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**Securing Japan in the ‘West’: The US–Japan Alliance and Identity Politics
in the Asian Century**

CHRISTIAN WIRTH

*Griffith Asia Institute, Griffith University
Brisbane, Australia*

Why has the military dimension of the US–Japan relationship remained the central point of reference for Japanese foreign relations, despite the demise of the Soviet Union? Why has Japan, deepening economic interdependence notwithstanding, remained politically distant from East Asia? Based on analysis of statements by Japanese and US political elites and academics regarding the US–Japan alliance, this article argues that the rise of China, coterminous with the rise of ‘Asia’, challenges the notion of the ‘West’ as, according to standards of industrial modernity, a superior social and political order. These moving ideational boundaries question Japan’s position as the most advanced Asian nation and member of the (Western) international society of states. Therefore, the US–Japan alliance has since the mid-1990s become increasingly important for securing Japan in the ‘West’ and the ‘West’s’ boundaries in East Asia.

INTRODUCTION: RISING ASIA, DECLINING JAPAN

In stark contrast to preceding decades, economic growth in Japan has been stagnating since the early 1990s. Japan’s economy was overtaken by China in terms of GDP size in 2010 and its population entered a phase of accelerating decline even in urban areas.¹ At the same time domestic politics continue to be volatile while diplomatic relations with neighboring countries deteriorate. Conventional wisdom holds that while China and other parts of Asia are rising and Japan is declining, to safeguard its national security Japan must strengthen its military alliance with the United States and boost its economy.² In this view only a militarily active, ‘normalized’ Japan can contribute to global peace and stability and act as a responsible member of the international community.

This article considers that view in the context of identity politics. It explores why the view continues to hold the military dimension of the Japan–US relationship as the main point of reference for Japanese foreign relations and the linchpin for US East Asia policy despite the end of the Cold War. Thus, it also addresses the flip side of the coin that is the question why Japan remains politically distant from its neighbors despite deepening social and economic interdependence in East Asia. Transcending discussions of mutual threat perceptions, the

Correspondence address: Christian Wirth, Griffith Asia Institute, 170 Kessels Road, Nathan 4111 QLD, Australia. E-mail: c.wirth@griffith.edu.au

study contributes to the debates about order and security as they are conducted under the headings of Japan's 'normalization' and identity by epistemically linking Japan's relations with the United States to its relations with East Asia. At the same time, the article contributes to recent research on the revival of geopolitics in the post Cold War period. It argues that the rise of China, coterminous with the rise of 'Asia', challenges the prevailing notion of the 'West' rooted in the post-war period. The moving boundaries intrinsic to these ascensions render Japan's position as the most advanced nation in 'Asia' and as a member of the 'Western' international society of states precarious. Consequently, the US–Japan alliance is not merely protecting Japan from military threats, it also anchors Japan in this 'Western' international society of states while securing the Society's boundary in East Asia. Rather than applying dichotomous generalizations about what 'Asia' and the 'West' are, however, the study identifies the characteristics of the civilizational geopolitics at work. It suggests that the alliance embodies a set of modern industrial and therefore increasingly unsustainable norms of statehood whose observance, according to conservative elites on both sides of the Pacific, remains a condition for the recognition of a state as an actor in international relations.

The present discussion neither denies the existence of political or military actions that can be perceived as threats, nor belittles subjectively felt insecurity. It looks at disputes and conflicts as produced by the interaction of two or more actors. For this purpose, it is more useful to speak of danger than threat because danger is the product of interaction between parties rather than a property of a specific actor. Danger does not exist independent of those to whom it becomes a threat.³ Thus, threat refers to subjective perceptions that call for defensive action on the part of the state's security organs, while danger is used as an analytical concept that points to the disciplinary effect of officially designated threats. As it structures human behavior, danger sustains definitions of identity and maintains authority.

Despite the end of the Cold War, Northeast Asia has remained dangerously unstable, or according to some accounts has become more so. Since 2005, official narratives of national victimhood and independence struggles have tightened the link with maritime territorial disputes, which Japan has with all its Asian neighbors except North Korea. To be sure, it is not difficult to see how Chinese naval modernization and North Korean missile and nuclear weapons development have heightened threat perceptions. Of greater concern, however, are the underlying anti-Japanese feelings continuously fostered through patriotic education, news media and film in China, North Korea and also South Korea. Thus, the Cold War division along the former US perimeter of defense against the Communist Threat, the so-called Acheson line, has re-emerged. Japan remains politically distant from East Asia and the 38th parallel on the Korean Peninsula, the East China Sea, the Taiwan Strait and the South China Sea continue to be frontlines, if not of containment then at least for balancing China's rise.⁴

A closer look at problems Japan has with its neighbors reveals that responsibilities lie with all sides. Education has left people in Japan largely unaware of the weight of history. This enabled significant parts of conservative if not nationalist elites to hold on to revisionist views on wartime history including denial of events like the Nanjing massacre and Japan's systematic enslavement of women across its Asian colonies for sexual service in the Imperial Army by incumbent political leaders.⁵ As a consequence, perceptions that Japan's Asian neighbors are less developed and that Japan's past colonization was beneficial for their industrialization continue to permeate thinking among these elites. As I shall show, such views – whether open or tacit and unconsciously expressed in discourses of danger from Asia – are linked to Japanese anxieties of being left behind the Euro–Atlantic 'West', and 'Western' views of Japan being too 'closed' and needing to become 'normal'. This hierarchy apparent in

the material power discourse and institutionalized through the post-war security architecture assigns Japan the prominent role of ‘linchpin’ of stability, peace and security in East Asia. Since it keeps Japan in place at the side of the US, the alliance enables the continuity of post-war ideational and institutional structures. As it protects Japan’s identity within the post-war order, it also tends to shield the country and its elites from a range of political and social reforms, including the conciliatory reappraisal of wartime history.

To substantiate this argument, I first review the debate about Japan’s evolving role in international relations. I then outline how the encounter with the Western international society of states has shaped Japan’s relations with its East Asian neighbors and the United States in the post-war period. Next I discuss how the end of Japan’s growth phase, that is, accomplishing the national modernization project that coincided with the end of the global Cold War and the rise of China, has thrown the Japanese political landscape into disarray and once again left Japan adrift in a rapidly changing international order. Last, I show how conscious efforts on both sides of the Pacific have despite the impending Asian Century secured Japan’s position in the ‘Western’ society of international states defined as, according to standards of industrial modernity, a superior social and political order.

INTERNATIONAL ORDER AND THE AMBIGUITY OF JAPANESE STATEHOOD

Discussion about the nature of the Japanese state as an actor in international politics became increasingly salient in the early 1990s. The end of global bipolarity alongside the coming to power of a non-Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) government for the first time since 1955 opened space for such a debate. However, as a result of what conventional analysts see as the inevitable consequences of the anarchic international system manifest in objectively present threats posed by North Korea and China, the debate soon narrowed down to whether Japan’s foreign and security policies conform to (neo-)realist expectations and how the US–Japan alliance can be strengthened.

The end of the Soviet Union confronted Japan and Germany with similar questions. Hanns Maull saw the two states as models because they had renounced militarism, embraced pacifism and through their focus on economic development became integrated with the world.⁶ In line with Yoichi Funabashi,⁷ he argued that Japan’s sense of responsibility as a ‘civilian power’ must be shaped around its alliance with the United States and global challenges such as Third World development and environmental reconstruction. Ichiro Ozawa, while adhering to the US–Japan alliance, suggested a more active Japanese participation in the United Nations (UN) and stronger engagement with Northeast Asian countries.⁸ He understood the ‘normalization’ of Japan as deep-going comprehensive reforms aimed at breaking out of the static post-war norms that had come to prevent the adaptation of institutions in both the domestic sphere, e.g., the education system, and the international sphere (i.e. diplomacy). Similarly, the Commission on Japan’s Goals in the 21st Century’s report, submitted to the prime minister in January 2000, concluded that the past catch up-and-overtake strategy that Japan had been following since the Meiji era (1868–1912) was no longer suitable, and that the world no more offered any ready-made models.⁹ It also called for enhancing Japan’s status through a foreign policy of a ‘global civilian power’.

However, albeit often implicit, Japan’s statehood, its self-conception or identity as an actor in international affairs continues to be inextricably linked with the United States.¹⁰ Inoguchi and Bacon adhere to the conventional wisdom that “the bilateral alliance is the most critical

element ensuring regional stability and order in East Asia,” and contend that “there are no obvious alternatives to the alliance system on the horizon that are sufficiently credible and operable.”¹¹ Therefore, the central issue of how Japan’s ties with the United States relate to those with its East Asian neighbors remains obscure. The problems stemming from this ambiguous position, however, are manifest in the tension between the structural imperatives of great power politics, and normative constraints that support middle-power diplomacy.¹² In contrast to the former’s focus on traditional security and bilateral relationships, the latter emphasize the promotion of human security and the use of multilateral frameworks to foster a stronger global role for Japan. This is why Soeya’s suggestion that Japan becoming a ‘normal nation’ is just the beginning of the country’s “soul-searching journey” deserves attention.¹³

The 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks opened another chapter in this journey. Observing the rise in Japan’s nominal defense expenditures, its qualitative arms build-up including some power-projection capabilities and legal changes that allowed the Japan Self-Defense Force to engage in the War On Terror in the Indian Ocean and Iraq, Christopher Hughes finds that these policy changes all occurred in the context of Japan’s relations with the US.¹⁴ Hughes argues that Japanese leaders’ motivation for supporting the US was mainly “to avoid any form of abandonment by the US in dealing with security threats closer to home” and concludes that “the fundamental glue that holds the Japan–US alliance together remains regional East-Asian threats.”¹⁵ Thus, for most analysts the newly emerging threats came first and the strengthening of the alliance necessarily followed. At least as obvious seems the fact that threats come in the form of material state power and are directed against other states. To maintain regional stability, Richard Samuels, therefore, recommends strengthening the alliance because “if either Japan or the US fails to meet or enhance its commitment to the other, a new regional security architecture not of Washington’s (or Tokyo’s) choosing will surely result.”¹⁶ Without denying the emergence of a number of security issues, however, Hughes’ and Samuels’ findings reveal a profound anxiety about the stability of the US-Japan relationship. An alternate reading of these very arguments about traditional security allows for the conclusion that it is primarily the US-Japan relationship and the pertaining understandings of order that are under threat.

The discourse over China’s irresistible rise marginalizes questions about how and with what limits the US–Japan alliance provides the public good of stability to whom.¹⁷ As a result, Japan’s very significant contribution to the international community through engagement within the United Nations took a back seat to alliance politics. Similarly, regional cooperation in East Asia, after considerable enthusiasm and institution-building in the 1990s, by 2010 became largely reduced to the competitive establishment of free-trade agreements. Calls to support the international community in the maintenance of peace, security and stability came to be answered through moral calls to uphold norms of human rights, the extension of overseas development assistance (ODA), and increasingly urgent, by the deployment of troops to the Middle East and West Asia. International community, however, is better understood as the international society of states. Building upon Hedley Bull’s and Martin Wight’s earlier work, scholars sometimes identified as belonging to the English School argue that rather than perennial anarchy, international order is constituted by norms and institutions that legitimize power and thereby define actors and their relations.¹⁸ Institutions that are “connected sets of norms and rules (transactional, regulative, and constitutive) embedded in stable and on-going social practices” help to “project, cement, and stabilize power.”¹⁹

Despite the formally universal adoption of the system of sovereign nation-states embodied in the UN Charter, the international society of states (hereafter referred to as ‘the Society’ or ‘the West’), is hierarchical.²⁰ This hierarchy is determined by the degree of adherence to the core norms of democracy and economic–technical development. In this regard, Geraóid Ó Tuathail, similar to Manuel Castells, notes that the US geopolitical discourse that defines the ‘West’, articulates “the mythic system of industrial modernity.”²¹ According to Ulrich Beck, it “asserts that the developed industrial society with its pattern of work and life, its production sectors, its thinking in categories of economic growth, its understandings of science and technology and its forms of democracy, is a *thoroughly modern* society, a pinnacle of modernity, which it scarcely makes sense to even consider surpassing.”²²

The discourses of power-shift and ‘normalizing’ Japan suggest that the US–Japan alliance is the product of the Society’s norms and rules whose observance is a condition for membership, and that failure to do so leads to social opprobrium.²³ This explains why Alexandra Sakaki finds that, in contrast to Germany, Japanese leaders’ desire for Japan to become a “respected and trusted country,” paying “*highest single priority*” to be a “reliable partner” to the US.²⁴ Thus, she concludes that “the alliance [...] provides Tokyo’s leaders with the psychological reassurance that Japan will remain integrated in the international community,”²⁵ Yet beyond the mere need to secure allies in the event of being attacked, the perception of increasing military threats, that is danger, originating from East Asia points to the possibility that the Japanese post-war state is in heightened need for differentiation and legitimation in the so-called Asian Century.

Through delineating the orderly and secure inside from a disorderly and insecure outside, discourses of danger draw the boundaries of political communities and discipline the behavior of their subjects. Danger manifest in officially recognized external and internal threats makes subjects rally behind the existing political ideas and institutions. In David Campbell’s words, “[s]ecuring identity in the form of the state requires an emphasis on the unfinished and endangered nature of the world.”²⁶ In other words, danger of falling behind, that is, being left out or excluded from the community makes members and aspiring members conform to and internalize the norms officially defined by the power centre. At the state level, these efforts may require people to work hard, pay taxes, accept constraints possibly sacrifice civil liberties and fight wars for what is authoritatively identified as the common good. At the international level, this effect extends to the bigger, loosely imagined political communities such as civilizations. To remain a member of the community, in this case the Western international society of states, adherence to its constitutive norms is indispensable.

The heightened need to differentiate Japan from East Asia also explains why the two, at first sight incompatible narratives of Japan as pacifist state and the strengthening of the US–Japan alliance as a means to provide stability and security dovetail in the post Cold War power shift discourse. This conception of changing order also explains how the majority of Japanese nationalists, marginalizing the extreme right, came to support the US–Japan alliance while long-standing opposition from the left largely disappeared.²⁷ As such, this article complements studies on Japanese statehood and identity. While the former have so far been limited to analyses of Japan’s interaction with East Asian countries, the latter have predominantly focused on the evolution of Japanese defense policies.²⁸ In addition, the study contributes to research on the revival of geopolitics in the post-Cold War period.²⁹ However, while the discourse changed in terms of its wording and perspective, the ambiguity of Japanese statehood and the question of the country’s role in international politics is not an entirely new issue.

JAPAN'S COMPLICATED ENCOUNTERS WITH THE WESTERN SOCIETY OF STATES

The demise of the Chinese tributary system and the foray of European and US imperial powers into East Asia in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century prompted Japanese industrialization and the building of a modern state. Socialized into the international society of states' norms of colonialism and imperialism, elites of Meiji Japan embarked on their own militarist adventures and caused the contemporary history problems with China and the Koreans. In 1902, Japan concluded an alliance with superpower Great Britain and, as the first non-Western power in the modern era, defeated a Western state, Russia, in 1904/05. This is how Japan gained a seat at the table of European great power politics. The "Janus-faced" Western society of states, as Shogo Suzuki called it, however, was ambivalent toward its non-white member.³⁰ Japan remained marginal in the great powers' club. Exiting Asia (*Datsu-A*) without being able to fully enter the West (*Nyu-O*) left its leaders with a strong sense of isolation and insecurity.

Japan's pariah status as aggressor state meant that it had, following defeat in 1945, once more to earn its membership and respect in the Society. This overarching national goal is enshrined in the constitution's preamble with the pledge: "*We desire to occupy an honored place in an international society striving for the preservation of peace, and the banishment of tyranny and slavery, oppression and intolerance for all time from the earth.*"³¹ Over the next two decades, bureaucrats and business leaders with their knowledge acquired in pre-war years and favorable access to US markets forcefully promoted economic development to catch up with the 'West' again.³² As Ernest Gellner pointed out, fast economic development was not only a question of improving people's living conditions, but a means to "assume full human status by taking part in an industrial civilization, participation in which *alone* enables a nation or an individual to compel others to treat it as equal. Inability to take part in it makes a nation militarily powerless against its neighbors, administratively unable to control its own citizens, and culturally incapable of speaking the international language."³³

As a result of US primacy, diplomatic interaction with Northeast Asian neighbors followed Washington's lead. When President Nixon, largely due to the geopolitics surrounding the Vietnam War, visited China in 1972, this came as a shock to Japan's leaders.³⁴ However, it also allowed and even created the need for the hasty restoration of diplomatic relations between Tokyo and Beijing, ties that had been severed upon US pressure to recognize the government in Taipei as representative of China.³⁵ In the following two decades, Japanese elites engaged in friendship diplomacy with their neighbors in China.³⁶ Given the authoritarian political systems and low levels of economic development, interaction was largely limited to Japanese Official Development Assistance (ODA) and occasional meetings among diplomats.

In contrast, the trade imbalance believed to stem from unfair economic policies in particular, fuelled Japan threat perceptions in the US in the 1980s and early 1990s.³⁷ Conscious efforts on both sides of the Pacific to separate economics from politics, however, engendered and enabled the strengthening of the alliance. At the high-point of US-Soviet tensions, Prime Minister Nakasone made the unprecedented move of siding with the 'West' in countering the Soviet threat in the early 1980s.³⁸ Nakasone subsequently sought to dismantle legal obstacles such as laws banning the export of weapons systems and the ceiling on defense spending while agreeing to participate in research on US President Reagan's proposed missile defense system dubbed Star Wars. At the November 1983 Tokyo summit with Reagan, Nakasone stated, "The

Western countries should stand firmly in unity and solidarity for freedom and peace and should not hesitate to bear any hardships in upholding this cause.”³⁹ He added “[t]he Japan–U.S. security arrangements are the foundation of the peace and security of Japan and the Far East.” Reagan, spelling out the primary norms defining the West, concurred: “I have come as a friend of Japan seeking to strengthen our partnership for peace, prosperity, and progress.”⁴⁰ He also emphasized that US bases in Japan “are essential not only to the defense of Japan but also contribute to peace and prosperity in the Far East.”

If the US–Japan relationship with the alliance at its centre was about military threats, the demise of the Soviet Union in 1991 should have profoundly improved Japan’s position at the frontline of containment and opened political space for the realignment of foreign and security politics. Rather than making Japan more secure, however, the end of the Cold War – a war that had by no means remained cold in Japan’s neighborhood – ironically created more insecurity. Prominent historian Shinichi Kitaoka explains that:

*[t]he end of the Cold War and the Gulf War had an even greater impact [than the 1980s trade disputes with the US] on Japan. Until that time, Japan had for its own protection been an integral part of the framework of the Western security alliance. As the threat from the Soviet Union and then Russia diminished, though, Japan was brought to keenly realize the obvious fact that limiting its concerns to domestic affairs would make it difficult to fulfill its obligations to the international community.*⁴¹

The reason for this defining impact becomes apparent if the end of the Cold War is seen as questioning the notion of the ‘West’. In addition, perceptions of rapid Chinese economic development undermined beliefs in the superiority of liberal democracy and market economy in the promotion of prosperity and power. This was particularly troublesome for Japanese elites because, as the Japan-threat arguments of the 1980s and the ongoing trade disputes showed, the country was still at the fringes of the Society. The continued doldrums of the Japanese economy, sharply contrasting with the rapid growth in the rest of East Asia, further exacerbated the sense of crisis. The following statement by Kenichi Ito is insightful:

*Japan belongs to neither the West nor the East and is consequently troubled by a loss of identity and he [Masataka Kosaka] forecast [during Sino–US normalization in 1978] that, despite the fact that Japan's defeat in World War II, its subsequent dependence on the US, and its attempts to Americanize had led it to forget this concern for a time, the emergence of China as a major power would once again force Japan to confront the ambivalence of its stand between the West and the East, indeed a perennial problem for Japan and the Japanese that today has once again been thrust before us.*⁴²

But Japanese elites were not the only ones whom the end of bipolarity made unsure of themselves.

THE UNITED STATES AND JAPAN ADRIFT

By the early 1990s, the US–Japan relationship with the alliance at its core had become adrift.⁴³ At first, it seemed that the détente and eventual end of the Cold War had opened new avenues for Tokyo to relate to its neighbors and play an enhanced role on the stage of world politics. The

UN-sanctioned, US-led military operation for the liberation of Kuwait from Iraqi occupation starting in January 1991, however, revealed the changed meaning of ‘international community’ and the degree to which Japan’s relationship with the United States embodied Tokyo’s leaders’ desire to be a respected part of it. Adhering to the social and constitutional norm of pacifism similar to Germany, Japan had instead of sending troops contributed US \$13 billion and other in-kind support to the war effort. Even though this was higher than European material support, it was deemed “too little, too late” in Washington.⁴⁴ Japan’s allegedly slow political response was decried as weak leadership rooted in Japanese culture and ossified institutions.⁴⁵ US Secretary of State James Baker on one of his few trips to East Asia criticized Tokyo’s “checkbook diplomacy,” and “self-indulgent” attitude towards the US. He urged Japan to provide leadership not just in economic matters but also in what emerged as the new-found common purpose for the members of the ‘West’: “building democracy, respect for human rights, stopping the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and in facing transnational challenges in areas such as the environment, narcotics and refugees.”⁴⁶ More generally, the episode was seen as characteristic of an abnormal state, an economic superpower but political pygmy,⁴⁷ a free-rider⁴⁸ or at least a cheap-rider⁴⁹ reluctant to act as a responsible stakeholder and sharing the burden of maintaining international security. Japan’s political response was slow and appeared indecisive because the intense debates in Tokyo extended to the role of the military and the provisions of the constitution’s war-renouncing Article 9 that go to the very heart of Japanese national identity. The affair characterized by the deliberate pressure from the US, left leaders and bureaucrats in Japan under shock and humiliated.⁵⁰ The invigorated debate on foreign and security politics subsequently led to the passing in 1992 of the International Peace Cooperation Law, which enabled Japanese diplomats and troops to take the lead in the major UN mission in Cambodia the same year.

Japan’s strengthened engagement in UN-peacekeeping missions and a call for a more multilateral diplomatic orientation by a panel of experts in the 1994 Higuchi Report – in spite the disappearance of the longstanding resistance of the Socialist Party against the alliance – aroused alarm, particularly among Japan-policy circles in the US.⁵¹ Noting that “[t]he critical factor in developing this [security] relationship on the Japanese side was, however, never the Soviet threat,” but rather “the alliance was nurtured from within”, Patrick Cronin and Michael Green urged decisive action to redefine the fragile alliance relationship.⁵² The reason for this concern was that “[t]he report’s attention to strengthening the bilateral defense relationship with the United States is overshadowed, however, by the emphasis given to multilateralism and autonomous capabilities.”⁵³ In their concluding policy recommendations, Cronin and Green consequently argued for new guidelines for security cooperation that include such points as “Coordinating regional multilateral security initiatives (at the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), etc.) *before* presenting them to the rest of the region.”⁵⁴

As a response to this changing security environment including the perceived lack of Japan’s preparedness to support an intervention on the Korean Peninsula during the 1994 nuclear crisis, Assistant Secretary of Defense Joseph Nye presented the East Asia Strategy Report.⁵⁵ It laid the foundation for reinvigorating the US–Japan alliance, symbolized by the 1996 Clinton–Hashimoto Declaration. The revamping of the alliance, however, was not just about the defense of Japan. In essence, Funabashi writes,

[t]here was a strong tendency here to view both Japan and China as challengers of the existing order. As the architect of that order, the United States had to engage them. In the

*words of the Nye Report, the U.S. presence in the region acted as 'oxygen'. In such a blueprint, Japan and China were nothing more than possible sources of carbon dioxide.*⁵⁶

It was not that Washington exercised coercive power. Conservative Japanese and other Northeast Asian officials actively sought reassurance and continued commitment by the US. Thus, mainstream policy-makers in Tokyo embraced their enhanced status as the 'linchpin' of East Asian security. Evidence for their internalization of this role is that the Japanese National Defense Policy Outline (NDPO) issued in 1996 incorporated the East Asia Strategy Report's assessment and recommendations. The significant expansion of the alliance's scope of application from the territorial defense of Japan to situationally defined 'areas surrounding Japan' can be seen as compensating for the lost ideational distance between Japan and rapidly catching-up China, rising 'Asia' respectively.⁵⁷ The changed environment defined in the geopolitical terms of power shift, however, also required a changed Japan.

ANCHORING AND STABILIZING THE US AND JAPAN

The 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks and their aftermath were crucial for defining the post-Cold War world order. In the eyes of many, it gave rise to the clash of civilizations. Prime Minister Koizumi's statements suggest that Japanese support for the US went beyond mere solidarity, coercive US power, or use of the War on Terror for furthering parochial national interests. Koizumi held a firm belief in modernity and progress centered on the US. He displayed deep concern that Japan's economic stagnation would forfeit its status as a member of the Society. In the contemporary context that he characterized as long-term stagnation, eroding trust and disillusionment, he stated, "the top priority that I must address is to rebuild our economy and reconstruct our society into ones full of pride and confidence. Moreover, Japan must fulfill a constructive role as a member of the global community."⁵⁸ What appeared to be at stake was not just the economy but Japan's very statehood. Turning to (pre-September 2001) foreign affairs, Koizumi said in the same policy speech:

*Japan must never again isolate itself from the international community and must never again wage war. Indeed, the prosperity that Japan enjoys is based upon the Japan-US relationship that has functioned effectively. Based on the foundation of the Japan-US alliance, we must maintain and enhance Japan's friendly relations with its neighbors, including the People's Republic of China, the Republic of Korea and the Russian Federation.*⁵⁹

For Koizumi, the United States leads the Society (i.e. international community), therefore, the US-Japan alliance as it forms the core of bilateral relations becomes Japan's crucial link to the rest of the world. That explains the unusual practice for a sovereign state in making relations with a particular state the vantage point from which foreign relations with all other (non-Western) neighbors are defined. The alliance *means* peace and prosperity, that is, Japan's arrival in modernity. Koizumi's statements in the aftermath of 11 September 2001 showed this more clearly: "The alliance today is the cornerstone for the peace and prosperity of not only the Asia Pacific region but the entire world," and "I believe that Japan, together with the United States, will play a leading role in promoting the prosperity of the global community."⁶⁰

Under the impression of the 1991 diplomatic trauma around the liberation of Kuwait from Iraqi occupation, Koizumi was quick not only to express moral and financial support for the victims, but also to commit personnel to the US-led War on Terror. The deployment of ground forces to Iraq was significantly more controversial than that of Maritime Self-Defense Forces to the Indian Ocean. Thus, Koizumi feared that in refusing to contribute sweat – a euphemism for sending troops who would possibly need to spill blood – the US–Japan relationship, and with it Japan’s role as a ‘responsible’ member of the Society would be at risk.⁶¹ Since almost the entire world including China condemned terrorism and sided with the US, Japan’s commitment as (the) major US ally had to be particularly strong if differentiation from Asia was to be maintained. In addition to financial and military support for US policies, this was attempted through likening unidentified North Korean boats (*fushin-sen*) approaching Japanese shores to September 2001 terrorist attacks.⁶²

Prime Minister Koizumi, whose regular visits to the war-glorifying Yasukuni shrine contributed to deteriorating relations with South Korea and China, was not alone among Japanese leaders in emphasizing Japan being different from Asia. In a policy speech, then Foreign Minister Taro Aso, too, displayed how much economic development used to define Japan’s international standing. Conceding that Japan had lost its economic edge, he suggested Japan was a “thought leader” in Asia.⁶³ At the same time, the emphasis on the future reveals his belief in the overarching goals of progress and modernity, the path to which requires sacrifice:

*Because of this [belief in a] brighter tomorrow, people don't shy away from the hard work they have in front of them today, resulting in a solid work ethic. It is exactly these two aspects that the Japanese demonstrated to the world earlier than anyone else in modern Asia. And it seems to me that the people who derived the greatest impetus from this were, not surprisingly, our Asian neighbors.*⁶⁴

According to Aso, Japan as a democratic state and market economy, due to its successful mastering of challenges such as nationalism, environmental problems and demographic challenges, is essential for the stability of Asia.⁶⁵ That the achievement of modernity serves as a tool to positively differentiate Japan from ‘Asia’ while likening it to the ‘West’ in geopolitical terms, is also apparent in the diplomatic strategy emphasizing “‘universal values’ such as democracy, freedom, human rights, the rule of law, and the market economy.”⁶⁶ Aso patronizingly pointed to the danger emanating from “young democracies,” which “[...] produce a tremendous amount of what we might call "growth hormones." Those can be channelled towards creating systems which settle the society down. But within these early years there is also the case that the impulse for destruction prevails.”⁶⁷

Aso concludes that, therefore, Japan must forge closer military ties with nations that share common views and interests, namely the United States, Australia, India, and the member states of the EU and NATO, and work with these towards the expansion of an arc of freedom and prosperity.⁶⁸ By quoting Rudyard Kipling (1865–1936), an orientalist writer well-known for his controversial poem, *The White Man’s Burden*, Aso reveals why defense cooperation with the Western alliance is deemed important. His view of Japan being more advanced than its Asian neighbors is inextricably linked to Japan’s ambiguous position *vis-à-vis* the West. This has direct implications for security politics. Quoting from Rudyard Kipling’s controversial poem *The White Man’s Burden*, “East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet”, conservative political heavyweight Taro Aso revealed that defense cooperation with NATO is a welcome tool for alleviating Japan’s ambiguous position *vis-à-vis* the ‘West’.⁶⁹

While others such as former prime ministers Fukuda and Hatoyama also pointed to Japan's pioneering experiences related to earlier rapid modernization, they did so with significantly more favourable views of their neighbors while at the same time displaying more confidence in Japan's status in relation to the US.⁷⁰

However, international status remained important across party-political divides. In 2010 Prime Minister Kan, discussing his foreign policy strategy aiming for Japan to "occupy an honoured place in... [sic] international society," noted that "Japan is a maritime nation bordering the Pacific Ocean and is at the same time an Asian nation."⁷¹ The implications of this ambiguous position came to the fore in the wake of the unprecedented 11 March 2011 Triple Disaster of the tsunami, earthquake and nuclear meltdown in Northeast Japan – Japan's 9-11 also dubbed 3-11. Subsequently, Chinese and South Korean assertiveness in maritime disputes with Japan was widely interpreted as invited by Japan's weakness in political leadership, technological mastery and economic performance. Even though foreign audiences were impressed by the orderly and brave response of the affected people, and expressed great sympathy and support, Prime Minister Noda remarked that "We now hear certain mocking comments from overseas suggesting that 'procrastination and the inability to show political leadership' are 'the Japanese way.' *The trust and confidence that our country has earned up to now is currently in real danger of being lost.*"⁷² Thus, the deepened sense of national crisis stemmed from the perceived loss of status and confidence in being an advanced country. The nuclear crisis caused by the meltdown of multiple reactors at the Fukushima plant is taken as particularly grave, even humiliating, due to the strong symbolism of nuclear technology as marker of industrial modernity.

A report authored by Richard Armitage and Joseph Nye and the response by incoming Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in 2012 demonstrates the context of the concern with national decline and its security political relevance. The US architects of the post-Cold War alliance relationship warned that, "For Japan, however, there is a decision to be made. Does Japan desire to continue to be a tier-one nation, or is she content to drift into tier-two status?"⁷³ The authors urge the Japanese government to enhance their country's military and economic power by, for instance, continuing the promotion of nuclear power generation and research. This is because "[a]s China plans to join Russia, South Korea, and France in the major leagues of global development in civilian nuclear power, Japan cannot afford to fall behind."⁷⁴ They also recommend Japan unilaterally send minesweepers to the Strait of Hormuz at the first signs of an impending Iran contingency and patrol the South China Sea in collaboration with the US to ensure freedom of navigation.

Despite unprecedented levels of cooperation, however, anxiety about the bilateral relationship continued. The underlying reason for efforts at keeping Tokyo engaged in the US security agenda are concerns that Japan, as exemplified by the Hatoyama cabinet's proposal to advance an East Asian community excluding the US, could be distancing itself: "In this period of drift, Operation Tomodachi bought the U.S.–Japan alliance some time. It gave the alliance the meaning and value it urgently needed following the idiosyncratic political discord of the last three years."⁷⁵ Prime Minister Abe on his first visit to the US took up the cue. He reassured his audience in Washington that "Japan is not, and will never be, a tier-two country." He pledged to "bring back a strong Japan, strong enough to do even more good for the betterment of the world."⁷⁶ The reason, he explained, was that "when the Asia-Pacific, or the Indo-Pacific region gets more and more prosperous, Japan must remain a leading promoter of rules."⁷⁷

The very rhetoric of stabilizing the Asia-Pacific and of securing Japan's and the US's roles as leading promoters of rules amid a phase of power shift points to anxieties about losing control.

CONCLUSION

A conventional reading suggests that the US–Japan alliance was established and served as a means to protect Japan from the Soviet military threat. At the same time, it was portrayed as a ‘cap in the bottle’ of the allegedly latent danger of the resurgence of Japanese militarism. Consequently, strengthening and deepening the alliance after the demise of the Soviet Union must, in this view, be rationalized on the basis of increasing North Korean and Chinese threats. However, more than a means to address military threats, the US–Japan alliance has been since its inception, and at its basic level still is, a means to secure Japan in the ‘West’. To be sure, the demise of the Soviet Union as the other pole meant that the boundaries of the ‘West’ got in motion. For a number of reasons whose elaboration is beyond the scope of this article, rising China cannot replace the ‘East’ against which a post-cold War Western international society of states could be defined. However, the rising of China, including the impending Asian Century, means that a clarification of Japan's position in the fluid order came along the dichotomous axis of either becoming more ‘Asian’, or aligning with the US to retain its position within the hierarchy of states as it exists across the Pacific.

As the meaning of the ‘West’ had changed both globally and in relation to East Asia, a democratic political system and a developed market economy were apparently insufficient for Japan to secure its status. What was henceforth required was ‘normal’ statehood predicated on active military engagement in the War on Terror and contribution to the protection of the ‘Western’ sphere of influence including US primacy in the Western Pacific. Concomitant with these developments, Japan's political left, traditionally opposed to the military engagement, withered and the military dimension of the US–Japan relationship gained in importance. Not the least, because it reaffirms Japan's position in the Society, the Obama administration's attempt to push back against the rise of China and the dawn of the Asian Century, by ‘pivoting’ or ‘rebalancing’ toward the Asia-Pacific primarily through the strengthening of military alliances, has been welcomed in Tokyo.

The danger for Japan in becoming ‘lost’ and in ostensible need of protection from external threats bears significant consequences for both domestic and international politics. Contrary to conventional analysis, the two realms cannot easily be separated. The disciplining force of danger led to reinforcement of the modern state with its powers to control and mobilize. In the security political realm, the moving boundaries of the Society resulted in the need for increased defense spending, for example, to finance the expensive participation in the Western Pacific ballistic missile defense system – despite its questionable military benefits for Japan⁷⁸ – and increased pressure for the change and reinterpretation of the war-renouncing Article 9 for sending troops to combat zones overseas. Not the least, stronger emphasis on US–Japan military cooperation on the background of persisting history problems invariably concerned Japan's neighbors and thereby contributed to the perpetuation of a vicious cycle of mutual distrust.⁷⁹

Yet the impact on domestic politics is probably even more profound. It is not only that long-standing, controversial questions around US bases on Okinawa remained, in the face of external threats, insulated from democratic processes.⁸⁰ With considerable consequences for

the transparency of government, the adoption of the State Security Law in December 2013 has strengthened the state, too. Similarly, the ostensible need for stronger executive power to bring Japan back to prosperity served as reason for the creation of a “national control tower” in the form of the National Security Council in November 2013.⁸¹ Moreover, political arguments over national security have also enabled the government to continue promoting nuclear power generation despite the ongoing and for the population disastrous crisis at the Fukushima plant.⁸² While the majority of people in Japan have become genuinely concerned with threats from North Korea and China, all the above policies clearly run against established public opinion.⁸³ This led to public protests on scales unseen since 1960. Therefore, leaders have embarked on the quest to convince the population – in euphemistic terms, to “ask for their understanding” of these policies – while at the same time enhancing efforts at instilling patriotism.⁸⁴ Thus, conservative and nationalist elite’s search for Japan’s future in its past has created the paradox of reinforcing Japan’s ambiguous and constrained position in international politics they sought to overcome.

Leaders in Tokyo have contributed their share to the production of danger, that is, the heightening of mutually reinforcing threats. Again, this is not to deny that a number of Chinese or North Korean actions can be perceived as threats. With its focus on Japan, the present analysis tells only part of the story. China threat arguments, which emerged in Japan on the background of economic crisis and Japan-bashing in the US, however, came in an extraordinary variety ranging from military aggression to hegemonic aspirations, disorder through collapse and refugees, energy security, environmental pollution, and not the least, economic competition and development as explicitly confirmed by Prime Minister Koizumi.⁸⁵ Therefore, the effects of the production of danger also reach much deeper than the tactical employment of, for instance, China threat arguments. Rather than conscious political strategy, the production of danger is a consequence of the need to constitute and reconstitute political communities and their governing institutions in the face of socio-economic change.

The hierarchy constituted of norms of modern statehood equally reinforces concerns about the need to catch-up in both industrial and military capacity under firm leadership, for instance of the Communist Party in China.⁸⁶ It brings additional elements of competition and military rivalry. These come in the forms of the race to promote African development, including ODA-donor status, arms dynamics such as aircraft carrier and stealth fighter jet acquisitions, or attempts to legitimize maritime territorial claims.⁸⁷

However, for leaders in Tokyo to endorse the power shift narrative, as revealed in Samuel Huntington’s explicit statements on Japan, means in effect to make themselves a buffer-civilization at the frontline in the potentially self-fulfilling prophecy of a clash of civilizations.⁸⁸ Thus, the fundamental question in the current discussion about order and security across the Pacific is not how to ‘normalize’ Japan, how to strengthen the US–Japan alliance, or how to balance China. The question is how to alter norms of statehood in ways that allow post-war political systems to adapt to contemporary socio-economic realities and bolster their legitimacy not just internationally but also domestically.

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