

Japan March 9, 2015 3:11 pm

Merkel intervenes in Japanese second world war

Robin Harding in Tokyo, Jamil Anderlini in Beijing and Stefan Wagstyl in Berlin

Angela Merkel intervened in Japan's debate about how it remembers the second world war by telling an audience in Tokyo that Germany had faced its history "openly and squarely".

But the German chancellor also has a message for [Japan's neighbours](#), noting that it was the "generous gestures" of Germany's adversaries that had made postwar reconciliation possible.

Ms Merkel's remarks on her first visit to Japan for seven years come as [Shinzo Abe](#), the prime minister, prepares a statement to mark the 70th anniversary of defeat in a war that continues to plague relations with China and South Korea.

Although Ms Merkel insisted she was not offering advice, saying the process of dealing with war memories "must come out of society", Germany's clarity on the past contrasts with Japan's inability to reconcile fully with its neighbours.

Ms Merkel referred to a landmark speech made in 1985 by former president [Richard von Weizsäcker](#), in which he called on Germans to think hard about their personal responsibility for the crimes of the Third Reich.

"To paraphrase the words of the late President Richard von Weizsäcker, who died a few weeks ago: the end of the war in Europe, May 8, 1945, was a day of liberation — liberation from the barbarism of Nazism, the horrors unleashed by Germany in world war two and the collapse of civilisation in the Shoah," she said.

But she added: "We Germans will never forget that after all the suffering that was brought by our country over Europe and the world, the hand of reconciliation was there for us. We are fortunate that a lot of trust was placed in the then young Federal [West German] Republic."

China and South Korea have long called for Japanese leaders to show more contrition for the occupation of their countries before and during the second world war. They regard Mr Abe as an unreconstructed nationalist.

China in particular still feeds its public a steady diet of propaganda on the brutality of the Japanese invaders and even small children in remote parts of the country can often recite the litany of Japan's wartime atrocities.

An editorial published on Monday by Xinhua, China's official government mouthpiece, described Ms Merkel's comments as "fierce criticism of Japanese rightists" and said she had "taught a valuable lesson to Japan" while "noting that Japan should look at its own history squarely".

But while the Chinese government often portrays its deep animosity towards Japan as representative of a broad international consensus, most southeast Asian countries are far less vocal in their criticism, and more wary of the recent rapid [military rise of China](#) than the possibility of resurgent Japanese militarism.

Mr Abe's long-term political project is to make Japan a more "normal" country by amending its pacifist constitution but the prime minister has said he will uphold past government statements apologising for the war, while also calling for a more forward-looking declaration to mark the 70th anniversary.

Crucial formulas used in previous statements include the line that "through its colonial rule and aggression", Japan "caused tremendous damage and suffering to the people of many countries".

Past prime ministers expressed their "deep remorse" and "heartfelt apology". If Mr Abe were to weaken these formulas, it would prompt resentment from Japan's neighbours.

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- Angela Merkel

- - 9 March 2015 Last updated at 09:48 **BBC**
- **Germany's Merkel addresses WW2 reconciliation in Japan**



Ms Merkel visited a science museum where she met Asimo, a humanoid robot developed by car company Honda

German Chancellor Angela Merkel has begun a two-day visit to Japan by discussing Germany's reconciliation efforts after World War Two.

She said Germany had "faced its past squarely", helping it move forward.

Japan has been criticised by its neighbours for what is seen as its inadequate acknowledgement and education of wartime atrocities.

PM Shinzo Abe is due to give a statement later this year to mark the 70th anniversary of the end of the war.

But there is speculation he may water down Japan's past apologies for its aggression in Asia.

Ms Merkel and Mr Abe are expected to use her visit to discuss a free trade agreement, the crisis in Ukraine, and anti-terrorism efforts.

'Generous gestures'

During her lecture - at the headquarters of the Asahi Shimbun newspaper in Tokyo on Monday - Ms Merkel noted that Germany's acceptance into the international community following World War Two was possible because Germany had dealt with its past.

"There was the acceptance in Germany to call things by their name," she said.

What also helped were "generous gestures by our neighbours" in re-accepting Germany, she said. France had made "just as valuable a contribution as the Germans have" to reconciliation, she added.

She said she could not give specific advice on how Japan should deal with the past, but that "history and experience tells us also that peaceful means of reconciliation have to be found".

Her remarks come a month after Japan's Crown Prince Naruhito urged the country to "look back humbly on the past".

PM Shinzo Abe, who is known for his hawkish views, has appointed a panel to advise him on a statement he plans to make in August on the 70th anniversary of the end of World War Two.

Heavy criticism

The issue of forgiveness has been for decades the source of diplomatic tension between Japan and its wartime victims, notably China and South Korea.

This tension has ramped up in recent years, particularly since Mr Abe took office in 2012.

China and South Korea have denounced visits made by Mr Abe and other senior ministers to Yasukuni Shrine which commemorates Japan's war dead including war criminals.

An attempt by his government to review Japan's landmark 1993 apology for forcing Asian women to be sex slaves also drew intense criticism, and was shelved last year.

Japanese school history textbooks have long been accused of whitewashing Japan's wartime atrocities.

The issue has also been aggravated by Japan's move towards militarisation, which Mr Abe has defended as a right to collective self-defence, and territorial claims.

10 March 2015 Last updated at 07:25

China media urge Japan to learn from Merkel's 'history lecture'



AP German Chancellor Angela Merkel met

Japanese PM Shinzo Abe on Monday

Papers urge Japanese PM Shinzo Abe to learn from German Chancellor Angela Merkel's "history lecture" and "face up" to the country's military past.

During a lecture in Tokyo on Monday, Mrs Merkel said Germany had "faced its past squarely", helping it to move forward.

She said she could not give specific advice on how Japan should deal with the past, but that "history and experience tells us also that peaceful means of reconciliation have to be found".

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The China Daily reprints a sharply-worded **Xinhua commentary** that criticises the Abe administration's "wishful scheme" for trying to "elevate itself to the rank of Germany on the international stage".

"Tokyo's cowardice is all the more conspicuous against the backdrop of Berlin's sincerity in historical remorse," it says.

'Stubborn' Abe

A front-page commentary in the overseas edition of the **People's Daily** feels that Mr Abe "may not be persuaded by Mrs Merkel".

"It is apparent that Mr Abe resists talking about historical issues," says the commentary.

"Countries including China and South Korea are the victims. It is not that the victims are lacking the heart to forgive and accept, but the victimiser should show sincerity and prove it with actions," urges the article.

Echoing similar sentiments, an opinion piece in the **Nanfang Net** wonders if the "stubborn" Mr Abe will understand "Mrs Merkel's history lesson".

"Mr Abe wants to improve ties with China and hopes to meet the Chinese leaders... His wish has been granted, but the bilateral relationship still has not improved as the problem lies with Mr Abe's reluctance to reflect on historical issues with a correct attitude," says the article.

Mr Abe had met Chinese President Xi Jinping on the sidelines of the Asia Pacific Economic Co-operation meeting held in Beijing last November.

Dalai Lama's successor (cut)