

Eighty Years after WWII: A Comparative Analysis of Historical Reckoning in Europe and Asia

Valérie Niquet

Abstract

Eighty years after the conclusion of the Second World War, historical memory remains a constitutive element of both European and Asian political orders. This article undertakes a comparative analysis of Germany and Japan, two former aggressor states whose trajectories of postwar “reckoning” illustrate divergent institutional, societal, and geopolitical dynamics. In the German case, the consolidation of a remembrance culture—anchored in law, education, and symbolic acts by political elites—has long been presented as a model of contrition, even as the rise of nationalist movements reveals the fragility of consensus. Japan, by contrast, has issued multiple apologies and statements of remorse, yet the persistence of regional disputes underscores the constraints imposed by domestic factional politics and the instrumentalization of history by neighboring states. The contrast between Europe’s dense institutional frameworks and Asia’s fragmented security environment demonstrates how memory functions as a strategic resource, shaping legitimacy, diplomacy, and regional stability in the twenty-first century.

Introduction

The eightieth anniversary of the end of the Second World War is more than a commemorative date. It is a vantage point from which to examine how states and societies have integrated the consequences of a conflict that was both global in scope and regional in its effects, still felt today. The war’s end in 1945 did not erase the political, moral, and territorial questions it had generated. In both Europe and Asia, it reshaped political orders and embedded historical narratives that continue to influence policy and diplomacy today.

The legacies of that war are not simply about territory lost or won, or about the treaties signed in its aftermath. They are about how two former aggressor states—Germany and Japan—can be accepted as “normal powers” in the international system. This is not only a matter related to History; it is also about how societies and their political leadership choose to present themselves to their citizens and the world and how the world accept this presentation.¹ The “reckoning” with the past, a phrase often used in academic and political commentary, encompasses education policy and memorialization, the words used in official statements, the silences maintained for domestic political reasons, as well as the exploitation of historical memories by non-democratic regimes.

The dominant international narrative frames Germany as the model pupil of postwar repentance. The Federal Republic is often credited with having squarely faced the crimes of the Nazi regime, embedding remembrance into law, culture, and education. Germany’s political leadership—whether centre-right or centre-left—has generally treated responsibility

¹ Ian Buruma, *The Wages of Guilt: Memories of War in Germany and Japan*, (New York: Farrar Straus and Giroux, 1994).

for the Holocaust and wartime aggression as non-negotiable elements of national identity, particularly since the second half of the 1970s, after the disastrous aftermath of the terror attack against Jewish athletes at the 1972 Olympic Games in München.² Today, it explains in part the unwavering support Germany gives to Israel. High-profile symbolic acts, such as Chancellor Willy Brandt's kneeling at the Warsaw Ghetto Memorial in 1970, or Chancellor Helmut Kohl's 1989 visit to Auschwitz alongside Polish Prime Minister Tadeusz Mazowiecki, are presented as evidence of a political class committed to moral clarity.

Japan, by contrast, is often portrayed as more hesitant. The criticism centers on perceived ambiguity in official language, misunderstood disputes over school textbooks, and the periodic visits of Japanese politicians to the Yasukuni Shrine, with poor knowledge of what it represents and its History.³ The absence of a Japanese equivalent to Germany's sustained public contrition is frequently cited as a key reason for persistent tension with China and South Korea. In this telling, including in the West, Germany is the gold standard of remembrance, while Japan serves as the cautionary tale.

However, the reality is more complex. In Germany, the political elite has indeed established a robust culture of remembrance, but parts of the electorate—particularly in economically disadvantaged regions of the former East, where the Communist regime never undertook the work of remembrance that was carried out in West Germany—are increasingly receptive to nationalist rhetoric. The rise of the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), a far-right party polling around 35% in some eastern states, demonstrates that historical consensus among elites does not guarantee consensus in society at large. In Japan, the hesitation to issue more statements of repentance often reflects the internal dynamics of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), where an influential faction opposed to an attitude of excessive repentance can exercise pressure over the use of sensitive language. This is less about widespread hostility to apology and more about the arithmetic of party politics.

The context of 2025 gives the comparison added relevance. Prime Minister Ishiba issued a statement expressing deep remorse (反省), using the word for the first time since 2012, following a prolonged debate within the LDP.⁴ However, this comes against a backdrop of repeated Japanese apologies: the 1993 Kōno Statement on “comfort women,” the 1995 Murayama Statement on colonial rule and aggression, the 1998 Obuchi–Kim joint declaration, the 2005 Koizumi reaffirmation, and the 2015 Abe statement marking the 70th anniversary. These examples complicate the claim that Japan has “never” apologized.⁵

The question, then, is not simply whether each country has acknowledged its past, but how the structure of domestic politics, the priorities of foreign policy, and—a dominant factor in East Asia—the behavior of neighboring states play a role in sustaining or softening historical disputes. In both Europe and Asia, memory is not a static inheritance from 1945; it is an active element of political strategy. Governments invoke it to bolster legitimacy, critics use it to challenge powers in place, and foreign states mobilize it as a tool of leverage.

Eighty years on, the politics of remembrance remain entangled with present-day strategic concerns. In Europe, Germany faced renewed debates over reparations with Greece and Poland

² Federal Ministry of the Interior, *Re-Examining the Attack on the Israeli Olympic Team at the 1972 Summer Games*, <https://www.bmi.bund.de/SharedDocs/schwerpunkte/EN/histcom-1972/historikerkommission-1972-artikel.html>, view 12-07-2025.

³ Edo Naito, “Dispelling the Myth of Yasukuni Shrine,” *The Japan Times*, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/commentary/2025/08/13/japan/the-myths-surrounding-yasukuni-shrine/>, 13-08-2025.

⁴ Himari Semans, “As Japan Marks 80 Years since WWII Surrender, Ishiba Expresses remorse,” *The Japan Times*, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2025/08/15/japan/politics/end-of-ww2/>, 15-08-2025.

⁵ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, “Issues Regarding History,” https://www.mofa.go.jp/policy/q_a/faq16.html, 01-02-2021.

—debates given fresh urgency by economic crises and EU politics. In Asia, the People's Republic of China (PRC) and South Korea continue to link History to current disputes over security policy, trade, and regional leadership. Both Germany and Japan are targets of external expectations about repentance, yet each also faces domestic constraints on how far it can go to meet those expectations.

This essay will examine these dynamics in a comparative framework. It will first explore the evolution of Germany's postwar reckoning, from Allied-imposed denazification to domestically sustained remembrance, and then Japan's complex relationship with its wartime past, shaped by both domestic political structures and regional diplomacy. It will then consider the strategic implications of these findings for Europe and Asia in the twenty-first Century.

Europe's Experience: Germany's Reckoning and Its Contradictions

The postwar narrative of responsibility

When the Third Reich ended in May 1945, Germany was a country under direct occupation, stripped of sovereignty, and confronted with the evidence of its crimes. The Allied powers, each with its own strategic and political agendas, set out to dismantle the Nazi regime's structures and to re-educate German society. This process, known as *denazification*, was uneven in application, but it established the framework for what later became a distinctive German approach to historical reckoning.⁶

In the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG), founded in 1949 in the western occupation zones, the early years were marked by ambivalence. Many Germans saw themselves primarily as victims of bombing, displacement, and Soviet occupation—rather than as perpetrators of crimes against humanity. The Nuremberg Trials of 1945–46, which prosecuted the foremost Nazi leaders, were conducted by the Allies and often viewed domestically as “victor's justice.”⁷ However, over time, as democratic institutions took root and a new generation entered public life, this perception began to shift.

The turning point came in the late 1960s and 1970s, when a younger generation challenged the silences of their parents. The student and intellectual movements of 1960s demanded a whole confrontation with the Nazi past. Universities, media, and political parties gradually integrated this reckoning into the national narrative. The concept of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*—coming to terms with the past—moved from academic discourse into the language of everyday politics.

Political leadership played a decisive role in consolidating this shift. Chancellor Willy Brandt's 1970 highly symbolic gesture—the spontaneous kneeling at the Warsaw Ghetto Memorial—had an immediate impact.⁸ Images of the moment circulated globally, signaling a readiness to acknowledge guilt without defensiveness. Two decades later, in 1989, Chancellor Helmut Kohl stood at the site of the Auschwitz concentration camp.⁹ This was more than a symbolic act; it came at a time when the Cold War order was dissolving, and Germany sought to reassure its neighbors that reunification would not bring a resurgence of old ambitions. However, regime change in

⁶ British Online Archives, “Building a New Germany: Denazification and Political Re-Education, 1944–1948,” <https://britishonlinearchives.com/collections/127/building-a-new-germany-denazification-and-political-re-education-1944-1948>, view 07-08-2025.

⁷ Benjamin Kane, “Victory for Justice or Victor's Justice?: Due Process and the Legacy of the Nuremberg Trials,” [https://doi.org/10.4079/2578-9201.4\(2021\).02](https://doi.org/10.4079/2578-9201.4(2021).02), 2021.

⁸ Peter Hille, Rosalia Romaniec, Ralf Bosen, “50 Years since Willy Brandt's Historic Gesture in Poland,” Deutsche Welle, <https://www.dw.com/en/germany-poland-reconciliation-willy-brandt/a-55828523>, 12-06-2020.

⁹ Mary Battiata, “Kohl Visits Auschwitz, Lays Wreath, Bonn Soothes Poles on Reunification,” *The Washington Post*, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1989/11/15/kohl-visits-auschwitz-lays-wreath/dcab686a-29e3-4685-8589-3e16a3a9b4b0/>, 15-11-1989.

Poland and the Eastern Bloc also allowed for a positive shift in attitudes toward Germany.

In addition to symbolic gestures, the German state embedded remembrance into law and education. Holocaust education became mandatory in schools, with visits to concentration camp memorials often part of the curriculum. Public memorials, such as the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe in Berlin, were designed to confront tragedy. Commemorations were often accompanied by explicit recognition of responsibility, making denial or relativization was socially unacceptable in mainstream politics.

Current political tensions challenge this moral posture.

The durability of this moral and institutional posture has been tested in recent years. The rise of the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), a party founded in 2013 initially to oppose eurozone bailouts, has brought nationalist rhetoric into the mainstream of German politics. While its initial focus was economic, the Party has increasingly embraced themes of cultural identity, immigration control, and, in some cases, historical reinterpretation. Some of its leaders have downplayed the uniqueness of Nazi crimes with a criticism of “Shame Culture” (*SchuldKult*), statements that would have been politically unthinkable in the early postwar decades.

The AfD’s electoral strength varies significantly across different regions. In the former East Germany, it has reached or exceeded 35% in polls, becoming the leading Party. This regional concentration is not coincidental. Under the socialist German Democratic Republic (GDR), the official narrative framed the East German state as the legitimate heir to antifascist resistance, portraying Nazism as a specifically West German problem. This allowed East German society to avoid a more profound reckoning with questions of collective responsibility. After reunification in 1990, the rapid collapse of local industries, high unemployment, and demographic decline generated resentment toward the federal government and the political establishment in Berlin. In this environment, nationalist and anti-establishment appeals have found fertile ground.

This dynamic contrasts with Japan. In Germany, the political elite across major parties remains firmly committed to guarding against historical revisionism. The pressures toward nationalist reinterpretation come primarily from parts of the electorate in economically disadvantaged regions. In Japan, by contrast, the electorate at large remains indifferent to issues of historical apology. At the same time, the political leadership must contend with the political influence within the ruling Party, whose posture is not so much the result of historical denialism as it can be in Europe, but rather out of frustration in facing the constant use of historical issues by some neighboring countries.

Lingering postwar tensions in Europe

However, eighty years after the war, Germany’s relations with some of its European neighbors still bear the imprint of History. In the case of Greece, the issue of wartime reparations resurfaced dramatically during the eurozone crisis of the late 2000s and early 2010s. As Athens faced harsh austerity measures in exchange for international bailouts, Greek politicians invoked the memory of the Nazi occupation (1941–44) to argue that Germany owed not only a moral debt but also financial compensation.¹⁰ The claim included demands for repayment of a forced wartime loan and damages related to atrocities committed during the occupation. While the German government maintained that all reparations claims had been settled in previous agreements, the political symbolism was potent: austerity was framed not just as economic policy, but as a continuation of historical injustice.

Poland has also revived the issue of reparations. In 2022, the Polish government formally

¹⁰ BBC, “Greece Nazi Occupation: Athens Asks Germany for €279bn,” <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-32202768>, 07-04-2015.

demanded hundreds of billions of euros in compensation for wartime destruction.¹¹ This demand came amid broader political tensions over the rule of law, migration, and EU governance. As in the Greek case, the reparations debate served multiple purposes: it appealed to domestic nationalist sentiment, pressured Berlin in EU negotiations, and reinforced a narrative of historical grievance.

Other, less publicized disputes also exist. In parts of Eastern Europe, memories of German wartime occupation intersect with concerns about contemporary German influence in EU policy-making. While these tensions rarely escalate into open diplomatic conflict, they illustrate that even in a highly institutionalized regional order like the EU, History can be mobilized when political circumstances make it advantageous.

The European context in comparative perspective

The European case offers two important insights for the comparative analysis with Asia. First, even the most rigorous and sustained program of historical reckoning does not eliminate the political uses of the past. Germany's example shows that remembrance can be institutionalized and culturally embedded, yet still challenged by political actors when economic or social grievances create an opening.

Second, Europe benefits from an extensive network of institutions—the EU, NATO, the OSCE—that provide channels for dispute resolution and cooperation. These structures do not erase historical tensions, but they create incentives for compromise and mechanisms to contain disputes.¹² Asia lacks equivalent institutions with comparable depth and binding authority, making historical disputes more vulnerable to sudden escalation; moreover, the ideological divide characteristic of the Cold War still exist in Asia with the absence of regime change in the PRC and North Korea.

Asia's Experience: Complex Relationship with the Past

The standard narrative and its limits

Japan's postwar handling of historical responsibility has long been framed—both in regional diplomacy and in global commentary—as hesitant, incomplete, or even evasive. Critics point to disputes over the content of school textbooks, political visits to the Yasukuni Shrine, and carefully worded official statements.¹³ In this simple narrative, this is Japan's lack of a sustained, unambiguous stance on its wartime record that explains the persistence of tensions with its neighbors, particularly China and South Korea.

Nevertheless, this portrayal is partial. Japan's postwar governments have, on multiple occasions, issued explicit apologies or statements of remorse for the suffering caused by Japanese aggression and colonial rule. The 1993 Kōno Statement expressed “sincere apologies and remorse” to the victims of sexual exploitation during the war.¹⁴ The 1995 Murayama Statement, delivered by Prime Minister Tomiichi Murayama on the fiftieth anniversary of the war's end, recognized that Japan had, “through its colonial rule and aggression, caused tremendous damage

¹¹ “Poland Claims €1.3 Trillion in War Reparations from Germany,” *Le Monde*, 01-09-2022. The Case has been dropped in 2024 after a change in electoral majority.

¹² Valérie Niquet, “Territorial Conflicts in Europe: Possible Lessons for Japan ?,” *Japan Review*, Vol 6 n° 1, 2023.

¹³ Ironically, these debates were first initiated by Japanese scholars more than two decades before the PRC began to take notice.

¹⁴ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Statement by the Chief Cabinet Secretary*, https://www.mofa.go.jp/a_o/rp/page25e_000343.html?utm_source=chatgpt.com, 04-08-1989.

and suffering” and offered “deep remorse” and a “heartfelt apology.”¹⁵

In 1998, Prime Minister Keizo Obuchi and South Korean President Kim Dae-jung issued a joint declaration in which Obuchi expressed “deep remorse and heartfelt apology” for the colonial period.¹⁶ In 2005, Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi reaffirmed the Murayama Statement. And in 2015, marking the seventieth anniversary of the war’s end, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe explicitly stated that Japan had “repeatedly expressed the feelings of deep remorse and heartfelt apology” and that this position “will remain unshakable into the future.”¹⁷

Despite this record, official apologies have rarely succeeded in ending diplomatic disputes over History. Part of the reason lies in the cyclical nature of these controversies: when political or strategic tensions rise, past issues are revived or reframed. Another factor is the nature of Japan’s national narrative. While official statements directed to outside audiences have addressed Japan’s role as aggressor, the domestic focus of wartime memory often falls on Japanese suffering—most notably the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945 but also the incendiary bombings of Tokyo and other major cities that caused hundreds of thousands of deaths and were never properly acknowledged by the United States. These events occupy a central place in public commemoration and education, shaping an image of Japan as both a perpetrator and a victim. This dual framing complicates the politics of remorse, as acknowledgment of guilt exists alongside, and sometimes in tension with, narratives of victimhood. In Europe, Austria has also been affected by this double narrative reflecting to contradicting memories.¹⁸

The year 2025 adds a new layer to this picture. The Japanese Prime Minister, Shigeru Ishiba, apparently hesitated to deliver a statement on August 15, the date marking Japan’s surrender. The omission was not the result of public hostility toward expressions of regret. Opinion polls indicate that the Japanese public is primarily concerned with current economic and social issues. The decision was primarily driven by intra-party politics: Ishiba faced resistance from different opinions within the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), but also the surge of the Sanseitō, a relatively new political party that obtained 14 seats (8 % of the votes) at the July 2025 Upper House election.¹⁹

Political Dynamics within Japan

The internal politics of the LDP also help explain Japan’s uneven approach to historical issues. Since its formation in 1955, the Party has been a coalition of factions, each with its networks, funding sources, and policy priorities. While the majority of LDP politicians accept the need for diplomatic caution on historical matters, another wing is more cautious and resists further concessions. Some members express a nostalgia for Japan’s pre-war certitudes and tend to see repeated apologies as unnecessary or even harmful to national pride. The majority however, voice a legitimate concern about the futility of constant apologies to regimes that, by their very nature, must keep Japan in a perpetual ‘culprit’ role in order to diminish its influence in the region.

In such a context, Prime Ministers may avoid controversial acts of contrition not because they fear a backlash from the electorate at large, but because they wish to maintain factional support

¹⁵ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Statement by Prime Minister Tomiichi Murayama on the Occasion of the 50th Anniversary of the War’s End*, <https://www.mofa.go.jp/announce/press/pm/murayama/9508.html>, 15-08-1995.

¹⁶ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Japan-Republic of Korea Joint Declaration*, 08-10-1998.

¹⁷ Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet, *Statement by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe*, https://japan.kantei.go.jp/97_abe/statement/201508/0814statement.html, 14-08-2015.

¹⁸ Austria was both a perpetrator and a victim of Nazi Germany.

¹⁹ “Right-Wing Sanseito Party’s ‘Japanese First’ Policy Inspires both Hope and Worry: Poll,” *The Mainichi*, <https://mainichi.jp/english/articles/20250813/p2a/00m/0na/018000c>, 14-08-2025.

within the Party. This is a key difference from Germany, where the major parties operate within a relatively centralized structure and are united in strongly opposing historical revisionism.

The case of Shinzo Abe illustrates the complexity of this dynamics. Often portrayed abroad as a historical revisionist, Abe reaffirmed previous apologies during his tenure. His core strategic priorities lay elsewhere: revising Japan's constitution to allow for a more active security role, revitalizing the economy, and strengthening alliances, particularly with the United States. His engagement with nationalist symbols, such as visits to Yasukuni or more cautious language on wartime responsibility, was like his predecessor Junichiro Koizumi (2001–2006), more a strong will to respond to outside pressure from antagonistic countries like the People's Republic of China, than a primary policy goal.

Public Attitudes and Regional Perceptions

In contrast to Germany, where historical remembrance remains a live issue in public debate, Japanese society at large is relatively disengaged from the politics of wartime memory. Support for the Sanseitō, which remains moderate, stems more from resentment toward overtourism and a sense of humiliation over Japan's economic difficulties than from any revisionist stance.

Regionally, the picture is mixed. In Northeast Asia, China and South Korea remain the most vocal critics of Japan's historical stance. Both governments—but mostly China these days—have institutionalized wartime memory in education, public culture, and diplomacy. Chinese state media regularly highlight anniversaries of wartime events, framing them as lessons in vigilance against a resurgent Japan. South Korea's disputes with Japan have extended into the legal domain, with court rulings ordering compensation for forced labourers, sometimes in defiance of bilateral agreements. These attitudes, however, are closely tied to internal politics. In the case of China, the global strategic situation, notably China-US relations, is a significant factor. Since the return of President Donald Trump to power in January 2025, the regime's attitude toward Japan has been less consistently aggressive. South Korea, sharing the same strategic concerns, is also eager to build closer relations with Japan, looking toward the future.²⁰

The divergence between official positions and popular behavior in these two countries is striking. Despite recurring tensions, Chinese and South Korean tourists consistently rank among the largest groups of foreign visitors to Japan. Four years after the end of the COVID pandemic, they account for a substantial share of inbound tourism. This suggests that, for many individuals, historical grievances do not preclude personal engagement and the attractiveness of contemporary Japan.

In Southeast Asia, the stance toward Japan is even more pragmatic. Countries such as Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, and the Philippines endured Japanese occupation during the war. However, these states have generally been less vocal in pressing Japan on historical issues. Economic factors play a significant role: Japan has been a key source of investment, development assistance, and infrastructure financing. Strategic considerations also matter: shared concerns about China's assertiveness in the South China Sea and the broader Indo-Pacific have made Japan a valued partner in defense and maritime security.

The Asian case shows that historical disputes do not operate in a vacuum. They are embedded in broader strategic and economic relationships. In Northeast Asia, where territorial disputes, security dilemmas, ideology, and competition for regional leadership are acute, History serves as both a moral claim and a strategic instrument. In Southeast Asia, where economic interdependence and maritime security concerns dominate, History is less frequently invoked in bilateral relations.

²⁰ Jesse Johnson, « At Meeting Rich in Symbolism, Ishiba and South Korea's Lee Agree to Steadily Build Ties, » *The Japan Times*, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2025/08/24/japan/politics/south-korea-japan-ishiba-lee-summit/>, 24-08-2025.

Japan's domestic politics adds another layer of complexity. Unlike Germany, where the electorate is the primary source of nationalist pressure, Japan's public is detached mainly from these debates. The constraints come from within the political elite, where factional bargaining play a role.

Regional Dynamics and the Use of History

China's strategic use of historical grievances

For the People's Republic of China, the Second World War—referred to domestically as the “War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression” (1937–1945)—is not only a chapter in national History; it is a foundational narrative of the Chinese Communist Party's legitimacy.²¹ The victory over Japan is presented as a triumph of Chinese unity under Communist leadership, even though, in reality, the role of Nationalist forces was much more significant, despite its limitations.

The CCP has enforced this narrative in ideology, education, media, and public commemorations particularly after 1989. School curricula devote substantial time to wartime history, often in a way that frames Japan's aggression as part of a broader story of “a century of humiliation” at the hands of foreign powers. The purpose is twofold: to foster national pride in resistance and to maintain vigilance against fabricated threats.

This historical framing serves several political and strategic functions. Domestic political cohesion is reinforced by stressing the external threat posed by Japan, which highlights the CCP's role as the protector of the Chinese nation. By reminding citizens of past atrocities, the Party aims to cultivate loyalty and deflect attention from domestic problems.

On a second level, China can frame Japanese initiatives to expand its security role—such as constitutional reinterpretation or increased Defence spending—as evidence of a dangerous “return to militarism.” By keeping historical grievances active in the bilateral relationship, China ensures that Japan is on the defensive in diplomatic encounters, expending political capital to respond to past issues rather than advancing its strategic priorities. In August 2025, Foreign Minister Wang Yi once again asked Japan to “make the right choice,” as if the Japan of today, 80 years after the end of World War Two, were not a completely different country.²²

From Beijing's perspective, even genuine and repeated Japanese apologies cannot “settle” History. The value of the grievance lies precisely in its renewability: each anniversary, each new school cohort, each diplomatic incident provides an opportunity to reassert the narrative. This instrumentalization is not unique to China—other states have also used historical memory for political ends—but its systematic integration into governance and foreign policy is notable.

South Korea's legal and political disputes

South Korea's relationship with Japan over historical issues has its dynamics, shaped by the colonial period (1910–1945). The 1965 Treaty on Basic Relations normalized diplomatic ties and included Japanese financial assistance, which both sides considered a final settlement of economic claims. However, opposition in South Korea denounced it as an agreement between elites that did not reflect popular sentiment. As a result, there have been cycles of diplomatic tension.

The emotive nature of these issues makes them politically potent in South Korea. Politicians across the spectrum have invoked History to mobilize support, particularly during election periods. However, as in the Chinese case, there is a disconnect between official narratives and

²¹ Valérie Niquet, “History and Memory Issues in Europe and Asia: Acknowledging Similarities for a Better Understanding of Contemporary Tensions,” *Japan Review*, vol.2 n° 1, Summer 2018

²² Jiji, « On Anniversary of WWII's end China Urges Japan to Make the 'Right Choice', » *The Japan Times*, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2025/08/16/japan/politics/japan-china-wwii-south-korea/>, 16-08-2025.

personal behavior. Japanese popular culture, fashion, and design enjoy popularity in South Korea. Tourism flows between the two countries remain substantial. The strength of common strategic challenges in Northeast Asia and economic challenges at the global level seems to lead, at least for the time being, to a break in the negative cycle of tensions between the two countries.

Another striking features of Northeast Asian historical disputes is the coexistence of tension at the political level with strong economic interaction. Even during periods of diplomatic chill, trade continues—except in sectors weaponized by the PRC, such as a ban on importing fish and agricultural products from Fukushima Prefecture—and people-to-people exchanges flourish. This suggests that History is essentially used as a political tool.

In the EU context, historical disputes are generally contained within institutional frameworks and do not prevent extensive cooperation. In Northeast Asia, the absence of such mechanisms—and the persistence of the Cold War framework despite economic opening up—means that regimes like the PRC and North Korea are still in place, allowing disputes to be rekindled quickly.

History as a strategic resource: similarities and differences with Europe

When we compare the use of History in Asia with that in Europe, several similarities emerge. In both regions, History can be mobilized to strengthen domestic legitimacy, put pressure on foreign governments, or frame current disputes in moral terms. The persistence of grievances is not necessarily correlated with the absence of apologies or compensation. Both Germany and Japan have made repeated gestures of contrition, yet both still face demands for further acknowledgment or reparations. Public opinion does not always align with official narratives. In Germany, parts of the population are more receptive to nationalist reinterpretations than the political elite; in Japan, the political elite is more constrained by factional politics than the general public.

However, there are also structural differences. Europe's dense network of political and economic institutions helps manage disputes and incentivizes compromise. Asia lacks comparable structures, making historical issues more likely to be used as tactical instruments in bilateral relations. Moreover, in Europe, NATO provides a framework for collective defense that reduces the military dimension of historical disputes. In Asia, where regional security rivalries are acute, historical narratives can directly influence perceptions of military policy.

For Japan, managing historical disputes is not simply a matter of diplomacy; it is a question of strategic positioning. Balancing acknowledgment of the past with resistance to its political manipulation is a delicate task. Overstressing apology risks emboldening those who would use History to constrain Japan's security role and its legitimate return to the status of "normal power"; on the contrary, minimizing it risks alienating potential partners in and far away from the region, affecting public diplomacy initiatives.

Japan's comparative success in building strong relations with Southeast Asian states offers a potential model. These relationships are grounded in economic cooperation, development aid, and shared strategic concerns, rather than in contested narratives of the past. While they do not erase the memory of wartime occupation, they demonstrate that forward-looking partnerships are possible even without complete historical consensus. They are also based on a shared perception of the strategic evolutions in the region since the end of the Second World War and the emergence of a revisionist, more aggressive China aiming to reestablish its vision of unipolar Asia centered around its strategic interests.

Comparative Insights: Europe and Asia Eighty Years Later

Common patterns in the politics of memory

Eighty years after the end of the Second World War, both Europe and Asia demonstrate that historical memory is not a fixed legacy, but a living, dynamic political resource. It can be

mobilized to legitimize governments, challenge rivals, or frame contemporary policies in moral terms. This mobilization is not necessarily diminished by repeated apologies or compensation. Both Germany and Japan have, at various points, expressed contrition in explicit and public terms, yet both still encounter demands for further acknowledgment.

In both contexts, the persistence of grievances reflects several underlying patterns. Nations tend to emphasize parts of their History that support contemporary identity and policy. Germany's remembrance culture focuses on acknowledging guilt and preventing recurrence; Japan's domestic narrative highlights both guilt and victimhood, particularly through the powerful lens of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Historical grievances can be reactivated when useful in current disputes. Greek reparations demands intensified during the eurozone crisis; Chinese criticisms of Japan often spike during periods of heightened strategic tension.

In Germany, elites are the primary defenders of a culture of remembrance, while segments of the public—especially in economically distressed areas—are more open to nationalist reinterpretations. In Japan, public opinion is detached mainly, while nationalist pressure primarily comes from within the ruling Party's elite.

Legal or diplomatic settlements rarely close the door entirely. Even after treaties or joint declarations, disputes can resurface in altered form, often linked to changes in domestic politics, particularly in authoritarian regimes, as exemplified by the tensions between France and its former colony, Algeria.²³

Structural differences between the two regions

Despite these similarities, Europe and Asia differ in ways that shape how historical disputes unfold. Europe's postwar reconciliation was embedded in dense networks of integration—the EU, NATO, the Council of Europe—that create forums for dialogue and mechanisms for dispute resolution. These institutions do not eliminate grievances, but they provide incentives for cooperation and penalties for escalation. In Asia, the absence of comparably binding structures leaves historical disputes more exposed to fluctuations in bilateral relations and domestic politics.²⁴

Postwar Europe developed a norm of public contrition as part of the process of interstate reconciliation. Leaders like Brandt and Kohl made gestures that became reference points for acceptable conduct. In Asia, reconciliation has been less about public contrition and more about pragmatic engagement. Japan's relationships with Southeast Asian states improved rapidly through economic cooperation, with less emphasis on symbolic acts.

From a comparative perspective, the key lesson is that historical reconciliation is not a linear process. It is shaped as much by contemporary politics as by past events. In Germany, the culture of remembrance was not inevitable; it developed through deliberate political choices, generational shifts, and integration into European and transatlantic structures. In Japan, repeated apologies coexist with selective domestic narratives, constrained by factional politics and a security environment in which rivals can weaponize History.

Strategic Implications for the 21st Century

Germany's principal challenge is to preserve its culture of remembrance in the face of shifting domestic and international pressures. The rise of nationalist rhetoric, particularly in the East, underscores the need to address socio-economic disparities that fuel political discontent. This

²³ Valérie Niquet JR Algeria.

²⁴ Valérie Niquet, "Territorial Conflicts in Europe: Possible Lessons for Japan ?," *Japan Review*, Vol 6 n° 1, 2023.

requires investment not only in economic development but also in civic education that links historical awareness to contemporary democratic values.

At the European level, managing historical disputes constructively is essential for maintaining cohesion. The re-emergence of reparations claims from Greece and Poland illustrates how easily historical grievances can intersect with contemporary crises. In an EU facing geopolitical competition, migration challenges, and the war in Ukraine, the instrumentalization of History could undermine collective action.

Japan's strategic challenge is more complex. It must navigate between acknowledging its past and resisting attempts by rivals to use that past as a means of constraining its present and future. This balancing act is not about evading responsibility but about ensuring that History is not used to veto legitimate policy choices. Internationally, Japan's close ties with Southeast Asian states demonstrate that constructive relations are possible even where historical issues exist, provided that economic and strategic cooperation are prioritized.

Conclusion

Eighty years after the end of the Second World War, History remains an active element of both European and Asian politics. Germany's experience is often cited as a model of contrition, yet nationalist sentiment persists, particularly in regions facing economic hardship. Japan's record of apology is frequently questioned. However, the constraints it faces are more about domestic political structures and regional strategic rivalries as they are about an unwillingness to acknowledge the past.

The comparison reveals that the politics of memory cannot be reduced to a binary of contrition versus denial. It is a dynamic process in which domestic politics, regional institutions, and security environments interact. In both Europe and Asia, the instrumentalization of History poses risks to stability and security. Historical reconciliation and reckoning WW Two both in Europe and Asia, is a challenge: it demands vigilance against both refusal to acknowledge the past and glorifying a romanticized version of what should be national pride; and the exploitation of grievance by adversaries.