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Research article

# Past-Oriented Foreign Policy: Japanese State-Identity and South Korea Discourse 2009-2012

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## Abstract

*Upon its 2009 General Elections victory, the Democratic Party of Japan defined the Republic of Korea as the core of its Asia-focused foreign policy. Despite initial enthusiasm, the resurgence of controversies like the Dokdo/Takeshima dispute and the Comfort Women issue pulled bilateral relations down to historic lows. This paper contributes to the research on Japan-South Korea relations by adopting a relational constructivist perspective, and offers a comprehensive account of DPJ state-identity narratives vis-à-vis South Korea, until now little discussed in existing literature. An analysis of the foreign policy discourse of Japan's DPJ prime ministers and their cabinet will show that what neutralises successful cooperation is a resilient narrative of superiority against the South Korean other.*

**Keywords:** *relational constructivism, Japan-South Korea relations, identity, Democratic Party of Japan*

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## Introduction

Upon its 2009 General Elections victory, the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) pledged to pursue a more Asia-focused foreign policy by putting the Republic

of Korea (ROK) at its core. Despite initial enthusiasm, the resurgence of controversies like the Dokdo/Takeshima dispute and the Comfort Women issue pulled bilateral relations down to historic lows. Tokyo and Seoul are close commercial partners and US allies, but both face a diplomatic deadlock each time they are confronted with issues belonging to their wartime past. Indeed, Japan's claims of 'future-oriented relations' and 'facing the past squarely' seem to be vague pledges rather than serious commitments to effective foreign policy. The South Korean population is very sensitive to historical memory, and according to Seoul, Japan is still trying to eschew past responsibility. In fact, it appears that what underlies Japan's foreign policy stance vis-à-vis Asian 'others' is a resilient sense of superiority, which several scholars indicated as a direct inheritance of wartime state-identity. More precisely, this legacy can be traced back to processes of identity formation during the so-called Meiji Restoration, when Japan underwent a radical change in its social and political structures. The ideologues of Japanese modernisation saw neighbouring countries as backward and incapable of industrialising, hence offering a weak flank to the pressure of Western powers in Asia. This view, paired with the rising ethnocentric ideology of *kokutai*, bolstered Japan's self-appointed role as Asia's saviour, ready to fend off the West even by directly colonising 'peripheral' nations (Tamaki 2010: 63).

The literature on state-identity in IR, and of Japanese identity in particular, has developed into two main theoretical strands, namely norm-constructivism and relational constructivism. The first attempts at explaining state-identity as something created domestically and following local norms. When focusing on Japan, norm-constructivist scholars tended to emphasise that Article 9 of the Japanese Constitution (Cabinet Office 1947) was the main reason why Japan had an overall peace-oriented foreign-policy attitude. This kind of perspective would make us assume that Japan's 'pacifist' identity and culture reproduce a pacifist behaviour. However, recent developments in Japanese security policy challenged this normative constraint. Notable examples are, among others, the introduction of a National Security Council in 2013 and the nationwide campaigning for the revision of Article 9 aimed at allowing collective self-defence.

On the other hand, relational constructivists view state-identity as something which is intersubjectively created through the interaction of a 'self' and an 'other'. State identities are thus located on the liminal zone between sameness and difference. There, behavioural patterns are not defined by a fixed content, but are always subject to mutation according to ongoing political struggles. Differently from norm-constructivists, who can be criticised for their view of Japanese pacifism as an inherently domestic feature, relational constructivists disregard the possibility of a domestic domain without it being indissolubly linked to

an outside, international ‘otherness’. However, not all relational constructivists agree on how to observe state-identity. Some argue that it tends towards resilience and reification, while others claim that it has more propensity for change.

This paper aims at contributing to Japanese IR literature by adopting a relational constructivist approach to state-identity construction, while also corroborating the theoretical stance which sees identity as resilient in international politics. It does so by conducting an analysis of Japan’s South Korea foreign-policy discourse under the DPJ government, with special attention paid to how state-identity articulations in official discourse play out and evolve in light of controversial events and what kind of repercussions they have on bilateral ties. The DPJ defeated a long-dominant Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) rule and promised to break with the ‘traditional’ patterns of Japanese politics, with the ambitious intent of establishing a flourishing Asia-Pacific community. Nonetheless, successful cooperation has been neutralised by the resurfacing of a narrative of superiority against the South Korean other.

The DPJ stint as party leader of Japan’s cabinet has received limited attention from IR scholars. Neorealists have claimed that the DPJ failed to implement its policy lines due to domestic and international structural pressures, which condemned the administration to fall back into LDP-style policymaking (Hughes 2012). Regarding South Korea more specifically, policy analysts had readily noticed how military agreements won’t come to fruition until historical issues are thoroughly addressed (Khan 2012). Still, the reasons why Japan’s state-identity narratives under the DPJ turned antagonistic towards South Korea, a US ally and a prominent liberal democracy in East Asia, remain largely under-researched. Since after the American occupation, Japanese politics has been dominated by the LDP, which often irked neighbouring states over war-time issues.<sup>1</sup> The only precedent of a non-LDP led government in 1994-1996 had Japan publicly apologising for the atrocities committed during colonialism. Hence, a thorough analysis of Japan’s state-identity under the 2009-2012 DPJ government can help us understand what kind of deep-seated issues nullify efforts at cooperation and diplomacy even under a purportedly more progressive government.

The paper will be structured as follows: first, a literature review on state-of-the-art IR research on Japanese state-identity will contextualise the theoretical and methodological approaches informing this study. Subsequently, an intro-

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<sup>1</sup> A foremost example is represented by the visits of LDP leaders to the Yasukuni Shrine in Tokyo. The Yasukuni Shrine is a privately run Shintō shrine located in central Tokyo commemorating Japanese war victims. The controversy is due to the fact that 14 Class A war criminals, i.e. those who actively contributed to the planning and the waging of the war, are also enshrined among other war dead.

duction to South Korea-Japan relations will outline a background for the main foreign policy discourse analysis, which will be structured around the three different premiership tenures of Hatoyama Yukio, Kan Naoto and Noda Yoshihiko. Empirical evidence will be gathered from official statements, cabinet session speeches, press releases and diplomatic materials of the Government of Japan. A conclusion will finally summarise the findings and highlight the resilience of state-level narratives of superiority, which precluded successful bilateral cooperation despite favourable auspices.

### **Japan, state-identity and IR**

From the end of World War II up until the late 1980s, Tokyo was able to maintain relatively stable relations with most of its neighbours in East Asia. Territorial disputes were set aside after initial turmoil, as Japan pursued a normalisation of relations with South Korea and China (UN 1965; MOFA 1978). Thanks to the American Umbrella and the canons of the Yoshida Doctrine,<sup>2</sup> the Japanese economy managed to recover and flourish. The long period of stability granted by American protection and the country's isolationism allowed Japan and its economy to grow unrivalled. However, the domestic implosion of the asset bubble shook the country's very foundations, sparking a debate among IR scholars on what would have Japan's foreign policy choices been in the short to the mid-term. Academia was essentially divided between two interpretations of Japanese state-identity: one describing a 'great power state' and the other hinting at a 'culturally anti-militaristic' country. Prominent realists claimed that the 'abnormal state' Japan would have eventually remilitarised as a great power by resorting to nuclear weapons (Layne 1993; Waltz 1992, 2000). Although, while some contended that to a great economic power should correspond an equivalent military capability (Waltz 2000: 64), others viewed that, historically, Japan's aims of achieving the status of great power were mainly driven by its strong vulnerability (Layne 1993: 28-31). In general, realists contended that no state identifying as a 'great power' could escape the framework of nuclear deterrence.

Neo-liberal and norm-constructivist scholars have offered alternative views to explain Japan's anomalous state-identity. Some believed that Japan, due to its binary characterisation as 'economic giant' and 'military dwarf', should have pursued a twofold foreign policy line: namely, a strong engagement for world peace and a path of military self-restraint (Funabashi 1991: 66). The Japanese leadership role had to be ancillary to the American hegemon, so that Japan could reassert a

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2 The tenet of the Yoshida Doctrine, named after the Japanese Prime Minister Yoshida Shigeru (1878-1967), was to build up a strong US-Japan alliance for security purposes while spending as little as possible on defence.

new image of itself in the world as a 'global civilian power' (Funabashi 1991: 65). Others stressed instead the 'reactive' and 'defensive' aspects of Japan's security identity (Calder 2003; Pharr 1993). Meanwhile, norm-constructivists purported that common cultural norms and 'domestic' identities had a major part in influencing a state's anti-militaristic stance. For some, Japanese policy was shaped by a mutually constitutive structure of domestic determinants and shared norms (Katzenstein & Okawara 1993: 85). Different scholars argued instead that the disaster of the war and the American usurpation fostered a sense of opposition to militarisation, an opinion which was shared both by the elites and the population at large (Berger 1993: 120). Most recently, it has been claimed that Japan's pacifist identity was challenged by security reforms, but would have nonetheless preserved itself under the reassuring label of 'proactive pacifism' (Oros 2015: 157).

Both under neorealist/neo-liberal and norm-constructivist perspectives, Japanese identity has been considered as something either already determined by the structure of international anarchy, or as an inherent feature to one country's specific culture and set of norms. These views are underpinned by a conception of state-identity that is fixed and pre-given, and considers state behaviour as the dependent variable for policy analysis. In recent times, these epistemological positions, particularly within Japanese IR scholarship, have been challenged by the surge of relational constructivism (Gustafsson, Hagström & Hanssen 2018; Hagström 2015; Hagström & Gustafsson 2015; Hagström & Hanssen 2016). The stress on the relational aspect of inter-state interaction allows us to grasp intersubjective identity formation processes. That is, state-identity is a variable that shifts in accordance with political struggles and is formed at the liminal zone where sameness and difference are determined among political actors. This novel approach has produced a largely heterogeneous body of literature and theoretical perspectives, where scholars of ontological security theory (Bukh 2015; Gustafsson 2015, 2019; Kumagai 2015; Zarakol 2010), historical memory studies (Gustafsson 2014; Kim 2014) and those studying state-level identity narratives (Guillaume 2011; Tamaki 2010), all demonstrated how processes of identity construction are ultimately the result of the struggle against a differential 'otherness'.

### **How to analyse Japanese state-identity: a theoretical and methodological approach**

The thrust of constructivist IR and its focus on ideas and norms has widely promoted the interest in the identity of states and other political actors. Identity as such is a rather slippery concept and often makes it difficult to determine clearly what it refers to. Relational constructivist analyses of state-identity are focused on the processes that bring into existence a nation's collective imagination or

ideological foundation, which is ultimately subject to transformation over space and time (Hagström & Hanssen 2016: 271). In turn, specific identities either enable or constrain political choices and actions.

This research article adopts the theoretical stance according to which identity construction relies on processes of differentiation. By differentiation it is meant the demarcation of one's self-identity from that of the other, following the principle by which something can be known only by what it is not (Rumelili 2004: 29), recalling the classical thesis '*omnis determinatio est negatio*'. This dualism of self versus other implies a binary logic of equivalence and difference (Laclau & Mouffe 1985: 128-130), namely one according to which states tend to be friendly towards political actors endorsing ideologies akin to their own, and exclude others which are not (Hagström 2015: 124-126). Obviously, instances of pure equivalence and pure difference are mere abstractions, and state identities are oscillating on a continuum between polar opposites. The more two different identities oscillate towards equivalence, the more positive will be the identification of the self versus the other. In international politics, positive definitions like 'rational' and 'democratic' are usually in line with what is regarded as superior in the hierarchical frame of world politics; conversely, representations of 'emotional' or 'non-transparent' others are examples of negative differentiation (Hansen 2008: 16-20), as is non-compliance with shared norms in the international community.

In order to make sense of how states articulate their identity vis-à-vis each other, it is crucial to identify the wide frame of discourse through which identity comes into force. To solve the issue of pinpointing a nationwide discursive space we ought to be looking for the structure of such a discourse (Wæver 2002). That is, by observing how leaders and prominent spokespeople, sometimes defined as identity entrepreneurs (Hagström & Gustafsson 2015: 7-9), shape dominant discourses through political struggles (Lupovici 2016: 80-81). The methodological advantage of this strategy is that dominant positions within a political discourse can be efficiently recognised by following, among others, official statements and diplomatic documents, parliamentary debates, party programmes and media outlets. These textual sources eventually constitute a dominant 'biographical narrative' of political ideologies (Hansen 2008: 21), conveying along deeply embedded variables, such as culture and social hierarchy (Steele 2008: 5). The identity of a state emerges out of predominant narratives, and is subsequently set against other states at the international level, where lines of demarcation between an 'us' and a 'them' are drawn (Hansen 2008: 16).

This article adopts discourse analysis as a tool to dissect the Democratic Party of Japan's South Korea discourse during the 2009-2012 government. The DPJ assumed office pledging fundamental changes from the previous Liberal Demo-

cratic Party governments, not only at the domestic level, but especially in foreign policy, with South Korea being heralded as the core of Japan's Asia policy (Hatoyama 2009b). Prime minister speeches, Cabinet press releases and various governmental sources will be adopted as main evidence, according to the principle that decision makers and political elites are powerful agents who contribute to establishing the dominant identity discourse of the polity they represent. The rationale behind the choice of texts is that they are widely attended sources and contribute to the creation of an official, state-level discourse (Hansen 2008: 65-82). The analysis will pay special attention to the ways in which the DJP cabinet, the self-component, differentiated the Korean other, highlighting how the foreign policy discourse is re-articulated in order to reassert security and keep at bay state-identity anxiety.

### **Japan's state-identity and South Korea discourse**

Japan's state-identity has been one of an actor striving to occupying an 'honoured place in the international society' (Cabinet Office 1947) since the end of World War II. The impact of defeat and the acceptance of universal principles built the grounds for new, pacifist narratives, such as the ones of *heiwa kokka* (peace state) and *shōnin kokka* (merchant state) (Tamaki 2010: 7-8). Since the unprecedented set of apologies towards former colonial states enshrined in the 1995 Murayama Statement, Japan has embraced the so-called *mirai shikō gaikō* (future-oriented foreign policy), a diplomatic attitude aimed at maintaining friendly relations with neighbouring states, especially those sharing a negative past with Japan. However, recent efforts towards military normalisation and constitutional revision (Hagström & Hanssen 2016: 268), as well as controversies pertaining to wartime issues, have stirred significant controversy both at the regional and global level (Zarakol 2010: 18).

This duality of Japanese state-identity can be better understood if we frame in hierarchical terms Japan's relations with the outside world. In order to do this, we ought to consider the importance of *kokutai* in shaping modern Japanese identity (Kitagawa 1974; Tamaki 2010). Traditionally, the term *kokutai* referred to the ethnocentric, foundational myth of Japan, and could be translated literally as 'body of the nation', with the Emperor as a central figure towards whom Japanese people are eternally devoted. The Western-style, modern Japanese state has evolved out of the *kokutai* theocratic model, thus unifying the social and legal patterns of occidental polities and the uniqueness of being 'Japanese'. This allowed Japan to compete with Western powers, and at the same time fostered a sense of superiority towards Asian backwardness and 'weakness', which eventually gave rise to colonialism (Notehelfer 2005). Contemporary scholars tend to

agree that *kokutai* was a 'key narrative matrix' in the construction of Japanese identity (Guillaume 2011: 63-99), and that it embodies a resilient identity pattern shaping the way Japan relates to its various others (Tamaki 2010: 62).

To give a thorough account of Japan's South Korea discourse is beyond the scope of this research. Nonetheless, a contextualisation of such discourse is necessary to follow the subsequent discussion of DPJ's South Korea foreign policy. Japan and the ROK normalised bilateral relations in 1965, with Tokyo providing compensation money for wartime victims such as Comfort Women and forced labourers (Ishikida 2005: 21). The treaty also established that upon Japan's reparations South Korea would have waived any right to ask for further reparations in the future. Even if relations had been relatively stable for several decades, lingering issues were *de facto* merely shelved, as the Comfort Women controversy resurged in the early 1990s (Jonsson 2015), while the Takeshima territorial dispute re-emerged in the mid-2000s (Emmers 2012). In the meantime, South Korea's growing economy drew Seoul closer to powerful Western liberal democracies, and at the same time closer to Japan's state-identity. The economic growth, coupled by nationalist claims over wartime issues, engendered ambiguous narratives in Japan's South Korea discourse. Tokyo often praised Seoul for endorsing 'the values of democracy, freedom and market economy', and by such principles also contributing to 'world peace' (Kan 2010d). However, remnants of a 'negative past', still heartfelt by the majority of Koreans according to recent surveys (Genron NPO 2018), happen to reify backwardness in Japan-ROK relations as 'a predominant mode of representing Korean otherness against which the Japanese self needs to reassert its legitimacy' (Tamaki 2010: 111). In other words, in the eyes of the ROK, Japan is trying to forget about the past and eschew responsibility, whereas Japan claims of having dealt sufficiently with history and sees South Korea's criticism as irrational and disqualifying.

### **Hatoyama Yukio: substantive regionalism and 'yū-ai' politics**

The establishment of the new governmental coalition, formed by the DPJ, the Social Democratic Party (SDP) and the People's New Party (PNP), marked the first step towards a transformation of Japanese politics since the 1955 System. The two pillars upon which the new government was founded were 'true popular sovereignty' and 'substantive regionalism' (Hatoyama 2009a). If the first tenet would have been observed by breaking the links with the long-established pork barrel politics,<sup>3</sup> the second one was to be implemented by taking a foremost role

3 By pork barrel politics, especially in the case of Japan, I refer to what has been described as the interplay between politicians, bureaucracy and interest groups,



in the shaping of an Asia-Pacific community. An increased degree of interdependence among Asian nations would have guaranteed a stronger, peace-friendly environment within which to tackle delicate issues, such as nuclear disarmament and the economic crisis. As Hatoyama put it:

From the present, Japan will contribute to the well-being of the international community through not only activities in the economic field but also those in the areas of the environment, peace, culture, science and technology, creating a country that is trusted by the international community. We must build a country and a society whose people can once again hold great pride in being Japanese (Hatoyama 2009a).

Against such a backdrop, representations of the South Korean other were exceptionally favourable. Tokyo recognised Seoul as a prominent member of the international community, one with whom to create a ‘sea of fraternity’ in order to establish peace and prosperity along maritime routes (Hatoyama 2009d). The line of Hatoyama’s foreign policy revolved around the concept of *yū-ai* (literally ‘friendship’, also note the assonance with the English ‘You-I’), and the Prime Minister pledged to pursue bilateral relations with a future-oriented approach and to have the courage to look at history squarely (Hatoyama 2009b). The *yū-ai* ideology juxtaposed two positive differentiations of the Japanese self versus the Korean other: on the one hand, both Japan and Korea are considered strong regional actors proud of their cultural roots and identity; on the other, the international community acknowledges their efforts in keeping peace and prosperity and welcomes them as states with a ‘global perspective’ (Hatoyama 2009b). Moreover, Hatoyama intended to resume the promotion of economic partnerships and trade agreements with South Korea, in order to ease Japan’s investment environment for foreigners (Hatoayma 2010).

The instability of North Korea was also a factor in the strengthening of Tokyo-Seoul relations (see Hagström & Söderberg 2006). At the regional level, pacifism and economic development were key points in the six-party talks,<sup>4</sup> where both Japan and the ROK cooperated in a trilateral axis with

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working closely together to achieve mutual interests and secure political control. A landmark case is *amakudari* (literally, ‘descent from heaven’), a practice through which retired senior bureaucrats are employed in public or private corporations and organisations, often in the same field of their ministerial occupation. The practice has been characterised by high degrees of corruption and regulatory laxity in managing industry and markets.

4 The six-party talks is a series of multilateral meetings aimed at finding a peaceful resolution of the North Korean nuclear weapons programme. States participating to the talks are North Korea, the ROK, Japan, China, the US and Russia. Official

China in keeping at check fluctuations in North Korea's nuclear programme and military non-transparency. It is of interest to note that, during a Japan-ROK-China trilateral summit, then Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao characterised China's efforts for North Korea's development and denuclearisation as in line with the 'UN's thinking' (Hatoyama 2009c). Mentioning directly 'consistency' with the 'UN's thinking' is not casual, as Japan and Korea, unlike China, had already established their identities as states committed to liberal, western-friendly values.

Hatoyama eventually stepped down from his office due to low consensus, mainly driven by political scandals and the failure in managing successfully the relocation of the Futenma air base.<sup>5</sup> Throughout his premiership South Korea was regarded as 'intimate as well as nearby' (Hatoyama 2009b), and no international accidents of relevance occurred between Tokyo and Seoul. The *yū-ai* ideology worked in shelving recurring issues, such as the Dokdo/Takeshima dispute, even if those were soon to be back in official discourse. In fact, the 2010 Diplomatic Bluebook of Japan, published a few months before Hatoyama's resignation, claimed that according to both history and international law the island belonged to Japan (MOFA 2010: 29). Still, apart from ordinary counter-claims from the ROK, there occurred no significant changes in foreign policy narratives on both sides.

### **Kan Naoto: dynamic defense and the importance of alliance**

The change of prime minister did not entail much change in policy-making, at least in the initial phase of the new course. Kan Naoto, deputy prime minister of the Hatoyama Cabinet, built up his agenda by endorsing Hatoyama's reformist approach, with the resolution of pushing forward initiatives that had been previously left unfinished. Kan's administration stressed once again the importance for Japan to make clear what kind of country it aspired to be (Kan 2010b). While retaining the focus on Japan being regarded as a country respected by the international community, Kan and his cabinet established a narrative that relied heavily on the role of defence capabilities and the strengthening of existing alliances

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meetings started in 2003 and stopped after North Korea announced a satellite launch, despite international pressure not to do so. At the actual state, further updates upon resumption of the talks are pending, as Kim Jong-un recently agreed to reopen discussions.

- 5 I refer here to the funding scandal that involved the then party secretary general (ex-LDP) Ozawa Ichiro, whose image was still connected to the interest-based politics that was the status quo of the old LDP establishment. The mishandling of the Futenma base relocation brought about the dismissal of Minister for Consumer Affairs Fukushima Mizuho, who was the head of the Social Democratic Party of Japan (SDP). In turn, her sacking caused the retreat of the SDP from the ruling coalition.

(MOD 2010: 149-165). Most importantly, the new National Defense Program Guidelines were approved by the government in December 2010. The key point of the security reform was the streamlining of the Self-Defense Forces for a more dynamic and qualitative approach to security issues, favouring reflexive deterrence over offensive deterrence (MOD 2010: 155). This defensive thrust was likely prompted by a series of international incidents that increased the perception of instability in North-East Asia, i.e. a missile test from North Korea (Choe 2009) and a boat collision near the Senkaku/Diaoyu contested islets (McCurry 2010).

The new PM differentiated clearly the diplomatic identification of Japan's two main interlocutors in East Asia, i.e. China and South Korea. He referred to the first country as one with whom to 'deepen our mutually beneficial relationship based on common strategic interests', whereas with the ROK Japan had to 'forge a future-oriented partnership' (Kan 2010a). Clearly, the phrasing 'common strategic interests' implies a sort of detached view of the partner, meaning that the way China was integrated in the Japanese foreign policy discourse was in terms of how it could 'instrumentally' contribute to a shared 'strategic' aim, with not much space conceded to how to construct a relationship between potentially 'equal' entities. On the other hand, the ROK is seen as a partner with whom to deepen trust for the sake of a common future. South Korea narratives indeed maintained the imprint of Hatoyama's *yū-ai* foreign policy, and bilateral ties were depicted as unprecedented in their strength:

Japan and the Republic of Korea have become the most important and closest neighbouring nations now in this twenty-first century, sharing such values as democracy, freedom and market economy. Our relationship is not confined to our bilateral relations, but rather it is a partnership where we cooperate and exercise leadership for the peace and prosperity of the region and the world by encompassing a broad spectrum of agenda: the peace and stability of this region envisioning, among others, the future establishment of an East Asia community, the growth and development of the world's economy, as well as issues of global scale such as nuclear disarmament, climate change, poverty and peace-building (Kan 2010d).

The ROK was fully integrated into Japan's 'international community' narrative, as well as being admired as a leading regional partner (Kan 2011). Efforts in recognising past mistakes, and even in helping restore Korea's cultural heritage, were effectively undertaken. Kan extended 'heartfelt apologies' and reiterated a sense of 'deep remorse' for Japan's colonisation of Korea, going as far as mention-

ing the strength of the *Sam-il*<sup>6</sup> resistance movement during Japan's colonial rule (Kan 2010d). He also promised to transfer back from Japan precious archives of the *Joseon* era seized during the occupation, and to return remains of ethnic Koreans buried in Japan. One cannot underestimate the impact of these latter pledges: they do not represent a mere commitment to atonement (as monetary compensation would have been), but contribute to reinstating South Korea's cultural wholeness and human dignity.

However, Kan's Cabinet reinstated the same controversial positions on the Dokdo/Takeshima territorial dispute, contained both in the Defense White Paper (MOD 2011: 3) and the Diplomatic Bluebook released in 2011 (MOFA 2011a: 32). In addition, Japan's territorial claims were also repeated in history textbooks officially approved by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (Borowiec 2011). Kan and his administration eventually managed to navigate the preludes to a diplomatic crisis. Direct confrontation of issues was usually eschewed in public press releases (Kan 2010c), and at the same time the occurrence of the catastrophic Tōhoku earthquake shifted the attention of political actors towards urgent humanitarian aid and the dispatch of rescue personnel. Nonetheless, the increased regional instability and the flare-ups of lingering issues paved the way to a more severe bilateral deadlock in the following government.

### **Noda Yoshihiko: economic diplomacy and South Korea crisis**

Kan officially resigned as prime minister on 30 August 2011. His approval ratings plunged as criticism hit the slow progress in reconstruction and the confused management of the nuclear crisis that followed the earthquake (The Associated Press 2011). The ensuing head of the Cabinet, Noda Yoshihiko, had served as minister of finance in the previous administration, and his new foreign policy was heavily imprinted on economic diplomacy:

To date I have engaged in my own way in economic diplomacy in matters such as currency and international finance, and in the future it is my intention to also engage actively in multi-faceted economic diplomacy, including even greater levels of economic cooperation and also diplomacy relating to natural resources, among other issues. In particular, I believe that it is essential for Japan to draw on the inherent vitality in

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6 Commonly referred to as the March First Movement, the *Sam-il* movement sought independence from Japanese colonial rule and refused the assimilation of the Japanese way of life for Koreans. The name comes from a protest occurred on 1 March 1919, where 33 activists assembled together in a Seoul restaurant and read aloud the Korean Declaration of Independence.

the Asia-Pacific region. From this perspective too, I will engage in active efforts to promote economic diplomacy (Noda 2011a).

The cornerstone of Noda's new foreign policy line was to enter negotiations for a Trans Pacific Partnership, an initiative which was previously opposed by Hatoyama but embraced enthusiastically by Kan. Moreover, the government opened negotiations for a trilateral Economic Partnership Agreement with the ROK and China (MOFA 2011c). This latter agreement had the purpose of keeping in check currency fluctuations among the three countries (Noda 2011b), in order to be shielded from financial turmoil in the eurozone.

With Noda's economic diplomacy, South Korea narratives had an unprecedented shift after the establishment of Hatoyama's government. During Noda's Cabinet Japan recognised the ROK as an equal only when it successfully complied with dominant narratives in the international community: the condemnation of military non-transparency (MOFA 2012a), the peaceful use of nuclear energy (MOFA 2011b), the signing of multilateral agreements (MOFA 2012b). While the two former Cabinets integrated Seoul in their identity discourse as both a global actor and an intimate neighbour with unique cultural values, this latter identification was almost completely ignored throughout the new course of government. In other words, under the last DPJ premiership, Japanese official sources generally disregarded the recognition of South Korea's 'positive uniqueness', i.e. that national character rendering different states united across borders in their diversity. In turn, this posture enabled the resurfacing of these narratives of superiority that underlay Japan-South Korea relations already in the past.

A diplomatic deadlock was already looming large since the day of Kan's resignation. On 30 August 2011, the Korean Constitutional Court concluded that the ROK government acted unconstitutionally by failing to address the Comfort Women issue properly since the 1990s, prioritising the development of ROK-Japan relations instead of making efforts to solve the controversy. The flare-up of the issue also triggered the installation of a 'peace monument', a life-size statue of a young woman, in front of the Japanese Embassy in Seoul (Lee 2011). Noda's approach to the outbreak was all but diplomatic. He offered no apology to South Korea and requested the statue be removed (Jonsson 2015: 15): a demand which the ROK promptly rejected. An attempt at easing the impasse was made by Vice Foreign Minister Sasae Kenichirō, who proposed a three-point solution: a letter to the victims from the Prime Minister, a face-to-face apology from the Japanese ambassador to South Korea, and financial support. The ROK government did not accept the proposal as it was considered insufficient (Yoo & Kim 2015). Here it is clear how Japan was yet again attempting at buying its way out of past bur-

dens. The Sasae proposal had close resemblance to the one-time compensation of the normalisation treaty, which effectively only managed to shelve the problem for a few decades. The promised apologies give the impression of being a token to the international community itself. Indeed, it can be argued that among what changed from 1965 is the way humanitarian issues are perceived globally, hence not paying attention to them in foreign-policy discourse would risk undermining Japan's identity of global actor.

In addition to how strained Japan-ROK relations were becoming, the instability of the security environment in North-East Asia induced even more anxiety. The death of the Supreme Leader of North Korea Kim Jong-Il in December 2011 and the subsequent ascension to the chairman seat of his son Kim Jong-Un, urged Japan to be ready for extreme contingencies and to gather as much intelligence data as possible (Noda 2012a). Tokyo and Seoul were expected to sign two crucial military agreements, the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) and the Acquisition and Cross Servicing Agreement (ACSA). The first would have facilitated the sharing of classified defence information on North Korea's nuclear programme, while the second agreement was more logistical in nature, dealing with matters of humanitarian assistance and post-disaster relief (Cossa 2012). Nonetheless, the ROK government decided to withdraw from the two agreements on the day scheduled for the signing. Such a move did not come as unexpected though. South Korea's PM Cabinet hastily approved the agreement provisions without first briefing the Korean National Assembly, whose ratification is necessary for matters concerning national security. Some scholars argue that the burden of a negative past had a significant impact in this failure (Taylor 2012). It has in fact been proven how common security agendas can be torn apart by problems pertaining to historical memory (Koga 2016). Memory is not merely a dead matter belonging to a distant past, but is a collectively institutionalised cultural asset (Gustafsson 2011). The institutionalisation of memory allows for the creation of group narratives that can ultimately provide ontological security to an entire society (Gustafsson 2014: 73-74). In turn, these narratives easily conflate with nationalist and identitarian discourse, both for victims and aggressors alike. It is then clear that Japan's reticence to acknowledge responsibility for the past still offers the image of an unrepentant aggressor in the eyes of former colonies.

The Japan-ROK diplomatic crisis exploded in full force during the summer of 2012. ROK president Lee Myung-Bak explicitly challenged Japan's sovereignty claims over Dokdo/Takeshima by making an official visit to the contested island (McCurry 2012). The gesture had been defined as an act of 'unilateral occupation' and contradictory to 'law and justice of the international community'

(Noda 2012b). Upon the ROK government's refusal to settle the case in front of the International Court of Justice, Foreign Affairs Minister Gemba Koichirō further expressed disappointment and advocated for 'Global Korea' to be consistent with international law (Gemba 2012). This streak of statements openly betrays Japan's self-perceived superiority vis-à-vis South Korea. While Tokyo reinstated its identity as a 'law-abiding' member of the international community, Seoul was essentially regarded as prey to an emotional fit of nationalism, thus challenged over its role as 'important member state' of the UN. Reading between the lines and throwing a glance at past relations, we can identify a shift in emphasis along the superiority narrative. For some decades after the end of the war, 'backward' South Korea was no threat to Japan's security identity: Tokyo had already learned its lesson from the defeat, and aimed at consolidating its role as a pacifist nation by economically cooperating with an open, yet underdeveloped, Seoul. In 2012, South Korea's economic development was comparable to Japan, and the only way for Japan to reassert its identity was to resort to a superiority of moral disposition and (inter)national character, i.e. one of a 'rational' and 'mature' state.

## Conclusion

The article has shown how the DPJ's South Korea discourse deteriorated down to a fully-fledged diplomatic crisis along the three different premierships. During the first two administrations, official narratives proposed a positive differentiation of the South Korean other, which has been in turn defined as 'intimate as well as nearby', a 'leader for peace and stability' in East Asia, and also a global promoter of 'democracy and market economy'. However, flare-ups of deep-seated issues related to the wartime past made resurface a lingering narrative of superiority. The ROK's 'unilateral interpretation' of the past was branded as an emotional fit of nationalism, and its irrationality was not befitting the figure of a respected and law-abiding member of the international community. While both Hatoyama and Kan recognised the 'positive uniqueness' of South Korea taken singularly, i.e. not bound to a series of equivalences with international community narratives, Noda's Cabinet ended up ignoring this aspect and treated Seoul as a cold and merely economic partner. This lack of recognition, paired with an increased perception of security anxiety in North-East Asia, steered Japan's official foreign policy discourse towards entrenched identity positions. The impact of this resilient pattern in Japanese state-identity cannot be underestimated enough, since it even contributed to the failure of important intelligence and logistics agreements such as the GSOMIA and the ACSA.

The tenets of the Murayama Statement eventually did not resonate with the ideology of the 2009-2012 DPJ government. This research demonstrated how, at

its most sedimented layer, Japanese state-identity was still orientated at maintaining the integrity of Japan's own image to the detriment of the South Korean other. The ubiquitous slogan of 'future-oriented ties' has proved its exact opposite: Japan's foreign policy has effectively been *past-oriented*, as Tokyo struggled to be immune from any further responsibility. The evidence collected in this article demonstrates that, fundamentally, Japanese political elites across the whole electoral spectrum tend to reproduce the same patterns of identity construction, which corroborates the theoretical assumptions upheld in the introduction. Structural issues, both domestic and abroad, have surely put significant pressure on the DPJ cabinets, but not in all three of them increased tension was followed by diplomatic crisis. The unkept promise of looking at history squarely eventually backfired, bearing witness to the fact that to reach a practical solution of wartime issues is almost impossible. This is all the more evident if we consider that Japanese administrations have constantly tried to buy themselves out of colonial responsibilities, either by dispensing one-time atonement money or through apologetic tokenism.

However culpable the DPJ government, one must not forget the more or less complicit role of South Korean governmental elites in stirring trouble for political reasons. Further research should aim at analysing articulations of state identity narratives in the ROK, and assess to what extent they might be entangled with party interests in gathering domestic support and disqualifying international 'others'. An imaginable solution to this seemingly unending deadlock cannot come unilaterally, and both states should be held accountable for how much they are aggrandising the self to the detriment of their significant others.



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