difference?

Poles deeply appreciated German support for Poland's entry into the EU and NATO–a gesture that first emerged in the mid–1990s, but became undeniable in the mid–2000s, after Germany pushed for Polish inclusion in NATO and then the EU. Freudenstein (1998, 53), a German scholar, agrees: "Germany's role as Poland's advocate within NATO and the EU has had profound positive effects on its image in Poland." Dariusz Rosati, a former Polish foreign minister, says German deeds were more helpful than German words: "They took very real, very tangible steps to close the door on the past. They welcomed us into European institutions, made us a genuine partner in the peace–building process" (interview by author, April 23, 2012).

JAPAN–CHINA

Japan invaded China twice, first in 1894 and then again in 1937. Before invading the second time, it carved out its own puppet regime in Manchuria. As they clamored for international acclaim, the Japanese looked down upon the Chinese as barbaric, as backwards, as unworthy of any-

thing but low status in the hierarchy of civilizations (Hatch 2010, 383–384). This helps us understand the brutality of Japanese war crimes in China, which include the slaughter of civilians in Nanjing and the medical or biowarfare experiments carried out on live patients in Harbin.

It's no wonder that the Chinese reviled Japan for so many years. But still today?

As with their early apologies to Korea, Japanese apologies for invasion and war crimes in China were initially rather weak. In 1972, Prime Minister Tanaka Kakuei expressed "regret" for the "inconvenience" (*meiwaku*) caused by Japanese militarism in China. Although this statement sounds superficial today, it was received graciously. The Chinese premier hailed the "friendship between our great nations," blamed Japanese militarism (rather than Japan more broadly) for any bad blood between the countries, and once again renounced any claim to war reparations (Tian 1997, 103–4).

In the 1980s and early 1990s, Japanese leaders continued to cautiously, not generously, dole out contrition. Prime Minister Nakasone Yasuhiro, for example, told a United Nations gathering in 1985 that Japan "regrets the unleashing of rampant ultranationalism and militarism." He did not mention China, and did not apologize specifically for invading its neighbor or for committing atrocities (Yamazaki 2006, 141). Likewise, Emperor Akihito, visiting Beijing in 1992, stopped short of an explicit apology, expressing only regret for the "great suffering" that the imperial army had "inflicted" on the Chinese people. But this tepid tone of contrition did not undermine Sino–Japanese relations. Jiang (1989) reports that 53.6 percent of Chinese respondents in a rare poll had a favorable view of Japan, compared to 38.6 percent who had an unfavorable view. Chinese writers such as Feng (1992) and Xiao (1992) portrayed Japan in a positive light, noting that it served as a useful model for economic development, Deng Xiaoping's top goal. Rozman (2002) and Ross (2013) describe this period as the calm before the storm that battered Sino–Japanese relations.

It was in the mid–1990s that Japan dramatically improved the quality of its apologies. Prime Minister Hosokawa Morihiro used specific

language at a 1993 press conference, condemning Japan's "mistaken" war of "aggression" against China. Less than a year later, he went further and sincerely apologized for these "acts of aggression … which have caused unbearable suffering and sorrow" (Yamazaki 2006, 74–5, 148). This groundbreaking apology was followed, and surpassed, almost immediately by another. In August 1995, the 50th anniversary of Japan's surrender in World War II, Prime Minister Murayama Tomiichi expressed his "deep remorse" and offered a "heartfelt apology" for his country's aggression against China. The Murayama statement became the gold standard, repeated by nearly every prime minister who followed him. Even Koizumi Jun'ichiro, perhaps the Japanese leader most despised by Beijing, drew on the statement in 2001 when he visited China and placed a wreath on the statue of a Chinese soldier outside an anti–Japanese war museum.

But these supposedly improved Japanese apologies did not move the needle toward reconciliation. Chinese leaders in the last decade of the 20th century and first decade of the 21st century hectored their Japanese counterparts more loudly than before. And Chinese respondents became more negative in their views toward Japan, according to polling conducted by a Beijing–based think tank. See Figure 5.

One thing missing during those days was any major commitment by Tokyo to cooperate more closely with its neighbors, including China. Northeast Asia was then a region remarkably bereft of formal ties promoting economic integration or security collaboration. This was not, however, due to lack of effort. In 1990, Prime Minister Mahathir of Malaysia proposed an East Asian Economic Group (EAEG) that would include China, Japan, and South Korea, along with Southeast Asian nations, and that would strive to foster greater trade and investment across the region. But the U.S. pressured Japan to withdraw from the EAEG, calling it "exclusionary." (The group did, of course, exclude the United States, which is not geographically a member of East Asia.) In 1997, Japan called for an Asian Monetary Fund (AMF) to bail out financially strapped economies in the region. Once again, though, the U.S. protested; it feared that the AMF would undermine the International Monetary

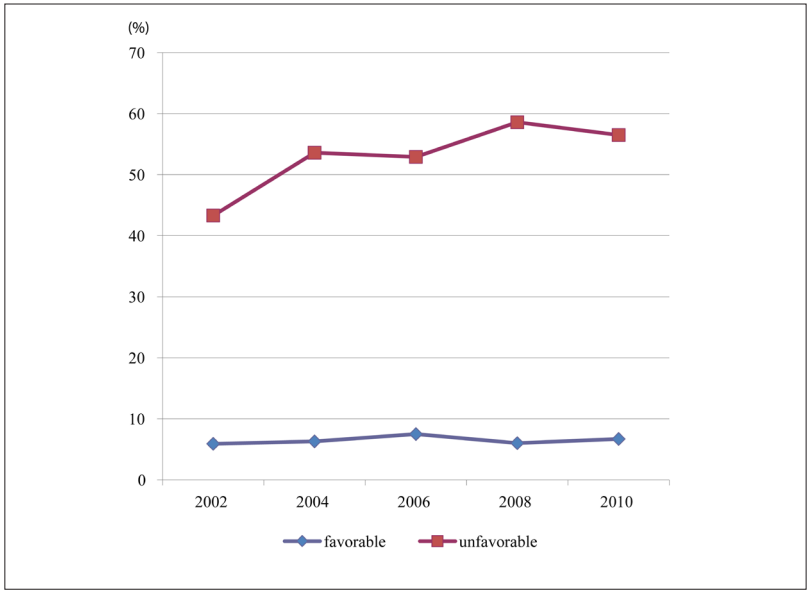

Figure 5. Chinese Views of Japan
Source: Author (https://www.fulcrum.org/concern/file_sets/6969z3403?locale=en)

Fund (IMF), a global but Washington-based organization that the U.S. controls. And once again, Japan backed out.[12] Finally, in 2002, China pushed for an East Asia Summit (EAS) that would include the 10 members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), plus the three major states in Northeast Asia (China, Japan, and South Korea). Over time, prodded one more time by the U.S. and its closest allies in the region, the organization expanded–first to 16 members (the original 13 plus Australia, New Zealand and India, all aligned then with the United States, not China) and eventually to an unwieldly 18 members (including the U.S. and Russia). EAS became another ineffective if not entirely moribund regional organization.

Writing at the time, Ma (2006, 32) highlights the problem: "North-

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[12] This diplomatic history is summarized in Hatch (2023, 115–6).

east Asia countries have been aware of the importance of regional cooperation; however, they have differed both in their attitudes on how to achieve it and on the extent of their participation. The situation has resulted in the lack of a multilateral consultation mechanism which can provide an overall framework for regional cooperation, a factor which has prevented multilateral cooperation from moving forward."

Even bilaterally, cooperation was slim in those days; Japanese and Chinese leaders barely talked with one another. There was only one bilateral summit meeting between 1999 and 2006, and that was at the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) gathering in Shanghai (2001).

Polling by China Daily shows a slight warming trend between 2013 and 2020. What was happening then? Well, it certainly was not "better" or more sincere apologies. In 2015, Prime Minister Abe signaled his impatience with what he viewed as endless calls for Japanese contrition: "We must not let our children, grandchildren, and even future generations to come, who have nothing to do with (World War II) be predestined to apologize" (New York Times, August 14, 2015).

No, what was happening more often was dialogue and cooperation. Japan and China began moving forward with a joint initiative to raise living standards along the Mekong River–especially in Cambodia and Laos, where both governments have supplied substantial foreign aid. And in 2018, Abe forged several important agreements with President Xi Jinping at a summit meeting in Beijing. The two leaders agreed, for example, to renew an expired plan to swap currencies, creating a reserve pool of $30 billion to help their own companies facing trade-related complications and rescue Asian economies facing financial stress. They signed a pact to establish the "China-Japan Innovation Cooperation Mechanism" to promote joint research on advanced technologies, including artificial intelligence. Japan also signaled it would join China's "Belt and Road Initiative," collaborating on infrastructure projects such as a high-speed railway connecting Thailand's major airports (Hatch 2023, 110-11).

These agreements were widely discussed in the Chinese media, and they probably led to some short-term improvement in Sino-Japanese relations. See Figure 6.

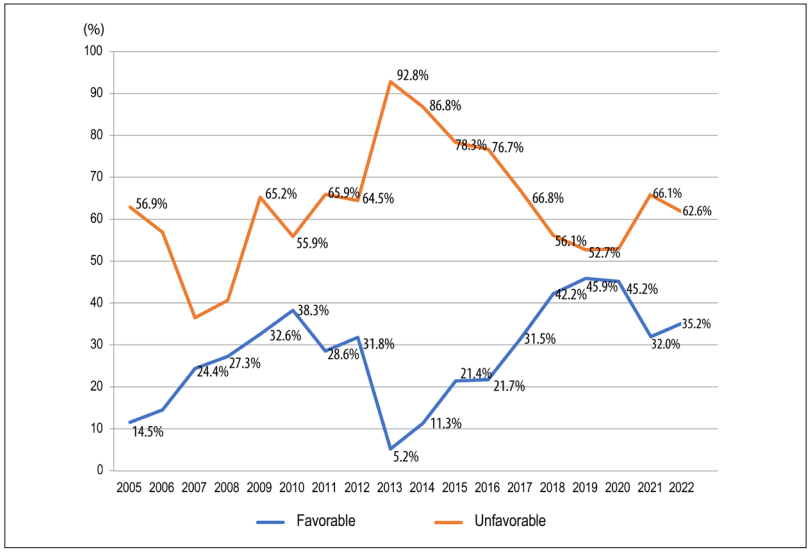

Figure 6. Chinese Views of Japan
Source: Author (https://www.fulcrum.org/concern/file_sets/j098zd49b?locale=en)

CAVEATS

One might object that I have overlooked particular actions (or the lack thereof) that call into question the quality or sincerity of Japanese apologies. What about, for example, the "pilgrimages" by politicians to the Yasukuni Shrine in Tokyo? Or revisionist history textbooks authorized by the government? Or the reckless remarks made periodically by Japanese nationalists? Finally, what about the claim that Japan, unlike Germany, has not paid reparations to victims of its past brutality? Let me address these in order.

Yasukuni became controversial in 1978, when the Shinto priests who run the shrine decided to add 14 war criminals to the long list of dead soldiers enshrined there. Prime Minister Nakasone, the first prime minister to make the trek after that decision, triggered a backlash from critics in South Korea and China who viewed his 1985 "pilgrimage" as

tacit support for imperial atrocities. With some notable exceptions, subsequent Japanese leaders stayed away. But ultra-nationalists like Koizumi and Abe had made campaign pledges to a right-wing veterans' group (Izokukai) to visit Yasukuni and pay respect to the war dead (Mochizuki 2010).

Defenders of this practice note that Yasukuni is the closest thing in Japan to a national cemetery for fallen soldiers, but in this case is privately owned and operated–a fact that limits the government's ability to determine who is honored there. One might call it a Japanese version of Arlington National Cemetery, the burial ground for American soldiers–including almost 500 who fought for an insurrection, the Confederacy, which wanted to maintain the practice of human bondage. On Memorial Day each year, U.S. presidents traditionally have sent a funeral wreath to the Confederate monument in Arlington cemetery (McGreevy 2005).

Likewise, in 1985, former German Chancellor Helmut Kohl, joined by U.S. President Ronald Reagan, visited a war cemetery in Bitburg that included the remains of nearly 50 members of the Waffen-SS, Hitler's most loyal military force. The visit upset Jews around the world, but apparently did not undermine West Germany's relations with Poland or France (Eder 2016).

Although history textbooks in Japan have long been the object of scrutiny, their most vociferous critics were, at least at first, Japanese. For decades, the domestic Left viewed those textbooks, unfavorably, as excessively nationalist. In 1975, the Tokyo Higher Court criticized the Ministry of Education for censoring books written by leftist historian Ienaga Saburo that highlighted many of the military government's violent misadventures. This forced the ministry to change its procedures for reviewing and authorizing books (Mitani 2008, 85). In 1982, critics in South Korea and China erupted in anger over Japanese history textbooks that appeared to whitewash Japan's earlier war crimes. Those books were not nearly as bad (or revisionist) as media reports in Tokyo first indicated, according to Rose (1998, 80-94). But the damage was done; the world, especially the rest of Northeast Asia, was on alert.

When I lived in Japan in the 1990s, I carefully read my son and

daughter's junior high school history textbooks. I actually was impressed. Compared to my own junior high school experience reading about American history with slavery and Jim Crow, and imperialism in Latin America and the Philippines, for example, I thought my kids were getting a relatively honest appraisal of Japan's ugly past. They were learning about the brutal colonization of Korea, the puppet state in Manchuria, the invasion of the rest of China.

The next decade was more contentious, as right-wing nationalists in Japan demanded an opportunity to develop their own version of history. In 2001, a group of conservative historians–the Japanese Society for History Textbook Reform (known in Japan by the abbreviated name, Tsukurukai)–wrote a new book for junior high schoolers and won authorization from the government. Japanese society was inflamed, but so was Korea and China.

The most salient fact here is that this ultra-nationalist textbook was read by very few junior high school students in Japan. Although the Ministry of Education has the power to authorize textbooks, it does not have the power to compel Japanese schools to adopt them. In the end, only 0.04% of schools adopted the book for their students (Mitani 2008, 85).

West Germany had its own struggle with textbooks. In the 1950s and early 1960s, German students were encouraged to focus on their country's own victimization in the wake of World War II, and–when pressed to look further back–highlight the positive: Goethe, Bach, Schopenhauer, and so on (Olick 2016). This is not unlike Japan's own historiography from that era.

It was in the mid and late 1960s, when a new and more progressive generation entered the workforce, that German educators began pushing their students to learn about their country's ugly past, according to Puaca (2011). Even so, they focused almost entirely on the Holocaust, ignoring the multiple of conquests of France and partitions of Poland. This was more than a decade ahead of Japan's own reckoning with the past, but it followed a similar pattern: nationalist self-protection followed by more honest historiography.

One cannot deny that Japanese nationalists have engaged repeated-

ly in, well, denialism. For example, in 1994, Justice Minister Nagano Shigeto referred to the Nanjing Massacre as a "fabrication." In the same year, Sakurai Shin, director of the Environmental Agency, claimed that Japan never engaged in "aggression," embracing revisionist historiography that it was trying instead to liberate East Asia from Western colonialism. This was repeated in a 2008 essay penned by Tamogami Toshio, chief of staff for Japan's Air Self-Defense Force, who argued that Japan was never an imperialist power. But here is what is critical to recall: In all such cases, the revisionists (or deniers) were forced to resign.

Finally, let's discuss reparations. Although West Germany did not compensate France for its three invasions, a unified Germany led by Social Democrats did agree to pay Polish victims of forced labor during World War II. In 2000, under the "Remembrance, Responsibility and the Future" Foundation funded by government and industry, about a half-million Poles received a total of nearly 1 billion euros (Around this time, conservatives in the Bundestag began making their own demands for recognition of the financial and real estate losses incurred by Germans expelled from what became West Poland at the end of World War II. Hatch 2023, 81).

This does not come close to matching the compensation Japan paid to victimized neighbors. Under the 1965 Normalization Treaty, the Republic of Korea received $300 million in grants, $200 million in low interest loans, and $300 million in commercial loans to settle claims of Japanese misbehavior. These payments were technically not "reparations," and Korean civil society organizations continued to press for more money. As noted previously, the Abe administration agreed in 2015 to compensate Korean victims of the Japanese military's sex slavery program. Likewise, under a 1972 treaty, China gave up the right to any formal compensation in exchange for diplomatic recognition from Japan. In lieu of formal reparations, however, the Japanese began to pay Official Development Assistance (ODA, or foreign aid) to China, underwriting its economic development campaign in the form of massive yen loans for infrastructure, manufacturing plants, and technical guidance … to the tune of about $1 billion a year in the early 1990s (Hatch 2023, 103-5).

CONCLUSION

Even with the caveats, our case studies paint a rather clear picture: Deeds trump words in fostering interstate reconciliation. Germany never apologized to France for a series of brutal invasions, but the two states reached a rapprochement in the late 1950s and early 1960s after Bonn committed itself to European integration (the ECSC and the EEC, which eventually became the EU) and trans-Atlantic security cooperation (NATO). Japanese apologies to the Republic of Korea for its brutal colonization became more sincere and specific in the 1990s, but Korean views of Japan became more and more negative at the same time. There was, though, a short period of better relations in the late teens–a result of limited cooperation between Tokyo and Seoul. German apologies to Poland didn't shift Polish opinion nearly as much as Bonn/Berlin's efforts to usher its eastern neighbor into NATO and the EU. Chinese views of Japan became worse in the early 21st century–just as Japanese apologies became "better." A temporary warming of Sino-Japanese relations flowed from increased bilateral cooperation, not from any new statements of contrition.

My analysis suggests that Japan should follow Germany's lead by nesting itself in strong regional institutions that demonstrate to its neighbors that it can be a trustworthy partner. But the United States, by insisting on playing a dominant role in the emerging web of economic and political networks in Asia, has limited Japan's ability to make such credible commitments to cooperation. The U.S.-Japan Security Alliance, now in its 73rd year, renders Japan a semi-sovereign nation under American guardianship, if not complete domination. In an ongoing research project, I explore these constraints on Japanese foreign policy toward the rest of Asia, especially China.

Ironically, the contemporary geopolitical moment might disrupt this pattern, creating an opportunity for Asian cooperation. More than in his first term (2017-2020), U.S. President Donald Trump is now pushing isolationist and unilateral policies on trade and defense that could cause Japan to question America's commitment to the alliance. Japanese leaders have indicated they want to strengthen bilateral ties, but they may end

up looking elsewhere–maybe even in Tokyo's own backyard–for stable relations (Kushida 2025).

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