

The effects of ‘apology-backlash’ recurrence on Korea–Japan relations

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Abstract Even with the Comfort Women Agreement in 2015, not much seems to have improved. The victims are still requesting for a sincere apology of the Japanese Prime Minister, where Abe is *not at all considering*. Why are the victims again demanding another sincere apology even after numerous previous apologies? Why has this apology problem repeated for over 20 years despite tremendous efforts by both governments? By raising the question ‘*what are the mechanisms for Japanese political apologies and backlashes?*’ the paper aims to explain motivations for both apology and backlash. The significance of this paper is in its combination of two key concepts, apology and backlash, into a single framework and its explanation on Korea–Japan relations accordingly. Unlike previous literatures that stressed the importance of sincere apology for reconciliation between the two, this paper aims to show that such an argument rather blurs the comprehensive approach towards the apology problem. The arguments of the paper are twofold. First, the act of Japanese apology and backlash is not a result of sincere remorse of the past, but a result of inter/intra party competition for future political benefits. Second, despite the significance of apology in achieving stable reconciliation, it is unlikely that Japan will choose to express another apology.

Keywords Apology · Political backlash · Apology-backlash mechanism · Inter-party politics · Intra-party politics

Introduction

International politics has repeated conflict and reconciliation over the passage of years. In order to understand such repetition between nations, the field of International Relations (IR) has focused its study on the two key areas, respectively (Tavuchis 1991; Philips 1998;

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Ackermann 1994, pp. 229–250). However, even after a long period of effort to end what seemed to be the never-ending conflict, international politics still floundered in the volatile status of war and peace. Cooperation and reconciliation between nations were no more than a temporary and fragile status that could whenever be broken down in a single strike of conflict.

In order to tackle such limitations, scholars began paying attention to a mid-positioned research field that could provide theoretical explanation of processes in between conflict and reconciliation—apology being one of them. Scholars, such as Cohen (2004), Dodds (2003), and Weyeneth (2001) argued that political apology based on sincere remorse of the past is the strongest symbolic action that can lead two conflicting countries to reconciliation. In other words, without a sincere apology, reconciliation was hard to achieve. Unlike personal apology, official apology from a nation is a result of not only complex political involvement of only two related governments, but also domestic groups and international circumstances surrounding the specific period. Considering such complexity, political apology by a nation has been neglected in the field of IR; however, it deserves significant academic attention.

The relationship between Korea and Japan also falls under such academic trends. Literatures have dedicated effort to understand the distinctive characteristics of the two and tried to explain what leads the two countries to conflict or cooperation. Large portion of literatures have pointed out the effects of domestic variables, such as resurgence of historical nationalism, or regional variables, such as rise of China or North Korea, as an external threat had on bilateral relationship (Chun 2005, pp. 91–125; Soeya 2012; Sohn 2009; Samuels 2007; Lee 2012; Shunji 2012; Park 2015, pp. 134–167; Hasegawa and Togo 2008). However, even despite years of effort to explain the repetition, Korea and Japan were still struggling from a fragile relation. This led scholars to the mid-positioned research field so as to thoroughly explain the processes in between conflict and cooperation—apology being a large part of it.

To look at some of the cases: Germany has long been considered a successful nation in making sincere apology. Germany's apology and reparation began in the mid-1960s with President Heinemann and Chancellor Brandt. The two leaders acknowledged the aggression made by the Germans and accordingly made reparations to the neighboring countries. Germany's apology was also a result of complex involvement of not only the governments, but also domestic parties, moreover, the international agenda of German unification. As Grosser (1977) argues, Germany was able to achieve effective and successful political apology which led to reconciliation with its neighboring countries like France, despite lack of active and continuous apology.¹

Unlike Germany, however, Japan has long been considered a nation with unsuccessful apology diplomacy. Since the diplomatic normalization between the two countries in 1965, Japanese Prime Ministers have made numerous apologies, namely, 1993 Kono statement and 1995 Murayama statement. Most recently under the Comfort Women Agreement in 2015, Abe's administration not only delivered the acknowledgement and apology for Japan's past wrongdoings, but also financed ¥1 billion aid fund for the victims. However, even after numerous apologies from the Japanese government, the victims and the Korean people are still demanding for another *remorse and sincere* apology as they have done for the past 20 years. Polls show that Korea still recognizes 'unapologetic attitude' as the

¹ According to Grosser, a German political scientist, France's perception of Germany shifted from *no enemy but Germany* in 1944 to *no friend but Germany* in the 1960 s. In 1965, France perceived Germany as *the best friend of France*.

biggest barrier that blocks a sound relation (EAI 2016). Unlike theories, Japanese political apology has caused more conflicts rather than stable reconciliation. This led scholars to raise questions as what is so different about Japanese apology compared to that of the Germany? Why have numerous apologies led to conflict rather than reconciliation?

Previous literatures on Japanese political apology² have tried to explain the aforementioned questions. The first school had its focus on the *absence or reluctance* of apology (Field 1995; Benfell 2002; Weyeneth 2001; Han 1999; Park 2004). Benfell argues that the Tokyo trial, as a result, exempted the war criminal, notably to the conservatives, and the Emperor from war responsibilities. This gave Japan the legal immunity for its past aggression making it difficult for the nation to apologize, and reluctant to repeatedly express its apology (Benfell 2002, p. 6). However, then, how can numerous political apologies made by conservative political leaders, such as Miyazawa, Obuchi, Koizumi, or Abe, be explained? How can the official declaration of reconciliation that was made by Obuchi and Kim Dae Jung in 1998 be explained?

The second school had its focus on the *effectiveness* of given apologies (Dodds 2003; Nobles 2008; Lind 2011). Lind argues that the fundamental reason for the ineffectiveness of Japanese apology is in its political denials—what she terms, *political backlash* (Lind 2009, p. 520). Whenever a political apology is expressed by Prime Ministers or officials, the opposing parties deny and refuse such an apology while justifying Japan's past aggression. These political backlashes, caused by apology, rather provoke the victims while diminishing the given apology and consequently lead to another conflict. Thus, another sincere apology would rather cause more conflict than reconciliation. Such arguments have made a considerable contribution by shedding light on the significance of political backlash in understanding apology between inter-states. However, as Lind points out, further studies on the causes of political backlashes are necessary in order to explain apology-backlash problem comprehensively (Lind 2009, p. 548). Without such research we are still left with questions of why Korea is asking for another sincere apology even after numerous apologies were made? Why do Japanese domestic groups choose to apologize or backlash at certain points in certain ways? Most importantly, how does this apology-backlash recurrence affect the bilateral relationship? These unanswered questions are critical in understanding the past, present, and the future Korea–Japan relations.

Thus, this paper explores the question of '*what are the mechanisms for political apologies and backlashes?*' The reasons for raising such question are as follows. First, it aims to explore the motivations of political backlashes. Previous literatures, especially the second school, have set political backlashes only as an independent variable, elaborating mostly on the effects and the impacts of such actions. However, by setting political backlash as a dependent variable, the paper aims to explore why such backlashes occur at a certain point in a certain way. Such an approach is distinctive, but extends questions of the previous literatures.

Second, it aims to provide explanation on the 'apology-backlash' recurrence—the *apology problem*. Unlike previous literatures, this paper combines two concepts into one frame. By doing so, the paper aims to explain the recurrences of apology-backlash which together shapes the soundness of Korea and Japan relations. Most literatures have

² Study on rhetoric of apology is another important field in the study of apology. Taking major portions within apology studies, it explores what a meaningful political apology is or the basic elements of political apologies (Yamazaki 2012; Kim 2011; Chun 2014; Chun 2015). By examining whether an official apology includes terms such as 'aggression', 'colonial rule', 'a deep remorse', or 'heartfelt apology', it evaluates the sincerity and acceptableness of the apology. This may explain the completeness of each apology, but cannot provide comprehensiveness of the whole apology issue.

concluded the motivations for apology and domestic backlash as a result of historical perception—sincere remorse of the past wrongdoings. However, considering that a political action is a result of complex calculation of benefits and cost, historical perception cannot alone provide explanation for such political choices. Thus, by looking at the reasons of recurrence of ‘apology-backlash,’ the paper aims to provide comprehensive explanation on the apology problem.

Key concepts and theoretical framework

The subject of apology is confined to expressions on past aggression, colonial rule, and comfort women issue. Although, Dokdo/Takeshima, enforced labor and compensation issues are important, these issues are judicial matters and thus do not fall under the subject of apology. Accordingly, the paper defines apology as ‘*remorse expressions of past aggression, colonial rule and the comfort women.*’

In case of political backlash, it can be defined as ‘*(un)official verbal expressions or visible actions taken individually or collectively aimed to deny apologies made by (former) Prime Ministers or official.*’ Backlashes containing verbal expressions refer to statements or speeches by Prime Ministers or officials (Diet members) that deny the subject of apologies. On the other hand, backlashes containing visible actions refer to conduct of visiting Yasukuni shrines, forming anti-apologetic organizations, or distorting historical facts in the textbooks.

Unlike literatures which differentiated stances on apology of domestic actors by major political parties, this paper divides the key political factions (groups) within those major parties, mainly Liberal Democratic Party (hereafter, LDP) and Democratic Party of Japan (hereafter, DPJ). Since the key argument of this paper is that apology and backlashes are the results of inter/intra party competition among the factions rather than sincere remorse of the past, discussing key political stances of each political faction is crucial in understanding the domestic and foreign policies of each administration. As shown in Table 1, LDP has five major political factions: Seiwa, heisei, Kochikai, Shisuikai, and the Ikkokai.

Table 1 Intra-political factions in liberal democratic party Source Ko (2015), pp. 58–95

Name	Key figures	Political stance
Seiwa	Abe	[Far-right conservatives] Revision of constitution, remilitarization, Stronger US–Jap Alliance, stronger national defense
Heisei	Obuchi, Hashimoto	[Liberal conservatives] Pro-China, Pro-Korea, Asia-centered
Kochikai	Miyazawa	[Liberal conservatives] Emphasis on US–Japan Alliance, liberal values
Shisuikai	Nakasone, Eto	[Conservative-right] Revision of constitution, strong North Korea Policies Oppose Privatization of Japan Post, Traditional Values
Ikkokai	Kono, Aso	Kono [Liberal] Pro-China Aso [Far-right] Pro-Taiwan

On the other hand, as shown in Table 2, DPJ also has five major political factions based on its political position: Itshinkai, Association for the Realization of Political Promises, Transcendent Association, Country Form Research Society, and the Kaseikai.

Table 2 Intra-political factions in democratic party of Japan *Source* Park et al. (2014), pp. 70–93

Name	Key figures	Political stance
Itshinkai	Ozawa	Against tax raise, Asia-centered
Association for the realization of political promises	Hatoyama	[Middle-conservatives/pro-Ozawa] Against tax raise, equal alliance, Asia-centered
Transcendent association	Maehara	[Conservative/anti-Ozawa] For tax raise, revision of constitution
Country Form Research Society	Kan	[Middle-left conservatives/anti-Ozawa] For tax raise, Asia-centered
Kaseikai	Noda	[Far-right conservatives/Anti-Ozawa] For tax raise, strong Asia diplomacy

Research period

In terms of the research period, the paper divided periods into three phases: the first phase (Miyazawa to Hashimoto, 1991–1998), the second phase (Obuchi to Aso, 1998–2009), and the third phase (Hatoyama to Abe, 2009–2016). The division was based on the following conditions. First, apology issues became politicized in 1990s. Prior to 1990s, the issues were marginalized under military government in Korea. Second, official apologies by Prime Ministers began to be expressed after 1990. The first Prime Minister to express official apology after 1990 was Miyazawa. Third, apology issue of today cannot be explained without the apologies of the past. The mechanism of apology-backlash repetition can generally be understood in the process of 'Japanese apology- Japanese backlash- Korean criticism- Japanese re-apology/re-backlash.' As shown in the case of Abe's administration, backlash to apology made in 1995 occurs in 2012. Thus, it is important to analyze the periods from 1990 to 2016 in a single framework. Last but not least, the division into phases was based on the policy shift from either apology to non-apology or the vice versa (Fig. 1).

Phase	Apology Diplomacy		Backlash Diplomacy	
	Major Features	Administration	Administration	Major Features
1 st Phase ⁴ 91-98	Apology on comfort women issue	Miyazawa 91-93		
	Kono Statement	Hosokawa 93-94		
	Murayama Statement	Murayama 94-96		
			→ Hashimoto 96-98	Justification of colonial rule, Worship Yasukuni
2 nd Phase 98-09	Korea-Japan Joint Declaration	Obuchi 98-00	←	
	Succession of Obuchi	Mori 00-01		
			→ Koizumi 01-05	Six consecutive worship of Yasukuni
			Abe 06-07	Denial of military involvement in comfort women issue
			Fukuda 07-08	Avoiding expression of apology
			Aso 08-09	Denial of military involvement in comfort women issue
3 rd Phase 09-16	Refusal of Yasukuni worship	Hatoyama 09-10	←	
	Kan Statement	Kan 10-11		
			→ Noda 11-12	Denying comfort women's characteristic as 'sex slavery'
			Abe 12-16	Revising Murayama Statement, Refusing further measures of 2015 Agreement

Fig. 1 Position of past administrations on apology and backlash

Based on the research period, the paper will focus in explaining why certain political parties or factions choose apology whereas others shift to backlashes in each phase. Although intra/inter party competition is a useful theoretical framework in explaining the occurrence of apology and backlash, it cannot explain the degree and the depth of each apology and backlash. To complement such limits, the paper also sheds light on regional and Korean factors such as the advent of common external threats, shifts in US' Asia policy, or rise of China. By explaining how these factors affected the degree and the depth of specific apology or backlash, the paper aims to explain causes of not only the occurrence but also the degree and the depth of each apology and backlash, in turn, providing a comprehensive approach to the apology problem.

The first phase (1991–1998): should Japan apologize or not?

Advent of apology diplomacy: Miyazawa, Hosokawa, Murayama administration (1991–1996)

With the end of the cold war, one of the changes for East Asian countries was the necessity for a new identity in their foreign policy. The cold war's frame of communism versus liberalism was no longer an effective tool. It could neither sustain Chinese nationalism nor anti-communism for both Japan and South Korea. The death of Emperor Showa, the long period of economic recession, and the demand for an active role in the international society led Japan to search for its national grand strategy (Han 1999, pp. 113–117). Another significant change took place in domestic politics. While Korea and China experienced a

rapid economic growth, Japan, on the other hand, was experiencing a long decade of economic recession since the Plaza Accord in 1985. This naturally led Japan for a stable political and economic surrounding its recovery.

Under such political circumstances, two incidents led Miyazawa administration towards apology diplomacy: participation in peacekeeping operations and the politicization of the comfort women issue. With the outbreak of the Gulf war, Japan was asked to provide support. Although Japan ended up providing \$13 billion, Japan was not only exempted from the appreciation list by Kuwait but also from after-war negotiation led by the US. Japan realized that economic diplomacy that has no military foundation was of no use. This led Japan for a more active and stronger foreign policy (Kim 1992, p. 37). However, an identity shift from a peaceful to a stronger country not only faced resistance within, but strongly from its neighboring countries. Both Korea and China expressed its worries by issuing statements stressing that “Japan should not forget its past wrongdoings it has done to neighboring countries”. (DongA 1992) Japan had to ease the worries if it were to achieve its political goal.

With the gulf war shock, a critical incident led Japan to adopt apology diplomacy, the politicization of comfort women issue. However, the initial response of Japanese government official, Mottoka Shoji, was a denial. The Korean Council for Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan (hereafter, Korean Council for Comfort Women) angrily demanded for apology. This was the beginning of ever-repeating apology-backlash phenomenon. The turning point of the game was the document that was publicized by Yoshiaki Yoshimi that proved the involvement of Japanese military in systemizing military brothels. Despite being a LDP government, such document left no choice but to admit its involvement and to apologize. On January 13th, Koichi Kato, Chief Cabinet Secretary, made an official apology and Prime Minister Miyazawa also apologized to the victims, accordingly. After further and thorough investigations in 1993, Japanese government, once again, officially apologized with a document that stipulated military involvement, the Kono Statement. This marked the beginning of Japanese apology diplomacy.

The apology diplomacy also continued in Hosokawa's administration; however, not because of Hosokawa's sincere remorse of the past but because of its political calculation. The result of the 40th Lower House election in 1993 was unprecedented. The division within the LDP, led by Ozawa's breakaway, resulted in losing its position as the major party for the first time in 38 years. With no party having a single majority, Hosokawa formed a coalition of non-LDP and non-Communist Parties. The key issues for Hosokawa administration were reformation of electoral system, opening rice markets, and adjusting national welfare taxes. To do so, however, cooperation of the Socialist Party was critical since it held 77 seats, the largest within the coalition government (JoongAng 1993). The apology diplomacy, which the Socialist Party has long argued for, was a useful political measure to promote cooperation with the progressives. Despite harsh political backlashes from the opposition parties, even condemning the administration for infecting 'apology disease', Hosokawa expressed his apologies four times that included the term 'profound remorse' and 'apology'.

A recurrence of issuing official apology reignited the debate of whether Japan should apologize. Such a debate was most contentious in 1995. Being the first progressive Prime Minister, Murayama wanted to make it clear of Japanese national identity as a peaceful nation by making a national apology in the form of a Diet resolution. The progressives asserted that the resolution should include key terms of 'regret of past aggression' and 'apology.' However, such a proposal was faced with fierce political backlashes by opposition parties, namely the New Frontier Party. Although the Diet resolution was passed, the

term ‘apology’ was left out which ultimately satisfied neither faction of pros and cons. Facing criticisms not only from coalition parties but also from its neighbors, Korea, Murayama, on October 15th 1995, made a statement that included the aggression, colonial rule, a deep remorse, and apology. Murayama tried to rectify the inconsistency of past political stances on apology and establish the country’s national identity as a ‘peaceful nation’ (Park 2011, p. 275).

This was met with strong political backlashes and complaints from the anti-apologetic factions (Park 2004, pp. 311–322). Some diet members created groups that aimed to deny Murayama’s apology and to show their disagreement towards Socialist Parties diplomatic stance. Shimamura Yoshinobu argued that “there needs to be no more apologies for the Pacific War and making apologies are signs of indignity”. Minister Eto Takami also expressed that “Murayama’s apology is wrong. Not all the actions of the colonial period were wrong”. (Hankyoreh 1995) Korean government strongly condemned the expressions and even tried to cancel Korea–Japan Summit that was to be held in a few days. To resolve the tension, Murayama sent a letter to President Kim Young Sam stating that such acts of backlashes were wrong and made Eto to resign from his position. Murayama administration actively tried to sustain its apology diplomacy through after measures. Since this point, the politics of apology was not a game of sincere remorse of the past, but was rather a competition between the progressives versus conservatives, mainly represented by Socialist Party and LDP. This gave significant importance on which political faction holds power in explaining the recurrence of apology-backlash.

Rise of political backlashes: Hashimoto Administration (1996–1998)

The political efforts to sustain apology diplomacy ended with the advent of Hashimoto administration in January 1996. He denied the wrongdoings of the Pacific War and even made territorial claims as well as official worship of the Yasukuni shrines as his campaign agenda. Despite being from the *heisei* faction of LDP, reluctant for strong nationalism, political backlashes heightened during the period as a result of *inter-party political competition* between the progressives and the conservatives. How and why did Hashimoto administration choose such a dramatic diplomatic shift?

First, the ideological collapse of the Socialist Party was one reason. Socialist Party has argued for anti-US–Japan alliance and anti-SDF. However, with Murayama becoming the Prime Minister and the commander in chief, opposing US–Japan alliance and the SDF was illogical and contradictory. Ironically, Murayama becoming the Prime Minister led Socialist Party to abandon its long-argued identity which, in turn, set the beginning of the ideological collapse of the Party.

Second, the political collapse of small parties was also critical. The root cause of such collapse is attributable to the change of Japanese electoral system. Japan replaced its old electoral system, with a new, mixed member system. This brought a tremendous political change by lowering the possibility of small parties, such as Communist Party or Socialist Party, from entering the Diet (Park 2007, pp. 214–216). LDP won 28 more seats than the previous election at the 41st Lower House election in 1996, whereas Socialist Party (hereafter, Socialist-Democratic Party, SDP) lost 14 seats. SDP won total of only five seats in 1998. Such ideological and political collapses made the SDP to lose its political drive to apologetic and peaceful diplomacy. The foundation for check and balance on foreign policy started to lean towards one side.

On top of such a political situation, the rationale for Hashimoto’s drive towards non/anti-apologetic diplomacy can be found in the formation of his coalition government. The

Table 3 Number of Anti-apology Groups Organized *Source* Ku (2014)

Year	1985	1990	1993	1995	1996	1997	2000	2001
Number	1	1	1	2	1	5	1	1
Year	2002	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2010	2011
Number	2	2	2	1	5	2	1	1

coalition government consisted of LDP, SDP, and the New Party Sakigake. The administration was divided into two factions: one advocating for the coalition with the SDP and the other opposing it. The division was based on each faction's position on the SDP's apologetic diplomacy (Park 2011, pp. 283–284). However, as aforementioned, with SDP's consecutive loss of seats in the elections and the resignation of liberal conservative leader, Kono, political merits of maintaining coalition started to decrease.

With no political faction to balance the LDP, stronger political backlashes were possible. This can be evidenced by pursuit of nationalistic policies, such as official visits to the Yasukuni shrines and the growth of anti-apologizing political organizations, by both the government and the Diet members. The political organizations, although different in their names, all commonly condemned and refused the self-torturing, apologetic diplomacy pursued by the SDP in the early and mid-1990s. Although they were against apology, the fundamental characteristic was anti-SDP. This provided stronger characteristic to inter/intra party competition leading to apology rather than sincere remorse of the past. As shown in Table 3, the political backlash heightened in between Murayama and Hashimoto administration with half of them organized in 1997 alone. In this sense, the cause of heightened political backlashes was the result of *inter-party political competition* between the progressives (SDP) and the conservatives (LDP).

The second phase (1998–2009): how anti-apologists knocked down apologists

Back to apology: Obuchi, Mori administration (1998–2000)

The regional and international political changes in the second phase were as rapid as in the early 1990s. Financial crises struck Asia and terrorism suddenly became an important security issue. Most of all, missile threat from North Korea became imminent. Under these circumstances, Obuchi administration, replacing Hashimoto, was faced with urgent political and economic tasks. Korean officials expected not so much of a big change from Hashimoto to Obuchi administration considering that Hashimoto and Obuchi were both from *heisei* faction (JoongAng 1998). However, Obuchi and Kim Dae Jung's administration marked the unprecedented heyday of Korea and Japan relations. Obuchi apologized, Kim accepted it, and both countries even declared reconciliation. The fact that grand strategies differ even within the same political faction proves apology is not a matter of sincerity but of political calculation. Then, how is the Obuchi political strategy different from Hashimoto?

First, economic recovery was the utmost priority for Obuchi administration. Japan underwent a continuous decline in its economic performances from 5.57% in 1990 which even dropped to −2% in 1998, the worst record in the last 10 years. (The World Bank 2016) Financial corporations began to fall and big banks underwent bankruptcy. Obuchi's

urgency was reflected in name of the administration, “Cabinet for Economic Revitalization”. The situation in Korea, under President Kim Dae Jung, was similar. Both leaders knew that cooperation was vital in achieving economic recovery which provided a conducive condition for partnership. Diplomatic conflict was needless, for both.

Second, a more direct reason that triggered apology was the missile threat from North Korea. On August 1998, North Korea launched a long-range ballistic missile, Taepodong, which overflowed the mainland of Japan and splashed down in the Pacific Ocean. Japan convened a National Security Council and expressed its ‘shock and anger’ and shared the perception that the military action was a ‘serious threat to national security’. Such military provocation required a change in the military cooperation among US, Japan, and Korea (Hideki 2007, pp. 199–200). However, domestic politics in South Korea were not favorable to military cooperation with Japan due to its historical memory. Japan had to prove its non-belligerent and benign intention.

A month later, on October 8th, Prime Minister Obuchi made an official apology to Korean people and the government which President Kim accepted and declared a future prospective relationship based on reconciliation. Both governments focused on formulating an Action Plan to deter the threat posed by North Korea, where annual Security dialogues and frequent information exchanges were planned. This also led to a Joint Naval Training and establishment of hot line. Obuchi’s grand foreign strategy was to establish a stable diplomatic environment to focus on his utmost priority, the economic recovery. This led the administration to establish ‘Friendly-Cooperative Relationship’ with China and ‘Creative Partnership’ with Russia. Apology was one useful political measurement to achieve such a grand strategy.

The apologetic foreign policy and high level of cooperation were struck with fierce political backlashes from anti-apology groups. As Senkai reported, members of the anti-apology groups denied and refused to make an official apology based on the remorse of the past (Senkai 1998). They expressed ‘apology fatigue’ where Prime Ministers have to repeatedly express its remorse and apology whenever the administration changes. Such repetitive political apologies made future administrations reluctant to issue another official apology. Despite such political backlashes, effort to establish a sound diplomatic relation was stabilized when coalition with the Liberal Party and Komeito Party was made in 1999. Under the calculation that in order to pass bills that were required to revitalize the financial market, LDP had to partner up with the two parties. The commonality that *heisei* faction shared with Komeito was in its foreign policy strategy, where both put stress on a sound diplomatic relation with its neighboring countries, especially with China. Komeito served to balance LDP’s foreign policy. However, such settlement began to quake with the sudden resignation of Obuchi due to his health status and with the incompetence of Mori.

Knocking down apology diplomacy: Koizumi, Abe, Fukuda, Aso administration (2000–2009)

Obuchi administration’s sound and stable diplomatic relation with Korea was maintained for another 2 years until Koizumi’s advent as Prime Minister. Unlike the previous LDP leaders, Koizumi was from a different political faction, the *seiwa*. The advent of a far-right conservative leader was a game changer in Japanese foreign policy. Since the progressives lost its political power in the beginning of 1995, Koizumi found no merit of competing with the progressives. Rather, Koizumi sought to strengthen *seiwa*’s position within the LDP by eliminating the liberal conservatives both politically and ideologically. He aimed to eliminate the liberalness color of LDP that had been pervasive for the last decade. Thus,

the political backlashes in Koizumi's period were a result of *intra-party political competition* within the LDP, specifically between the conservative liberals (*heisei/cochi*) and conservative rights (*seiwa*).

To achieve such a goal, first, he excluded the *heisei* faction when constituting his first cabinet. Unlike the past where balanced allocation of seats among factions was stressed, Koizumi ignored such tradition. Out of 18 positions, he only brought two from the *heisei* faction in his Cabinet. Second, in the process of dissolution of the Lower House in 2003, Koizumi excluded former Prime Minister Nakasone and Miyazawa from the official nomination. Third, Koizumi pushed postal privatization. Holding nearly 30% of Japan's total deposit providing the *heisei* faction with tremendous political leverages, privatizing Japan Post was fatal. Through such measures, Koizumi tried to strengthen *seiwa* position while weakening other factions at the same time.

Koizumi's strategies were also realized in his foreign policy. He basically denied and reversed all the core policies that were made by the liberal factions, apology being one of them. First, Koizumi worshiped Yasukuni shrines 6 times consecutively, despite strong resistance from both Korea and China. The Korean government strongly condemned the visit by issuing statements that emphasized the 'worries and the anger.' Visiting Yasukuni was a signal of justifying the past aggression of Japanese military since 1990 (Nam 2015, 379–410). In spite of such perception, Koizumi visited Yasukuni six straight times. During his visits to Yasukuni shrines, he was also accompanied by the Diet members. 'Association of Diet Members for Worshipping at Yasukuni Shrine Together' encouraged collective action of the members to visit the shrines.

Second, ministry of education verified far-right historical textbooks. In April 2001, Ministry of Education verified eight far-right historical textbooks that were published by 'Japan Society for History Textbook Reform,' a far-right group within Japan. These textbooks exempted the delineation of comfort women issue, justified colonization of Korea as modernization and stressing the victim-identity of Japan in the Pacific War. These movements were also paralleled with the civil society. The fact that the Tokyo Board of Education penalized 250 members of the teacher's union who refused being loyal to national courtesy and Ishihara Shintaro, a far-right figure, being elected as the governor of Tokyo reflected such inclination.

Third, anti-apology groups rapidly increased in Koizumi's administration. As shown in Table 3, nine groups were organized during Koizumi's period. Such rapid rise of anti-apologetic groups implies the solidness of these far-right ideologies (Lee 2014, p. 101). Even serious was the political statements made by official and Diet members: Aso Taro, Secretary-general of the LDP, commented that "changing Korean names to Japanese names during the colonial period were done voluntarily rather than mandatorily."

Table 4 Political stance survey of Japanese Diet Member in 2000s Source Lee 2014, p. 101

Issue	Year	For (%)	Against (%)	Respondents
Strengthening defense	2003	48.2	20.2	456
	2005	52.1	30.1	396
Constitution revision	2003	29.8	39.9	456
	2005	34.9	40.7	396
Preemptive military attack	2003	31.4	31.6	456
	2005	35.2	30.2	396

Although similar anti-apologetic comments were also made in the 1990s, governments, namely Murayama administration, blocked such comments and, if not, canceled or dismissed the concerned official. However, with already solidified far-right ideology as shown in Table 4, similar measures were not made in Koizumi's administration. Koizumi saw no reason or merit in doing so. Unlike the 1st phase, where apology issues were central to each political faction's identity shaping, apology began losing its political significance with the advent of Koizumi. Denying or reversing apologetic diplomacy was one part of Koizumi's grand strategy settings.

The movement towards far-right was further solidified with the advent of Abe, Fukuda, and Aso administration. Abe's ideology-based policies, however, did not earn the support from the public. The election in 2007 well reflected such a situation. LDP lost its position as a major party which was replaced by the DPJ. To alleviate the loss, LDP appointed Yasuo Fukuda who was relatively liberal compared to Abe. Although Fukuda did not express any additional official apology, the administration tried to recover the damaged diplomatic relationship. In 2008, Aso came to the office facing World Financial Crisis in 2008. The situation bridled him to avoid any diplomatic conflict and to focus on domestic issue. To overcome the crisis, Aso actively participated in regional cooperation with Korea and Japan so as to solve the economic issue. Such domestic and foreign policies directly contradicted the Koizumi's policy, which led to the criticism of 'losing *seiwa* color.' The crack within LDP started to worsen and finally in 2009, DPJ replaced the administration, heralding a different but brighter diplomatic relation.

The third phase (2009–2016): no more apologies, no more

Struggle to bring back apology diplomacy: Hatoyama, Kan administration (2010–2011)

The economic and military rises of China and US pivot to Asia were key regional and international environments surrounding East Asia in 2010. Under these political grounds, for the first time in history, DPJ replaced LDP. When DPJ were formed in 1996, the key positions were anti-LDP, anti-Communist Party, anti-Komeito Party. By absorbing factions that fell into the criteria, DPJ firmly stood as the leading opposition party finally in 2003. LDP holding the administration in the 2000s, DPJ's main political stance settled into *anti-LDP*. Instead of dealing with urgent social and economic agendas, focusing on ideology and non-urgent issues, the public turned their backs on the LDP and put their political hopes to DPJ.

The first task for DPJ was to differentiate itself from LDP. In order to draw a clear line with the LDP administrations, a middle-conservative within the DPJ, Yukio Hatoyama chose policies that were directly opposite of the LDP. Domestically, reversing *negatacho* politics, he stressed policies that directly affected people's daily lives such as highway tolls; petrol tax; and revitalizing vibrant agricultural, forestry, and fishing communities-enhancing welfare programs. Internationally, rather than strengthening US–Japan alliance and remilitarizing, he iterated an equal US–Japan alliance and Asia-centered diplomacy which led to pursuing East Asian Communities. (Sohn 2009, p. 3) Through such measures, the administration tried to make clear of its anti-LDP political stance.

The key idea of East Asian Community was to promote cooperation among small and middle power countries that shared similar security concerns under the two great powers,

US and China. South Korea was definitely one of them, raising its strategic value. Despite fierce resistance and backlashes from the opposition side, Hatoyama visited the National Cemetery in his visit to Korea. He also made it clear of his administration's succession of Murayama statement. However, the domestic policies were bridled by lack of budgets and relocating U.S. Futenma military base was struck with strong opposition both within and out. His policies were ideologically convincing but realistically unrealizable.

Thus, Kan administration relatively adopted a political approach of *half-LDP and half-DPJ*. Such shifts were based on three facts. In July 2010, an anti-LDP and anti-DPJ, the Minnato Party political faction earned ten additional seats compared to the previous election. This implied that the public were disappointed by both major parties. Kan tried to reflect such reality. Moreover, since Kan was from the 'Country Form Research Society,' a more middle-left conservative, he had to differentiate himself from Hatoyama. Last but not least, the military rise and threat of China from the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands dispute in 2010 was the critical juncture for Japanese foreign policy transition (Park 2010, p. 5). The incident led Kan to strengthen US–Japan alliance in accordance with US pivot to Asia policy. Under US pivot to Asia and with North Korea's threat shown from Cheonan warship incident in 2010, strategic cooperation with South Korea became inevitable. The government had to be realistic.

Japan actively pursued friendly diplomacy to Korea. Japan returned 1205 volumes of Korean historical texts looted during Japan's colonial rule. Moreover, Japan conveyed an official apology based on acknowledgement of aggression and sincere remorse through Kan statement in 2010. What was notable was that the statement, unlike the previous ones, only targeted Korea in expressing its apology. Apology was once again a useful political tool to achieve such foreign policy goals. As in the past, immediate political backlashes were made. Around 20 members of conservative rights from both the DPJ and LDP, such as Matsbara Jin and Maki Yoshio, formed anti-apologetic groups and stated that "apology to Korea harmed national pride of Japan." Despite such backlashes, Korean government and the Korean Council for Comfort encouraged and welcomed Kan's effort to overcome the past atrocities.

No more apologies: Noda, Abe administration (2012–2016)

However, due to weak military response to China during the Senkaku dispute and its incompetence in recovering the aftermaths of east Japan earthquake, political support for DPJ began to decline. Resurgence back to conservatism within Japanese society heightened. With the advent of Noda who was from 'Transcendent Association,' a far-right conservative within the DPJ, Japanese foreign policy began its shift, again, to the right end. Noda's domestic and foreign policies were more *quasi-LDP*. Noda differentiated himself with Hatoyama and Kan by bringing up the issue of consumption tax raise which Ozawa was strongly against. This led to Ozawa leaving the party, creating a crack in DPJ. Noda insisted that the "A-class war criminals are not guilty" and the "comfort women issues were already a finished issue in 1965." These political backlashes were also results of *intra-party political competition* within the DPJ, specifically among the *middle-conservatives*, *middle-left*, and *far-right* factions. It undermined Korea and Japan relations which just seemed to have recovered from a severe fluctuation.

On top of this situation, President Lee Myung Bak visited Dokdo/Takeshima while demanding for an apology from the Emperor. This *put a period mark* to the apologetic effort. This shocked and angered the Japanese political and civil society. Gemba Koichiro, Minister of Foreign Affairs, commented that President Lee's actions were "difficult to

understand and extremely regrettable” (MOFA Japan 2012). However, criticisms were pointed more towards the DPJ rather than the Korean government for its incompetence on foreign policy. The opposition parties argued that President Lee’s visit was a result of DPJ’s failed diplomacy. This gave greater support for anti-apologetic and far-right tended foreign policy. Strong political protests by right-wing civil groups took place and even attacks at the Korean Embassy were made. The relationship between the two countries was at its worst. Although Dokdo/Takeshima was not a direct subject of apology, President Lee’s visit to the island, without a doubt, affected the efficacy of Japanese apologetic and Asia-centered foreign policy. Japan had no reason to pursue such diplomacy.

It was at this point when Abe’s 2nd term began. Just like his 1st term, Abe urged for a strong and active Japan. Under Abe, his far-right conservative ideologies were visible. He was clearly different from DPJ’s failed foreign policy. First, Abe together with the Diet members started visiting the Yasukuni shrines in a collective manner which for a few years was restrained: 168 Diet members in 2013, 84 members in 2014, six officials and 141 members in 2015 worshiped the shrines. Second, Abe in 2013 also expressed his plans to revise the Murayama statement that was made back in 1995. Although Korea and China delivered its worries, it was of no use. Third, text books began expurgating Japan’s wrongdoings in the Pacific War and even delineated the comfort women issue as personal misfortunes that occurred during the war period. Fourth, in 2015, Abe appointed Hase Hiroshi as Minister of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology, who repeatedly denied the involvement of Japanese military in comfort women issue.

Abe tried to revise the grand strategy of Japanese foreign policy by revising the constitution. Such far-right political stance gained strong support considering the rapid economic and military rise of China, Korea tilting towards China, and North Korea strengthening its nuclear capability. These provided a concrete justification for Abe to push Japan towards the right end and apology was just an obstacle in the way. Abe’s resurgence of nationalism and *nagatacho* politics was propelled by the Lower House elections of 2012 and 2014, and the House of Councilors of 2013 and 2016. With the most recent election on July 10th 2016, Abe’s coalition of LDP and Komeito Party now has over two-thirds majority of the 121-seat upper house, taking him a step further towards his long dream of constitution revision. Out of 242 seats, Abe’s coalition earned 161 seats, whereas the opposition earned 67 seats in total. Although the DPJ (hereafter, Democratic Party, DP) gained more votes compared to 2013 election, it does not seem strong enough to deter Abe’s coalition government. (Lee 2016a, b; p. 1).

With US–China power competition in East Asia, China–Japan’s recent diplomatic recovery and *seiwā* being dominant in the party, there stands the Comfort Women Agreement (Sohn 2016, pp. 1–2). Progressives’ ideological and political fall, DP’s failure in foreign policy, and Abe’s coalition holding two-thirds of the majority, there seems to be no possibility of returning back to apology diplomacy. Although the Korean government argues that the Japanese military have acknowledged its involvement in the comfort women issue, Japanese government has officially refuted such argument on February 2016. Although the Korean government argues that the ¥1 billion aid fund is reparation, Japanese government has also officially refuted that it is only an aid to the victims (JoongAng 2016). Such position brings the whole apology problem back to the beginning, however, marginalized to the least. Victims are still demanding for a sincere apology of the Japanese Prime Minister, where Abe is not at all considering.

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Conclusion

Through analysis of the three phases, the paper aimed to show that apology and backlashes were not a matter of sincere remorse of the past, but rather a result of intra/inter party competition for intended political benefits. Considering that the domestic and foreign policies even within the same political parties or factions differed depending on certain political situations, it can be said that apology and backlashes have less to do with the historical perception but more with the political calculation for benefits of each phases. In this sense, the party politics can provide answers to the research question of the paper—*what are the mechanisms for political apologies and backlashes*.

Japan's apologies were largely motivated by party-politics competition. First, Japan used apology as a symbolic measure when setting its future grand strategies. Apology diplomacy has been a useful political measure to signal its benign and peaceful characteristic as Miyazawa, Hosokawa, Murayama, Obuchi, and Hatoyama have done. Second, apology served as a useful tool to pursue party coalition. In the case of Hosokawa, adopting apology diplomacy was a useful means of achieving coalition with the SDP, whereas Obuchi formed coalition with the Komeito Party to pass required bills for economic revitalization. Lastly, apology was expressed when the strategic value of South Korea increased. This was clear in the case of Obuchi, where the strategic value of South Korea rose due to missile threats from North Korea. It also applied to Kan administration, where military threats from both China and North Korea made cooperation with Korea inevitable. Under such circumstances, apology was a useful tool to make cooperation with South Korea.

Likewise, the causes of political backlashes were also the results of intra/inter party competition. The cause of the first phase was a result of inter-party political competition between the LDP and the SDP in their positions on apology. In this phase, apology had central role in shaping not only party identities but also national grand strategy. Apology had the most significance in Japanese domestic politics in the 1st phase. The cause for the second phase was a result of intra-party political competition between the *heisei/cochi* and *seiwa* for their dominance and differentiation in the party. Koizumi directly reversed the apology diplomacy in order to stand on the other side of *heisei/cochi* line. The rise of political backlashes in this period was an extension of *seiwa*'s domestic political calculation to eliminate the powers of other factions. Apology began losing its significance with the advent of Koizumi's administration. The causes for the third phase began with intra-party political competition within the DP, specifically among the middle/left-conservatives and the far-right factions for their differentiation in domestic and foreign policies; however, was solidified by inter-party competition with the advent of Abe's administration. DP's foreign policy failure evidenced by President Lee's visit to Dokdo/Takeshima provided Abe's nationalistic foreign policy. With Abe emphasizing the final and irreversible characteristics of the Comfort Women Agreement, the significance of apology has been and will be marginalized in Korea–Japan relations.

What can be concluded through such findings is that although the resolution of the apology problem is a critical foundation for a stable reconciliation between the two countries, the significance of apology is fading away in Japanese domestic politics. Although Abe and President Park reached the 2015 Agreement in order to solve the fading away apology problem, the result seems to have rather caused the opposite. Having considered the recurrence of apology-backlash through the three phases and with Abe

continuously stressing the final and irreversible characteristics of the Agreement, there seems to be low possibility of apology diplomacy reviving.

Only when political benefits for apology diplomacy fit the power holding parties or factions will there be a revival of Japanese political apology.

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