

Summary: The experiences of Germany and Japan after World War II have been nothing short of miraculous. Germany and Japan, who for over 70 years have benefited from the international order and its value system and medium-sized powers today, should play a larger role in world affairs by employing their multilateralist abilities and cooperating more with other medium-sized powers, the United States, and the new, rising powers.

Seventy Years After World War II: German and Japanese Successes and Responsibilities

by Volker Stanzel

In many ways, the experiences of Germany and Japan after World War II have been nothing short of miraculous. Both countries lay in ruins after they lost the war. They lost their sovereignty to the victors and were deemed such a threat that the United Nations was created in October 1945 to prevent them from causing another catastrophe. Nevertheless, the United States, which lost half a million lives during the war, proved farsighted enough to invest billions of dollars in both countries and in Western Europe to rebuild economies that would eventually become its partners. Germany's neighbors were ready for reconciliation despite all of its atrocities, which stands in sharp contrast to how the victors of World War I treated the defeated powers. On all sides, there was a great longing for peace and reconstruction. Both Germany and Japan had been democratically structured, knowledge societies since they started their modernization processes in the 19th century, and had a strong foundation upon which to rebuild their countries and economies.

To understand the dimension of the success of the two countries' post-

war reemergence, consider how few sentiments of hate and aversion linger today. Not that they were completely absent. In the case of Germany, there is a suspicion that it may not be fully integrated into European structures. For instance, might Germany sacrifice the interests of its East European neighbors for the sake of its relationship with Russia? Or might Germany at some point steamroll over the interests of economically weaker EU members? The specter of a Germany not strong enough to dominate Europe but not ready to withstand that temptation reappears all too readily in the case of conflicts like the present one with Greece. In the case of Japan, despite successful reconciliation with most of its victims after the war, it has still not achieved normalcy in its relationships with Korea and China. Relations with Korea were reestablished only in 1965, and there was never a full effort for true reconciliation. Despite indemnities being paid and close civil society relations since the early 2000s, grievous emotions in Korea remain and revisionists in Japan every so often make statements about the war that let Koreans doubt on the sincerity of

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Japanese apologies. The Japanese-Chinese friendship treaty of 1972 contained an expression of Japan's remorse and a declaration by China to forgo war reparations. For more than 20 years, Japan was closer to China than the United States or any European country. That changed once China became stronger and discovered that past pain was a useful tool in bilateral conflicts. Now even the younger generations on each side to some degree raise old antagonisms.

Amazingly, these historical burdens are of marginal importance to the role both countries play internationally today. Japan has become the most stable — and affluent — democracy in Asia and an active member of the international community. As an oft-quoted statement goes, today Germany is accepted as a “European Germany” — an engine of European integration and a member of NATO — rather than feared for trying to create a “German Europe.” Both countries enjoy the trust not only of their direct neighbors but of partners worldwide. Pew and BBC polls annually have them at the top of the list of the most-liked countries in the world. This trust has enabled them to play significant constructive roles. They have both become skilled in using the instruments of multilateral diplomacy from inside the coalitions they are members of, but clearly not as their leaders. Their role is limited to that of medium-sized countries. But it is not insignificant. It is well worth considering whether the division of Europe would have been overcome without Germany or whether China would have grown to its present stature without Japan. The question today, 70 years after the two were defeated and set out on a new path, is whether the trust they enjoy and their multilateralist abilities will give them sufficient confidence to contribute more to tackling the pressing problems confronting the international community today.

The bipolar world of the Cold War is over. The unipolar moment of the post-Cold War period has passed as well. But a peaceful, multipolar world is not emerging. Instead, we have a world of dissolving order. The structures the international community has become used to are fading. The United States, the one country still assumed to be able to lead the world, is less and less ready to do so. This is less about its ability than about a lack of orientation and leverage in today's more fluid structures. The main problem is not that existing rules need to be replaced. The value of the existing rules is proven by the emancipation from colonialism and liberation from the absolute poverty so many countries have experienced over the past few decades. What

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is necessary is to employ the existing rules and structures more prudently. A greater readiness to shoulder responsibility is also necessary. And do Germany and Japan not owe to the international community, which made them members of a United Nations originally founded against them, a readiness to play a more active role?

The newest and gravest problem confronting the international community is the appearance of the so-called Islamic State. Invoking supposed “Islamic” values, it in effect denies the right of existence to all states except the “caliphate.” The burden of the responsibility for dealing with it rests with the Islamic countries of the Middle East. But it should be possible to create a coalition of Western and Islamic countries to solve the problem of the rise of a power that manages to attract young people from all over the world and denies the legitimacy of the values of the Enlightenment.

Rising powers have a right to occupy a position of their own in world affairs, possibly even to create a new one for themselves. Yet in possession of new and strong means of exerting influence, they at times tend to ride roughshod over smaller countries. It is necessary to support them in creating opportunities for their own people and for their international partners, while at the same time restraining them in the cases of assertiveness that are too robust.

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Russia is trying to rebuild the kind of empire that in the shape of the Soviet Union had a hegemonic say over its neighbors. The transatlantic community needs to deflect Russia's provocations toward its Central and Eastern European neighbors and to protect them, while at the same time leaving the door open to Russia to return to its position as a partner of EU and NATO countries, which it seemed to want after the downfall of the Soviet Union.

Humanity is confronted by other profound problems too: climate change, resource scarcity, pandemics, migration, international organized crime, and others. With less of a clear authority to turn to and less established ways of handling relations between countries, it is urgent to find ways to solve global problems in a "flat" world. The need to deal with these global problems is urgent and now is an appropriate moment for others to step up because the United States has been especially aware of the limits of its influence over global events of late.

Germany and Japan, who for over 70 years have benefited from the international order and its value system, and medium-sized powers today should play a larger role in world affairs by employing their multilateralist abilities and cooperating more with other medium-sized powers, the United States, and the new, rising powers. One might even argue that there is a moral obligation for the two countries that, with the help of the very countries they attacked, have become respected and well-liked international powers. Unfortunately, this kind of engagement by Germany and Japan has not happened so far. Japan works closely with the United States, but thus far it has not fully translated its experience in working inside multilateral institutions into initiating efforts to manage major global problems with others. Meanwhile, Germany has its hands full with the problems of the European Union. The stage is set for Japan and Germany to contribute more to preserving an international order that finds itself at risk — but is either country ready?

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