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The Franco-German Historical Reconciliation and Its Lessons for Northeast Asia's Future

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The Franco-German Historical Reconciliation and Its Lessons for Northeast Asia's Future

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1. The Enduring Partnership between de Gaulle and Adenauer

The origins of France and Germany's postwar reconciliation process, a significant accomplishment after the two countries' long history of bitter animosity, can ultimately be traced back to the close rapport established between two of their leaders, Charles de Gaulle and Konrad Adenauer.

The seeds of this unique camaraderie were sown on July 14th, 1958, when French Prime Minister de Gaulle hosted the West German Chancellor Adenauer at his residence for their inaugural encounter. Subsequently, another defining moment in the relationship between President de Gaulle and Chancellor Adenauer unfolded on July 8th, 1962, through their joint participation in a peace mass held at Reims Cathedral. Heavily laden with the historical scars of the Franco-Prussian War, World War I, and World War II, the city of Reims was a very apt



Source: Wikimedia Commons



Source: Klaus Pielert, "Die Hochzeit zwischen Michel und Marianne," Kölner Stadt-Anzeiger 1962, <https://tageswoche.ch/wp-content/uploads/2012/07/imagescms-image-000083601-1180x663.jpg>

setting to host such a transformative and symbolic event. A commemorative plaque, inscribed in both French and German, duly immortalizes the occasion, attributing to Monseigneur Marty, Archbishop of Reims, the declaration: "Excellency, Chancellor Adenauer and I come into your cathedral to seal the reconciliation of France and Germany."

The significance of the event was not lost upon the international community either, garnering a level of global attention that easily surpassed that of any prior meetings between the two leaders. Notably, a Cologne newspaper, reminiscing about Chancellor Adenauer's past tenure as that city's mayor, hailed their encounter as a symbolic wedding. In the accompanying cartoon, historical figures such as Wilhelm I, Chancellor Bismarck, Napoleon III, Napoleon I, Louis XIV, and Charlemagne were portrayed as groomsmen in the wedding.

Later, the pinnacle of this burgeoning friendship was marked on January 22, 1963, with the signing of the Treaty of Friendship between France and West Germany at the Elysee Palace in Paris (the Elysee Treaty). It has stood as the cornerstone of the enduring Franco-German partnership ever since. President de Gaulle's and Chancellor Adenauer's warm embrace immediately



https://www.eppgroup.eu/sites/default/files/styles/crop_838x582/public/photo/2013/01/elysee_0.jpg?itok=kU3Enc7v

after the signing, heralding more than six decades of the official reconciliation of France and Germany, invites us to contemplate the potential for similar great strides towards reconciliation in Northeast Asia's own future.

2. The Evolution of Franco-German Historical Reconciliation

1) Regular Diplomatic Engagements

Far from being a merely symbolic gesture of rapprochement, the Elysee Treaty derives its present-day status as the foundation of that process through its mandating of regular high-level meetings and consultations between France and the then West Germany. Specifically addressing matters of, among others, defense, education, and youth affairs, the persistence of these meetings and consultations stands as a testament to the enduring collaborative process initiated in 1963.

In 2003, marking the 40th anniversary of the Elysee Treaty, both countries mutually agreed to acknowledge dual citizenship for French and German residents in each other's territories, and to permit their respective governmental ministers to partake in each other's sessions. This latter historic step was first realized in 2010, when French Finance Minister Christine Lagarde attended Germany's weekly cabinet meeting.

Another significant event, commemorating the treaty's 40th anniversary, occurred when the Assemblée Nationale and the Deutsche Bundestag convened at the Palace of Versailles, graced by the presence of French President Jacques Chirac and German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder. Echoing the peace mass at Reims, the Palace of Versailles holds symbolic significance where both countries previously experienced moments of disgrace and humiliation; it witnessed the proclamation of German Empire after the Franco-German War and later served as the location where France coerced the defeated Germany of World War I into signing a harsh peace treaty.

Additionally, in January 2013, an extraordinary meeting of the Franco-German Council of Ministers and a joint parliamentary session were held in Berlin to honor the 50th anniversary of the Elysee Treaty. And then, fast-forwarding to January 2023, the 60th anniversary celebration



Source: Picture Alliance -DPA, https://www.deutschland.de/sites/default/files/styles/crop_page/public/media/image/392202467.jpg?itok=JwBk_97X

of the Elysee Treaty took place at Sorbonne University in Paris, with approximately 30 ministers and 200 lawmakers from both countries in attendance, including French President Emmanuel Macron and German Chancellor Olaf Scholz. Notably, during the ceremony, the Flag of Europe was raised alongside the German and French flags, symbolizing the inspiration provided and potential for a wider pan-European reconciliation and unity represented by the event.



Source: Macron's twitter, <https://pbs.twimg.com/media/FnGRcjdXgAEzDPz?format=jpg&name=900x900>

Further affirming this spirit, the leaders of both countries later presided over a joint ministerial meeting at the Elysee Palace, which is the official residence of the French President, and captured the moment by taking selfies afterwards. Despite occasional disagreements between France and Germany on various matters before and since, both countries remain well-known for setting an example with their persistent coordination and collaboration towards continuing to fortify their relationship.

2) Shared Historical Understanding

Alongside governmental meetings, efforts have also been made to bridge historical disparities between the peoples of both countries.

Prior to the Elysee Treaty, somewhat polarizing discrepancies in historical narratives existed. In particular, until World War II, Napoleon I and Chancellor Bismarck were glorified as heroes in their respective textbooks, while vilified as warmongers in those of the other countries. Furthermore, German textbooks depicted Napoleon III's policies against Germany as unwarranted interference that hindered German unification, whereas French textbooks viewed them as measures necessary for safeguarding France's security. This portrayal of a neighbor as a unilateral aggressor and oneself as a justified defender highlights the imperative for a jointly

agreed-upon narrative in order to move forward.

Consequently, following the Elysee Treaty, concerted efforts were made to facilitate shared historical awareness between both countries. Notable initiatives included joint history textbook compilations, exemplifying an endeavor to comprehend differing viewpoints without negating each country's perspectives. Early joint recommendations in 1987, and subsequent joint textbooks in 2006, delved into the nuances of shared histories, in particular acknowledging German resistance to the Nazis. France's attempts to prevent potential threats from Germany through its opposition to the US and UK recovery plans for post-World War II Germany were also highlighted.

In so doing, both Germany and France aspired to break free from a tumultuous past and cultivate a promising future. To further aid such goals, the German-French Youth Office was established in 1965, serving as a platform for youth exchanges. In the almost six decades since its creation, more than ten million teenagers have participated in diverse exchange programs, fostering long-term connections. Also, along with the joint Franco-German programs for secondary school students, the Franco-German University (FGU) was established as an international, collective institution following an intergovernmental agreement in 1997.

The FGU is a network of affiliated universities from France, Germany, and other countries to provide expert guidance on relations between French and German universities with the aim of improving cooperation in the areas of university study programs and research in both countries. Approximately 600,000 individuals have been estimated to be engaged in cross-border work as a result of its efforts.

Nonetheless, of crucial note is that sustained reconciliation between countries also requires complementary efforts in domestic politics and legal frameworks. In this vein, France has acknowledged the persecution of many Germans by the Nazis, recognizing them as victims, and, in so doing, attributed France's adversary not to the German people per se but to the power and ideology that oppressed them. Similarly, both the West German government before reunification

and the German government have consistently condemned Nazi war crimes through legal measures, signifying unwavering political support in doing so. Paradoxically, the rise and fall of extreme regimes, like the Nazis, paved the way for historical reconciliation between the two nations.

3) Adapting to a New International Order

The genesis of German-French reconciliation also stems partly from responding to the emergence of new global contenders. Throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries, France and Germany's relationship was heavily influenced by their vying for European hegemony. After the emergence of the superpowers of the United States and the Soviet Union in the Post-World War II era however, both Germany and France ultimately acknowledged they no longer had the ability to pursue such ambitions.

Be that as it may, it is also true that, initially, their reconciliation was spurred not only by the desire to foster unity between themselves, but also as a means of providing balance between the emerging superpowers, and to a lesser extent to counter the influence of the United Kingdom. For instance, the Elysee Treaty reflected de Gaulle's strong aspiration to secure a distinct role for France, and for its overall geopolitical policies to be aimed toward the Continent rather than the Atlantic. Consequently, France rejected Britain's attempts to join the EEC and the EC until as late as 1973. In the same vein, West Germany initially faced criticism from the US regarding the draft of the Elysee Treaty, due to its omission of provisions regarding the UK's EEC membership, and cooperation with NATO. Also, of particular note, it was only in initially opposing the proposal by the US to lift production restrictions in West Germany's Ruhr region, that in 1950 France's Foreign Minister Robert Schuman advocated joint management of coal and steel industries through transnational organizations to promote European solidarity. The fact remains though, that despite such pragmatic origins in reality, when West Germany, Italy, and Benelux accepted this proposal, leading to the establishment of the ECSC in 1952, and later the EC, and ultimately the EU, this moment would ultimately come to be considered a founding, pivotal moment in European reconciliation and integration.

3. Implications for Historical Reconciliation in Northeast Asia

1) Non-Hegemonic Reconciliation

The historical reconciliation between France and Germany bears significant lessons for Northeast Asia, currently a geopolitically tense and heavily militarized region.

Firstly, the aspirations for and exertion of regional hegemony stand as barriers to the advancement of reconciliation. So too, do distrust and animosity among Northeast Asian countries, heavily fueled by competing narratives over various historical grievances. Furthermore, the ongoing strong potential for nuclear or conventional arms races, even further destabilizing the region, remains profound.

A fundamental precondition for reconciliation or integration is the absence of perceived threats. In the case of France and Germany, reconciliation progressed when both countries acknowledged they no longer had any motives or gains to be made in threatening or provoking each other. Therefore, to achieve historical reconciliation or integration in Northeast Asia, countries wielding substantial military forces, particularly those countries with vocal, hostile international stances, should refrain from increasing their militaries. Each country should comprehend that the wariness and tit-for-tat mentality observed from neighboring countries can only diminish once one reduces its own threats to others accordingly.

Furthermore, Northeast Asia's situation necessitates the establishment of a regional community that eschews hegemonic aspirations. In particular, Korea's historical experience of subjugation to China and Japan, a victimized country, underscores its potential effectiveness in leading reconciliation and integration efforts. Korea, indeed, can play a pivotal role in fostering a Northeast Asian community by harmonizing disparities between countries while advocating a collective approach towards unity.

2) Historical Memory as the Legacy for Future Generations

Historical reconciliation is not an erasure of the past. Throughout the process of reconciliation between Germany and France, deliberate efforts were made to vividly recall the past without dismissing it, exemplified by aforementioned initiatives such as collaboratively authored history textbooks and shared memorials for historical events. Such transparency is essential for conveying the message that any steps towards reconciliation are sincere efforts.

In essence, forgiveness and reconciliation ought to be guided by the victims. Neither governments nor civic groups, nor even descendants, should unilaterally decide upon this process. Governments that failed to protect their people should acknowledge their failures and future responsibilities. Conversely, perpetrators, including their governments and descendants, must proactively exhibit a willingness to apologize. An attitude of reluctance in contrast, questioning why unrelated descendants should apologize for colonial rule, only hampers rather than fosters reconciliation.

Collaborative endeavors between Korea, China, and Japan, like joint historical research and the publication of joint history textbooks, have certainly been initiated. The Korea-Japan Joint Research Committee on History for example, launched following the 2001 Korea-Japan summit agreement, concluded a three-year joint study with a published final report. Subsequently, the second Korea-Japan Joint Research Committee concluded a two-and-a-half-year joint study with a final report in 2010. Similarly, the China-Japan Joint Research Committee on History, established after the 2006 China-Japan summit agreement, published a final report, albeit one criticized for significantly diverging from the Korean perspective.

Yet although the projects of joint publication on history textbooks involving these countries have yielded some results, their overall impact on promoting reconciliation in Northeast Asia has been disappointing. Likewise, initiatives to foster shared historical awareness in Northeast Asia have progressed slowly.

Nevertheless, similar to the Franco-German history textbook collaboration spanning over 80 years from the 1920s to the early 2000s, the Northeast Asian joint history textbook project is an enduring endeavor for historical reconciliation that requires sustained commitment rather than rushing towards short-term, surface-level results. This, in turn, speaks to how ignoring or forgetting the past precludes genuine reconciliation. Acknowledging differences and resolving misunderstandings through reflections on the past naturally paves the way for long-term apology, forgiveness, and reconciliation.

The intensity of current relations often exacerbates historical issues, just as historical issues can significantly strain present relationships. It is imperative to take proactive steps in the present for a more amicable future relationship. This involves actively advancing joint history textbook compilations from a universal perspective and fostering robust youth exchanges aimed at cultivating a shared vision among future generations.

3) Reframing Diplomatic Strategies for Historical Reconciliation

In the aftermath of World War II, the victorious Allies implemented robust policies to help curb nationalist factions from ascending to power in Germany. Contrarily, in Northeast Asia, hardline nationalist groups have had much freer rein, and their positions have been strengthened whenever historical issues resurfaced in this region. Neighboring countries should therefore stress supporting those critically examining their past instead, akin to Europe's approach, encouraging the possibilities for such reflective individuals to garner political influence within their respective countries. Rather than antagonizing entire populations of neighboring countries, efforts should focus on nurturing such rational voices.

In particular, the contentious issue of forced mobilization during Japan's colonial era, including the tragic plight of those that came to be known as Japanese Military 'comfort women,' demands a perspective centered on human security, rather than entangling it in nationalist rhetoric. Public diplomacy, in the realm of human security, proves more effective than conventional diplomatic approaches.

Contemporary Northeast Asia grapples with recurrent disputes over the origin of cultural practices. Historically and geopolitically, China assumes a central role in these disputes. Just like how despite ancient Rome's significant political and cultural dominance in Europe in the past, modern-day Italy does not lay exclusive claim to every facet of Western culture, China's attempt to claim certain cultures and customs as exclusively its own sparks conflict instead of fostering an Asian community. Heightened nationalism in one nation often stirs similar sentiments in neighboring countries. Conversely, post-nationalist efforts can propagate similar sentiments across borders. Public diplomacy, unlike traditional diplomacy, can operate within the realm of post-nationalism.

In contrast to public diplomacy's focus on the populace, summit diplomacy centers around national leaders. However, both forms of diplomacy, at opposite ends, are interconnected. Summit diplomacy, like public diplomacy, has the potential to advance post-nationalist historical reconciliation. The reconciliation between France and Germany was an outcome of mutual agreement between their leaders. Today's efforts for reconciliation in Northeast Asia necessitate the similarly active involvement of national leaders.

It is noteworthy that both de Gaulle and Adenauer led democratic countries. In democratic settings, reconciliation over external conflicts tends to be a more favorable political choice for leaders, as it aligns with the logic of democratic peace. Therefore, within democracies, there is a greater likelihood for non-hegemonic leaders to ascend to power. In Northeast Asia, democracies that do not pose threats to each other are best positioned to lead reconciliation efforts. Promoting historical reconciliation might even offer political benefits to leaders of non-democratic countries at times. The future of Northeast Asia appears promising, therefore, when national leaders actively steer historical reconciliation efforts.

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