



The Abe Administration and Japanese National Identity: An Update

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It is tempting to see in developments in contemporary Japanese politics indications of a fundamental shift in Japanese national identity. Resist that temptation. There are changes afoot in Tokyo, but these are not radical moves, nor do they signal a fundamental transformation in how the Japanese see themselves or their place in their world. In fact, what is most notable in policy debates is the way that advocates of change play down the novelty of these positions and ground them in traditional conceptions of national identity. This chapter examines several of the Abe administration's decisions related to foreign and security policy and explains the impact of national identity concerns on them. It demonstrates the enduring importance of national identity for core components of Japanese foreign policy and how those conceptions have limited or shaped the resulting policies.

The portrait of Japan that emerged from *The Japan-South Korea Identity Clash*¹ was that of a nation that is fundamentally conservative, reluctant to change, and concerned more with internal developments than those of the world around it. Inhabiting an island nation has had profound implications for Japanese identity. It has meant that a sense of vulnerability colors Japanese thinking about their place in the world. This manifests itself in fatalism and resignation, even though the Japanese are applauded for their readiness to struggle on (*gambaru*) or endure (*taeru*). The island mentality has also promoted a sense of egalitarianism and equality. The limited resources of an island nation have obliged Japan to engage the world, which has reinforced its identity as a trading nation, one with a deep connection to the maritime domains.

This identity creates internal tensions: on the one hand, it forces the Japanese to look to the world beyond their shores, while reinforcing, on the other, differences between Japan and “others.” An abiding concern about entrapment in foreign affairs is another consequence of this orientation, a fear that has been stoked by the disastrous results of Japan's outward expansion in the first half of the 20th century. As a result of that sad history and the enduring internal orientation, Japanese are “reluctant realists,” who have adopted an antimilitarist security mindset and are deeply suspicious of the utility of military force as a tool of state policy. Finally, the Japanese take great pride in their successes, and like many nations are very conscious of status, but they fear (or are resigned to) being buffeted by forces beyond their control (another form of vulnerability).

COLLECTIVE SELF-DEFENSE: THE POWER OF NATIONAL IDENTITY

Perhaps the most important policies of the second Abe administration—certainly the subject of the most attention from the international commentariat—concern efforts to reinterpret the Constitution, in particular restraints on the exercise of the right of collective self-defense (CSD) and the legislation that would implement that new interpretation. (This is part of a much larger package of security and foreign policy measures that were put into effect during the first two years of the Abe government and are covered in *The Japan-South Korea Identity Clash*.) While he campaigned in 2012 on a pledge to amend the Constitution, Abe has governed with restraint, acknowledging that he is far in front of the public in regard to this objective, and has pressed instead for more measured advances toward that goal.

The first step was a July 2014 cabinet decision to reinterpret the Constitution to lift constraints on the exercise of the right of CSD. Traditionally, Japan had been thought to possess the right of CSD—as all states do—but constitutionally forbidden from exercising it. The 2014 decision was based on the premise that no country can secure its own peace by itself and, thus, collective action was needed to create national security, a common sense assertion. While considerably less provocative than a constitutional amendment, it was still a controversial move that was followed by legislation that would permit Japanese Self-Defense Forces (SDF) to join military operations from which they had been previously banned.

This change was often characterized as path breaking, radical, or a shedding of shackles that had been imposed on Japan throughout the postwar era by occupying forces.² In fact, it was a restrained step, one that is consistent with the evolution of Japanese defense policy over the past two decades. Throughout the parliamentary debate over the legislation, advocates invariably emphasized the limits on Japan's ability to deploy the SDF. The final version of the legislation identified three limiting conditions that must be met to exercise the right of CSD: 1) Japan's survival must be threatened; 2) there must be no alternative means of addressing the threat; and 3) Japan must use the minimum amount of force necessary to meet the threat.³ Japanese officials and interlocutors have consistently emphasized these self-imposed restraints and in track 1.5 and track 2 discussions the chief Japanese concern in the aftermath of the new bills has been a fear that U.S. expectations would be too great and Japan would risk disappointing its alliance partner.⁴ Nevertheless, the legislation still unleashed great tumult among the Japanese public, and galvanized students to create protest groups such as Students Emergency Action for Liberal Democracy (Sealds) while sparking large demonstrations.⁵

Even though these steps are not revolutionary, they are still significant. Constitutional reinterpretation has been a conservative dream for decades. Yet, as important as the changes is the rationale that was used to justify them. The Abe administration argued that the reforms it has advanced are “proactive contributions to peace,” ways that Japan, a successful trading state that has benefitted from a peaceful and open international order, can help maintain and support that system. This philosophy, which is based on the idea that Japan should contribute to international peace, stability, and prosperity in a manner commensurate with its economic and political standing, has also been called “proactive pacifism.”⁶ This language is not new: advocates of change have employed such rhetoric for over two decades to make shifts in security policy more palatable to the general public. It builds on Japan's record of peace in the second half of the 21st century and the language and intent of Article 9 while adapting to new circumstances. It seeks to transform Japanese thinking about the role of the military and to acknowledge the positive role it can play in promoting peace.

As one advocate explained, “This isn't about doing away with postwar pacifism, but an attempt to maintain its virtues while correcting its shortcomings so as to conform to Japan's increased national power and the drastic changes that have taken place in international society since the end of the Cold War.”⁷ He explained in some detail what a policy of proactive pacifism would involve: Japan will “(1) not aim to become a military major power and would retain as many aspects of postwar self-restraint concerning military power as it can, even in the times of change, (2) refrain from military action in cases other than self defense and international joint action for peace, but will (3) develop the military capabilities necessary

for self defense and cooperate with other nations without any notions of taboo, and (4) actively play a role commensurate with its national power in both military and non-military forms of international joint action for peace.”⁸

This language is revealing. It roots the new policy firmly in the soil of pacifism, a core component of Japanese national identity. To blunt criticism of their work, policy advocates counter that changes in defense policy are designed to serve the interests of longstanding policy objectives. The Foreign Ministry’s description of the new security policy emphasizes this continuity rather than the novelty, “No changes in Japan’s basic posture and orientation for the past 70 years, including a peace loving nation.”⁹ Only the means have shifted; the end remains the same. This approach speaks to the power of the pacifist strand of Japanese identity.

The call for change also incorporates other elements of Japanese identity. First, there is the claim that Japan’s success requires it to contribute more to maintaining the stability and security of the existing international order. This is more than just an attempt to leverage “guilt” or suggest Japan is a free or cheap rider. The image of Japan as a “success”—a wealthy, safe, modern economy and society—is another key element of contemporary Japanese national identity and a way of using identity to rationalize change. Similarly, the case for a higher, more active security profile is generated by references to Japan’s dependence on trade and the need for security of sea lanes: These are two other core components of Japan’s identity.

The debate over the national security agenda is a tug of war between those who seek to redefine Japanese identity and those who want to consolidate it. Some reject any change to the national security posture and anchor their position in a traditional, narrowly defined, and unyielding conception of pacifism that is antimilitarist. For them, national defense must be restricted to the nation and security is best pursued through nonmilitary means. On the other end of the spectrum are conservative nationalists who cling to another version of national identity.

For this group, Japan is a proud, patriotic nation that has lost its way as a result of the Constitution imposed by the Occupation forces in the aftermath of World War II. According to *Nippon Kaigi* (Japan Conference), the most important of the conservative groups fighting to realize this vision of Japan, core conservative policy objectives include: veneration of the emperor and the imperial family, revision of the Constitution, revision of the “masochistic view of history” along with promotion of patriotic education, development of national defense systems, and opposition to systems that will cause the “disintegration of families,” such as allowing husbands and wives to have different surnames.¹⁰ These policies, it insists, reflect Japan’s “true, original characteristics.”¹¹ Abe talks about “values such as public service, self-discipline, morals and attachment to and affection for the community and country where we have been born and raised.”¹² This benign interpretation is challenged by those who believe the real goal of the conservatives (or at least *Nippon Kaigi*) is the rehabilitation of the former imperial regime, and they point to visits to Yasukuni Shrine, where the spirits of Japan’s dead, including 14 Class-A war criminals, are enshrined as proof. For these critics, these acts are “supporting historical revisions, the whitewashing of Japan’s war crimes and brutality, ... and pledging support for a new Empire of Japan.”¹³

Occupying the middle ground are those who have, thus far, prevailed in the policy debate. They have argued for change within the existing parameters of national identity. In this

interpretation, the pacifist dimension of identity anchors and restrains security policy despite conservative efforts to shift or reframe the entire debate. The fact that the discussion of security policy continues to focus on the constraints is proof that existing national identity parameters have held. Strict, long-standing and self-imposed restrictions on Japanese behavior continue to frame the policy debate. “Rumors of their demise to the contrary, recent developments have stretched, but not removed, core principles that for decades have defined Japan’s self-restraint.”¹⁴

THE TPP THREAT TO JAPANESE IDENTITY¹⁵

A second important policy development of the last year that has implications for Japanese national identity is the pursuit of international negotiations through the TPP, a 12-member deal that is intended to set a gold standard for trade negotiations. It reflects growing disillusionment with the WTO-backed Doha round of trade talks; concern that the ever-expanding “noodle bowl” of bilateral and regional trade agreements in the Asia-Pacific risked segregating the region and crystalizing inefficient economic relationships; and a fear that the Pacific Ocean could separate Asia from the Americas in ways that would undermine economic prosperity and security. TPP was designed to be the best possible trade deal, constructed by 12 like-minded governments determined to maximize the free movement of goods and services and to deeply and permanently tie the United States to Asia. It was concluded on October 5, 2015 after seven years of negotiations and several missed deadlines.

For Abe, TPP is vital to the success of his “Abenomics” economic program, which, in turn, is critical to revitalizing Japan’s stagnant economy and ensuring that it would remain a “tier-one country.”¹⁶ Abenomics’ “third arrow” was structural reform, and TPP was viewed as “a one-shot opportunity to use external pressures (*gaiatsu*) to implement an unprecedented level of trade liberalization and the economic reforms promised by Prime Minister Abe.”¹⁷ Yet, even the prospect of joining the TPP talks set off a contentious debate in Japan. The easy explanation for the controversy surrounding the negotiations is that it threatened to transform Japan’s moribund agricultural sector – for years, METI strategists had argued for trade negotiations on just these grounds¹⁸ – and those long-protected constituencies were fighting back to protect their perks. That is, indeed, part of the story: the Central Union of Agricultural Cooperatives (Zenkoku Nogyo Kyodo Kumiai Chuokai -- or JA-Zenchu) has 10 million members, a bank with \$532 billion in deposits, and is considered Japan’s single most powerful special interest group.¹⁹

But Japanese resistance to agricultural reform reflects much more than mundane and tawdry money politics. The real objections to TPP, or at least those that give opposition traction broadly throughout Japan, are based on the notion that agriculture is central to Japanese identity, and the practices and culture that are intrinsic to rice farming, in particular, would be destroyed by reform. “The farmland and rice farming is at the core of our culture,” explained one rice farmer protesting TPP. “They are linked to this culture through community festivals ... But if we stop cultivating the rice, this culture will be destroyed.”²⁰ The significance attached to such reform is revealed in a comment by Yamada Masahiko, a former minister of Agriculture, Forestry, and Fisheries, who strongly opposed joining TPP and described it as the “black ship” that would lead to the complete collapse of Japanese agriculture.²¹ The “black ship” is a, if not the, most potent image in Japanese historical iconography: Commodore Matthew Perry entered Yokohama Bay in 1854 with a fleet of black ships,

which forced the Japanese to sign the Convention of Kanegawa, which led to the opening of Japan, which triggered the Meiji Restoration and the creation of modern Japan. The image is now shorthand for any foreign object that threatens traditional notions of Japanese culture and identity.

There is another way in which TPP and economic reform more generally threaten Japanese identity. A slowing economy has prompted many Japanese to challenge the consumer-orientation of their society. Complaints focus on the way that a capitalist economic model fragments communities, emphasizes acquisition that promotes inequality and drives consumption that erodes the traditional Japanese relationship with nature. There are two elements of this orientation. The first is the identification with nature, a belief that has roots in Shinto, although many adherents would deny that they have a religious orientation. A second element is the communitarian, egalitarian emphasis: the idea that Japan is an undifferentiated society in which all members are seen as the same. The critique of the Japanese economic model is typically articulated by the left, which has deep suspicions of capitalism in general and the U.S. model in particular, but it exists on both ends of the political spectrum, with conservatives lamenting the loss of “attachment to and affection for the community” (as Abe did in the remarks noted above).

Consider, for example, the charge that TPP will undermine Japanese healthcare. “If Japan takes part in the TPP, the universality of public health care coverage may be maintained, but in name only. It is highly possible that fair and equal access to medical care, the core function of this system, will be lost.”²² This too stems from a deeply rooted belief that Japanese society is naturally egalitarian. Opinion polls provide evidence of the power of this strand of identity when they explore preferences for meritocratic or egalitarian societies or the extent of social safety nets. It is confirmed by a spring 2011 Pew poll in which 74 percent of Japanese respondents agreed that “our traditional way of life is getting lost.”²³ The best evidence, however, can be found in literature and the degree to which writers explore or highlight such themes as isolation and loss of connection in their work. Writers trying to make sense of March 11 honed in on this sense of anomie and loss.²⁴

Here again, Nippon Kaigi’s opposition – and that of conservatives more generally – to systems that will cause the “disintegration of families” is important. An integral part of the reforms proposed by Abe administration economists is unleashing the productive potential of women. As Kathy Matsui, chief Japan strategist at Goldman Sachs pointed out, “Abe realized that given the severe demographic headwinds facing Japan, making better use of the other half of the population might help improve the nation’s growth potential.”²⁵ Yet, many conservatives also see these new roles for women as a challenge to their notions of an idealized social order that stems from conceptions of Japanese national identity.²⁶ This tension between the need for reform and the demands of traditional society has yet to be resolved and is likely to act as a continuing break on structural change.

REMEMBERING WAR

Another critical event in the last year was the 70th anniversary of the end of World War II. The speech by Abe offers insight into Japanese thinking about the war and the period since then and clues as to how Japanese use this seminal event to reinforce notions of national identity.²⁷ Several key features of identity can be adduced from this speech. First, there

is the identification of Japan as an isolated nation, buffeted by and responding to larger geopolitical forces. As Abe explained, “With their overwhelming supremacy in technology, waves of colonial rule surged toward Asia in the 19th century. There is no doubt that the resultant sense of crisis drove Japan forward to achieve modernization.” After World War I, geopolitical forces pushed Japan down the road to ruin: “with the Great Depression setting in and the Western countries launching economic blocs by involving colonial economies, Japan’s economy suffered a major blow. In such circumstances, Japan’s sense of isolation deepened and it attempted to overcome its diplomatic and economic deadlock through the use of force.” This establishes Japan as a nation that is more an object than a subject in international relations, a characterization that opens the door to a second key element of Japan’s identity: that of “victim.” While Abe recognized the pain that Japan inflicted on Asian nations, he begins his assessment of the costs of World War II by detailing the suffering experienced by the Japanese: death on the battlefield, families divided, the atomic bombings, the fire bombings of Tokyo and other cities, and the fighting on Okinawa.

Only after Japanese suffering is established does he turn to the wrongs inflicted by Japan on other countries. Those losses provided the foundation of modern Japan, a “peace-loving nation” that will “never again repeat the devastation of war” and a country “determined never to deviate from this steadfast course.” It is vital to recognize that in Japanese thinking about history and the Pacific War, the point of departure is Japan’s status as a victim as well, a status that is reinforced, ironically, by the fact that Japan lost the war. Defeat is part of the victim identity, one that has been internalized throughout the postwar period.²⁸

DEALING WITH THE “COMFORT WOMEN”

The victimization narrative is an important part of the entire history discussion in Japan (and throughout East Asia). To their great credit, Abe and President Park Geun-hye struck a deal on December 28, 2015 that offered “final and irreversible” settlement between their two countries on the “comfort women” issue.²⁹ On that day, the two countries’ foreign ministers released unilateral statements. Japanese Foreign Minister Kishida Fumio said that Abe, as the “cabinet prime minister of Japan,” extended “heartfelt apologies and remorse to all those who suffered immeasurable pain and incurable physical and psychological wounds as comfort women.” He acknowledged that “the honor and dignity of many women were severely injured with the involvement of the Japanese military,” and “From this perspective, the Japanese government fully realizes responsibility.” In acceptance of that responsibility, Japan will provide ¥1 billion from the government budget to fully finance a foundation, run by the Korean government, to support the “comfort women.” Scott Snyder and I are gratified by the two governments’ decision to adopt a recommendation in our book, but there is much more to be done before this issue is finally and irreversibly settled, much less the larger set of history issues that bedevil relations between the two countries. Immediate challenges include implementation of this deal, honoring the promise to refrain from criticizing each other over the issue in the international community, and “dealing with” the statue erected in front of the Japanese embassy in Seoul that honors the “comfort women.”³⁰

The “comfort women” issue has been especially difficult for Japan to address, not just because the issue was settled (in theory) in the 1965 normalization agreement or that the list of grievances of Koreans (and other victims of Japanese aggression during World War II) is long. The idea that Japan systematically engaged in behavior that violated the human

rights of women and used them as sexual slaves is not only naturally abhorrent, but it also challenges the victim narrative that is central to Japan's own national identity. The intensity of Japanese protests against the "comfort women" charges and the various solutions to this historical problem, including the December 2015 agreement, reflect the unease created by the incompatibility of this allegation with notions of who the Japanese think themselves to be. There are fears that the issue will never go away, that South Koreans will use history as a cudgel and a way to maintain the moral high ground with Japan no matter what it does and the notion of "a final and irreversible" agreement is a mirage. The durability and intensity of this belief – that Japan will continue to be beaten with the "comfort women" issue – is a reflection of the power of a conception of Japanese identity that stands upon the twin pillars of prewar powerlessness and postwar peacefulness.

Nevertheless, Abe calculated that a deal made sense. Tactical considerations likely influenced his thinking: Having created a floor in relations with China, the result of the September 2014 deal with Beijing that allowed President Xi Jinping to host the November APEC Leaders Meeting free of distractions, Abe anticipated that Park would soon be amenable to some arrangement, given the difficulties she was encountering on virtually every item on her foreign policy agenda. Good relations with South Korea are in Japan's national interest and agreeing to honor statements made by previous Japanese governments in exchange for cauterizing an open wound makes strategic sense. Moreover, any perceived "sacrifices" that Abe made in pursuit of that arrangement are easily validated from a still larger perspective: Abe (like Park) opted for a deal that transcended narrow formulations of nationalism and elevated him (like her) to the level of a genuinely historical leader who managed to move beyond an ugly and painful obstacle to Japan's relations with a vital partner. If the deal holds, Abe and Park will be able to say that they rewrote Northeast Asian political dynamics.

Japanese views of the December 28 agreement are mixed. A February 1, 2016 *Mainichi Shimbun* poll shows 65 percent of respondents approving of the deal although 72 percent do not believe that it will put an end to the issue.³¹ Those results are consistent with a January poll by the *Sankei Shimbun* (more conservative), in which nearly 60 percent of respondents approved of the agreement and nearly 81 percent thought the controversy would resurface,³² and an *Asahi Shimbun* survey in which 63 percent of respondents "approved" of the agreement and just 19 percent did not.³³ While the fate of this agreement may well rest in Seoul's hands – whether it can quell the anger and complaints raised by the "comfort women" themselves, and how it deals with the statue issue³⁴ – it appears as though the deal enjoys significant approval within Japan.

The deal's survival depends on faithful implementation, but the language in places is sufficiently broad to permit multiple interpretations. Thus, long-term success depends (among other things) on the readiness of the Japanese public to be open-minded and flexible; that will be easier if the agreement is seen as consistent with Japanese views of their national identity. The willingness of Koreans to differentiate between the Japanese imperial government that committed those atrocities and the current one will help facilitate that acceptance. This distinction will allow the Japanese identification of themselves as victims to go unchallenged, which should in turn diminish objections to the agreement. That will not end all the problems or ensure the agreement's survival, but it will help considerably.

South Koreans may not like this idea. The fundamental question for them is whether they can accept this notion of contemporary Japanese national identity: that there has been a transformation in Japan, that the Japanese society and polity of the 21st century represent a break with that of imperial Japan. If they can, then this deal may gain traction and endure. But Korean identity may prove unable to adjust. It may be predicated on the existence of an antagonistic Japan. The idea that a “hostile other” Japan may be intrinsic to Korean national identity is one of the most troubling conclusions of our study. If true, this would suggest that the recent agreement is doomed and that long-term reconciliation with Japan is practically impossible. It would demand far more active engagement on the part of the leadership and the elites in both countries to challenge prevailing views of the other nation, and continuing efforts and real diligence to lead. It would demand still greater involvement by the United States to help the two countries overcome their pasts and move beyond existing images of self and other that dominate relations.

The simple reality is that Japan is not the same country that it was 70 years ago, and the world has changed as well. External as well as internal restraints will prevent Koreans’ worst (and unfounded) nightmares from being realized. That also means that a rigid national identity, unable to adapt to circumstances, is hurting Korea’s ability to maximize its own interests and freedom of diplomatic maneuver.

A danger for Japan – and all of Northeast Asia – is that a negative feedback loop will emerge, with Korean anger and insecurity confirming and reinforcing the Japanese sense of victimization and isolation within Asia. This would ill serve the country and the region, as Japanese exceptionalism has historically distanced Japan from Asia, a process that began with the “datsu-a” choice of the Meiji era. Today, Japan is at a critical moment at which it must reassess relations with Asia, balancing that relationship with that of the United States. (This is not a zero-sum, but can easily and falsely be reduced to that binary set of options.) Japanese national identity can be used to build a more robust relationship with Asia, but it will require concerted effort by Japanese elites to advance and emphasize those strands of identity that do so; the more natural tendency is to stress exclusivity and separation. A conservative leadership that aims to rebuild Japan’s “national pride and confidence” is also less likely to prioritize the accommodative elements of identity that facilitate relationship building with Asia. Ironically, however, a Japanese leadership role in Asia, the real goal of conservative nationalists, is best accomplished through engagement on mutually satisfactory terms, not single-minded *realpolitik*.

The United States has an important role to play in this process. Washington has a stake in a good Japan-ROK relationship. As Deputy Secretary of State Antony Blinken noted, “our trilateral partnership is a force multiplier for good... Few countries have as much to contribute in upholding this [international rules-based] system and in advancing and reforming it as our three countries – as vibrant democracies deeply invested in its principles and norms and as economic leaders for sustainable growth and game-changing innovation.”³⁵ Yet, U.S. efforts to promote an effective trilateral – and it has been deeply engaged in efforts to push Seoul and Tokyo together – are fraught.³⁶ There is concern that it may take sides. There is fear that it will alienate one party or another. There is the danger that Washington will burn precious political capital and convince either ally that such cooperation means more to it than to them. Indeed, both sides often reason that they can count on Washington to force the other government to “do the right thing,” effectively lifting their own burden to act responsibly.³⁷

These difficulties and potential pitfalls must not stop the U.S. from pushing its allies to do more together; networking U.S. alliances is an integral part of the U.S. rebalance to Asia and an increasingly vital exercise given the nature of new security threats, the improved capabilities that allies possess, and the increasingly straitened fiscal circumstances every government faces. The national identity arguments articulated here provide a means to better tailor the logic (or at least the rhetoric) of the U.S. position to Japanese priorities and perspectives.

ENDNOTES

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