

Viewpoint:

Can the 'Apology Standoff' between China and Japan be Resolved?¹

by Darryl Lupton²

In recent history there has been a move to making public apologies from a variety of countries and political leaders. Kevin Rudd apologised to the Australian Aborigines, Stephen Harper to the First Nations peoples of Canada and the US Congress and Senate to Native Americans and African-Americans for slavery. In the 2000s Germany apologised to the Herero and Nama people of Namibia for the genocide perpetrated on them at the start of the 20th century. However, the apology to the Jewish people from subsequent German governments after World War II (WWII) was probably the most challenging of all. The iconic (kniefall) picture of Chancellor Willie Brandt kneeling at the monument to victims of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising summed up a genuine and heartfelt remorse that Germany had for its treatment of the East Europeans and the Jews in particular. In contrast, there is one nation, Japan, unable to construct an apology apparently sincere or wholehearted enough to satisfy, especially China, but also South Korea and other Asian countries. After the 70th anniversary of the surrender of Japan in WWII, Shinzo Abe made yet another public apology, as has become customary on decade anniversaries. But again his words have been considered insufficient by China, particularly on the issue of Japan's militarism. Looking more deeply at the Sino-Japanese dynamic on this matter of an apology, it would appear that the vicious cycle continues with Japan making apparently incomplete or insincere apologies and China refusing to accept them. This cycle of offer and rejection, a co-creation by both parties, has been mired at the level of politics and instead requires statesmen or stateswomen from both sides to step up and resolve it.

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It is important to grasp the violent and aggressive history China and Japan share that forms the backdrop to their present-day animosity. There have been two Sino-Japanese wars, one near the end of the 19th century and the most recent from 1931-1945. It is the latter that has generated the most ill-feeling on the Chinese side with the brutality of the ‘Rape of Nanjing’ being indelibly imprinted on the national psyche. The 1937 Japanese occupation and systematic execution of Chinese soldiers and civilians alike together with rape on a scale seldom committed in human history, has left a deep scar on the Chinese. After the war, the Tokyo Trials took place, but only a handful of the accused were found guilty (many escaped with the ‘tu quoque’ defence) and some of the worst offenders, those guilty of human experimentation, were exonerated in exchange for submitting their data to the US army. In addition, Emperor Hirohito, the supreme leader of the Japanese army, and the imperial family were absolved of guilt for political purposes. Therefore many Japanese perpetrators of atrocities re-entered society and strong nationalist sentiments continued beneath the surface of Japanese society.

Since the end of the war, the Japanese government (and Buddhist monks) have made many apologies to the victims of Japanese aggression. The most notable apology coming from former prime minister (PM) Tomiichi Murayama in 1995 commemorating the 50th anniversary of the war’s end. This became known as the ‘Murayama Statement’ and subsequent PMs have been expected annually to endorse it and certainly not regress on the wording or meaning. Though this is where the concern lies for the Chinese. The choice of Japanese words reflects the depth of remorse and whether it is just regret or sincere apologies the government is offering. Without “owabi” (apology) being used to express ‘heartfelt apology’ along with feelings of regret, the recipients of the message feel it is not sufficiently sincere. Observers feel that the Japan has not made a full and unqualified apology for all aspects of its wartime aggression. This is exemplified in PM Abe’s end-of-war commemorative statement before the US Congress in April 2015. Here he equivocated and omitted using key words to acknowledge Japanese wrongful actions like ‘invasion’ and did not use words signifying ‘heartfelt apology’. This is one of the key accusations against the Japanese government. There have been sincere apologies previously, including the August 15, 2015 one, but never an all inclusive apology that

is not only deeply sincere, using the right language, but also inclusive of all the areas of perceived injury. In other words, covering Japan's militarism, invasion, colonialism, use of sex slaves ('comfort women'), brutal treatment of prisoners and civilians and acknowledgment of events – notably the Rape of Nanjing.

The other key accusation is that after apologies are made, they are often questioned, qualified and even retracted by the same party or subsequent administrations. It is almost as though there is a struggle between making a sincere apology and avoiding a loss of face. What is connected to this contradiction in the Japanese approach is the teaching of history (or lack of) to their students. There is almost no mention of Japanese aggressive actions in WWII and to illustrate, it is only mentioned that Nanjing was "occupied" in December 1937, no more. Hence, many Japanese have grown up unaware of the atrocities their grandparents or forefathers committed and are perplexed by the real reasons for Chinese hatred of Japan. The third key and sensitive issue is the Yasukuni shrine. This is a war shrine honouring all the dead who have served Japan. However, it also includes Class A war criminals who committed heinous crimes against humanity and specifically China. Thus, when a Japanese PM patronises the shrine, as many have including PM Abe, it is offensive and insulting to victims of Japan's wartime aggression.

Japan could learn from the German government's approach to atonement. They were sincere, consistent and unwavering in their contrition. Furthermore, Nazism and holocaust denial were outlawed and comprehensive teaching of WWII history in schools was implemented. This has enabled the Germans to cathartically progress and build a new society and culture. It is no easy feat and the difficulty of the apology and forgiveness of the wrong is summarised by J-M Coicaud:

Hence, we are left with the following predicament: it is when an unforgivable crime has been committed that an apology has the greatest value. Nevertheless, it is also in this situation that issuing an apology, for the perpetrator, and accepting an apology, for the victim, are the most difficult. In this regard, crimes against humanity represent the ultimate 'unforgivable'. (2009, p.101)

The Chinese government's perspective on Japan's apologies is two-sided. On the one hand, Beijing is justified in wanting a full, unconditional heartfelt apology that covers

all Japan's wrongdoing and for this apology to stand uncontested and sincerely repeated through successive Japanese administrations.

China has also exacerbated the situation by finding fault with and rejecting any apology Japan makes and continually changing the criteria that would make them acceptable. This seems to be a political ploy by the CCP because anti-Japanese sentiment feeds Chinese nationalism and helps deflect criticism. This was a policy adopted after the 1989 Tiananmen Massacre, reinforced by introducing the Patriotic Education Campaign to educate the youth, lest they forget, of Japanese wartime atrocities. Having a common enemy to demonise has been a time-honoured political strategy to help unite the people and direct their anger away from domestic grievances. Consequently, Beijing has not visibly publicised all the Japanese apologies and even blocks information regarding them, like the Chinese language site on the *New York Times* referencing all the attempts the Japanese have made to apologise and also the amount of money Japan has loaned China for infrastructure projects that have never been publicly acknowledged. In addition to these factors, China ought to consider another reason for being more accommodating to Japan's apologies. For many reasons, but including anti-Japanese sentiment and subsequent Chinese aggression in the East China Sea, Japan is moving away from Article 9 of its pacifist constitution and becoming more offensively-oriented militarily. This is destabilising for the region and could precipitate an arms race and future conflict. Therefore, by not rejecting Japan and accepting a true apology, tensions might be defused and benefit both nations and the region.

Recommendations that would help to resolve the apology standoff would include: Japan making a full, all encompassing and heartfelt apology orally and in writing to China and other aggrieved parties. Also, for a comprehensive history detailing Japanese actions during WWII to be taught in Japan's schools; without this measure, there can never be national awareness of past wrongs, true regret and a 'never again' mind-set. Additional recommendations are for the Japanese government to remove and deconsecrate the nameplates of war criminals from the Yasukuni Shrine. In turn, China is recommended to accept and use the Japanese apology to overcome its tragic wartime memories and move forward to a new era of prosperity and peace. It would

take magnanimous politicians with a grander view of geopolitics to accomplish this, but the two countries and the region need them to succeed.

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