Can apology serve as a security policy? Responsible scholarship and breaking the chains of negative history in Sino-Japanese relations

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This article takes a critical look at conventional studies of Sino-Japanese relations and East Asian security. While realizing that memories of Japanese aggression are a key causal factor of mutual suspicions and security dilemmas between China and Japan, mainstream studies do not offer us concrete solutions to this problem because their solutions are either military-centric, or have an excessive focus on Chinese nationalism and China’s “patriotic education” as a key causal factor of Sino-Japanese tensions. Such works ignore the fact that Japanese atonement for its historical wrongs is necessary to prevent mutual suspicions and security dilemmas emerging between China and Japan. The article argues that an apology by Japan for its past aggression could be suggested as a new, albeit non-military, security policy that could contribute to the overall stability of Sino-Japanese relations and Northeast Asia. The article puts forward some suggestions of what an apology may look like under this policy, and argues that this policy could remove historical animosity toward Japan by demarcating the postwar Japanese state from its prewar counterpart, allowing China the opportunity to “desecuritize” its deeply held identity as a “victimized state” and the need for a dangerous Japanese “other” to shore up this identity.

Introduction

The field of security studies has arguably had an ethical dimension of ensuring the protection and survival of its “referents.” Traditional security studies have taken a state’s responsibility to protect its own citizens as a “given” and explored international political dynamics that may harm a state’s survival, as well as various strategies which may best help ensure the survival of the state. Such approaches have come under increasing challenge in the wake of the end of the Cold War where there have been numerous cases where the state has harmed its own citizens in the most brutal manner. Critics of traditional security thus continue to be deeply engaged with the ethical responsibility of security studies to ensure the “protection and survival” of humankind, rather than states.

Naturally, there is still no consensus on how this responsibility should be carried out: there remains some debate as to the degree to which scholars of security studies should play an active role in political decision-making or maintain the stance of a “disinterested observer.” This article, however, addresses another issue of “responsible scholarship” by taking as its starting point Robert Cox’s observation that theories which seek to “explain” international political phenomena can often unintentionally lead to the reproduction of the particular problem under observation, and that our theorizing may benefit from a greater exploration of how we can change and improve international life. By examining the issue of

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Sino-Japanese relations and the long shadow cast by the legacy of Japan’s imperialist past, this article suggests that security studies may have left their ethical goal of “protection from fear and harm” unfulfilled.

The aim of this article is not to simply state that history matters in the relations between Tokyo and Beijing or that we need to move beyond “problem-solving theory,” as this has already been done elsewhere. Instead, it is an attempt to explore new avenues of responsible scholarship in East Asian security. As will be discussed below, memories of Japanese aggression remain a cause for suspicion for all states in Northeast Asia, and could even trigger security dilemmas: to this extent, the issue of history is a security issue with pertinence to regional stability. Scholarship in Sino-Japanese relations and Asian security, however, while cognizant of this, has suggested very little on how the issue of history can be addressed. In order to examine what responsible scholarship in the study of the international relations of the Asia-Pacific could look like, and how security studies could fulfill its ethical responsibilities, this article seeks to investigate how scholarly work can promote peace and reconciliation between China and Japan. This question seems particularly salient, because any stability in the Asia-Pacific region, let alone Northeast Asia, requires an improvement in the bilateral relations of these two regional powers.

The article argues that the existing literature has so far concentrated too much on explaining the history problem, and has neglected an important policy that could help ameliorate the negative effects of historical memories. That is, for Japan to offer a convincing and genuine apology for its past. It suggests that if responsible scholarship wishes to further the reconciliation process in Sino-Japanese relations and prevent security dilemmas in the region from bringing instability to Northeast Asia, it could advocate apology as part of a security policy.

Before we proceed, however, at least two caveats are needed. First, while the focus of this article is on apology, we should note that restitution for historical wrongs takes many forms, such as punishing war criminals or paying appropriate compensation. An apology is just a part of what Takahashi Tetsuya has called “postwar responsibility (sengo sekinin),” which is a responsibility which arises from “actions undertaken by earlier generations of Japanese citizens” and must be shouldered by all Japanese citizens insofar as it is the Japanese government which has to carry out postwar responsibilities on behalf of the people. All these acts form part of a duty to recognize any past wrongdoing and the responsibilities that arise from this (Takahashi calls this “haji,” a “sense of shame”). However, which method or form is best suited to addressing historical crimes committed by the state is beyond the scope of this article, and is not discussed here.

Second, by calling for a Japanese apology, this article does not mean to suggest that all Japanese citizens, including future generations, need to take criminal responsibility for damage caused in the past. For those who lived through the war, there are clearly different degrees of culpability. It would be equally unreasonable to hold the postwar generation directly accountable for war crimes simply on the basis of their ethnicity, as Ienaga Saburō does.

Scholarship on history and Sino-Japanese relations: reproducing the problem?

It is a truism to suggest that the issues of history/historical memory have a strong and adverse effect on the bilateral relations of Japan and China. It is well known that any perceived revival of Japanese militarism, the publication of revisionist textbooks, or Tokyo’s censoring of history textbooks which take a critical view of Japanese imperialism invoke emotional reactions among the Chinese. The process by which former Prime
Minister Koizumi Jun’ichirō caused increased bilateral acrimony through his repeated visits to the controversial Yasukuni shrine has been equally well documented.

Sino-Japanese disputes over the interpretation of history are not merely political disputes, but have security implications that could affect the stability of Northeast Asia. Tokyo’s perceived lack of atonement for Japan’s imperialist past has often led to Chinese charges that the spirit of “militarism” has not been eradicated in Japan. Japanese attempts to send the Self-Defense Forces on peacekeeping missions, or attempts to amend the constitution, are thus “associated with the re-emergence of extreme militarism and jingoistic patriotism”, or “aimed at containing China and expanding Tokyo’s sphere of influence in military terms.”

Chinese anxieties over Japan could in turn lead to increased military spending, triggering Japanese fears of a rising, militarily threatening, China—ultimately resulting in a classic security dilemma.

Why, then, do Sino-Japanese relations sour whenever there is controversy surrounding history? Why does the People’s Republic of China (PRC) appear to view Japan in such a negative light? In recent years, the most popular argument adopted by scholars is that the Chinese government uses Japan and its imperialist history instrumentally—either for political leverage vis-à-vis Tokyo, or to bolster its domestic legitimacy. The post-Mao “reform and opening” policies have effectively ended the utility of communist ideology as a basis for legitimatizing the rule of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) regime. In its place, the CCP has utilized nationalism to bolster its popular support, launching a series of “patriotic education campaigns” that remind its citizens of China’s “hundred years of humiliation,” as well as the crucial role the Party played in overthrowing imperialist domination of China. Through this process of emphasizing China’s “victimhood,” Beijing presents the CCP regime as a nationalist force. Not surprisingly, Japan plays a crucial role in this process, with Chinese textbooks or museums emphasizing Chinese suffering at the hands of the Japanese imperialist forces. Consequently, this means that the Chinese leaders will take a hard-line view toward Tokyo whenever there is a bilateral dispute, as this serves to strengthen their patriotic image and domestic legitimacy. This has become particularly important in the past two decades, as the CCP has found it increasingly difficult to command the people’s loyalty, primarily because of its internal corruption and falling support for communist ideology.

These arguments are not necessarily wrong, as national elites have manipulated historical memories to serve their political agendas. At the same time, however, they tend to trivialize the role that memory does play in the minds of the people. There are at least three aspects to this. First, by postulating a rational elite that cynically manipulates history, these explanations do not consider the possibility that the political leaders may be just as affected by historical memories. Second, the Chinese people are portrayed as empty vessels that can somehow be filled with anti-Japanese sentiments. Third, these arguments ignore the fact that any rhetorical statement must have broad public resonance to work as a political tool in the first place. While taking a strong anti-Japanese stand may indeed bolster the CCP’s legitimacy, we are neither given much sense of where these anti-Japanese sentiments came from in the first place, nor why anti-Japanese feelings remain strong among the Chinese populace despite their increasing cynicism about a government propaganda and the fact that top-down manipulation of memory is often much more difficult than is assumed to be.

More worrying from a normative standpoint is that by emphasizing the PRC government’s role in fostering anti-Japanese sentiments, these arguments downplay the normative obligations that Japan has to shoulder in order to remove historically rooted suspicions. This is not to suggest that scholars who hold this view are seeking to release
Japan from its moral responsibilities. Most scholars are in fact highly critical of Tokyo’s insensitive view of history and its lack of responsiveness in addressing genuine grievances that many victims of Japanese imperialism bear. Furthermore, the Beijing government is certainly not a totally innocent party in causing increasingly acrimonious emotions felt by people in both countries. However, it is important to note that by focusing on Beijing’s role in perpetuating negative historical memories, the bulk of the responsibility for ending this vicious cycle falls (by implication) on the Chinese government, which should presumably terminate its “patriotic education campaigns” that indoctrinate its citizens to hold negative perceptions of Japan.

**Responsible scholarship—what is to be done?**

One of the key reasons why the aforementioned ethical issue arises is because mainstream scholarship on Sino-Japanese relations and East Asian security is based on what Robert Cox has called “problem-solving theory,” which seeks to “be a guide to help solve the problems posed within the terms of the particular perspective which was the point of departure.” In the context of recent Sino-Japanese disputes, then, such studies seek to explain the immediate cause of the rise of anti-Japanese emotions within China at a particular point in time (in this case, post-1989 Chinese society, when the “patriotic education campaigns” were taking place). What they do not do is explain the deeply rooted origins of anti-Japanese emotion which makes such campaigns so successful. Furthermore, these works do not really tell us how we might be able to overcome the problem of history in Sino-Japanese relations, and in this sense they serve to “reproduce” existing realities.

The reasons for this shortcoming are twofold: the first appears to be the enduring influence of a belief that political science should strive to be value-neutral, and offer “a rational theory of international politics—to create knowledge in the service of power.” Sino-Japanese history is a highly emotionally charged issue, and taking one side over the other may risk damaging a state’s bilateral relations with the other. For instance, in the case of Washington’s policy toward Beijing and Tokyo, there “is little perceived gain for the United States in having a warm relationship between China and Japan,” in contrast to close bilateral relations between two key American regional allies, Japan and South Korea (ROK). For this reason, it makes strategic sense for American policymakers to refrain from facilitating any reconciliation between the two Asian powers. In this sense, then, the “neutral” stance adopted by conventional studies vis-à-vis the Sino-Japanese history issue suits the interests of the United States, where many of their authors are based.

Second, conventional scholarship has so far been unable to suggest any pathways for the Chinese and Japanese to overcome the pernicious effects of war memories because of the intellectual straitjacket of conventional security studies. Thomas J. Christensen provides a good example of this. He proposes that in order to ameliorate the security dilemmas that arise between China and Japan, the United States should play the role of the regional balancer. By committing itself to the U.S.-Japan Security Alliance, it can assuage Tokyo’s fears of a rising China. Simultaneously, by carefully managing Japan’s involvement in security issues in Northeast Asia through the alliance, Washington can also help allay Beijing’s fears of China. Christensen’s approach, however, still leaves studies of East Asian security unable to carry out their responsibility of seeking policies to “protect”—whether it be humans or states—from harm. While Christensen’s policy recommendations may temporarily remove security dilemmas between China and Japan, they are nothing but “stopgap” measures that depend on the political will of the United States. They are of little utility in addressing
the fundamental problem of history, which gives rise to security dilemmas and instability between China and Japan in the first place. Indeed, the implicit assumption behind Christensen’s policy prescription is that both Japanese “historical amnesia” and Chinese manipulation of history and utilization of anti-Japanese sentiment is going to continue. Scant attention is paid to how the Japanese themselves could help overcome bilateral ill-will emanating from negative historical perceptions.

Worse still, the commitment to maintaining a neutral stance and consequent reluctance to take a clear moral stance on the history issue means that many scholars’ analyses are being increasingly utilized by the Japanese right-wing to serve the latter’s myopic political interests. Kyoto University Professor Nakanishi Terumasa charges that the PRC has “used the ‘history card’ to draw out Overseas Development Aid and other aid on several occasions,” and that Chinese anti-Japan demonstrations are used cynically by the regime to draw out diplomatic concessions from Tokyo. The comments made by Sakurai Yoshiko, a well-known Japanese right-wing/conservative public intellectual, are also instructive:

For China, isn’t the Yasukuni issue nothing but a tool designed to divert the people’s distrust away from the [Chinese] communist government? . . . I cannot help but think that the Yasukuni issue is being used to serve as a “safety valve” to let members of society vent their frustrations. In this sense, as a Japanese, I resent that Prime Minister Abe’s visit to China is being used to serve in the Hu Jintao leadership’s power struggles.

There are at least two implications behind these statements: First, both individuals fail to appreciate that a significant proportion of the anger directed toward Japanese “historical amnesia” and politicians’ visits to Yasukuni shrine could—CCP manipulation notwithstanding—be the product of genuine resentment toward the political act of sending a “strongest message to the Japanese people that ‘dying for one’s country’ is a ‘precious’ act and an act worthy of national honor,” particularly if those who committed this “noble” act include class-A war criminals or individuals who participated in mass atrocities.

Second, as pointed out above, both Sakurai and Nakanishi’s arguments absolve the Japanese from accepting (moral) responsibility for Japan’s past war crimes against the Chinese people. Sakurai and Nakanishi conveniently ignore the causal effects of Japanese politicians’ gaffes, reluctance to admit to Japan’s imperialist past, and historical revisionism, all of which result in causing the rise of anti-Japanese sentiment in China (as well as the rest of the Asia-Pacific). Instead, it is the Chinese government which is to blame for anti-Japanese sentiments: historically motivated anger toward Japan is seen, in Yayama Tarō’s words, as the product of Chinese “anti-Japanese education which fabricates the ‘revival of Japanese militarism’ to justify totalitarian rule,” or as a tool to be used for Beijing’s factional politics.

From the viewpoint of human security, such arguments by the Japanese right-wingers pose a fundamental challenge to human rights. They ignore the abuse many individuals suffered under Japanese imperialism, but also refuse to respect the dignity of the victims and their descendants’ calls for historical wrongs to be redressed. If the responsibility of security studies should include exploring pathways to protecting human rights, such refusal to acknowledge past crimes against humanity must be resisted. However, the need to maintain the role of a “disinterested observer” means that conventional security studies are powerless to do this. It is interesting to note in this context that Christensen does not call on Japanese historical revisionists or politicians to face up more squarely to their past. This is of course not to suggest that Christensen and other authors who adopt similar views are supporters of the Japanese right in any sense. The point is that such arguments
that remain silent on Japan’s moral responsibility for atoning for its past can come uncomfortably close to being “represented ... as serving particular national, sectional, or class interests, which are comfortable within the given order,”26 particularly in supplying the intellectual ammunition for the Japanese right who refuse to take moral responsibility for Japanese imperialism and its historical legacies.

**Advocating apology as strategy: responsible scholarship?**

It is in this context that responsible scholarship in Sino-Japanese relations and East Asian security has a duty to counter attempts by the Japanese right to “hijack” scholarship and shun their war responsibilities. Specifically, apology could be advanced as a new security policy. To date, mainstream studies of Asian security have been somewhat reluctant to take an overt stance on the history issue between China and Japan, for reasons stated above. Given their limitations, however, it is perhaps time for security studies to raise “embarrassing questions” and “unsettle” conventional wisdom.27

Why, then, should an apology be proposed as a “security policy”? How can an apology serve as a viable policy? There are a number of reasons for this. First, insofar as International Relations should try and illuminate security problems and seek to explore ways to resolve them, we need to devise ways for both states to overcome the history issue, as this has arguably become intimately connected to traditional security issues. As noted above, historical suspicion of Japan serves as a catalyst for security dilemmas, and from a narrow point of view “considering Japan’s security objectives—regional peace and security for the coming century—[Tokyo’s] current reluctance to apologize for its wartime aggression can only be described as either counterrorintuitive or shortsighted.”28 Furthermore, as Gerrit W. Gong has argued:

> the juxtaposition of memory, history, and strategic alignment in Asia and elsewhere means that key relationships, such as among China, Japan, North and South Korea, and the United States, are destined to be expressed in historical terms. Issues of history will thus become the international vocabulary to describe shifting strategic alignments during coming periods of watershed change.29

Second, the arguments forwarded by conventional studies would suggest that once regime insecurity has been resolved in China, “patriotic education campaigns” would cease and Sino-Japanese security dilemmas produced by memories of history would become less of an issue. This is highly unlikely, however. As has been argued, the modern Chinese state was “imagined” against the backdrop of an unprecedented threat from the Western powers and Japan, and a deep sense of national identity based on “victimhood” persists to this very day.30 Japan has played a key role as an “Other” which serves to bolster this identity at both elite and popular level, regardless of government manipulation.31 In this sense, then, anti-Japanese sentiments are a product of creating and reproducing modern Chinese national identity, and not the exclusive monopoly of the communist regime.32 Conventional studies often miss this point, and as a result their policy prescriptions are not necessarily best suited for bringing about some form of reconciliation in Sino-Japanese relations. We are thus in need of alternatives to overcome the history issue.

Naturally, advocating an apology as a “security policy” comes with its potential pitfalls: the term “policy” implies an act that has resulted from some form of political necessity. Ken Booth, a scholar who has been at the forefront of advocating “critical security” which sets “emancipation” as its ultimate goal, writes that we need studies which can serve as “a guide for tactical setting.” By “engaging in immanent critique” he argues,
“emancipatory ideas can develop that in turn can be translated into tactical action.” The problem with this statement in the context of Sino-Japanese relations and the history issue is that if we advocate “apology” as a “tactic” for “emancipating” ourselves from the shackles of negative history, this risks making an apology seem to be undertaken for the sake of expediency, and thus rob it of its normative content.

This is particularly relevant in the case of Japan. It is true that the Japanese government has apologized on many occasions, and many civil society groups and individuals have shown genuine and continuous regret for Japan’s actions in World War II. However, with regard to official apologies by the Japanese government, this has frequently been subjected to opposition within the Diet, and even when it has taken place, it was under international pressure. This not only gives an inconsistent, ad hoc impression; it also serves to illuminate that “historical views [on Japan’s imperialist behavior during World War II] are subordinated to real political necessities,” rather than the other way round.

Nevertheless, as Ole Wæver has argued, the framing of certain issue areas as “security issues” has the effect of boosting their importance and forcing states and their governments to divert the attention and resources needed for solving the particular issue at hand. Given the reluctance demonstrated by the Japanese government to acknowledge historical wrongs, such acts of “securitization” of the history issue could be a useful way of speeding up this process (provided the apology meets certain criteria, as will be discussed below), as it encourages Tokyo to make a unilateral move to address historical wrongs. While some studies which suggests that “[t]he process of reconciliation cannot be unilateral,” it can be argued that an apology does not require reciprocity, and indeed may be more effective if made unilaterally. Drawing on social psychology, William J. Long and Peter Brecke have argued that the higher the “voluntariness” and “irrevocability or noncontingency” of the apology, the more likely it is to be successful. “Reconciliation signals,” they state, “are best when made unilaterally, rather than as the result of pressure or coercion.” Furthermore, “[m]aking noncontingent and irrevocable offers that are likely to be understood as conciliatory, rather than quid pro quo, contribute to the success of a reconciliation attempt.”

In addition, if China cannot let go of its “victimized” identity we cannot expect an improvement in Sino-Japanese relations. So far, there is very little sign that this is about to happen soon. Within the People’s Republic of China rewriting historical narrative remains difficult, despite recent moves to engage in joint historical research and write history textbooks which share a common historical viewpoint. In some sense, the “victimized” Chinese identity has become the referent of security, and is seen as something essential to the PRC’s identity and worth protecting in its own right. The authorities banned Yuan Weishi’s recent article in the journal Bingdian, which warned that Chinese history textbooks were breeding a narrow, xenophobic form of nationalism. Even at the grassroots level, it is difficult to move beyond the image of a “victimizing” Japan, as the controversy surrounding Ma Licheng’s “new thinking” on Sino-Japanese relations demonstrated.

An apology, however, could help the Chinese “desecuritize” its victimhood identity and its need for a “victimizing” Japanese Other, and can thus be presented as a new and better opportunity for “creat[ing] collective identity transformations [and] existential redemptions from the past.” Long and Brecke note that if (historical) wrongdoing is acknowledged, the victim can begin the process of forging a new self-identity and moving beyond being a “victim.” This can then be followed by “constructing a new identity for the other, the enemy” where the perpetrator is “separat[ed] . . . from the wrong which has been committed . . . Reframing does not do away with the wrong itself, nor does it deny the wrongdoer’s
responsibility for it, but it allows us to regard the wrongdoer in a more complete, more
detailed, more rounded way.”45 Much Chinese nationalist discourse on Japan continues to
claim some form of continuity between prewar and postwar Japanese politics and society, as
exemplified by the constant debates over the “revival” of “Japanese militarism.”46 An
apology can serve as a “positive” means to prevent this. As Takahashi Tetsuya observes:

Contrary to the misunderstandings by the “historical revisionists”, acknowledging one’s
country’s war responsibilities does not denote an acceptance of being treated as “descendants
of criminals” “for future generations” to come. It is a positive act which cuts the connection
between the past state and the self.47

While an apology in itself may not immediately serve to remove China’s “victimhood”
identity, it could provide a valuable function by which it can transform the “Other”
required for this particular identity. By emphasizing the continuity between Imperial Japan
and the contemporary Japanese state, the Chinese render post-war Japan a “victimizing
Other.” An apology may actually serve to make China’s “Other” the “Imperial Japanese
state” of the past.

Naturally, there may be objections that this argument is too one-sided. After all, it is
true that anti-Japanese sentiments are fomented by the CCP regime for their own political
agenda. It could be argued that while Japan may perhaps have to be more explicit in
demonstrating its own atonement for the past, Beijing equally has to stop using Japan for
its myopic interests. While remaining sympathetic to this argument, it is worth noting that
there is greater scope within Japan to “make the first move.” Any form of reconciliation
between China and Japan will involve a reinterpretation of history to some degree. While
China may need to overcome its “victimized” historical memories, Japan also needs to
reinterpret its dominant perception of World War II, which has tended to view the war
primarily as one that was fought between Japan and the United States (hence the term
“Pacific War”—tailheiyō sensō—to describe World War II), and paint the Japanese as
victims of American bombing attacks, particularly in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The war in
Asia—where the Japanese were primarily the perpetrators—has been conspicuously absent
from the public imagination. To the extent the Japanese have been responsible for the war,
this has been largely delegated to the military leaders of the time, and any culpability on the
Japanese public’s part has not been seriously debated or questioned.48 As a democracy,
there is greater political space for Japanese civil society to debate and forward alternative
interpretations of history and resist both official and non-official attempts to dilute Japan’s
war responsibilities. The lively debate taking place within Japanese society on how to
counter “historical revisionism” is testament to this.49

What an apology-oriented security policy may look like

Implementing an apology-oriented security policy, however, is not as easy as it may seem.
As Janna Thompson has pointed out:

acts of state are to be explained by power plays, conflicts of interests, and the compromises that
lie behind them. This explanation of acts of states ... undermines the idea that they can be
regarded as ... agents capable of acting consistently and responsibly over time.50

This point is particularly pertinent in Japan’s case, as successive prime ministers have
actually apologized—however perfunctorily—only to see the effects of their expressions of
remorse eclipsed by Japanese right-wing politicians’ denials of Japan’s war responsibility.
Making a state apology seem “genuine” is obviously a difficult task, as it is impossible to
expect all citizens of a state to commit to the same idea of collective responsibility for historical wrongs, particularly if these were committed by previous generations. This, however, does not mean that we should discard state apologies as doomed to failure. First, as Thompson notes, the very existence of international law, as well as various shared norms and rules within international society, provides strong evidence that states can be bound by social conventions: therefore, “[i]f states can make treaties and accept obligations of reparation, then they should be able to make genuine apologies.” Second, the recent spate of apologies issued by states for historical wrongs has had the effect of bringing about and strengthening international norms that states have the moral responsibility to atone for their past mistakes. As constructivist scholarship of International Relations has elucidated, states wishing to be seen as “good international citizens” would feel considerable pressure to comply with these norms. There is no reason to suggest that Japan is somehow impervious to such normative pressures.

Finally, we must resist the temptation to abandon the notion of state apology as “too difficult to attain.” Caroline Rose has noted that what Ruti Teitel calls an ‘executive apology’ (in this case an apology from the Japanese government) can play a crucial role in initiating the reconciliation process between China and Japan, as many victims of Japanese imperialism appear to attach particular importance to a state apology rather than other forms of restitution (such as financial compensation). This is because in a democratic society the executive is the embodiment of the popular will: an apology from the executive “necessarily depends on the prior action of other political actors involved in processes of investigation, laying the foundation for the apology’s exercise.” For this to be achieved, the following policies could be implemented as part of an “apology-oriented” security policy.

First, the apology must be seen to reflect the collective will of the Japanese populace as much as possible, and while the initial apology can by made unilaterally, this must be followed by a conscious effort on the part of the Japanese government to “demonstrate that the injustice and the sufferings of the victims have become embedded in the official history of the nation, and this historical account should be something that the victims can endorse.” To this end, attempts to dilute Japan’s war responsibilities needs to be resisted, and victims of the country’s war crimes must be accorded public commemoration.

Second, mass education in Japan needs to face its past squarely. As noted above, restitution for past wrongs has proved to be controversial because it has never been clear to which degree future generations should shoulder the responsibility for crimes their forefathers committed. Naturally, future generations need not be held directly accountable for crimes they did not commit. However, they should bear responsibility to ensure that past mistakes are not repeated. To this end, it is important that:

the party issuing an apology can ask itself “why” it did what it did. Without this, the apology will do little to advance understanding, leaving the apologizer to commit the same kinds of mistakes . leaving those who already have been victimized in a position where they (and others) might well be harmed again in the future.

By undertaking this process, hopefully we can foster a sense of some form of collective responsibility to the point where Japanese citizens will fulfill their moral obligation to hold the government to account when it fails to carry out its responsibilities arising from Japanese war crimes. This, in turn, should reduce the inconsistencies in Japan’s “apologies” and make them more genuine.

Finally, an “apology-oriented” security policy should encourage and continue recent bilateral efforts to engage in joint historical research and share their historical narratives.
This approach, Barkan argues, “provides both a space to negotiate identities and a mechanism to mediate between national histories. It is a discourse about nationalism and a negotiation regarding whose story and what versions of national narratives can be legitimated.” Naturally, this is not an easy task, given the tight control Beijing still exerts over the writing and rewriting of historical narratives. However, as Van Ness argues, if any consensus does emerge—no matter how small—provided this is “linked to specific plans in the present about what the two governments are prepared to do for the future,” this “could both help to put the history issue to rest, and also provide a more substantial basis for cooperation.”

Conclusion: the way forward

This article has argued that conventional studies of Sino-Japanese relations and East Asian security have identified negative emotions emanating from Japan’s imperialist past as a key factor that can cause security dilemmas between the two states, but have not yet made many policy suggestions on how to overcome the negative effects of historical memories. Instead, scholars in this field have concentrated too much on “explaining” the mechanisms of history-related tensions between the two states.

The resolution of the “history issue,” however, is of paramount importance not only in Sino-Japanese relations but also for Northeast Asia as a whole. The region continues to suffer from deep-seated, historically held suspicions that results in what Gilbert Rozman has called “stunted regionalism.” While China and Japan’s mutual antipathy is well known, the same “history dynamic” continues to dog Japan’s relations with the Republic of Korea (ROK). Theorists of the “democratic peace” have noted that a shared liberal democratic political system can lead to the development of a common identity and solidarity that not only dispels distrust but also makes states see an attack on one democracy as a threat to their own identities, or “selves,” as well as the entire community of democratic states. Despite both being liberal democracies, this could not be further from the truth in the case of Japan and the ROK. Japan’s image has taken a battering following Koizumi’s visits to the Yasukuni shrine, and there is scant evidence that Tokyo or Seoul sees each other’s security in “communal” terms. In fact, Victor Cha’s study of Japan–ROK alliance behavior has revealed that the two states only appear to have closer security relations when they feel a sense of “abandonment” by their senior alliance partner, the United States. This is dictated almost entirely by pure expediency, and hardly suggests a close relationship defined by “democratic solidarity” or any other community sentiment.

Traditional scholarship of Sino-Japanese relations and the international security of East Asia has done very little to forward policies that would help remove the pernicious effects of negative historical memories, which is one of the key causes of security dilemmas and instability in Northeast Asia. To this end, in order to fulfill our obligations for “responsible scholarship,” scholars need to be less timid in making their political convictions clear vis-à-vis Japan’s imperialist past. Calling for Japan to apologize also helps make scholars’ political position clear, and prevents our analysis from being taken out of context and poached by the Japanese right-wing. Furthermore, our scholarship could serve as a form of advocacy and put greater pressure on the Japanese government to adopt a more ethical and consistent policy with regard to Japan’s war legacy. This of course may entail compromising some scholars’ commitment to “value-neutral” political science, as well as placing an ethical duty on scholars to raise “embarrassing questions” and “unsettle others” by pressuring their own respective governments to adopt a much stronger stance toward Tokyo on how it atones for its past mistakes—something which many
governments may find awkward to do. However, evidence suggests that international scrutiny of Japanese “historical amnesia” does result in positive changes. The controversies surrounding Prime Minister Koizumi’s visits to the controversial Yasukuni shrine helped bring about a nationwide debate on Japan’s dark past. As Rose notes:

“[t]here is a growing consensus that if sufficient pressure is put on the Japanese government by Japanese, Asian and international organizations, and if more victims come forward to claim compensation and demand official apologies, then the Japanese government will have little choice but to respond in a more favorable way ...”

One of the results of this was the *Yomiuri Shimbun*’s project on war responsibility, which played an important role in “reminding its many readers of their ongoing relationship with the past” and “the responsibility ... to know about their past and heed its lessons.”

Furthermore, international “textbook watching” has led to the emergence of Japanese textbooks that challenge “the monolithic conception of the Japanese nation as the victim of the state” and include “the voices of the victims of Japan’s imperialism ... [which] challenge ... Japan’s monologue-like narration of its history.”

Our commitment to “responsible scholarship” could also entail deeper investigations of how Sino-Japanese reconciliation might be achieved. One avenue may be in exploring how an apology may affect China’s own identity as a “victimized” state. If an apology helps in severing the perceived continuity of prewar and postwar Japan as a “victimizer,” how will the Chinese react to this? Will this prompt a new policy and reaction toward Japan along the lines of Ma Licheng’s “new thinking”? It may also be interesting to see how this move may be countered by Chinese neo-nationalists as well. This line of inquiry would link well with Hayward Alker’s call that “[t]he extent to which identity-specific values or symbols are severely threatened enough within particular communities or societies to require securitization responses must be further researched.”

To the extent that apology can also be seen as “negotiated history,” as argued by Barkan and Karn, this topic could also be adopted to examine recent moves to come to a “shared history” between China and Japan. While this development must be welcomed, what we do not know is to what extent this “shared history” can be accepted by the citizens of both states. Insofar as nationalist voices remain influential in both states we could also benefit from studying how nationalist and various contending voices will be prepared to accept a new “national narrative” and identity that inevitably accompanies it. While it could be argued that China’s authoritarian system of governance may make a “top-down” process of rewriting easier than Japan, the recent anti-Japanese demonstrations and the controversies surrounding Ma Licheng’s article suggest that popular perceptions and opinion do and will matter even more. Such studies may help us gauge the degree of success an apology is likely to have, and what factors may hinder the reconciliation process in both countries.

Second, we perhaps need better studies of what form of apology is most likely to move the reconciliation process forward. While the Japanese government has indeed apologized in the past, recent and past events demonstrate that this has not been enough to resolve the tensions in their bilateral relations. Purely rational theories of apology which call to attention the “costs” associated with making this gesture are useful, but they do not take the identity of the apologizer into sufficient account. For instance, most apologies by Japanese politicians—no matter how weak—do entail some domestic costs, as Prime Ministers Hosokawa and Murayama found out. But despite this, the Chinese appear to be suspicious of Japan’s sincerity, precisely because Japanese politicians’ apologies have appeared (regardless of their true intentions) as “cheap talk.” They seem ad hoc and made
grudgingly under international/regional pressure. Perhaps scholarship could contribute to breaking this vicious cycle by drawing on studies of reconciliation to engage in a comparative study of why some apologies by different countries have been more successful than others.

Joshua Foa Dienstag has argued “simply telling stories will not make us free; an inability to narrate, however, is an impediment that must be overcome on the path to freedom. . . .” Apology helps us tell a new story that could have transformative effects on Chinese and Japanese identities that will (in different ways) alter their identities as “victims” of the war and lead them to shake up the shackles of the past. Advocating apology as part of a “security policy” helps us highlight its policy relevance and move it up the list of political priorities (in a similar way to the process of securitization), but also allows scholars to further the goal of emancipation and perhaps carry out their social responsibilities.

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Notes

4. Ibid., 27. This definition closely matches the thinking behind Australian attempts to apologize for past wrongs committed against Aborigines and Torres Straits Islanders. Interestingly, the concept of “shame” is also used, and is defined as “a recognition of ethical flaws in the identity of the collective, or rather its failure to live up to its ideal self as defined in its constitutional principles.” See Elazar Barkan and Alexander Karn, eds., “Group Apology as an Ethical Imperative,” in Taking Wrongs Seriously: Apologies and Reconciliation (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006), 17.


21. This dilemma is discussed ably by Tickner, “On the Frontlines or Sidelines of Knowledge and Power?” 383–6.


26. Cox, Approaches to World Order, 89. Insofar as Christensen’s article is concerned with security issues, his arguments are also vulnerable to similar criticisms from critical security approaches. See Steve Smith, “The Contested Concept of Security,” in Critical Security Studies and World Politics, ed. Ken Booth (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2005), 42.


30. Gries, China’s New Nationalism.


34. My thanks to Hiro Katsumata and Matt McDonald for this important point.

35. See Rose’s excellent study, Sino-Japanese Relations, 100–8 for a detailed examination of the question of official apologies in Sino-Japanese relations.


45. Long and Brecke, War and Reconciliation, 30.

46. See for instance Zi Shui and Xiao Shi’s polemical text Jingti riben diguo zhuyi (Beijing: Jincheng chubanshe, 1997). It is interesting to note that these views are not limited to nationalists alone: see Wang Xinhua’s comments in a Xinhua report, where he states that Japan’s political reforms aimed at becoming a normal country “cannot but help raise a high degree of wariness among the peoples of China and the rest of the world.” Wang’s point implicitly suggests a degree of continuity between prewar and postwar Japan, and that Japan’s strengthening of its military power somehow spells the return to an expansionist and imperialistic Japan. Wang Xinhua, “Jinian kangri zhanzheng bushi guochi jiaoyu,” http://news.xinhuanet.com/video/2004-07/07/content_1580768.htm#, accessed on February 1, 2007.

47. Takahashi Tetsuya, Rekishishûsei shugi, 13.


52. Thompson, “Apology, Justice, and Respect,” 38.


56. The section that follows draws heavily on Gibney and Roxstrom, “The Status of State Apologies,” 926–36.

57. 7. Ibid., 927.


59. Ibid., 41–2.


Notes on contributor

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