



Japan and the United States Confront the Past

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We must never repeat the horrors of war again," said Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzo at Pearl Harbor, echoing U.S. President Barack Obama several months earlier at his historic visit to Hiroshima. These visits were celebrated on both sides, and mark a noticeable change in Japan-US relations. Indeed, for decades after World War II, the United States and Japan forged a remarkable reconciliation but avoided discussing the war. But in these recent bilateral visits, the two governments have begun to address the past. The visits provide a model of historical reconciliation for former enemies that are committed to cooperation.



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The needs of the present above the needs of the past

Remembering war is a fraught enterprise because former enemies often have a vast gap in their perceptions. Countries do not see themselves as an aggressor in the war, but rather view their own actions as self-defense. After soldiers and civilians die in the millions, after women are raped and cities are bombed, people are hurting and angry. Countries create dueling narratives in which each side frames itself as a victim and the other as the aggressor. They each focus on their own suffering and have little patience to hear about suffering on the other side. The people want their political leaders to honor victims at home and hold the other side accountable, often with legal trials and demands for apologies and reparations.

Sometimes after wars, however, former enemies are driven to cooperate. In such situations countries face a shared security threat, and recognize that cooperation would make them more secure. If they are to cooperate productively, countries cannot dwell on the traumatic past. After all, given what is often a wide gap in perceptions, if one country demands apologies or compensation from the other side, this would cause controversy or even a diplomatic crisis. Such discord undermines political cooperation.

Thus former enemies that are driven to cooperate because of shared strategic need have an incentive to prioritize cooperation over demands for apologies and other kinds of contrition. In other words, they have an incentive to put the past behind them. Leaders in those countries are more likely to emphasize unifying (rather than divisive) themes, and the importance of reconciliation.

Minimizing the past in US-Japan relations

Such was the experience of postwar US-Japan relations. In the late 1940s, as soon as the United States decided on the need to build up Japan as an anti-Soviet ally, Washington abandoned reparations claims. Neither government pressed the other for apologies; anniversaries of wartime events were observed separately, not together. The two countries built a strong alliance based on addressing the challenge at hand – Soviet containment – while avoiding the trauma in their history.

Of course, the past could not be totally suppressed; over the years it would sometimes awkwardly intrude. Memories of the war came into the foreground in 1994, when Japanese were dismayed by a commemorative postage stamp issued by the U.S. Postal Service. The stamp, bearing a picture of a mushroom cloud, praised the role of the atomic bomb in ending World War II. Memories of the war also intruded when Japanese prime ministers occasionally visited Yasukuni Shrine, to the consternation of U.S. former POWs and veterans. And occasionally the two countries debated the need for apologies. The Japanese Diet held an acrimonious debate about the 1995 Diet Resolution. In the US, presidents Bill Clinton and George H.W. Bush both dismissed the idea of a U.S. apology to Japan. Thus the wartime past was impossible to ignore. But for decades Tokyo and Washington avoided official commemoration, and instead focused on the business of the alliance.

Over the years the two countries forged a remarkable reconciliation. What began as a narrow, transactional alliance evolved into a far closer, multidimensional relationship.ⁱ Starting in the 1960s, the two countries created numerous exchange programs for students and educators, as well as for leaders in politics, economics, and culture. A half-century later, two countries are close partners in economics, finance, and global governance. Tourists, businesspeople, and students flow back and forth. Americans today root for Japanese athletes in Major League Baseball, while in Japan fans cheer on their American counterparts. Scientists, writers, educators, and artists from both countries cooperate and learn from each other, to their mutual gain and to the benefit of the whole world.

Discovering the past: Abe and Obama

In the military realm, facing growing threats from North Korea and China, Japan and the United States have grown closer than ever before. The two allies recently renegotiated the Guidelines for Defense Cooperation, which increase and streamline military cooperation. In September 2015 Japan also passed landmark legislation that legalizes its participation in “collective self-defense.”ⁱⁱ

As the allies have moved closer, their leaders have begun to confront the two countries’ wartime history. As they did, they did not offer apologies.ⁱⁱⁱ Rather, they recognized past

violence, and expressed empathy for people on both sides who suffered. In 2010, for the first time, Obama sent ambassadors (first John Roos then Caroline Kennedy) to the annual August 6 ceremonies at Hiroshima.

In 2015, Abe also made an important visit to Washington DC. He visited its World War II memorial and delivered an address to a Joint Session of Congress. Abe honored the people who lost their lives in the war, noting that the memorial symbolized “the pain, sorrow, and love for family of young Americans who otherwise would have lived happy lives.”

The confrontation with the past deepened when Obama announced that he would become the first sitting U.S. president to visit Hiroshima in May 2016. This visit risked controversy: after all, Obama announced he would not issue an apology (in keeping with the views of the American people, who oppose such an apology to Japan).^{iv} At the same time, this announcement would likely disappoint or anger many Japanese, who believed that an apology was due. Discord was not what the US-Japan alliance needed; with North Korea improving its nuclear capabilities, with China militarizing islands in the South China Sea and menacing the Senkaku (Diaoyu in Chinese) islands, the alliance needed unity, not division.

Ultimately Obama’s visit to Hiroshima was spectacularly successful. In his speech, the president voiced a history about which leaders had long kept silent. “We come to mourn the dead,” Obama said. “We stand here in the middle of this city and force ourselves to imagine the moment the bomb fell. We force ourselves to feel the dread of children confused by what they see. We listen to a silent cry.”

The president’s visit further deepened the two governments’ engagement with the wartime past. “Mere words cannot give voice to such suffering,” Obama said. “But we have a shared responsibility to look directly into the eye of history and ask what we must do differently to curb such suffering again.”

Japan and the United States continued to engage the past when Abe and Obama visited Pearl Harbor seven months later. In his speech at the USS Arizona memorial, Abe noted the names inscribed on the walls of the memorial. “Sailors and Marines hailing from California and New York, Michigan and Texas, and various other places, serving to uphold their noble duty of protecting the homeland they loved, lost their lives amidst searing flames that day....”

Abe commented, “Every one of those servicemen had a mother and a father anxious about his safety. Many had wives and girlfriends they loved, and many must have had children they would have loved watch grow up. All of that was brought to an end. When I contemplate that solemn reality I am rendered entirely speechless.” Abe cast flowers into the water and said, “Rest in peace, precious souls of the fallen.”

Obama, in his speech at the ceremony, celebrated the reconciliation between the U.S. and Japan. “Our presence here today -- the connections not just between our governments, but between our people -- remind us of what is possible between nations and between peoples. Wars can end,” the president said. “The most bitter of adversaries can become the strongest of allies.”

Will Abe go to Nanjing or Seoul?

After Abe's visit to Pearl Harbor, the Chinese government suggested that the prime minister visit China. Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Lu Kang said that Abe might visit locations such as the Nanjing Massacre Memorial Hall or the Shenyang museum for the 1931 Mukden Incident. "If the Japanese side intends to deeply reflect upon itself and make a sincere apology," Lu said, "there are many places in China where they can pay tribute to."^v

Kang seems to misunderstand the nature of the events at hand. The point of the events at Hiroshima and Pearl Harbor, after all, was not so either leader could "make a sincere apology"; indeed both Obama and Abe explicitly ruled this out before their visits. Rather, the leaders sought through their visits to acknowledge suffering and express empathy, so to further deepen the already strong US-Japan reconciliation.

The reason Abe could "go to Pearl Harbor" (and the reason Obama could "go to Hiroshima") is because the other side was willing to compromise to bring him there. In other words, each country was willing to forgo demands for apologies, and willing to find a compromise narrative about the war. Kang's quote makes very clear that these conditions do not apply in China's relations with Japan. Thus Abe cannot "go to Nanjing"; the circumstances that allowed him to go to Pearl Harbor (and allowed Obama to go to Hiroshima) are absent.

Could Abe "go to Seoul": to Seodaemun prison, Tapgol Park, or another meaningful location in Japan-Korean history? After all, previous Japanese leaders have visited: Junichiro Koizumi went to Seodaemun prison in 2001, where he apologized and bowed before the memorial to the Korean independence leaders; Kaifu Toshiki did the same in Tapgol Park ten years earlier. The fact that these visits happened long ago, and barely registered, raises questions about whether another such visit would be useful. On both sides, Japanese and South Koreans continue to remember their history in divisive ways – as shown by the recent backtracking on the "comfort women" issue.^{vi} Until Japan and South Korea perceive a vital need to cooperate, they will lack incentives to compromise on how they remember the past.

Although Japan has been unable to engage in shared historical remembrance with China, and has had trouble doing so with South Korea, Japan has pursued historical reconciliation with other neighbors. During the Cold War, Japan repaired its relations with Australia, India, and the Philippines; today Japan and those countries share fears about China's growing power and assertiveness.

These countries have already held with Japan ceremonies that jointly remember the past. Japanese and Australian leaders have productively and empathetically dealt with the past since 1957, when their leaders, Kishi Nobusuke and Robert Menzies, traded national visits. Tokyo and India have found common ground in their remembrances of World War II, as evinced during state visits by Abe and Narendra Modi, India's prime minister. In 2016, Japan's Emperor Akihito and Empress Michiko paid a moving visit to the Philippines, where they recognized losses from

the war.^{vii} Such symbolic gestures complement the diplomatic and military cooperation among these countries. These cases – plus the recent remembrances between Japan and the United States – show that countries that have strong incentives to cooperate are able to move forward from the past.

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Source: <https://sites.dartmouth.edu/jlind/>

ⁱ Jennifer Lind, "When Camelot Went to Tokyo," *National Interest*, July/August 2013.

ⁱⁱ Sheila A. Smith, "Defining Defense: Japan's Military Identity Crisis," *World Politics Review*, May 12, 2015.

ⁱⁱⁱ On the risk of political backlash from apologies, see Jennifer Lind, *Sorry States: Apologies in International Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008).

^{iv} 73 percent of Americans oppose an apology to Japan for the atomic bombings. See Bruce Stokes, “70 years after Hiroshima, opinions have shifted on use of atomic bomb,” Pew Research Center, August 4, 2015.

^v Ko Hirano, “Chinese scholar urges Abe to follow Pearl Harbor with Nanjing visit,” *Japan Times*, December 28, 2016.

^{vi} “No Closure on the Comfort Women,” *New York Times*, January 6, 2017.

^{vii} Alan Rix, *The Australia-Japan Political Alignment: 1952 to the Present* (London: Routledge, 1999), 33; Yuki Tatsumi, “Japan’s Emperor Visits Philippines: Major Takeaways,” *The Diplomat*, February 6, 2016.