

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Senkaku/Diaoyu Island Dispute and the Reconstruction of China as Japan's "Other"

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Abstract: In the recent years, much has been written about Japan's security "normalization," that is, the resurgence of Japan as a "proactive contributor to world peace." This article aims to add to this debate, but it will approach it from a novel angle. Basing its epistemology in critical security studies, I investigate the relationship between national identity and Japan's foreign policy (i.e., its normalization). The article dismisses realist assumptions that Japan's security rejuvenation is a reaction to the changing balance of power in Asia. Rather, it argues that the normalization is a product of Japan's discursive practice of victimization, that is, situating itself as a victim of foreign pressure. The identity of a victim is reproduced through the practice of "othering"—differentiating from various "others." For most parts of the 20th century, the United States served as the focal other to Japan's self-identification. In the last two decades, however, Japan's identity has become practiced through differentiation to China. The article illustrates this process on the case study of Japan's primary discourse on the Senkaku/Diaoyu island dispute of 2010 through 2014. Japan's narrative on the dispute has managed to depict China as a coercive, immoral and abnormal state that bullies subsequently weak, coerced, but moral and lawful Japan. By writing Japan as a coerced, yet lawful state protecting the status quo, Tokyo succeeded in persuading the United States to subdue the disputed territory under its nuclear umbrella. Through the process of victimization of a weak Japan then, the Prime Minister Abe Shinzo managed to propagate the new security legislature as a means of reconstruction of Japan from weak to a normal state.

Keywords: Japan, China, identity, revisionism, normalization, discourse

In recent years, much has been written about Japan's changing security posture from a pacifist (reactive) to a normal (proactive) country (Ozawa, 1993; Katzenstein & Okawara, 1993; Berger, 1998; Bukh, 2010). The recent Japanese Prime Minister's Abe Shinzo's political strategies of "proactive contribution of peace" (2013) and new security guidelines (2015), that broadened the capabilities of the Japanese Self-Defense Forces (SDF), were understood as an embodiment of these changes. For a number of neorealist authors (Waltz, 2000; Mearsheimer, 2006, 2010), this security realignment has been a result of changing structural factors, mainly the division of power in Asia. Is Tokyo, however, only pragmatically reacting towards Chinese assertive push for resources and recognition?

Contrary to most positivist analyses of Japan's security realignment, this article offers an alternative interpretation built on critical ontological and epistemological foundations. It argues that Japan's narrative on China, rather than structural factors, played a key role in its national identity realignment. In the last three decades, Japan's identity entrepreneurs (influential actors pursuing their narrative of what the Japanese "self" should be—most notably politicians, administrations, media) began painting a story of a strong, coercive, and unlawful China that bullies weak and subservient Japan that heavily depends on the outside protection. This narrative has subsequently legitimized Japan's security policy changes. Because Japan narrated itself as a victim of Chinese aggression, its security legislature was presented as a legitimate protection. The national identity of a proactive and normal state can thus be perceived as a product of this political practice.

To illustrate this discursive construction of Japanese national identity, the article will investigate a case study of the Abe Shinzo administration and popular media narratives on China during the Senkaku/Diaoyu island dispute since 2010 through 2014. These were the peak points of Sino–Japanese crisis and an exacerbation of the changes in Japanese people's China perception. Whereas the case study will focus on the narrative on China, the aim rests on the implications this narrative has for the Japanese self. Investigating Abe's political discourse, the article articulates his strategy of victimization of a weak Japan from a bullying China

that played a key role in Abe's policy practice. Through this identity entrepreneurship, Abe's cabinet succeeded in gaining support both from abroad (especially the United States) and from within (Japanese society is becoming increasingly nationalistic), in order to push for a resolute change in Japan's security posture.

Before investigating the victimization strategy of the Abe administration, the article introduces basic theoretical approaches to studying national identity in Japan, describes the role of other in Japan's identity history, and provides with the changes that Japanese narrative on China has undergone since the Second World War. These provide much-needed background that highlights the recent shifts in Japan's China perception.

Japan's National Identity Between Norms and Differentiation

The role of identity in Japan's foreign policy is a frequent and reappearing theme in current international relations research on Japan. Basically, we can distinguish two approaches identifying the influence of identity in Japan's policy practice. The first one builds on classical constructivism of Alexander Wendt (1999) and Nicholas Onuf (1989) and understands Japan's identity as a socially created norm. The second one works with critical and post-structuralist epistemological foundations of Michel Foucault or James Der Derian and understand Japan's identity as a product of power-related othering—distinguishing the self from various others that enter into a power relation with the Self.

For classical constructivist authors (i.e., Katzenstein & Okawara, 1993; Berger, 1998; Beuchamps, 2002; Ashizawa, 2008; Singh, 2008; Oros, 2008, 2015), national identity is a product of domestic societies and their cultural and historical characteristics. Identity is perceived as one of the sources of foreign policy and thus perceived as an independent variable. In this regard, constructivist authors mostly focused on Japan's post-war antimilitaristic foreign policy (which was dubbed abnormal or an anomaly by the (neo)realists, see Kennedy, 1994; Waltz, 1993, 2000), and understood it as a product of socially created identity in the wake of World War 2. Japanese peaceful constitution was a primary bearer of this norm of

antimilitarism. Since they perceived national identity to change only through the change of culture, they (Katzenstein & Okawara, 1993) predicted only little change to Japan's foreign policy.

Critical constructivists and post-structuralists (Clammer, 2001; Suzuki, 2007; Bukh, 2010; Hoshino & Satoh, 2012; Kolmas, 2014, 2017a; Hagstrom & Gustafsson, 2015; Hagstrom & Hanssen, 2015; Tamaki, 2015) criticized this approach for its neglect of other, than domestic factors in identity creation. Critical theorists, on the other hand, understand Japan's national identity to be created discursively through differentiation vis-à-vis its "others." The narrative process of "othering" can take on many shapes, as there might be various others (as well as various selves), yet neither material nor domestic factors can exist outside of such identity construction (Hagstrom & Gustafsson, 2015; Kolmas, 2017b). Simply, rather than being a dependent variable, policy practice constitutes the narrative on national identity and, thus, the identity itself (see also Neumann, 1996; Campbell, 1998; Wæver, 2002; Hansen 2006). Tamaki (2015), for instance, argued that Japan's narrative of a dangerous Asia prompted Tokyo to engage in its program of colonialism before World War 2, and compels policy makers to address territorial issues in Asia today.

This approach is better suited to explain the creation of Japan's national identity and its linkage with foreign policy practice. The reasons are twofold. First, the simple distinction between pre-war militarism and post-war anti-militarism is questionable. For instance, Oguma (2002) showed that instead of becoming simply anti-militaristic in the aftermath of World War 2, the Japanese people were rather reluctant to accept their military cooperating with the enemy (United States). The changes in public opinion over the last couple of decades also disprove the image of Japanese society as strictly anti-militaristic. In 1988, 77% of Japanese population indicated that they were favorably impressed by the SDF (Dolan & Worden, 1992).

Second, the image of the outside played a crucial role in defining both cultural and political Japanese self. Culturally, the narrative on what defines Japanese uniqueness materialized in the concept of *nihonjinron*. Literally translated as the theory of a Japanese person or the theory of Japanese, *nihonjinron* encompasses a

bulk of scientific and popular literature that was present in Japan since the Tokugawa period (1603–1868) and that aimed at illustrating the uniqueness of Japanese people and nation. In the wake of World War 2 (and culminating in the 1970s) this literature became much stronger in political discourse. Japan simply needed a new symbol and ideas to build their society upon. According to Dale (1986), this narrative was dominated by three lines: (1) Japan constitutes a socially and culturally homogeneous racial entity, whose essence is essentially unchanged from the prehistoric times; (2) Japanese people differ radically from the others; and (3) any mode of analysis that does not derive from Japanese sources is faulty, since it cannot capture Japan's uniqueness. In the essence then, *nihonjinron* constituted a form of "cultural nationalism" that illustrated the differences and homogeneity of Japan as opposed to other countries and peoples. For instance, the narrative on Japan as a homogeneous country highlighted Japan's race as single, whereas the Western societies were a product of a mixture of races. Socially, Japan was seen as a collectivist, feminine society, whereas the West was individualist and masculine. Geographically, Japan was narrated as a country beset by forests and untamed landscape, where nature dominates the men. The West, however, was seen as a land of pastures, where the men dominate nature (Dale, 1986; Kimura, 1999; Bukh, 2010).

The *nihonjinron* discourse offers a unique insight into the role of other in cultural identification of Japanese self as "collectivist, homogeneous" (etc.). It has also influenced some of the political leaders and their identity entrepreneurship, as will be discussed later. The level of foreign policy articulation, similarly, offers a vast variety of others for Japan's identification of the various selves. For instance, distinguishing Japan vis-à-vis North Korea, China, the United States or the West (and the East) in general, as well as vis-à-vis its past, has created a variety of selves stretching from peaceful, democratic, lawful, environmental, modern and so forth. It remains, however, a question of how these identities synergized on the national level and/or why and when one identity/narrative wins over another. Most of the post-structural literature on Japan's identity (Tamaki, 2015; Bukh, 2010) fail to offer an answer to this question. Wæver (2002) offers some insights in

his “sedimentation” model. Building on the classical agency–actor debate, he treated identity as “layered, and simultaneously constituted on mutually interacting levels of inter-subjective meaning making. In such a framework, identity change in the less institutionalized layers interacts with and builds on layers that are more institutionalized—whether they too change or not” (p. 31). He can thus distinguish between the “more” and “less” sedimented identities and define their interaction. It is fair to say though that why some identities sediment more and less is still rather an open question.

Hagstrom and Gustaffson (2015) built on this approach by defining three layers of sedimentation in the case of Japan. They believed that the most sedimented layer lies is Japan’s “understanding of the self in hierarchical terms, where Japan is constructed through differentiation to others, who are alternately understood as superior or inferior to Japan” (p. 6). This layer defines Japan as a modern and peaceful country and has played a key role in the Meiji restoration and imperial aggressions, since it defined Japan as a middle part between the “modern West” and the “culturally close Orient” (see Oguma, 2002). The middle layer is the layer where the “more exact distinctions and demarcations between self and other are negotiated” (Hagstrom & Gustaffson, 2015, p. 7). At these layers, identities of the self as rational, democratic, emotional and the like are being defined and prioritized. The least sedimented layer is the layer where individual policies and political issues are discussed and where agents operate. Through discourse then (both official and unofficial), agents may propose their visions of identity that can push for the realignment in the middle and to an extent to the most sedimented layer and thus prioritize one identity over another. For instance, Koizumi and Abe’s visits to the Yasukuni shrine (where the souls of Japanese soldiers reside) could be perceived as the least sedimented identity entrepreneurship, which tries to pressure on the middle level identity layer of Japan as an independent and/or self-confident country.

This layered approach is, in my opinion, (1) scientifically innovative, because it focuses on the political agency level as a basic parameter for analysis; and (2) more suitable for the explanation of changes within Japan’s national identity and security policy

from pacifist to normal state. The aim of this article is to illustrate the change in Japan’s narrative on China as a source of Japan’s national identity. This paper will argue that the discursive practice of victimization vis-à-vis growing China played a key role in Japan’s identity recreation. It will focus on the least sedimented layer of political agency, namely on the identity entrepreneurship of the Abe Shinzo administration during the peak of the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands crisis (2010 through 2014). This identity entrepreneurship present in Abe’s political narrative aims at reshaping the more sedimented layers of Japan’s self. Whether or not the Chinese revisionism presented a current regional security issue (as realist international relations scholars would argue), the rise of assertive China has undeniably affected Japan’s self-construction as a victim, and thus legitimized Japanese will for normalizing its security legislature.

To illustrate the victimization strategy, the article will analyze Japan’s narrative (more on narrative analysis, for instance, Browning, 2008; Wodak & Meyer, 2009; Tonra, 2011) on China during the island crisis years of 2010–2014. It will look into all of Abe’s cabinet’s speeches, statements, and security legislature connected to the crisis and into a significant portion of secondary, popular literature such as the main Japanese newspapers (*Yomiuri Shimbun*, *Japan Times*, *Sankei Shimbun*, *Mainichi Shimbun*, and *Asahi Shimbun*), that have an impact on the popular emotions in Japan. In the narrative analysis, the article will focus on the image of China and its implications to the construction of Japanese self. Before illustrating this narrative process, let me first investigate in the historical evolution of Japan’s China narrative, which will enlighten us on how much has Abe’s identity entrepreneurship changed.

China in Postwar Japan’s Identity Construction

Although both Chinese and Japanese societies share roots in classical Chinese civilization, for most parts of the postwar history, Japanese identity construction neglected China as a distinguishing factor for self-construction (Suzuki, 2015). It is fair to say that postwar Japan built its identity distinctively different to prewar Japan. Militaristic expansionism of a multi-nation empire was replaced by a defeated country seeking new

uniqueness within its island borders. Article 9 of the Japanese Constitution (1947), which prohibits Japan from possessing traditional military forces, is a best example of this new posture. The Constitution created the basis for Japan's pacifist security policy, but it also served as a focal point of revisionists seeking Japan's normalization (Ozawa, 1993).

The debates about the constitutional restraint signal the fear about Japan's new world position. As Suzuki (2015, p. 100) wrote, "what is often missed is the fact that the fundamental issue undergirding these discussions has frequently been about constructing an identity of Japan as an 'autonomous state.' Whatever one's political colors were, debates surrounding Article 9 were intimately linked to a persistent fear that Japan had a 'weak' or 'subservient' identity that allowed it to be dominated by foreign powers." The construction of a weak self presupposes the construction of a dominant other. Although, as said before, the varieties in Japanese self evoke the variety of others, rather than China being the dominant other, Japan's postwar self-construction (and thus the security posture) focused on the United States, a point to which I am proceeding right away.

There is a plethora of reasons for why to interpret the United States as the most significant other to postwar Japan. Historically, the United States played a major influence on Japan's identity even before the war. It was Commodore Perry who forced the Tokugawa Japan to open its gates to foreign pressures in 1853. With the strong and independent Japanese self, which resulted in the economic and political growth over the Taisho (1912-1926) and prewar part of the Showa era (1926-1989), Japan was able to defy the American other (as illustrated in the Pearl Harbor attack); America's role in the World War 2 was crucial in Japan's postwar identity switch to a weak and servant country. The images of Hiroshima and Nagasaki created all-important symbols of American dominance and Japan's defeat. It was also the Americans who ultimately forced Japan to accept its surrender in the Second World War and the Americans who played a major role in recreating Japan's sovereignty in the late 1940s by drafting a new, peace constitution (McCargo, 2013, pp. 32-33). The resulting security dependence on the United States was the forming factor of the Japanese perception as a significantly weak state. While

unable to maintain self-security, Japan narrated itself as an ashamed and hardly an independent country (Oguma, 2002).

According to Suzuki (2015), the narrative of a dependent country vis-à-vis the United States was shared by both idealist right and idealist left, yet for different reasons. Right wing Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) politicians criticized the "inexistent" sovereignty and resulting security dependence. Left-wing idealists called for independence because they believed that Japan's servant posture to Washington could possibly entrap Japan in American militarized conflict. That is also why Japan's postwar Yoshida doctrine (named after the PM Yoshida Shigeru) that defined Japan's low key political strategy based primarily in economic cooperation, was of such criticism of both idealist groups (Oguma, 1998). Japan's ambiguity towards the United States also resurfaced on many occasions. During the protests against the new security treaty between Tokyo and Washington in 1960, up to 100,000 Japanese marched in the streets of Tokyo, symbolizing the politicization of US-Japanese relations (Reischauer & Craig, 1989). United States further functioned as a reference point within Japan's *nihonjinron* discourse as discussed before.

Japanese narrative on the United States and subsequently on Japan's security policies formed the popular debate in the postwar years. Suzuki (2005) showed that major Japanese newspapers *Asahi*, *Mainichi*, and *Yomiuri* produced a significantly higher amount of articles containing the words "Japan, America" (*beikoku*) and "resolute" (*kizen*) than the words "Japan, China" (*nicchuu*) and resolute. According to Suzuki, this was visible throughout the second part of 20th century, up to the year 2012. China, however, occupied a relatively minor spot in Japanese people's sentiments and security debates. Although Japanese self-image practically reversed after the Second World War, the relatively successful experience with Western modernity, postwar dynamic economic growth strongly weakened the significance of China in Japanese self-narrative. Although some highlighted the cultural heritage Japan and China shared, Japan, as Chalmers Johnson wrote in 1972 seemed to be befogged by a long-standing inability to take the Chinese seriously:

It is perhaps not too far-fetched to describe Japanese attitudes toward their continental neighbors as somewhat comparable to the English or German industrialist's attitude toward an Italian or Spanish aristocrat recently gone into commerce. He admires, and is slightly intimidated by, the ancient cultural achievements to which his modern counterpart is heir, but he finds it almost impossible in the company board room to suggest seriously that the new boy might become a competitor or a threat. (Johnson, 1972)

This narrative led to Japan swiftly normalizing relations with its Eastern neighbor right after the American envoy heralded a new era in US–China relations in 1970s. The friendship treaty signed between Japan and China in 1979 was facilitated by Beijing's skillful diplomacy contributing to Japan's good feelings towards China, such as Mao Zedong's generous expression of forgivingness for Japan's past aggression and Premier Zhou Enlai's skillful renunciation of reparation demands (Watanabe, 2015). The transformation of the China narrative from “responsible friend” toward “coercive status-quo changing bully” did not take roots until the mid-1980s, when the conservative newspapers (such as some politicians) strongly objected to China's criticism over Premier Nakasone Yasuhiro's visit to the Yasukuni shrine as meddling in Japan's internal affairs (Rose, 2007). Deterioration of Japan's narrative on China was exacerbated following the 1989 Tiananmen Square incident, in which the Chinese government violently cracked down on a pro-democracy protest movement. Still, for most of 1990s, the viability of United States as an other to Japan's national identity and subsequently foreign policy was far more visible. Japan did, for instance, signal its new role in international relations by promoting the Kyoto Protocol even if the United States withdrew from the ratification process. By some (Tiberghien & Schreurs, 2007), this was perceived as a sign of normalization of Japan's identity towards becoming a proactive world community member.

While the rise of China as Japan's other has been emerging during the past three decades, the events from the last decade influenced the massive rise of Japanese nationalism towards its Chinese neighbor. The image of arrogant China started to resurface in 1980s, coupled with its rapid military growth in the

1990s and 2000s. In 1992, China unilaterally claimed sovereignty over the Spratly Islands with the enactment of the Law of the Territorial Sea and Contiguous Zone. Given China's expansionary past, Japan started to feel suspicious over China's perceived revisionism. Furthermore, although throughout postwar years China was perceived as a culturally alike country to Japan, this positive narrative in Japanese society gradually deteriorated. China became pictured as an immoral and culturally inferior state with fundamentally different values than Japan. For instance, when Chinese foreign minister Li Zhaoxing in his press speech in March 2006 criticized Japan's lack of repentance (symbolized by their visits to Yasukuni shrine), the then-Cabinet Secretary Abe Shinzo called his remarks stupid and immoral and demanded justification (“Chūgoku gaishō hatsugen,” 2006). On other occasions, media as well as commentators have criticized China's rise as unethical, given the fact that Japan's significant development assistance (ODA) has been used to finance China's strategic interests without any signs of gratitude (i.e. Masuda, 2003). Moreover, China's actions against Japan about the recent reheating of the Senkaku/Diaoyu dispute were often described as “running against shared values (between Japan and the West) such as democracy and the rule of law” (Nakajima & Shirakawa, 2015, par. 3).

These examples exacerbate the declining role of the United States as Japan's other. The qualities now prescribed to China within Japan's discourse two decades ago were similarly prescribed to the United States. For instance, during his 1986 visit to the United States, Japanese Prime Minister Nakasone was quoted saying that the trade deficit between Japan and the United States can partly be attributed to American multiracial society (“the presence of the blacks, Puerto Ricans and Mexicans has impaired educational process compared to Japan,” Chira, 1986, par. 6). This statement implied that Japan's economic and educational prowess was a product of racially homogeneous and thus superior Japanese society.

Senkaku/Diaoyu Dispute and Japan's Victimization Discourse

The recent dispute over Senkaku/Diaoyu islands marks the highpoint of Japan's nationalistic discourse

towards China. The conflict, however, has a long history. Although it resurfaced in the beginning of 1970s when rich deposits of oil were discovered around the disputed islands, claims of both the Chinese and the Japanese people stretch further to the past. In a nutshell, China claims that the islands were a part of China's territory since ancient times, serving as important fishing ground administered by the province of Taiwan. China supports this claim by a number of historical maps placing the islands within China's exclusive territory. Japan, on the other hand, claims that it surveyed the islands in the second half of 19th century and found no evidence that they belonged to China. Tokyo then seized them as *terra nullius* and sold them to a family of Japanese fishermen named Koga. In 1951, they were covered by the San Francisco peace treaty and in 1971, they were returned to the hands of the Koga family by the United States as a part of the Okinawa reverse treaty (see for instance Blanchard, 2000; Pan, 2007; Smith, 2014; Kolmas, 2016). In the 1970s, the Koga family sold these islands to Kurihara family of Saitama Prefecture and in 2012, Japanese government nationalized the islands by purchasing them from the Kurihara family for 2.05 billion yen (around 18.2 million USD).

The current debate about the island conflict, although at times heated and emotional, contains some reappearing narratives of Japan's self-construction vis-à-vis Chinese growing threat. These narratives revolve around several major lines. First, the status quo is understood as a guarantee of stable security environment in the region. Second, Beijing's behavior is seen as upsetting the status quo. Third, Japan is pictured as a victim to China's bullying strategy of status-quo reformulation and fourth, Japan's reaction (reformulation of Japan's security strategy) towards Beijing's aggression is calm, peaceful, and strictly complacent to the norms of international law. Let us investigate these claims.

Although the disagreement about the ownership of these islands was reappearing from time to time since the 1970s, these never really heated into the shape of open hostility. Tokyo and Beijing, for instance, discussed and later (2008) agreed on a joint development program of undersea gas fields in the East China Sea. This hostility was, however,

exacerbated in 2010 when a Chinese trawler collided with a Japanese coast guard patrol in the disputed area. Consequently to the collision, Japan detained the ship captain for a period of 17 days, only to release him after massive Chinese protests. Japan's primary and secondary discourse on the incident remained very stern and focused, stressing the abnormality, aggressiveness, and unlawful behavior of China. The newly appointed foreign minister, Maehara Seiji, called the collision a "malicious act taking place in (Japan's) sovereign territory" (Ito, 2010, par. 3). Japan's tabloid media, *Yukan Fuji* denounced Japan's handling of the affair as *dogeza gaikō* (bowing diplomacy), implying Japan bowed in a sign of extreme humility. Tokyo's right-wing governor, Ishihara Shintaro, compared China's stance to that of organized crime by stating "what China's doing is no different from gangsters" (Schreiber, 2010, par. 7).

Furthermore, while picturing China as an "unlawful" revisionist, Japanese narrative of the incident stressed Tokyo's reaction as a just one. In a *Yomiuri Shimbun* editorial ("Senkakuoki shōto jiken," 2010) for instance, it claimed the arrest as natural and legitimate reaction to the incursion of sovereign territorial waters, and one that should be criminally prosecuted according to Japanese domestic law. This was rather a novel approach for the Japanese side. Before 2010, there were occasions when Chinese vessels ventured into the disputed waters, yet there was a silent agreement that Japan would return the crew without arrest. In protest, Beijing called Japanese actions unjust "incursions into Chinese waters" based on China's claim over the islands ("Japan arrests Chinese captain," 2010). Major newspapers reacted by emphasizing China's revisionist and aggressive attitudes. Apart from massive demonstrations attacking Japanese embassy and Japanese companies, Beijing introduced a range of sanctions including a ban on the export of rare metals to Japan and a cancellation of the joint development project of a gas field in the East China Sea. Conservative newspaper *Sankei Shimbun's* editorial, in turn, proclaimed Beijing's sanctions as abnormal and irrational (Suzuki, 2015, p. 103).

Moreover, after the massive anti-Japanese demonstrations occurred in China, Japanese media criticized them as fake protests of controlled citizens carried out by Chinese authorities. Suzuki and Murai

(2014) argued that “once again the Japanese media framed China and its citizens as an irrational, arrogant nation in contrast to the rational and mature Japanese” (p. 150). The contrast between “abnormal, belligerent” China and “normal, threatened” Japan was as well propagated within Japan’s official primary discourse. In his interview with the *Wall Street Journal* (“Q&A: Japanese foreign minister,” 2010), foreign minister Maehara denounced China’s claim over the islands by saying that “there is no territorial issue there” (par. 3). The ship skipper was arrested because “he crashed into the Japan’s coast guard,” in a crash that “could have sunk the ship” (par. 4). The incident was thus narrated as an unlawful and irrational attack on Japanese ships lawfully protecting Japan’s sovereign territorial waters.

The insistence on the unlawful character of Chinese behavior recreated Japan as a victim of China’s belligerent revisionism. However, according to Japanese media, the political handling of the island crisis only showed Japan’s weakness vis-à-vis China. Although, according to previous court decisions, the captain should have been detained until September 29, he was unexpectedly released five days earlier, while Prime Minister Kan Naoto and foreign minister Maehara were attending the United Nations General Assembly meeting. Media cited Chief Cabinet Secretary Sengoku Yoshihito (DPJ) saying the detention of the captain had “significantly bad impact on Sino–Japanese relations” (“Japan frees Chinese boat captain,” 2010, par. 3). However, as Suzuki and Murai (2014, p. 151) mentioned, *Yomiuri Shimbun* later revealed that it was Sengoku’s own decision that ordered the prosecutor’s office to release the captain, which portrayed the “lack of a unified and coherent position inside DPJ that might give China the opportunity to escalate its coercive international politics.”

The diplomatic row escalated in 2012. During his April visit to the United States, Tokyo governor Ishihara suddenly announced that he intended to buy the disputed islands for Tokyo. Speaking to a conservative think-tank Heritage Foundation in Washington, Ishihara argued that “it is unquestionable that the islands belong to Japan” and that he “aims to protect these islands” from Chinese attempts at taking “effective control” over them (Hayashi, 2012, par 5). “It is natural for Japan to purchase its own territory.

Why would anyone have a problem with that?” he asked (Hayashi, 2012, par. 6). Given Ishihara’s hawkish posture, it is not a surprise that he chose such stern words. Ishihara was a long-term critic of DPJ’s (and before, LDP’s) perceived “soft” policies vis-à-vis China. He argued that Japan is a victim of China’s aggression and should adopt tougher policies (for instance, acquire nuclear weapons) in order not to end up like Tibet (Fukue, 2012).

The new DPJ government of Noda Yoshihiko reacted to his action by striking a deal with the owners, the Kurihara family, on the purchase of these islands for JPY 2.05 billion. This deal very much angered Beijing. Anti-Japanese protests spread to more than 100 cities across China and the Chinese government accused Japan of stealing its sovereign territory. In response, Japan’s official reaction was that even though “there is no doubt that the Senkaku Islands are clearly an inherent territory of Japan,” the Government of Japan decided to purchase the islands “in an effort to minimize any negative impact on the bilateral relations” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan [MOFA], 2012, par. 4). Yet the damage had already been done. By the end of 2012, nationalism on both sides soared. For instance, even relatively moderate and pro-China newspaper *Asahi Shimbun* (“China brings up Japan’s past militarism,” 2012a) criticized China for “raising Japan’s militaristic past in hopes for winning support for its territorial claims” (par. 2) and scorned Beijing for the lack of effort in curbing the Anti-Japanese demonstrations (“Editorial: The ball is now on China’s court,” 2012b).

Abe and the Island Dispute

The narrative on China as a strong bully using coercive tactics on Japan transcended into more moderate media. The bully image of China was bolstered by Japan’s inclination to present itself as both a legitimate “lawful state” and a victim of Chinese belligerence and sovereignty reconfirmation, acting accordingly to domestic and international law. The construction of a weak Japan that is a victim to a strong China significantly helped Japan in promoting its security cooperation with the United States. During the heated escalation of the Senkaku crisis in 2013, the American government affirmed their commitment

to protect Japan while specifically mentioning the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands to be under Washington's nuclear umbrella. This security guarantee can very well be perceived as a success of Japanese victimization strategy that persuaded Washington to help Japan against Chinese oppression. Washington went even as far as to adopt the Japanese narrative of a coerced state by warning China against any coercive action over the island issue ("U.S. warns against 'coercive action' over Senkaku issue," 2013). Obama also (albeit implicitly) called on China to act according to law: "We have also emphasized that all of us have the responsibility to maintain the rule of law—large and small countries have to abide by what is considered just and fair" (McCurry & Branigan, 2014, par. 13).

While this diplomatic success outreached the victimization narrative outside of Japanese borders, we could perceive it as an outcome of a longer discursive strategy within the country. The narrative was almost consensually shared throughout Japan's political elite and played a key role in the 2012 national elections. In November 2012, Osaka's Mayor Hashimoto Tōru merged his newly founded conservative political party with Tokyo's Ishihara's Sunrise party to create a new third force for the upcoming elections. The so-called Japan's restoration party (*Nippon Ishin no Kai*) had the disputed islands on their official logo and won 11.64% of constituency votes and 54 seats in the Diet (the party eventually split in 2014, because of unsurmountable frictions between Hashimoto and Ishihara). Hashimoto then merged with the Unity party (*Yui no Tou*) to form Japan innovation party (*Ishin no Tou*) and Ishihara created a new conservative party called "Party for future generations" (*Jisedai no Tou*). The elections further brought a landslide victory for Abe Shinzo's LDP, winning a majority of 294 seats in the House of Representatives, while Noda's DPJ fell to 57 (closely followed by Ishihara & Hashimoto's Restoration party).

Abe's—a right wing conservative politician—election result signaled the retreat from the atmosphere that gave DPJ its landmark political victory three years earlier. The return of power to LDP, however, was hardly expected to soothe Sino-Japanese relations. Abe, being skilled at political marketing (Abe has, for instance, skillfully used the theme *Nihon wo*

torimodosu (I will take Japan back), reminding Japanese people of the glorious postwar Showa era and insinuating his rule will bring back the economic prosperity as well as national pride), did little to soften Japan's approach towards its significant other. Instead, the Prime Minister continued in the narration of Japan as a weak country with depressed society, which as he hoped, would rise again. "Japan shrank too much in the last 15 years," explained Abe in his interview with the *Wall Street Journal* (Baker & Nishiyama, 2013, par. 10), stressing that people have become "inward-looking" and public critical towards Tokyo's politics. Elsewhere, Abe sighed about Japanese people being "robbed of their confidence" and advised the society to be confident ("Dai hyakukyūhachi kyūkai kokkai," 2015; "Press conference by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe," 2015). Only through confidence, as Abe believed, it could lead to deepening public discussion regarding constitutional revision.

It is interesting, though, that media tried hard to soften the image of the new Cabinet as conservative. Suzuki and Murai (2014, p. 160) for instance cited various Japanese media to show how they worked to depict the idea of a conservative Cabinet as a creation of foreign grassroots organizations. Furthermore, Yomiuri Shimbun (Nakajima & Shirakawa, 2015) argued that it is necessary to clear up the misconception of conservative swing in order to maintain Japan's superiority over China: "LDP should work to demonstrate its political goals and strategies as clearly as possible to maintain transparency both domestically and internationally. This will (...) help to deepen people's understanding toward national security reformation and (...) differentiate Japan from China and its infamous opacity in military power" (par. 15).

When talking about the past, Abe never failed to mention the Japanese victims. When proposing the new Legislation for Peace and Security in May 2015, Abe started his speech by stressing that "in the past two years, Japanese nationals have fallen victim to terrorism in Algeria, Syria and Tunisia. Most of Japan is within range of hundreds of North Korea's ballistic missiles (...) and the number of scrambles by Self Defense Forces (SDF) (...) has increased a staggering seven-fold in a decade" ("Press conference by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe," 2015, par. 2). Talking about the

World War II, Abe repeatedly questioned its costs for Japan. “No less than 3.1 million of our compatriots lost their lives in World War II. In the devastation after the war, the Japanese who survived the war renewed their determination to foster peace and achieve post-war recovery” (“Opening remarks by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe,” 2015, par. 1). It is undeniable that Japan’s wartime casualties were very high. While talking about Japan’s victims, however, Abe was reluctant to accept Japanese guilt for the war. While acknowledging the great suffering and damage that Japan had caused, he questioned the claim that Japan had actually committed aggression against anyone in the war. “The definition of aggression has yet to be established in academia or in the international community,” stated Abe in 2013 question and answer session in the Diet (Spitzer, 2013, par. 5). Although Abe’s words were met with disdain from both China and South Korea, he did little to change his attitude afterwards. Sticking to his opinion about the uncertainty of the aggressor, Abe disagreed with a former Prime Minister Maruyama Tomiichi’s 1995 formal apology for the wartime crimes. As Tessa Morris-Suzuki (2015) explained, Abe’s choice of the word *hansei* (reflection) not followed by the word *owabi* (apology) indicates the superficial nature of Abe’s apology.

The narrative of a victim state (exacerbated by Abe’s unwillingness to accept guilt) was complemented by the narrative of a coerced state vis-à-vis China. The coercion strategy was mentioned constantly in primary government discourse and worked well to legitimize the changes to Japan’s security policy that Abe’s administration carried out. The Position paper, “Japan-China relations surrounding the situation of the Senkaku Islands: In response to China’s Airspace Incursion” (MOFA, 2012b), for instance, stated that China committed “a further dangerous act” by its aircraft “intruding into Japan’s airspace by flying over the Senkaku Islands” (par. 5). In his interview with the United States’ Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel, Abe said “countries should not use force of coercion” that “consolidates changes to the status quo by aggregating one fait accompli after another” (Sevastopulo, 2014, par. 14). The narrative of China as coercive state went hand-in-hand with Japan’s narrative of its just policy. China’s moves were narrated as contrary

to international law, while Japan’s position was predominantly legitimate, that is countering to these status-quo changing incursions. This legitimacy of Japan’s behavior is very well needed by Japan in order to gain support for its position from the international community, and especially from the United States.

From this perspective then, one can interpret Japan’s first ever National Security Strategy (NSS) as Abe’s reaction of a just and lawful state to the unlawful rise of a bullying giant. The strategy, adopted in December 2013, outlines three basic goals for Japan’s national security—ensuring the nation’s territorial sovereignty, improving the security environment in the Asia Pacific region by cooperating with the United States and other regional partners, and active participation in global efforts to maintain international order (Tatsumi, 2014). These goals are hidden under the slogan of “proactive contribution to peace,” which has been used as many as 10 times within the text, with more than 30 uses of the word proactive itself. Although the NSS mentions a variety of threats to Japan’s security, the narrative of a reaction to China’s revisionism is central to the strategy. The document clearly states that “China has taken actions that can be regarded as attempts to change the status quo by coercion based on their own assertions, which are incompatible with the existing order of international law, in the maritime domains, including the East China Sea and the South China Sea. In particular, China has rapidly expanded and intensified its activities in the seas and airspace around Japan, including intrusion into Japan’s territorial waters and airspace around the Senkaku islands” (MOFA, 2013, pp. 12–13).

The strategy of proactive contribution to peace is recognizably similar to the argument of Ozawa’s (1993) widely cited book, *Nihon Kaizo Keikaku*. In this book, Ozawa coined the term “normal Japan,” by attributing to it qualities such as proactive contribution to world peace through proactive security policy and active cooperation with international institutions (mostly the United Nations). The discourse on normal Japan occupied a significant amount of the last two decade’s literature and was shared by many Cabinet leaders, including Abe Shinzo. The NSS is continuing this discourse that can best be interpreted through the above-mentioned victimization narrative. Abe’s

administration succeeded in differentiating Japan from China as not only a weak and victim (coerced) state, but also a moral state. Whereas China disregards international law and intrudes into Japan's legal territory, Japan acts as a guardian of the legally defined status quo. This perception gives Japan the morally upper hand and international legitimacy. Japan's reaction towards China's incursion into the waters around Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands proves this moral discourse. In the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA, 2012) position papers on the Senkaku islands dispute, Tokyo stresses the need to "calmly deal with the matter under any circumstances" and to respond only "under domestic laws and regulations" (par. 7). The idea of a calm reaction is supplemented by its democratic nature of a country that "upholds universal values such as freedom, democracy and respect to human rights" (MOFA, 2013, par. 2). The proactive contribution to peace is then narrated as a moral quality designed to spread democratic values and the rule of law vis-à-vis undemocratic and unlawful China (also see "Japan adopts new security strategy," 2013).

Conclusion

It is no surprise that East Asian countries were major focal points for international relations identity scholars. Most significant East Asian states, such as Japan, China, or South Korea, underwent radical changes in their respective security situation, statehood, and self-perception. Japan can be seen as a ground stone of these changes. Once a confident, expanding, and militaristic nation, the outcome of the Second World War saw Japan building its national uniqueness all over again. Scholars from both the positivist/liberal and reflectivist/critical constructivist schools have aided in interpreting these changes. Liberal constructivists based their explanation in shared norms, culture, and history, arguing that Japanese pacifism was created from within the society. Reflectivists argued that Japan's postwar posture was created vis-à-vis various others.

This article has considered the second approach to be more suitable in explaining the changes within Japanese society and their linkage to policy practice. For most parts of postwar history, the United States has

occupied the focal point of Japanese self-construction. Countered with independent, masculine, military-heavy America, Japan narrated itself as a weak, dependent, and subservient country searching for a new role in the world. Although valid for most parts of the postwar history, nowadays the situation is changing. Japan's self-perception no longer relies on the focal point of the United States, but comes closer to distinguishing itself from the growing and revisionist China.

Sino-Japanese relations have been through better and worse. Postwar years have brought a period of a silent, suspicious neglect. Japan was focusing on its economic development tightly bound to the Yoshida doctrine. During the last three decades, however, China grew strong, while Japanese economy, as well as confidence, stagnated. Chinese revisionist demands, such as its confident policies towards the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands, helped to focus Japan's identity construction. Once constructed as a culturally similar country with shared historical heritage, China is gradually being narrated as a coercive, arrogant, immoral, and revisionist bully.

Japan, on the other hand, saw itself as an opposition to these qualities. The official, as well media discourse, managed to picture Japan as a victim of China's coercive policies. Politicians from both sides stressed the bullying policies Japan has to react to and argued that Japan's calm and lawful reactions prove the superiority of the Japanese society and its political model. This legitimization worked not only to gain international support (that of United States in particular), but also to gain popular support for the reformulation of Japanese security policies. Prime Minister Abe's push towards resolute and strong policies towards China and adopting more assertive defense policies are practical outcomes of this identity change.

What the future holds for the Sino-Japanese relations is unclear. We can, however, guess that as long as China remains the primary other for Japan's policy makers and media, depicted as a coercive, unlawful and immoral bully, the tensions between these two countries are likely to remain high, or even escalate (similarly to the Ishihara engagement). Integrating China into world economy, as well as international political institutions (such as the United

Nations), could work to ease these tensions but only through rationalizing of the discourse between these two countries can bring a true normalization of the relationship.

Acknowledgment

This publication is the outcome of research project no. 52-02 (Territorial studies, economy and international relations) implemented by Metropolitan University Prague and funded by the Institutional Support for Long-term Strategic Development of Research Organizations in 2017.

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