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## SYMBOLS MATTER: IMPERIAL DIPLOMACY IN POSTWAR JAPAN

### ABSTRACT

This article analyzes the significance of imperial diplomacy in postwar Japan. While the emperor performed many formal duties, he played only a symbolic role in decision-making process and was usually separated from politics. Nevertheless, the symbolic importance of the emperor was periodically used by politicians to promote friendly relations with other countries. The main aim of the article is to examine to what extent Japanese decision-makers took advantage of the emperor in diplomacy through drafting his speeches, arranging his appointments with foreign statespersons, and planning his visits abroad to realize their own foreign policy goals. Relying on institutional and legal analysis as well as short case studies, the authors argue that while the emperor was used in foreign policy, the reverence towards the emperor made such initiatives particularly controversial. The article tries to fill the gap in research on imperial diplomacy, which has been dominated by biographical studies on individual emperors.

**Keywords:** Japan, emperor, diplomacy, foreign policy

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The emperor has been considered a passive player in the Japanese political system. Under the 1946 Constitution, his role was limited to strictly ceremonial practices, such as greeting for-

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eign guests or sending cordial letters to the heads of other countries. The emperor's political neutrality was guarded both by Japanese bureaucrats and by public opinion which critically evaluated any attempts at taking political advantage of the emperor's duties.

In many aspects, the Japanese imperial diplomacy was similar to the involvement of other monarchs in diplomacy. As indicated by Young (2008, pp. 178–179) in his analysis of British foreign policy, unlike summits, state visits by monarchs did not generate the necessity of signing any significant agreements, but still provided “convenient cover for political talks held away from the public gaze.” Due to the exceptional separation of the Japanese emperor from politics, however, it was far more difficult to take political advantage of him than of other monarchs.

Taking into account the strictly symbolic position of the Japanese emperor, it is not surprising that imperial diplomacy has been rarely researched. Most of scholars have focused on biographical studies on individual emperors. Hata (2007, pp. 181–235) emphasized that Emperor Hirohito's role in foreign policy exceeded merely symbolic functions under the unusual situation of American occupation. Large (1992, pp. 184–185), in turn, stressed that Hirohito was constrained in his initiative to apologize for the war of aggression by the Imperial Household Agency and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA). Similarly, Togo (2010, pp. 281–285) underscored a crucial role of politicians in preparing Akihito's visits abroad. While offering partial insight into the imperial diplomacy, none of the abovementioned studies comprehensively examined the emperor's role in foreign policy.

This article argues that despite the theoretical separation of the emperor from political matters, the emperor was politically exploited in diplomacy both by the Japanese government and by foreign countries. On the one hand, Tokyo occasionally used the emperor's speeches, meetings with foreign dignitaries, and visits abroad to promote different initiatives in foreign policy. On the other hand, foreign governments took advantage of the symbolic significance of the emperor not only to promote friendly relations with Japan, but also to put pressure on Tokyo regarding such delicate matters as history problems.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

Institutional and legal analysis as well as qualitative and quantitative examination of the emperor's contacts with foreign dignitaries are the main research methods employed in this article. Emphasis is placed not only on the official position of the emperor, which stems from the Constitution and the Imperial House Law, but also on the informal rules of the emperor's involvement in diplomacy. While quantitative analysis is instrumental in tracing the evolution of the number of imperial state visits abroad, greater attention is paid to the qualitative examination of selected visits. In particular, the international, procedural, ideological, political, and personal factors that either encouraged or inhibited imperial diplomacy are analyzed under the administrations of different prime ministers. Such short case studies help to trace the political interests behind the emperor's involvement in diplomacy.

This article is composed of three sections. The first section describes the competences of the emperor according to the Japanese Constitution and the practices established after the end of the Second World War. In this light, the second section analyzes both formal and informal rules of the emperor's involvement in diplomacy. The last section examines the emperor's visits abroad as the most significant aspect of his role in promotion of Japan's interests

on the international scene. It is argued that as symbols matter in international relations, imperial diplomacy never was really politically neutral.

### 3. THE POSITION OF THE EMPEROR IN JAPAN'S CONSTITUTIONAL SYSTEM

The Imperial House Law in its current form was fully developed shortly after the Second World War. War nationalism and the emperor's strong cult, established in the Meiji era, became the main reason why the ruler was deprived of his right to rule the state after Japan's surrender. Moreover, the historical determinants are important to understand why it has been almost impossible to introduce any changes to the Imperial House Law in the postwar period.

The cult of the emperor, which was instilled in the entire nation by the decrees, official letters, and the native religion of Shinto, made many Japanese refuse to give up even in the face of inevitable defeat. Surrendering would mean breaking an order, which would amount to a loss of honor. Therefore, after the war, it became evident to the Allies that imperial authority could not remain under the previous form. Even before Japan's occupation by American forces, discussion took place about whether to abolish the emperor's institution or not. Eventually, it was decided that a ruler who would lose his influence and help make the necessary changes to the political system would be of greater use (Henshall, 2011, p. 193). On January 1, 1946, the emperor announced his humanitarian declaration (*ningen sengen*), in which he renounced the status of a living god, although the "divine" lineage was preserved. On May 3, 1947, two documents that became the imperial system's foundation came into force: Japan's Constitution (*Nihonkoku Kenpō*) and the Imperial House Law (*Kōshitsu Tenpan*).

Already in the Preamble to the Constitution, we can see a shift of the center of power from the emperor to the Japanese nation: "We, the Japanese people, acting through our duly elected representatives in the National Diet, [...] do proclaim that sovereign power resides with the people and do firmly establish this Constitution" (Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet, 1946). As in the previous Constitution, Chapter I was entirely devoted to the institution of the ruler, but this time its role was significantly limited. In Article 1, it was emphasized that the emperor's role was not to rule the state and that he retained his position as a result of the nation's decision, not a divine bestowal: "The Emperor shall be the symbol of the State and of the unity of the People, deriving his position from the will of the people with whom resides sovereign power" (Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet, 1946). Articles 3 and 4, in turn, defined the scope of his political power: "The advice and approval of the Cabinet shall be required for all acts of the Emperor in matters of state, and the Cabinet shall be responsible therefor" (Article 3); "The Emperor shall perform only such acts in matters of state as are provided for in this Constitution and he shall not have powers related to government" (Article 4) (Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet, 1946). According to this provision, all functions of the emperor in the government, such as appointment of the prime minister (appointed by the Japanese Diet), promulgation of laws and regulations of the government, administration of parliamentary elections, awarding of decorations, and reception of ambassadors, were purely representative. The emperor did not have the power that would allow him to engage in even the slightest political activity. Everything the emperor did was controlled and decided by the Japanese government (Piegzik, 2015, pp. 179–198).

The legal act regulating the emperor's and his family's life was the Imperial House Law. The imperial throne could be inherited only by male heirs in the order established in Article 2 of that law. The possibility of the emperor's abdication was excluded – the ruler remained in office from the moment he entered the throne until his death. Article 12 stipulated: “In case a female of the Imperial Family marries a person other than the Emperor or the members of the Imperial Family, she shall lose the status of the Imperial Family member” (Imperial Household Agency, 1947). In practice, this meant that an imperial family woman who married a man from outside her own family lost her status and all claims of her children to the throne, even if they were male descendants.

The imperial system constructed in this way, depriving the emperor of real power, was, of course, a response to the military nationalism that had existed until 1945. The historical background influenced the Japanese society so strongly that to this day, the Constitution and the Imperial House Law have survived in their unchanged form. Regarding the emperor, the Japanese government revised the law only once. It took place in the late 1970s and concerned the *nengō* system.<sup>1</sup>

In August 2016, Emperor Akihito, in a television appearance, stated: “When I consider that my fitness level is gradually declining, I am worried that it may become difficult for me to carry out my duties as the symbol of the state with my whole being, as I have done until now” (Sieg & Lies, 2016). While Akihito did not admit that he would like to step down, the meaning of his speech became clear to everyone. The imperial system excluded even the slightest influence on politics, so the emperor could not himself submit a proposal to amend the Imperial House Law to the parliament, nor could he even order someone else to do so. Taking this into account, such speech was the emperor's only chance to draw attention to the problem he was facing. And so it happened. Later that same day, Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzō said that he would establish a special commission to check whether the abdication would be legally possible (Foster, 2016).

It was not only the lack of legal provisions that constituted a serious obstacle to allowing the emperor to resign. Although abdication had been quite frequent in Japan's history, it also entailed an additional threat. During the Heian period, the ruler was usually dominated by his advisers, who exercised actual power on his behalf. This led to frequent rotations on the imperial throne, as the emperors abdicated to free themselves from behind-the-scenes politics. Unconstrained by the formal court, they began their political careers, which lay at the foundation of the ex-emperors' reign (Japanese: *insei*). In the following years, they increased their power not only in politics but also in economy, and their position was often much greater than that of the incumbent emperor (Tubielewicz, 1984, p. 109). There was a chance that a similar situation could take place in present times. Both the Constitution and the Imperial House Law did not in any way condition the role and limitations of the ex-emperor, so he could theoretically become involved in political matters, including foreign policy. Such situation, in turn, could once again lead to the strengthening of the role played by the emperor and even to a return of nationalism (Pamplung, 2016).

Historical facts were not the only obstacle to the development of a law that allowed abdication. If such right was stipulated as a permanent law and put into the Imperial House

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<sup>1</sup> The *nengō* system was legally sanctioned during the Meiji period, when the rule of only one era name was adopted by one emperor. This name is derived from the real name of the emperor, by which he will be referred to after his death.

Law, it would become a problem to establish criteria that would allow the emperor to resign. There would still be a possibility that he would step down from office under the pretext of bad health condition, and this decision could be influenced by political pressure or the emperor's personal wishes. This, in turn, would stand in opposition to the law in force, since the emperor could not decide for himself and did not have political power. Setting a uniform "retirement age" would also be troublesome, given the shrinking imperial family and the problem of an aging society in Japan. Therefore, the conservatives strongly opposed the introduction of such a law, and requested a regency be set up in the event of the ruler's deteriorating health (Yoshida, 2016).

Finally, in June 2017, the Japanese Diet passed a one-time bill that allowed Emperor Akihito to abdicate in April 2019. This law was added as a clause to the present Imperial House Law and may be used by future rulers as a precedent in applicable law. The emperor moved to Kyoto for his retirement and is under the care of a newly created office, whose task is to help him adapt to his new life. In practice, this was to prevent the ex-emperor from meddling with politics (Nikkei Asia, 2017).

As outlined above, the Japanese Constitution and the Imperial House Law not only did not allow the emperor to become involved in politics, but even refused him the right to abdicate. Due to historical determinants, any sign of the emperor's involvement in politics brought back the difficult memory of military nationalism. All the official activities of the emperor, who remained "the symbol of the State and of the unity of the People," were dependent on the decision of the government. Imperial diplomacy was not an exception. On the one hand, an uttermost attention was paid not to expose the emperor to political abuse. On the other hand, however, imperial diplomacy was subjected to the national interests formulated by each government.

#### 4. THE EMPEROR AND DIPLOMACY

The heads of state, including monarchs in democratic countries, usually play an important role in diplomacy. While the Japanese emperor was completely isolated from politics, he performed a lot of duties in the diplomatic sphere, such as meeting ambassadors and foreign dignitaries.

All newly appointed ambassadors extraordinary and plenipotentiary in Japan presented their credentials to the emperor, with participation of the foreign minister. It was a tradition that they were transported by horse-drawn carriages from the Tokyo Station to the Imperial Palace. In addition, the emperor and the empress received in audience ambassadors and their spouses before they assumed their posts. Occasionally, ambassadors were invited to teas, luncheons, cormorant-fishing in the Furutsu district in Gifu Prefecture, or duck-netting at the Saitama and Shinhama Imperial Wild Duck Preserves. The emperor was never involved in negotiations on concrete international matters. The same principle applied when the emperor sent letters to foreign heads of state. The letters always concerned politically neutral topics and were written on the occasions of foreign country's national holiday or independence day, the birthday of a monarch, the demise of a head of state, or a major disaster (Imperial Household Agency, 2020).

While all speeches of the emperor were prepared by Japanese diplomats, during conversation with foreign dignitaries, the emperor occasionally mentioned various topics on his

own initiative. For instance, during a meeting with Chinese Vice-Premier Deng Xiaoping in October 1978, Hirohito unexpectedly addressed the guest with words about long history of Sino-Japanese friendship that had been once disturbed by “unfortunate events” (*fukōna deki goto*). As the Japanese MOFA had consulted in detail the contents of the conversation between the emperor and Deng with the Imperial Household Agency and the Chinese Embassy in Tokyo, this spontaneous remark impressed the Chinese vice-premier. Deng responded positively, saying that instead of focusing on the past both countries should look forward to building friendship in the future (Shiroyama, 2009, pp. 50–51). In the same year, Hirohito stopped visiting Yasukuni – a shrine in central Tokyo that commemorated all the Japanese who had died for their fatherland. As disclosed by former Imperial Household Agency Grand Steward Tomita Tomohiko, this decision was made independently by the emperor due to his discomfort over the enshrinement of class-A war criminals (Tōgō, 2008, pp. 44–45). While Hirohito did not announce the reasons of his behavior at the time, it was evident that his personal convictions occasionally had an indirect impact on foreign policy matters. After all, in 1985, China and South Korea started criticizing Japanese prime ministers for paying homage to Yasukuni, so continuation of imperial visits to the shrine would have surely met with protests from Japan’s neighbors.

History problems constituted one of the most fragile topics for the emperor’s diplomacy. While Japanese prime ministers gradually started formulating more and more far-going apologies for the atrocities committed by the Imperial Army during the period of territorial expansion, they tried to keep Emperor Hirohito away from the dispute over his responsibility for the war of aggression. History problems were discussed when Chun Doo-hwan, as the first South Korean president ever, visited Japan in 1984. Because the annexation of Korea in 1910 had been carried out on behalf of the emperor, Seoul treated imperial apology as a precondition for this visit (Yamazaki, 2006, p. 35). Instructed by the government, during a meeting with Chun, Hirohito admitted that the “unfortunate past” between the two nations was “truly regrettable” (*makoto ni ikan*). Nevertheless, South Korea still hoped for a more direct apology (Yomiuri Shinbun Seijibu, 2014, p. 179). China was another country that paid attention to the emperor’s statements regarding history issues. After Hirohito’s funeral in 1989, his successor Akihito repeated the words of “regret” (*ikan no i*) for the “unfortunate history” (*fukōna rekishi*) in the contemporary period during a meeting with Chinese Prime Minister Li Peng (Shimada & Tian, 1997, p. 385). The new emperor went one step further when he greeted South Korean President Roh Tae-woo who visited Japan in 1990. Once more, Seoul insisted on an imperial apology. Akihito expressed a “feeling of intense sorrow” (*tsūseki no nen*) for the past. The ambiguous language, full of euphemisms, did not necessarily result from Tokyo’s intention to dilute its responsibility for the atrocities committed by Japan during the war. Such special language was characteristic of the mystique traditionally associated with the emperor (Yamazaki, 2006, pp. 36–40). Japanese MOFA, which drafted the emperor’s speech, claimed that no other country had ever apologized in a more explicit way for the colonial rule (Yomiuri Shinbun Seijibu, 2014, p. 179).

Meetings with the emperor were subject to a strict etiquette. The Imperial Household Agency remained sensitive to any signs of disrespect towards the emperor. For instance, Chinese President Jiang Zemin’s behavior during his visit to Tokyo in 1998 was commented as rude by part of the Japanese media. Although it remained a strict rule that all guests wore either full evening dress or their traditional national clothing during banquets with the em-

peror, Jiang came dressed in a Mao tunic suit. Responding to accusations from the press that Chinese president behaved impolitely, Japanese Chief Cabinet Secretary Nonaka Hiromu had to explain that such dress might be treated as an official garment in China. In addition, the media criticized the fact that Jiang referred to history problems between both countries in a greeting speech during the banquet (Eguchi, 2012, pp. 329–340). Such posture resulted from the fact that Prime Minister Obuchi Keizō had refused to offer written apologies to Beijing for the atrocities committed by Japan during the Second World War (Lam, 2002, pp. 31–54; Nukaga 2010, p. 94). As a result, Jiang's speech was interpreted as a method for applying political pressure on the emperor, which did not contribute to promotion of friendly relations between both countries.

Out of consideration for Emperor Akihito's advanced age and health problems, as well as for treating all foreign dignitaries equally, the Imperial Household Agency established an unofficial principle of arranging the emperor's appointments with foreign dignitaries with one month's notice. Violation of this rule met with general condemnation from public opinion. For instance, at the end of November 2009, Chief Cabinet Secretary Hirano Hirofumi and the Secretary-General of the ruling Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ), Ozawa Ichirō, exerted pressure on Imperial Household Agency Grand Steward Haketa Shingo to make Emperor Akihito meet Chinese Vice-President Xi Jinping in mid-December 2009. The leading DPJ politicians wanted to respond to Beijing's request that Japan treated Xi, who was the main candidate for the post of president, equally to President Hu Jintao, who had met the emperor as vice-president in 1998. The government argued that holding audiences with foreign dignitaries was a part of the emperor's duties under the Constitution, but opposition politicians as well as Grand Steward Haketa accused DPJ authorities of exploiting the emperor politically (Asahi Shinbun Seiken Shuzai Sentā, 2010, pp. 230–248).

The abovementioned examples prove that while theoretically being completely separated from politics, the emperor was occasionally used by politicians to promote their foreign policy initiatives. The South Korean and the Chinese authorities perceived the emperor as the most suitable person to address history issues, while Tokyo paid utmost attention not to let foreign leaders harm the emperor's dignity. Nevertheless, also the Japanese government was sometimes accused of taking political advantage of the emperor, for instance by overly insisting on the emperor's audiences with guests from abroad without heeding to the unofficial rules created by the Imperial Household Agency.

## 5. THE EMPEROR'S VISITS ABROAD

The emperor's state visits abroad were the most visible aspect of his involvement in diplomacy. As such visits always attracted attention from the media both in Japan and in the host countries, their preparation had a strategic importance for promotion of friendly relations with other states.

Table 1 shows Emperor Akihito and Empress Michiko's visits abroad between their enthronement in 1989 and abdication in 2019. It was a custom that the imperial couple paid only one state visit overseas per year and that it visited each country only once. The only exceptions was the United States, due to its strategic importance, as well as such monarchies as Belgium, the United Kingdom, and Thailand, which were visited more than once due to various ceremonies related to royal families – e.g., funerals or jubilees of enthronement. Figure 1

illustrates the evolution of the number of visits abroad by all members of the imperial family between 1989 and 2019. As Emperor Akihiko's health deteriorated over time, the members of his family to some extent filled the gap in diplomacy. Two times – in 2002 and 2014 – Empress Michiko paid visits overseas alone. Emperor Naruhito, who was enthroned on October 22, 2019, has not visited any country as emperor as of February 2021. The main reason was the outbreak of coronavirus pandemic in early 2020, which forced Tokyo to revise the diplomatic schedule of the imperial family.

Table 1. Imperial visits abroad since 1989

Date	Country	Comments
September 26 – October 6, 1991	Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia	Visits to foster friendly relations
October 23–28, 1992	People's Republic of China	Visit to foster friendly relations
August 6–9, 1993	Belgium	Visit to attend the funeral ceremonies of King Baudouin
September 3–19, 1993	Italy, Vatican, Belgium, Germany	Visits to foster friendly relations
June 10–26, 1994	United States	Visit to foster friendly relations
October 2–14, 1994	France, Spain, Germany	Visits to foster friendly relations
May 30 – June 13, 1997	Brazil, Argentina, Luxembourg, United States	Visits to foster friendly relations
May 23 – June 5, 1998	United Kingdom, Denmark, Portugal	Visits to foster friendly relations
May 20 – June 1, 2000	The Netherlands, Sweden, Switzerland, Finland	Visits to foster friendly relations
July 6 – July 20, 2002	Poland, Hungary, Czech Republic, Austria	Visits to foster friendly relations
September 28 – October 3, 2002	Switzerland	Empress alone. Visit to attend as patron of the Jubilee Congress of the International Board on Books for Young People (IBBY)
May 7–14, 2005	Norway, Ireland	Visits to foster friendly relations
June 27–28, 2005	United States (Saipan)	Visit to commemorate the 60th anniversary of the end of the Second World War
June 8–15, 2006	Singapore, Thailand, Malaysia	Visits to foster friendly relations, to celebrate the 40th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations with Singapore, and to commemorate the 60th anniversary of the enthronement of the king of Thailand

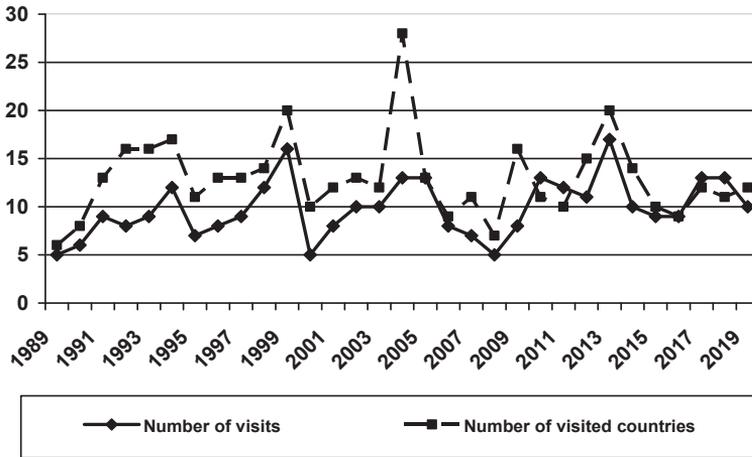
Table 1. Imperial... (cd.)

Date	Country	Comments
May 21–30, 2007	Sweden, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, United Kingdom	Visits to commemorate the 300th anniversary of the birth of Carl von Linné and to foster friendly relations
July 3–17, 2009	Canada, United States (Hawaii)	Visits to foster friendly relations and to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Crown Prince Akihito Scholarship Foundation, the State of Hawaii
May 16–20, 2012	United Kingdom	Visit commemorate the Diamond Jubilee of Queen Elizabeth II
November 30 – December 6, 2013	India	Visit to foster friendly relations
December 11–13, 2014	Belgium	Empress alone. Visit to attend the funeral of Queen Fabiola
April 8–9, 2015	Palau	Visit to commemorate the 70th of the end of the Second World War
January 26–30, 2016	Philippines	Visit to commemorate the 60th anniversary of the normalization of diplomatic relations
February 28 – March 6, 2017	Vietnam, Thailand	Visits to foster friendly relations

Source: Compiled by the authors based on Imperial Household Agency, 2021.

Just as in the case of meeting guests in Japan, it was expected that foreign dignitaries would pay utmost attention to maintaining strict etiquette when greeting the emperor in their countries. Despite this fact, unfortunate inconformity with diplomatic savoir-vivre occurred occasionally. For instance, during a meeting with the emperor in Poland in July 2002, Prime Minister Leszek Miller's wife, Aleksandra Miller, was dressed in a white and pink dress painted with such inscriptions as "sexy" or "love," which was widely criticized by the press (*Wprost*, 2002).

Figure 1. Visits abroad by imperial family members



Source: Compiled by the authors based on Imperial Household Agency, 2021.

While the imperial family's overseas visits usually were simply a sign of friendly relations with the host country, sometimes they had a strategic importance. For instance, Prime Minister Kishi Nobusuke promoted the crown prince's and princess' visit to the United States to create a favorable atmosphere for the revision of the bilateral security treaty in 1960. The opposition parties criticized this plan as a method of putting pressure on lawmakers during deliberations on the ratification of the controversial treaty that aroused massive protests in front of the Diet building. Eventually, the visit was postponed due to resistance from Imperial Household Agency Grand Steward Usami Takeshi (Large, 1992, p. 173).

Even more controversial was the emperor's visit to China to commemorate the 20th anniversary of normalization of Sino-Japanese diplomatic relations in 1992. Beijing insisted on inviting the emperor in order to show to the international community that domestic situation in China had returned to normal after the 1989 Tiananmen Incident. Nevertheless, right-wing LDP politicians opposed the initiative, claiming that China would exploit the visit politically (Nakajima, 1993, p. 23). In particular, the nationalists were afraid that Beijing would try to put pressure on the emperor to apologize for the atrocities committed by the Japanese Imperial Army during the Second World War. In addition, right-wing lawmakers said that Beijing could take advantage of the visit to reassert China's claim to the Senkaku/Diayou Islands in the East China Sea that were administered by Japan. They backed their argument with the fact that in February 1992, Beijing had issued the Law on the Territorial Sea and Contiguous Zone that included this uninhabited archipelago within the Chinese territory (Hagström, 2005, pp. 161–171). Referring to these bilateral problems, in August 1992, LDP lawmaker Fujio Masayuki gathered 57 signatures under a parliamentarians' petition to postpone the emperor's visit (Shimada & Tian, 1997, pp. 427–428).

Prime Minister Miyazawa Kiichi promoted the imperial visit to China, but he admitted that in order to accept China's invitation for the emperor, he had to first persuade the opponents in the ruling party (Miyazawa, Iokibe, Itō, & Yakushiji, 2006, p. 49). The final deci-

sion was entrusted to the main decision-making organ of the LDP, the General Council. Its chairperson, Satō Takayuki, was initially skeptical about authorizing the emperor's visit, but he was convinced to change his mind by his factional boss, former Prime Minister Nakasone Yasuhiro (Murakawa, 2000, pp. 65–57). Miyazawa also asked another former Prime Minister, Fukuda Takeo, to persuade the members of his faction, the biggest right-wing group in the LDP, not to block the visit (Xu, 2002, p. 229). In addition, in June 1992, Miyazawa summoned to Tokyo Japanese ambassador to China, who explained to LDP politicians that Beijing did not treat apologies for the past war as a precondition for the emperor's visit. These efforts sufficed to assuage voices of discontent in the ruling party. The imperial couple's visit to China in October 1992 was a symbolic event. In line with the speech prepared by Japanese diplomats, the emperor expressed "deep sorrow" with the "unfortunate period" in the history of Sino-Japanese relations. While Akihito did not address explicit apologies to China, his posture met with positive reception from the communist government (Żakowski, 2012, p. 248).

While both Tokyo and Beijing officially maintained that the emperor was kept away from international politics, in fact, both sides did exploit his visit politically. As already mentioned, China showed to the world that its diplomatic isolation on the international arena had ended, while Japan warned China that making any decisions undermining friendship between the two countries could cause postponement of the imperial visit (Hagström, 2005, pp. 170–171). As a result, at least temporarily, the visit led to assuaging bilateral frictions.

Japanese prime ministers paid uttermost attention to resolving any history issues before the emperor's visits to the countries that had suffered from Japan's aggression. Perhaps they did not want to allow repetition of incidents that occurred during Hirohito's trip to Europe in the autumn of 1971. Demonstrators threw faeces at the emperor in Denmark, called him "murderer" in the Netherlands, and poured hydrochloric acid on the roots of a symbolic tree of bilateral friendship he had planted in Great Britain (Large, 1992, pp. 184–185). A successful visit could become an opportunity at final reconciliation, while any incident against the emperor's dignity could negatively influence bilateral relations.

In order to prepare the emperor's visit to the United Kingdom in 1998, Prime Minister Hashimoto Ryūtarō asked his British counterpart how to please the English public opinion. Under Prime Minister Tony Blair's advice, Hashimoto sent a letter to *The Sun*, a popular British newspaper, in which he expressed "deep remorse and heartfelt apology for the tremendous damage and suffering" caused by Japan during the war. In a reply letter, Tony Blair highly praised the Japanese prime minister's posture, which prepared the ground for Akihito's cordial visit to London in May 1998. Despite the efforts by the politicians of both countries, the media reported that a group of 500 former prisoners of war turned their backs when a royal carriage with Emperor Akihito and Queen Elisabeth rode past to Buckingham Palace. On the other hand, thanks to a generally warm reception of the emperor by the British people, the incident did not overly harm bilateral relations (Togo, 2010, pp. 281–282).

Similar preparations were necessary before Akihito's visit to the Netherlands in 2000. It took several months for both sides to negotiate the exact wording of a statement that would satisfy both the Dutch victims of war and the groups in Japan who wanted to avoid issuing excessive apologies. Eventually, Prime Minister Obuchi Keizō expressed "deep remorse and heartfelt apology" to the Dutch during Prime Minister Willem Kok's visit to Japan in February 2000. The statement paved the way towards Akihito's visit to the Netherlands in May 2000. Symbolically, the imperial couple laid a wreath at the National Monument for the War

Dead (Togo, 2010, pp. 282–285). Despite limited demonstrations, the visit was positively commented by the press and served spiritual reconciliation between both nations (Suzuki & van Eemeren, 2004, pp. 102–111).

History issues explain why the emperor has never visited South Korea despite the strategic importance of that country for Japan. Seoul periodically criticized the lack of repentance by Tokyo for the period of colonial rule, prime ministerial visits to the Yasukuni Shrine, white-washing of the difficult past in history textbooks, and insufficient compensation for former “comfort women” – sexual slaves from Korea abused by the Imperial Army. The lack of reconciliation between both countries did not create favorable conditions for the emperor’s visit. President Lee Myung-bak invited Emperor Akihito to South Korea when he met him in Tokyo in April 2008. Nevertheless, in August 2012, Lee stated that the emperor “doesn’t need to come if he is coming just to offer his ‘deepest regret’” (Kyodo, 2012). In the same month, the South Korean president visited Tokdo/Takeshima – a small island in the Sea of Japan, which is disputed between both countries. Such provocative behavior made Tokyo doubt that the emperor’s dignity would not be harmed during a visit to Seoul.

Apart from enhancing friendly relations and pushing the process of reconciliation between Japan and other countries forward, the emperor’s overseas visits served promotion of foreign policy initiatives launched by different administrations. For instance, most of the visits prepared under the second Abe administration from December 2012 to September 2020 were aimed at strengthening cooperation with the countries important from the point of view of Tokyo’s strategy of containing China’s rising ambitions: India, the Philippines, and Vietnam. All three states played a crucial role in Prime Minister Abe Shinzō’s policy of enhancing economic cooperation as well as donating or selling military equipment to potential allies of Japan and the United States in order to counterbalance the economic and military power of Beijing (Żakowski, 2019, pp. 146–148). While the emperor avoided delivering any speeches referring to containment of China during his visits, the mere choice of destinations was aimed at promoting the foreign policy strategy of the government.

The emperor’s visits abroad were always carefully prepared to prevent any incidents that could harm the emperor’s dignity. Sometimes, as in the case of Great Britain and the Netherlands, they served finalization of the process of mutual reconciliation. On the other hand, any signs of disrespect towards the emperor, as displayed by South Korean politicians, made resolution of history issues even harder to achieve. As evidenced by Miyazawa’s policy of rapprochement with Beijing or Abe’s strategy of containing China, prime ministers occasionally took political advantage of imperial visits overseas by selecting their destinations in line with the diplomatic initiatives of the government.

## 6. CONCLUSIONS

The role of the emperor in diplomacy, as “the symbol of the State and of the unity of the People,” was limited to the symbolic, ceremonious sphere. Japanese politicians and diplomats paid great attention to keeping the emperor’s dignity intact during his meetings with foreign dignitaries. As any signs of disrespect towards the emperor were extensively commented by the press, they could harm friendly relations with other countries. While minor gaffes against the etiquette were usually quickly forgotten, any intentional incidents had a considerable impact on the moods in bilateral relations. For that reason, Japanese prime ministers

were particularly keen on resolving all controversial problems, such as history issues, before the emperor's visits abroad. Such visits often became an opportunity for finalizing the process of bilateral reconciliation, but excessive protests regarding insufficient compensation of the victims of wars waged by Japan before 1945 could, on the contrary, lead to reemergence of mutual animosities.

Being a passive player in foreign policy, the emperor was expected to remain politically neutral. In very rare cases, such as the meeting with Deng Xiaoping in 1978, did the emperor spontaneously mention politically significant topics without instruction from the government. Despite this fact, he was occasionally used by politicians to promote their diplomatic initiatives. While maintaining the appearances of a complete isolation of the emperor from political matters, the prime ministers were keen on exploiting his symbolic importance in their international endeavors through drafting his speeches, arranging his visits abroad, and planning his meetings with foreign dignitaries. The strategic use of imperial diplomacy was evidenced by DPJ's pressure on the Imperial Household Agency to make Emperor Akihito meet Chinese Vice-President Xi Jinping in 2009 or by an arbitrary choice of the destinations of imperial visits abroad by the Abe administration. Foreign governments were equally aware of the fact that symbols matter in international relations and they used invitation for the emperor as an opportunity for promoting diplomatic, economic, and cultural exchange with Japan. As such, imperial diplomacy never was really politically neutral.

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