Why Northeast Asia Feels the Need to Rewrite the Past

Jie-Hyun Lim
Disputes over differing textbook accounts of events mask a deeper problem with how history is taught in the region.

Alexis Dudden
Attempts to hide Japan’s World War II atrocities pit those who want to respect history against those who don’t.

Mel Gurtov
Why are apologies so hard to come by, and what if perpetrators of wrongdoing were more forthcoming in admitting mistakes?
Global Asias In Focus

We apologize

Two Words to Embrace to Right Injustices
By Mel Gurtov

APOLOGIES ARE never easy — not between individuals, not between governments or corporations and citizens, and certainly not between nations with a history of conflict. Handshakes, such as between Richard Nixon and Mao Zedong in 1972, and between Yasser Arafat and Yitzhak Rabin in 1993, are a good start symbolically, but they are not the same as a heartfelt apology for past violence. Expressions of remorse come closer, but still do not express what a forthright apology entails: a direct acknowledgment of wrongdoing and determination that it will not be repeated.

Leaders of states rarely apologize. They don’t want to appear weak, don’t want to injure national pride, and don’t want to run afoul of their political supporters or competitors. If the states they lead happen to be major powers, the chances are even slimmer that their leaders will ever have to account for decisions that ordinarily would warrant an apology — such as for ordering secret missions to assassinate foreign leaders, suppressing ethnic and religious autonomy within their borders, jailing and torturing people without trial, orchestrating coups to topple other governments, or seizing another country’s territory. To the contrary, triumphant great powers mete out “justice” for others’ crimes, as they did at the Nuremberg and Tokyo war crimes trials and now before the International Criminal Court (ICC).

Great powers do not apologize even when — like the US in Vietnam — they lose wars in which they carried out great destruction. They define war crimes, genocide and crimes against humanity, but they don’t suffer for committing those crimes. Thus, while Americans, Russians, Chinese and Europeans sit in judgment at the ICC, you will not find their political leaders in the dock to answer for drone attacks, carpet bombing, chemical warfare and other criminal acts.

Violent non-state organizations are the least likely to apologize, since they are not beholden to a public and often have no centralized command. Guerrilla bands, terrorist organizations and anti-government militias are responsible for terrible deeds, such as the beheading of “infidels,” the abduction and trafficking of children and use of them in war, raping and pillaging in villages, and trading diamonds for weapons. Leaders of such groups may occasionally be caught and punished, but they are no more likely to apologize than the police and army that pursued them without regard for civilians caught in the middle of the fighting.

The Elusive Sorry
Two very different current situations tell us a good deal about the politics of apologizing: in Japan, where ultranationalists are back in business, discounting the aggressions of World War II and the sexual enslavement of women; and in the US, where the CIA’s torture of Islamist prisoners in Afghanistan with approval at the highest level has now been fully documented (www.intelligence.senate.gov/study2014/sscistudy2.pdf).

Ian Buruma’s The Wages of Guilt is a marvellous comparative study of the different ways Germans and Japanese, in positions high and low, have reacted to the aggressions of their governments in the World War II period. While the Germans have for the most part faced the past forthrightly, the Japanese have shown embarrassment, obfuscation and self-righteousness. The prime minister of Japan is highly unlikely to emulate Willy Brandt, who went down on his knees in the Warsaw ghetto to apologize. Nor is the leader of Japan’s parliament likely to give his countrymen a history lesson in how the country became a “criminal state,” as Philipp Jenninger, president of Germany’s Bundestag, did in 1988 — for which he was widely criticized. Japan is on the other end of the stick, as senior officials find ways to deflect the apology issue, such as with assertions of moral equivalence: the atomic bombing was another Holocaust, or Japan’s imperialist adventures simply followed the example of Western colonizers, thus excusing or at least mitigating the crimes of the emperor and his military chiefs.

To be sure, Japanese officials have at times tried to apologize for past transgressions. In the so-called Kono Statement of 1993, a cabinet official admitted that the military had resorted to sexual slavery, and in 1995 socialist Prime Minister Tomiichi Murayama acknowledged Japan’s aggression in World War II. Prime Minister Keizo Obuchi, in a joint statement with South Korea’s President Kim Dae-jung in 1998, expressed “deep remorse and heartfelt apology” for the “tremendous damage and suffering” Japan caused. And again, on the 100th anniversary of Japan’s annexation of Korea...
in 1910, Prime Minister Naoto Kan said: “For the enormous damage and suffering caused during this colonial rule, I would like to express once again our deep remorse and heartfelt apology.”

But Japan’s ultranationalists and various government officials have consistently objected to the statements, and may yet disregard them. Now, under Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, excuses for the past have given way to outright attempts to bury it. Ominously, Abe’s resistance to apologizing has unleashed right-wing assaults on intellectuals and the liberal press, where regret over Japanese imperialism’s rampages and support of Article 9 of Japan’s “peace constitution” remain strong. As Professor Chung-in Moon of Yonsei University and editor-in-chief of Global Asia observes, some moderate Japanese academics have knuckled under, dodging the matter of Japan’s direct responsibility for atrocities by comparing Japanese behavior to that of Britain, France and other colonial powers that never apologized.

Abe, a neo-nationalist, wants the Japanese to take pride in their history, upgrade the military’s role in national security and change Article 9 to allow the military to engage in collective-security actions abroad. Abe established himself as a historian denier in his initial term as prime minister, saying for example that there was no proof that the Imperial Army forced “comfort women” into prostitution or trafficked in them. He still holds to that position today. So, while Abe has finally shaken the hand of China’s leader and vowed to “do it over again” if he had to, that view applies to instruments of mass violence used now or in the past by the US, such as drones, chemical weapons, and of course, atom bombs. None of these actions has ever led to an official apology, even when — as in the case of former defense secretary Robert McNamara, in his book Argument Without End: In Search of Answers to the Vietnam Tragedy — someone in authority steps forward to acknowledge that US decision-making was deeply flawed. But more than a policy mistake occurred. US war making exacted a terrible price on peoples, cultures and ecosystems in Southeast Asia — a price that keeps rising due to unexploded ordnance and chemical weapons such as Agent Orange.

Don’t the people of Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia deserve an apology as much as, say, South Koreans and Chinese deserve one from Japan?

IT CAN BE DONE

There are precedents for official apologies, or at least statements that tend in that direction. Here are some offered roughly over the last 25 years:

• In a statement of regret, the British government acknowledged its role in bringing on “The Great Hunger” in Ireland between 1845 and 1850 — by ignoring the potato blight that caused massive crop failure, the deaths of between 1 and 1.5 million people, a mass emigration of Irish Catholics and the eventual north-south division of Ireland.

• In 1988, US President Ronald Reagan formally apologized to Japanese-Americans who had been confined after Japan’s attack on Pearl Harbor under the presumption of disloyalty. About 120,000 people were interned by order of President Franklin Roosevelt.

• In 2002, North Korea’s Kim Jong Il apologized to Japanese Prime Minister Ichiro Koizumi for his country’s abduction of 12 people from Japan in the 1970s and 1980s, saying that his “special forces were carried away by a reckless quest for glory. It was regretful and I want to frankly apologize. I have taken steps to ensure that it will never happen again.” Kim said that the four abductees who were still alive were free to return home. In return, Koizumi expressed “deep remorse and heartfelt apology” for Japan’s 35 years of colonial rule over Korea.

• In 2008, the Australian government, “to remove a great stain from the nation’s soul,” apologized to its Aboriginal people. Prime Minister Kevin Rudd said “we say sorry” for the degrading actions of the government over many years, in particular the removal of many thousands of aboriginal children from their families as part of a policy of forced assimilation. Similarly, in 1988 the Canadian government formally apologized to indigenous peoples for various racist and paternalistic policies, and compensated them for the indignities they suffered.

• In 1998, US President Bill Clinton went to Rwanda to apologize for the failure of the US and the international community to act to save lives in the genocide, as he called it for the first time. He promised every effort to prevent another one. The following year, Clinton said the US was “wrong” to support the right-wing Guatemalan government’s attacks on Mayan villagers and leftist guerrillas in the 1960s — support that also involved CIA training of the Guatemalan military in operations that amounted to genocide and widespread human rights violations. Still later, US officials apologized to around 700 Guatemalans who, in the 1940s, were deliber-
WHY IT MATTERS
Does apologizing matter as a step toward peace? Britain’s apology to Ireland may have helped in settling the conflict in Northern Ireland and the demobilization of the IRA (in 2002, the IRA also offered “sincere apologies and condolences” to civilians it killed during the 30-year war in Northern Ireland). Might the history of US-Iran relations, from the hostage crisis to the nuclear confrontation, have been very different had Washington apologized for US training and support of the SAVAK, the Shah’s secret police, and other costly interventions in Iran’s political life? Wouldn’t Turkey’s stature rise if it finally, on the 100th anniversary of the genocide against Armenians, expresses remorse for its near-universally accepted responsibility? If Japan tomorrow were formally, unequivocally and irrevocably to apologize to civilians it killed during the 30-year war in Asia; its official denial in 1995 of the possibility that civilians, including those of Korean ancestry, were among its victims has been rejected by the International Court of Justice. More importantly, its sense of self might be different; apologizing would begin a process of healing, reconciliation and corporate acts that cause destruction of the planet’s environment. It might be objected that satisfying all the just claims for an apology would be impractical. But the goal is a solemn statement that “we are sorry,” not retribution or compensation. And while no amount of apologizing can ever wipe away crimes against humanity, most people understand the difference between forgiving and forgetting. Such crimes should never be forgotten, but we can preserve our humanity by forgiving precisely in order to ensure that the victims are not forgotten.

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| Donald G. McNeil, Jr., “US Apologies for Syphilis Tests in Guatemala,” The New York Times, Oct. 1, 2010. The US government has a history of condoning secret experiments on prisoners and soldiers without their full knowledge of the danger or consent to accepting it. For many years, starting in the 1940s, radioactive materials were injected in a wide range of people, including university employees, Inuit villagers and mentally challenged school children to test their reactions. A government-appointed committee uncovered this practice (www.nytimes.com/1995/10/03/us/judge-urges-us-to-apologize-for-radiation-testing-and-pay-damages.html).

Recall too the CIA’s MK-ULTRA experiments in the 1970s, which tested the behavioral effects of hallucinogenic drugs on unknowing people as part of a bio-weapons research program. Eighty universities, hospitals, prisons and pharmaceutical companies received CIA support for these experiments.

Note, however, certain common elements in these apologies and regrets. They were long overdue but finally issued only after years of domestic political wrangling. Opposition to apologizing usually centered on the feeble argument that only the government that caused the harm could legitimately apologize. Except for the interned Japanese-Americans and the Japanese abductions, none of the apologies was offered with compensation to the victims and their survivors. (In the latter case, it was the Japanese government that paid, disguised as economic aid.) Lastly, in no instance was the harm caused declared a crime as a warning to the then-present or future officials.

These cases in any event are the exception to the rule. The list of unspoken apologies for terrible, illegal, heinous acts that resulted in thousands, sometimes millions of deaths, mostly of civilians, is long indeed — state interventions and invasions, civil wars and coups, repression of ethnic, religious, and other groups, violence directed at women and children, and government and corporate acts that cause destruction of the planet’s environment. It might be objected that satisfying all the just claims for an apology would be impractical. But the goal is a solemn statement that “we are sorry,” not retribution or compensation. And while no amount of apologizing can ever wipe away crimes against humanity, most people understand the difference between forgiving and forgetting. Such crimes should never be forgotten, but we can preserve our humanity by forgiving precisely in order to ensure that the victims are not forgotten.

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Ian Buruma may be right that while Japan’s victims want apologies, a fundamental political transformation in Japan is the necessary first step. But counting on such a long-term prospect only defers the day of reckoning that a few choice sentiments could greatly shorten, to the country’s immediate benefit. But to hasten that day, those who would like Japan to apologize might consider setting an example. What right do Americans or anyone else have to demand that Japan finally and fully apologize for its World War II-era crimes when the US and other governments will not for theirs? Why not a heartfelt US apology to the people of Hiroshima and Nagasaki? Why not a Chinese apology to the families of those killed at Tiananmen or in Tibet, or a Korean apology to the victims of the Gwangju Uprising? Why not a US apology for torture — it’s an international and domestic crime, after all — and prosecution of those political and intelligence officials and contracted psychoanalysts who devised and approved it?

Perhaps the Germans once again have come up with a teaching moment. As recounted by Elizabeth Kolbert, a German artist named Gunter Demrig has created Stolpersteine (stepping stones), which he embeds in public sidewalks to memorialize individual victims of the Holocaust. The stones are placed in neighborhoods where the victims were last known to have lived. There are now over 50,000 such stones in several German cities as well as throughout Europe. Governments that erect memorials to soldiers and wars can surely support these and other ways to honor the innocent victims of state terror and promise, like Willy Brandt and Bill Clinton, “never again.”

Mass violence is a blight on civilization itself, and one of the civilized things we can work for is to urge governments to express profound remorse for what, in our names, they have done, and in doing so begin the painful process of learning from their mistakes. Confronting for having inflicted great pain and suffering on another people is the human thing to do, and potentially the pathway to policy change. Who knows? A multitude of apologies might help disseminate a new value of nonviolence and global responsibility. I can think of no country that can claim the moral high ground and evince this solemn responsibility.

Mel Gurtov is Professor Emeritus of Political Science at Portland State University and Editor-in-Chief of Asian Perspective. He blogs on foreign policy at www.mgurtov.wordpress.com. His latest book is Will This Be China’s Century? A Skeptic’s View (Lynne Rienner, 2013).