The Perils of Apology
What Japan Shouldn’t Learn From Germany

Jennifer Lind

More than 60 years after the end of World War II, chilly relations in East Asia stand in stark contrast to the thaw in western Europe. Germans have spent decades confronting and atoning for the crimes of the Nazi era. Today, Germany is welcomed as a leader in trade and diplomacy, and its military forces fight alongside those of its allies in UN and NATO operations. In 2004, the former Allies invited German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder to the 60th anniversary commemoration of the Normandy invasion. Standing beside the leaders of Germany’s former adversaries, Schröder celebrated the day as the anniversary of Germany’s liberation from fascism. French newspapers, featuring photos of the French and German leaders embracing, proclaimed it “the last day of World War II.”

In Asia, by contrast, Japan’s neighbors still keep a wary watch over the country that brutalized them in the early part of the twentieth century. Tokyo’s official apologies for its past aggression and atrocities are dismissed as too little, too late. Worse, they often trigger denials and calls of revisionism in Japan, which anger and alarm the country’s former victims. In 2005, when Japan’s Education Ministry approved textbooks widely perceived as whitewashing Japan’s past atrocities, violent protests erupted across China. Demonstrators overturned and

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torched Japanese cars, vandalized Japanese-owned businesses, and threw rocks and bottles at Japan’s embassy in Beijing. Chinese and South Koreans routinely express fear that Japan may return to militarism: even Tokyo’s dispatch of peacekeepers abroad creates unease. In East Asia, the last day of World War II has yet to come.

Why do Japan’s neighbors care so much about its repentance? Skeptics, after all, might dismiss political apologies and other such gestures as “cheap talk.” But how countries remember their pasts conveys information about their future behavior. Historically, states that have sought to mobilize their populaces for war have crafted nationalist narratives of the past. They have emphasized their adversaries’ prior violence and have justified (or simply forgotten) their own. On the other hand, a willingness to acknowledge past atrocities signals peaceful foreign policy intentions. It also shows a state’s commitment to human rights and conveys respect for another people’s suffering.

Many activists, scholars, and political leaders argue that in order for reconciliation to occur in East Asia, Japan needs to issue a clear apology and pay reparations to its former victims. They urge Japan to emulate the German model of “coming to terms with the past,” the remarkable contrition that West Germany began in the mid-1960s. According to this model, Bonn built museums and memorials to the victims of German atrocities; West Germany taught its dark past to its youth in history textbooks; its leaders apologized to Germany’s victims frequently, sincerely, and in unflinching detail.

But there is another German model—the one set by Chancellor Konrad Adenauer in the 1950s—and that one is more promising for Japan. Under Adenauer, West Germany acknowledged German atrocities yet emphasized the country’s postwar achievements. This approach enabled West Germany and France to effect a dramatic reconciliation. To be sure, the latter German model has much to recommend it: atonement is far more satisfying for victims, and it impressed and reassured West Germany’s neighbors. But the case of Japan and other cases show that apologies can be counterproductive because they can incite nationalist backlashes at home. Japan and other countries in a similar situation should follow the Adenauer model: it is a safer middle ground between denial and contrition.
DON'T KNOW MUCH ABOUT HISTORY

Memories of Japanese aggression and atrocities remain vivid in East Asia. In the early twentieth century, Japan annexed, colonized, and plundered Korea and Manchuria, repressing and sometimes conscripting the local populations. Many Japanese policies were rapacious: girls and women throughout the Japanese empire were deceptively recruited or abducted to provide sex for Japanese soldiers (euphemized as “comfort women”). The Japanese not only starved and abused prisoners of war throughout the Asian theater; they also enslaved them in wartime factories back home, and in China, the notorious Unit 731 conducted horrific medical experiments on both Chinese prisoners of war and Chinese civilians. And Japan’s imperial army fought a ruthless campaign against insurgents in Korea and China. In these countries, memories of Japan’s counterinsurgency strategy of “kill all, burn all, loot all” have not dimmed.

Japanese remembrance of these events has evolved significantly over the past six decades. In the early years after the war, Japanese leaders glorified their colonialism as a force that modernized Asia and liberated it from the Europeans. They celebrated their economic development while whitewashing the repression that accompanied it. Early postwar memories emphasized the Pacific war—the maritime battles against the United States and other Allies. This narrative dodged Japan’s atrocities on the Asian mainland and culminated in the ultimate example of Japanese victimhood: the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. When it came to history education, conservatives worried that coverage of wartime atrocities would diminish the Japanese people’s love of their country. Even the U.S. government endorsed their goal of inculcating patriotism; in the dawning of the Cold War, Washington adopted a policy of remilitarizing Japan and sought to build support for this effort among Japan’s war-weary population.

Later, as Japan began normalizing relations with its former victims, it began to offer them token apologies. Japanese Foreign Minister Etsusaburo Shiina delivered an apology to Seoul on the normalization of relations between the two countries in 1965. Tepid though it was, South Koreans welcomed the gesture. In the wake of
U.S. President Richard Nixon’s opening toward China in the early 1970s, Tokyo offered a vague statement of remorse to China, which Beijing accepted as part of diplomatic normalization. Over the next few decades, as history continued to hang heavily over Japan’s foreign relations, Tokyo sometimes made conciliatory gestures to mitigate the problem. For example, in the 1980s, when neighbors criticized Japanese history textbooks for their spotty coverage of Japanese colonization and the war, Prime Minister Yasuhiro Nakasone attempted to address their concerns.

Japan’s real awakening came in the 1990s. Memories had been stirred by the death of Emperor Hirohito in 1989 and by the 50th anniversaries of various wartime events. Japanese leaders began to offer apologies—some of them remarkable. In 1993, Prime Minister Morihiro Hosokawa detailed Japan’s violence against Koreans during the first half of the twentieth century, cited Japan as the aggressor, and expressed his “genuine contrition” and “deepest apologies.” Prime Minister Tomiichi Murayama also offered an important sweeping apology after he took office in 1994, and he offered a landmark one in 1995, half a century to the day after Japan’s surrender. Even former Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi, who is reviled by many Asians because of his visits to the Yasukuni Shrine (which is controversial because it includes war criminals), apologized repeatedly. Koizumi also raised awareness about his country’s past misdeeds by visiting a former Japanese prison in Seoul, where he apologized and laid a wreath at a monument for Korean independence fighters. Also in the 1990s, Japanese textbooks began to include more coverage of Japanese colonization and the war, and the government made some efforts to apologize to and compensate the comfort women.

As Japanese leaders began expressing remorse for the country’s past, however, other politicians and some intellectuals decried the trend. Nakasone’s conciliation during the textbook controversy in the 1980s prompted the education minister, Masayuki Fujio, to say that Korea bore responsibility for its 1910 annexation by Japan. In 1988, another cabinet member, Seisuke Okuno, defended Japanese
imperialism as “Asian liberation,” declaring that “Caucasians” had been the real aggressors in Asia. Murayama’s apologies in 1994 and 1995 caused conservatives—even those within his own cabinet—to defend Japan’s past policies. When liberal parliamentarians proposed a landmark national apology in the form of a Diet resolution, prominent conservatives denied, justified, and sometimes even glorified Japan’s past violence.

These reactions are just one feature of what the historian Alexis Dudden has called Japan’s “multimillion-dollar denial industry.” As Japanese textbooks began to include greater coverage of Japanese colonization and the war, conservative intellectuals wrote accounts emphasizing the more positive aspects of Japan’s past and whitewashing atrocities such as the Nanjing massacre or the treatment of the comfort women. Japan’s liberal educators rarely choose to use revisionist textbooks, but feel-good narratives appeal to a large popular audience. Authors such as Yoshinori Kobayashi and Kanji Nishio, who reject what they call the “masochistic” telling of Japanese history, have a wide following. The controversial New History Textbook, the subject of an international dispute in 2001, was a bestseller. Many scholars, journalists, authors, and filmmakers find large and enthusiastic audiences for history that glosses over—or even denies—Japan’s colonial and wartime atrocities.

LOATHE THY NEIGHBOR

Such denials have created what has become known as the “history problem” in Japan’s foreign relations. South Korean leaders have long argued that the way Japan has chosen to remember the period of colonization and war so far has hindered trust and reconciliation between the two countries. “What we most need from Japan,” South Korean President Syngman Rhee argued in 1951, “is . . . concrete and constructive evidence of repentance for past misdeeds and of a new determination to deal fairly with us now and in the future.” President Park Chung Hee (who, unlike Rhee, is known as having been very pro-Japanese) shared this view, citing Japanese remorse as a precondition for South Korean cooperation. In his speech on the country’s Liberation Day in 2001, President
Kim Dae Jung called on the Japanese to face their history. Otherwise, he asked, “how can we deal with them in the future with any degree of trust?”

The South Koreans have worried about a militarily resurgent Japan since the end of World War II. Early on, South Korean leaders implored U.S. officials not to rearm Japan for fear that it would again attempt to dominate the Korean Peninsula. The public shared this distrust, associating the Japanese with militarism and colonial abuse. In a 1982 poll, only ten percent of South Korean respondents viewed Japan as “a friendly country.” Such sentiment has not faded: in contemporary surveys, South Koreans continue to rank Japan as one of the countries they like the least, and between 40 and 60 percent of respondents typically identify Japan as South Korea’s next security threat. By contrast, South Koreans seem relatively unperturbed by the rapid rise of China, an authoritarian behemoth with whom they will someday share a land border.

Distrust of Japan in South Korea and elsewhere is fueled by Japan’s war memory. In the 1980s, the inflammatory remarks of some Japanese cabinet ministers produced a torrent of accusations that Tokyo was moving toward a militaristic foreign policy. After Nakasone visited Yasukuni in 1983, the shrine emerged as a divisive symbol of Japan’s past. Each official visit to the site—most recently by Koizumi—spurs Japan’s neighbors to excoriate Tokyo in government statements and op-eds and sparks public protests. Education has emerged as another battleground: since the 1980s, each release of new Japanese textbooks has routinely triggered diplomatic disputes. Beijing and Seoul sharply condemn Tokyo’s official approval of textbooks that omit or downplay Japanese atrocities or lay claim to the Takeshima/Tokdo islets, over which both Japan and South Korea declare sovereignty. Such controversy has obscured the contrition that Japan has sometimes shown. In 1995, op-eds published in Beijing and Seoul newspapers charged that the acrimonious debate surrounding the Diet’s proposed apology only showed that Japanese attitudes had not changed. Japan’s conservative history textbooks and Japanese leaders’ visits to the Yasukuni Shrine, commented then South Korean President Roh Moo Hyun in 2005, “nullify all the reflection and apologies Japan has so far made.”
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Japan’s history problem has very real effects on its foreign relations. The Chinese and the South Koreans are firmly opposed to the idea of giving Japan a permanent seat on the UN Security Council. In 2005, when he was South Korea’s ambassador to the UN, Kim Sam Hoon argued that Japan was incapable of playing the role of a world leader because it lacked the trust of its neighbors. South Korea’s Ministry of National Defense has identified Japan as a potential security threat, and it has called for increasing South Korea’s maritime power. This wariness of Japan has also led South Koreans to see the U.S.-Japanese security alliance as essential for keeping a lid on Japanese ambition and stabilizing East Asia. Crises over textbooks or shrine visits have caused Japan’s neighbors to recall their ambassadors from Tokyo and cancel summits even when these countries were negotiating with Japan about vital issues, such as North Korea’s acquisition of nuclear weapons.

FROM ADENAUER TO ATONEMENT

In order to calm tensions in East Asia, many regional leaders and analysts have urged Tokyo to emulate the German model of atonement. What they overlook, however, is that in the years after the war, West Germany followed two very different approaches to remembering its violent past. (East Germany, which emphasized Nazi Germany’s violence against communists, whitewashed the genocide of the Jews, and demonized Israel, pursued a third.) In the immediate postwar years, with Adenauer and his conservative Christian Democrats in power, West Germany acknowledged Germany’s wartime aggression and atrocities. Adenauer spearheaded the effort to pay reparations to Israel. As he endorsed the policy before the Bundestag in 1951, he said that most Germans were “aware of the immeasurable suffering brought to the Jews in Germany and in the occupied territories in the era of National Socialism” and that “unspeakable crimes were committed which require moral and material restitution.” In the late 1950s, Bonn expanded its reparations policy to Holocaust survivors living in other countries. During Adenauer’s tenure, no prominent West German leader defended or denied German atrocities or aggression.
At the same time, the Adenauer model was a far cry from the contrition that would later distinguish West Germany. Textbooks mostly dodged contemporary history, and any discussion of the war pinned all culpability on Hitler. Even though the German army was heavily implicated in the Holocaust, the myth spread that only the ss, not ordinary soldiers, had been involved. The dominant narrative emphasized Germany’s own suffering: the ethnic cleansing of Germans from Eastern Europe, the treatment of German prisoners of war in Soviet camps, and the brutality of the Soviet invasion. Wartime anniversaries slipped by—uncomfortably, unobserved.

During this period of partial German amnesia, West Germany and France nonetheless achieved a stunning reconciliation. The French scholar Alfred Grosser has argued that whereas in 1944 the French view had been “no enemy but Germany,” by 1960 it had shifted to “no friend but Germany.” In polls taken only 20 years after Germany’s defeat, the French public identified West Germany as “the best friend of France.” It is clear from the Allies’ occupation policies that they valued German acknowledgment of past crimes. (Education reforms, for example, sought to prevent mythmaking and hypernationalism.) However, France and the other Allies were willing to reconcile at a time when Bonn was doing very little to come to terms with its past.

Only in the late 1960s did West Germans begin to explore their country’s past atrocities in earnest. The Social Democrats’ electoral victories ushered in the “social-liberal” period, during which the West German left pursued its long-advocated agenda of atonement for Nazi crimes. The country’s preoccupation with its own victimhood gave way to Vergangenheitsbewältigung, or “coming to terms with the past.” Bonn prosecuted Holocaust perpetrators and expanded its reparations policy, paying billions of dollars to Holocaust survivors all over the world. It started preserving and memorializing concentration camps and other sites, holding ceremonies that mourned victims of the Holocaust, building museums that detailed German aggression and atrocities, and encouraging students and community members to explore their local wartime histories.

Unlike Germany’s experience, Japan’s attempt to confront the past has been fraught and counterproductive.
This shift to a greater emphasis on Germany’s shame did not occur without controversy. Chancellor Helmut Schmidt protested in 1975 that most Germans alive then had been born after Hitler’s rise and so were not guilty of Nazi crimes. The minister-president of Bavaria, Franz Josef Strauss, said that Germans had to get off their knees and learn to “walk tall” once more. Another conservative politician, Alfred Dregger, urged Germans to “come out of Hitler’s shadow” and “become normal.”

After the conservatives regained power in 1983, they attempted to steer German remembrance back on the course that Adenauer had charted three decades earlier. Although Chancellor Helmut Kohl was candid about Germany’s past violence and even offered notable gestures of contrition, he also commented that Germans of his generation enjoyed a “grace of late birth” that freed them from culpability. Kohl held joint commemorations at cemeteries with representatives from West Germany’s NATO allies: with French President François Mitterrand in Verdun, France, and with U.S. President Ronald Reagan in Bitburg, Germany. These ceremonies emphasized the tragedy of war generally rather than German atrocities specifically. Conservatives often argued that West Germany’s utmost responsibility was to create a stable democracy and cautioned that the German public would resent the obsession with war crimes and would shift its support to rightist leaders who offered them a prouder version of history. In other words, they warned about the political dangers of straying from the Adenauer model.

But their fears were not borne out. The public endorsed contrite statements, such as the stunning 1985 speech in which President Richard von Weizsäcker detailed German crimes, expressed remorse, and pledged that the nation would remember its dark past. And it rejected any semblance of revisionism. During the “historians’ debate,” over how to interpret the Holocaust, conservative scholars who justified fascism and genocide as defensive reactions to the Soviet threat were publicly condemned. Philipp Jenninger, president of the Bundestag, was forced to resign after he gave a speech intended to condemn Nazism that was so awkwardly written that it was interpreted as actually defending the Nazis. Rightist parties did not rise on a wave of public frustration, as conservatives had warned; they remained marginal.
Meanwhile, the rest of the world applauded West German atonement. The British praised West Germany’s efforts to teach its youth about World War II and the Holocaust. As The Economist put it, “a sense of guilt has entered deeply into the West German character.” Advisers told a nervous British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher at the Chequers conference in 1990 that West Germany could now be trusted, and so its reunification with East Germany encouraged, in great part because of its exemplary record of confronting its past violence. After German reunification, the Germans began observing Holocaust Remembrance Day and—following a candid national debate—built the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe in central Berlin. French media and elites lauded Germany’s domestic struggles with the past as evidence of the fortitude of postwar German democracy. The Vergangenheitsbewältigung model was a resounding success for Germany and for Europe.

**Sorry Seems to Be the Hardest Word**

To the extent that Japan has tried to come to terms with its past, it has not enjoyed as much success as has Germany. Bonn’s official apologies, reparations, and monuments were interwoven with wide debates in which the public rejected calls to move on and reaffirmed the nation’s commitment to atonement. In Japan as well, many people have enthusiastically supported official apologies and pressured the government for a greater admission of responsibility; Japanese scholars such as Saburo Ienaga, who led a decades-long legal battle against censorship of history textbooks, and Yoshiaki Yoshimi, who gathered data and raised awareness about the comfort women, are prominent examples. However, Japanese attempts at contrition have also sparked a noticeable backlash. One leader’s apology is often contradicted by other elites, sometimes from within the prime minister’s own cabinet. Unlike the German experience, Japan’s attempt to come to terms with the past has been fraught, polarizing, and diplomatically counterproductive.

Japan’s dismal experience with contrition is neither surprising nor unique. In the aftermath of a terrible war in which many people have lost their families, their homes, and even their cities, apologies offered
to victims far away are likely to be controversial. As people ache for the loved ones they have lost, they often support the leaders who call them heroes—not those who call them war criminals. Stripping veterans and civil servants of their pensions and sending scarce funds overseas as reparations are generally unpopular measures.

Indeed, all over the world, the exploration of a country’s past violence tends to trigger polarizing domestic debates. In Austria, the late Jörg Haider’s championing of the wartime generation propelled him to the leadership of the Freedom Party of Austria and later catapulted the party from the political fringe into national coalition governments. Austrians were responding to Haider’s cry, “A people who does not honor earlier generations is a people condemned to ruin.” In France, then President Jacques Chirac’s 1995 apology for French complicity in the Holocaust—including the deportation of 75,000 Jews—was denounced by both rightists and Socialists. Conservatives in Belgium, Italy, and Switzerland also mobilized against attempts to confront their countries’ past collaboration with the Nazis. There were national outcries in the United Kingdom after the archbishop of York suggested a national apology for the country’s complicity in the slave trade and when then Prime Minister Tony Blair proposed making apologies to Ireland (for the potato famine and for the 1972 Bloody Sunday massacre). In the United States, a 1994 exhibit at the Smithsonian Institution that displayed the horrors of Hiroshima and questioned the necessity of the bombing prompted the U.S. Congress and veterans’ groups to justify again the United States’ decision to drop the bombs. The Senate voted unanimously to demand the exhibit’s revision.

Given how divisive national apologies have been around the world, one wonders why the German experience has been so different. Most likely, in West Germany the backlash against contrition was so much more muted because of severe foreign policy constraints. During the Cold War, West German conservatives (those most likely to oppose apologies) had powerful reasons to keep quiet: both of their two main foreign policy goals—reunifying Germany and continuing to protect West Germany from the Soviet Union—required a clear denunciation of the Nazi past. West German leaders understood that in order for their allies to overcome serious reservations about German
rearmament and reunification, they would need to see that Germany had truly broken with its past. Observers who consider how Germany and Japan have each dealt with the past frequently wonder, “What is wrong with Japan?” But the puzzle to be explained is not why Japan cannot apologize but why Germany could.

THE ADENAUER WAY FOR JAPAN

If it wants to repair its relations with its neighbors, Japan should draw on the Adenauer model and acknowledge its past violence while focusing on the future. Meanwhile, Japanese leaders should abstain, as they have recently, from visiting the controversial Yasukuni Shrine. As many Japanese moderates have already proposed, veterans could be honored at a new, secular memorial, or national ceremonies could be held at the Chidorigafuchi National Cemetery, Japan’s tomb of the unknown soldier, which then Prime Minister Yasuo Fukuda visited last year.

Foreign leaders and the authors of scores of op-eds in newspapers in Asia and beyond have urged Japan to apologize once and for all. They have exhorted its prime ministers and emperor to kneel before Japan’s victims, as did West German Chancellor Willy Brandt in Warsaw in 1970—perhaps the most famous and most profound symbol of German contrition. But in keeping with the Adenauer model, Tokyo should avoid gestures that risk polarizing the Japanese public, such as official apologies or resolutions by the Diet. This should reduce the outbursts of denials and justifications by Japanese conservatives, which have already declined since the cantankerous 1990s.

If some prominent Japanese leaders do deny or glorify past violence, their party’s leadership should respond with dismissals or other reprimands. Tokyo must establish and defend its own boundaries for what is an acceptable discussion about the past. It must make impermissible what the human rights scholar Michael Ignatieff has called “permissible lies”—such as the lies about Japan’s atrocities that for the past 60 years have hamstrung its foreign relations. If Japan’s leaders and its people continue to tolerate such lies, the world will conclude that the country has not renounced the methods of its imperial era—invasions, massacres, mass rape, and colonization—as tools of statecraft in the twenty-first century.
Although many conservatives in Japan will argue that this approach will undermine Japanese patriotism, this need not be the case. The Adenauer model combined the acknowledgment of Germany’s past violence with a future-oriented vision and with pride in West Germany’s postwar achievements. Like Germany, Japan has much to be proud of. Despite its small size and limited natural resources, Japan was able to rise up from utter devastation and transform itself into one of the wealthiest, most stable, most technologically advanced, and most creative countries in the world. When some leaders and bureaucrats attempted to conceal past atrocities, Japan’s pugnacious activists, scholars, and journalists yanked the cover away for the world to see—a victory not only for the victims but also for Japan’s vibrant democracy. Just as West German conservatives argued for emphasizing their country’s remarkable postwar success, Japanese leaders who wish to inculcate patriotism in their people have a great deal they can say.

Tokyo’s adoption of the Adenauer model would go a long way toward repairing Japan’s image in Asia. But just as Franco-German reconciliation could not have occurred without France’s cooperation, Japan’s neighbors, too, must be willing partners. In Europe, countries cooperated in multilateral commissions that set standards for textbooks to help negotiate memories of the wartime era. Leaders staged joint commemorations—at the Reims Cathedral in 1962 and in Verdun in 1984—to symbolize the new relationship between France and Germany.

Tokyo and Seoul could adopt similar strategies. This would likely be controversial: some South Koreans will protest against letting Japan off the hook too easily, just as some French protested against the tenor of the Franco-German commemorations. (In 1984, for example, the scholar Grosser argued that the French and West German leaders should have met not at the Verdun battlefield but at the Dachau concentration camp.) Some backlash from Japanese nationalists, too, will be inevitable. But efforts to improve relations between Japan and South Korea will appeal to moderates in both...
countries. Conditions are becoming increasingly promising for reconciliation. South Korea’s leaders no longer need to flog Japan in order to bolster their legitimacy, and perhaps most important, their growing unease about China’s rise could bring Seoul and Tokyo together.

The prospects for calming relations between Beijing and Tokyo are less hopeful. Not only do China and Japan not face a shared threat that could unite them, but Japan may someday be part of an effort to contain China. To make matters worse, the Chinese Communist Party, left ideologically adrift after the country’s embrace of capitalism, has been known to stoke anti-Japanese sentiment to bolster its domestic political legitimacy. Many China watchers worry that the party will increasingly appeal to nationalism and xenophobia if the remaining sources of its legitimacy—economic growth and the claim to Taiwan—are jeopardized.

But China’s deep-seated antagonism toward Japan is not in fact so deep. Immediately after World War II, the Chinese Communist Party expended its energy demonizing Taiwan; toward Japan, it was conciliatory, portraying the Chinese and Japanese people as common victims of a rogue militaristic regime. This conciliation was motivated by
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Beijing’s desire to draw Tokyo away from the United States’ orbit and to woo its diplomatic recognition. Based on these interests, Beijing was willing to put the past behind, just as Paris had done with Bonn. It was only after several decades that the Chinese Communist Party began to stoke anti-Japanese nationalism.

Even now, the Chinese Communist Party can also be protective of its relations with Japan, China’s third-largest trading partner. In 2005, after allowing the rock throwers to let off some steam in anti-Japanese protests, the Chinese government put an end to the demonstrations before they could seriously threaten relations with Tokyo (and, most important for the leadership, before they morphed into antigovernment riots). More generally, Beijing has sought to reassure its neighbors of its desire to rise peacefully. It has cooperated in international institutions, settled territorial disputes, pursued less reactionary policies toward Taiwan, and taken tougher stances against the dictatorships with which it does business. As part of its charm offensive, Beijing might also be willing to put the past behind, as it did just after the war. After all, haranguing Tokyo also draws attention to China’s own egregious whitewashing of history and fuels fears of Chinese nationalism. Assuming Japan is willing to admit Japanese atrocities against the Chinese people—an acknowledgment Beijing justifiably requests—China might be willing to abandon its relatively recent politicization of memory.

Ideally, countries would offer their victims the contrition they deserve. Through public apologies, reparations, and trials, victims of terrible suffering receive some measure of justice. But in the real world, the backlash that such contrition engenders is counterproductive to reconciliation. A better approach is to acknowledge the harms done while looking forward. Japan would greatly improve its relations with its neighbors by following the prudent and promising model set by Adenauer rather than by mimicking the contrition that West Germany offered later. The sooner Japan does so, the sooner it will be able to assume the kind of leadership that would benefit not only Japan but also the rest of the world.