Analysis of Japanese, US and Chinese Political Leaders’ Statements about Japan’s Foreign Policy

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ABSTRACT

The article explores in the light of role theory the statements (speeches, interviews and remarks at the media) of Japanese and foreign political leaders (including high-ranking officials who are probably a reliable indicator of the political leader’s preference) related to foreign policy during the first and the second Abe administrations. In this article, qualitative content analysis is used to analyze the statements. The two main roles: 1) Japan is a reliable security partner, and 2) Japan is a pacifist country whose foreign policy is based on non-militarism are dealt with. Statements are categorized into either of them from a role theory viewpoint. The Abe administration’s role location, role competition, role conflicts, consistency and inconsistency between Japan’s National Role Conceptions (NRCs) and the main alter-parts (the other countries that can be allied or foes, the US and China in this article) roles representing the expectation and proscription of Japan can be analyzed. It it argued that Prime Minister Abe’s attempts to reinforce the assertiveness of Japan’s foreign policy have a result of strengthening ties with the US, which can deter China. Abe does not incur role conflicts either in security or historical issues. He conducts his foreign policy by adjusting NRCs and accommodating role expectations.

KEYWORDS: Abe’s foreign policy, Japan-US relations, Japan-China relations, role theory

Introduction

This article answers the research question why and how Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzo cautiously but steadily proceeded to change Japan’s NRCs: 1) Japan is a reliable security partner, and 2) Japan is a pacifist country whose foreign policy is based on non-militarism, during his first and second administrations (2006-2007 and 2012-2018). To do so, it examines how and to what extent those changes in NRC have the potential to induce transformation in Japan’s foreign policy. Within the role theory framework, it is observed that Abe administration’s policy may have impact on the consistency of some roles between Abe administration and the US and China (ego-part and alter-parts respectively, as explained later).
It cannot be excluded that role inconsistency and role conflict emerge as a result. Abe’s policies vis-à-vis the world can be regarded as his desire to play representative roles that can be separated in the two NRCs. This research is indeed all the more needed because opinion is divided among all political actors, scholars and critics about the assessment of Abe’s foreign policy initiatives. Some say his foreign policy is offensive and nationalistic, while others say it does not depart from traditional Japan’s foreign policy and shows restraint. Should key aspects of the traditional NRCs during the postwar period be reconsidered these role changes could subsequently impact on ego-part and alter-parts with the possibility of inducing changes in the direction of Japan’s foreign policy.

This article consists of three sections and a conclusion. The first section explains the role theory’s key concepts and methodology. The second section examines how Japan, the US and China recognize Japanese role and duty according to the role of “Japan is a reliable security partner”. Similarly, the third section examines the role of “Japan is a pacifist country based on non-militarism”. The conclusion makes an assessment of the influence of role expectations and the possible evolution of NRCs.

1 Role Theory Framework
Role theory originates from social psychology and sociology. Holsti (1970) applied it to state behavior as a theoretical tool of analysis to explain the regulative and constitutive effects of roles in international relations. The evolving intersubjective process between ego-part and key alter-parts nurtures NRC. Holsti defines NRC in the following way:

“A national role conception includes the policy-makers’ own definitions of the general kinds of decisions, commitments, rules and actions suitable to their state, and of the functions, if any, their state should perform on a continuing basis in the international system or in subordinate regional systems” (1970: 245-246).

NRC comprises two parts: 1) Ego-part is composed of duty and responsibility that political leaders who represent their own country perceive. It leads to specific performance conforming to the recognition of the roles; 2) Alter-part is a role expectation from foreign countries. In this case too it leads to specific performance concerning the perception and performance of the ego-part (Harnisch 2013).

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NRCs do not cause states to conduct foreign policy directly. Instead, they give support in providing motives for behavioral patterns (Aggestam 2004) and enable researchers to interpret the decision-makers’ perceived appropriate roles and objectives. Unlike constructivism, role theory cannot explain foreign policy in a positivist way. However, it can be utilized as it is an interpretative tool to shed light on decision-makers’ perception and try to link it to foreign policy (Sakaki 2011: 21). Since decision-makers generally reflect the dominant ideas of the society, their statements are suitable to uncover the roles of Japan. Moreover, as social interaction (including confrontation) with other actors continuously prompts a redefinition of a role conception, role theory makes it possible for scholars to move away from a target actor’s self-perception of the society.

There is research on Japan’s foreign policy using role theory. Macleod (1997), Sakaki (2011), and Hirata (2016) point out that Japan’s decision-makers have consistently supported ‘universal values’ since the Cold War and adopted a balance of power policy in securing the US’ presence in East Asia, changing its pacifism and security orientation gradually. Some studies take into account international dimensions. Maull (2011) argues that Japan is expected by the US to remain a “follower” which contributes to sustaining its regional and global policies through material, financial, political and security support. Maslow (2016) says that rising China’s role change to be more assertive prompts Japan to play more positive security roles in accordance with the US’ “pivot to Asia” under the Obama administration. Researches above-mentioned enable one to understand Japan’s behavior, but focus almost exclusively on Japan’s ego-part (Macleod 1997; Sakaki 2011; Hirata 2016). They do not incorporate alter-parts into their research. Even though they include alter-parts, they focus on the bilateral ties, Japan-US (Maull 2011) and Japan-China (Maslow 2016), although it is natural to think that the US and China should be taken into account concurrently. They also do not include the second Abe administration, which is eager to play more positive roles in international security than its predecessors, and do not tell readers about the current state of affairs. This article attempts to overcome these limitations to enlarge the scope of the analysis in considering the roles of two key alter-parts, the US and China, comprehensively in Abe’s second office term.

Should expectations be considered adequately met, no role inconsistency will occur and the political leaders’ roles will be incarnated in foreign policy subsequently. However, if role expectations are not fulfilled adequately, it may lead to role inconsistency that could induce role conflict, which potentially may entail a change in foreign policy (Le Prestre 1997).
Based on these things, the statements of Abe and foreign leaders are classified into the two appropriate role categories and interpreted by using this framework in the following sections.

### 1.2 Methodology

Role theory assumes that top political decision-makers’ remarks generally reflect the main role conceptions on foreign policy issues that international society ascribed to a given country and the role concepts ego-part expects (Edström 2004). A content analysis of important foreign policy statements (speeches, interviews and remarks in the media) related to roles, expectations and proscriptions as well as giving indications about the evolution of NRCs of Abe and of his foreign key alter-parts (the US and China) is conducted.

This research adopts a deductive approach with predetermined NRCs: 1) Japan is a reliable security partner and 2) Japan is a pacifist country whose foreign policy is based on non-militarism, in classifying statements regarding security and historical issues into either of them to avoid putting several distinct roles and expectations under one label.

### 2 Japan Is a Reliable Security Partner

#### 2.1 The Role toward the US

Abe’s aim is to make Japan a reliable security partner in the region and beyond. Abe argued in favor of the necessity of expanding Japan’s role along with the US. He already argued in the Diet session the necessity of expanding Japan’s role in concert with US policy in 2006 and 2007. He expressed the objectives of his initiatives as such:

> “In order to enable swift decisions under strong political leadership on national security and diplomatic strategies, the headquarters function of the Prime Minister's Office will be reorganized and strengthened, and intelligence gathering functions will also be enhanced. Regarding the Japan-U.S. alliance, I will put in place a framework that ensures constant communication between the Prime Minister's Office and the White House in order to further consolidate the trust, which forms the bedrock of the alliance” (Abe 2006).

He also declared in a press conference:
“We have to reconstruct a legal basis for security that befits the times in which we live, aiming to make a greater contribution to peace in the international community. I will continue to examine and study on the basis of the typified, individual, specific cases how to organize the relationship between our security policy and the Constitution, including the issue of the right of collective self-defense” (Abe 2007).

The second Abe administration put even more emphasis on the importance of the relationships with the US. It can be argued that Abe’s foreign policy corresponds to what Barack Obama’s administration had envisioned for the Japan-US relationship. Abe expressed his vision as follows:

“America is the world's greatest naval power and preeminent economic superpower; Japan is Asia's largest maritime democracy and a liberal capitalist state second only to the United States. It stands to reason that our two nations should be partners. Today the United States is shifting its focus to the confluence of the two oceans, the Indian and the Pacific--this very region where we stand today. At such a time, the Japan-US alliance takes on a more vital significance than ever before” (Abe 2013a).

This speech concentrates on Japan’s responsibility to share the burden with the US. Japan’s contribution must be reinforced by making laws and building institutions. In this sense, the enactment of the law allowing the limited exercise of the right of collective self-defense reflects the concern of Abe that Japan’s self-restraint in the exercise of the right will bring disadvantages to the Japan-US alliance.

The traditional stance, expressed since the end of the Second World War, that Japan does not need to take on security burden-sharing is not observed in Abe’s statements. Rather, he has consistently aspired after having Japan play leading and pivotal roles in the world with the US and other friendly countries. It can be assumed that his perceived international environment is becoming severe. He expressed this idea in a press conference during his visit to the US, which showed his confidence that Japan and the US shared the same viewpoint on security issues:

“First of all, with regard to security, given the increasingly severe security environment surrounding Japan, Japan is determined to
fulfill its responsibilities together with the United States, and President Obama fully shares this recognition. In concrete terms, I explained to President Obama Japan's own efforts toward reinforcing the alliance, including such matters as the right to collective self-defense, increased defense spending, and the review of our National Defense Program Guidelines (NDPGs)” (Abe 2013b).

This concern that the security environment surrounding Japan is becoming severe mainly due to the rise of China, as explained later, prompts Abe to reconsider Japan’s security role, resulting in highlighting willingness and necessity for Japan to be a reliable security partner in the region and the world. In fact, it could be said Abe concretized in his second term what he had advocated during the first one. He did it through legislation, i.e. in setting a National Security Council, enacting the state secrecy law, a conspiracy law and diverse other security-related bills, increasing defense budget and reviewing the NDPGs. Among others, security-related laws that took effect on 29 March 2016 are remarkable because collective self-defense became legalized to the minimum extent necessary. Rear area support does not have geographical restraint and the role of the Self-Defense Forces (SDF) expands. It is also possible to protect UN staff when they are attacked (The Mainichi 2016).

After the revision in 2013, NDPGs were revised again in December 2018. The new NDPGs emphasize maintaining Japan’s superiority in new areas, such as cyberspace and space. In addition, Japan begins to defend not only the Nansei Islands, near Okinawa prefecture, but also the Pacific Sea. Japan also decided to upgrade the Izumo-class helicopter carrier in order to give it the capability to allow the F35B fighter to take off and land. Overall it can be said that the new version of the NDPGs clarifies Japan’s sense of crisis to China (Tanaka 2018). Abe’s role performance to be a reliable partner of the US remains not only unchanged but even strengthened. This is related to the Japanese government’s perception that the influence of the US may decline as long as it is distracted by the Middle East and the fact that the Trump administration (since January 2017-) has also a strong concern about China’s expansionism.

Fatton reports the tour of the South China Sea (SCS) of the Izumo helicopter carrier. The Izumo stopped at several ports and participated in exercises with US forces during its tour (Fatton 2017: 274-275). The Maritime Self-Defense Forces (MSDF) sent P-3C patrol planes to the SCS 100 to 200 kilometers away from the disputed area to do a training for
search and rescue in September 2017. In addition, they exercised conjointly with US nuclear-powered aircraft carriers in the Sea of Japan in November of the same year in reaction to the increased threat of North Korea (Reuters 2017). Abe’s role that to consistently fall in line with the US is Japan’s national interests is visible from his statements and role performances. Thus, Abe’s role performance so far indicates the high priority of fulfilling Japan’s roles in keeping with the expectations related to a reliable security partner role conception in regional and global affairs.

2.2 Roles toward China
Abe’s statements about China reflect his perception of a threat coming from China. The attachment to universal values discourages and restrains Japan from deepening ties with China. Although Abe rarely acknowledges it explicitly in official statements, he identifies China with a country not sharing political values with Japan. His concern about the rise of China was expressed as such:

“As Prime Minister I intend to demonstrate my resolution to defend fully people's lives, our territory, and our beautiful ocean. Right now, at this very moment, the Japan Coast Guard and members of the Self-Defense Forces are defending Japan's seas and skies off the coast of the Senkaku Islands. The security of Japan is not someone else's problem; it is a crisis that exists right there and now” (Abe 2012).

In an interview with the Washington Post, Abe responded to questions about Japan-China relations and maritime dispute in the SCS as follows:

“What is important, first and foremost, is to make them [Chinese leaders] realize that they would not be able to change the rules or take away somebody’s territorial water or territory by coercion or intimidation. Accordingly, for the first time in 11 years, I have increased our defence budget, as well as the budget for the Japan coast guard. It is important for us to have them recognize that it is impossible to try to get their way by coercion or intimidation. In that regard, the Japan-U.S. alliance, as well as the U.S. presence, would be critical” (Abe 2013c).

In the interview, Abe was trying to put China in a different camp. China is described as a revisionist power intending to change the regional status quo
that the Japan-US alliance is defending. This response reveals his realistic world view that Japan must increase its military power to deter China with the US to maintain the balance of power to Japan’s advantage. Otherwise, its survival will be in danger. In this connection, as if Abe wanted to support his idea that China is a threat, the SDF (land, sea and air) has conducted a joint exercise in the Nansei Islands since 2014 to simulate that islands are conquered by the enemy and must be retaken (Ono & Fukumoto 2017). In addition, in 2016, Abe launched an idea of “Indo-Pacific Strategy” and has steadily developed its reliable security partner role in enlarging Japan’s activity area from South Asia, the Middle East to Africa. One of the important objectives is to form an “alliance against China” to maintain maritime order to oppose China’s unilateral change of status quo in Asia-Pacific and Indo-Pacific (Okada 2018). The emergence of the concept of Indo-Pacific means the continuity of the power struggle between Japan and China. As a whole, it can be said that Abe has steadily developed its countermeasure against China during his office term. The Maritime Safety Agency strengthened its mechanism to patrol around the Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea (ECS) by having 12 large-sized patrol boats (10 in Ishigaki Island, 2 in Okinawa Island) by the end of 2016. The total number of the staff of the Maritime Safety Agency in Ishigaki island near the Senkaku Islands is about 700 (Asahi Shimbun 2017). After all, Abe’s goal is to deploy a large number of SDF and MSDF personnel in the islands in the ECS in addition to a ‘network of antiship and antiaircraft missiles’ there (Austin 2016).

Abe’s policies reveal that considering Japan’s concerns about China’s long-time interference with Japan’s sovereignty, it is natural that Japan increased deterrence in the ECS to guarantee freedom of navigation, which is essential for Japan’s prosperity. This fundamental principle does not change to date as shown in Abe’s address to the personnel of the Japan Coast Guard: “The situation of the ocean areas surrounding our nation is more severe than ever […] The future of Japan as a maritime nation will be uncertain without the Coast Guard” (Abe 2018a). These are clear messages that there is no room for discussion about Japan’s sovereignty over the Senkaku Islands and Japan is not complacent in this regard.

Still, Abe wants to avoid deterioration of the Japan-China relationship because it would be against US expectations as seen below. During the Asian-African Conference in Indonesia in April 2015, Abe held talks with Xi Jinping, General Secretary of the Communist Party. Abe told reporters after they met that they decided to improve the relations for regional stability: “We want to make the improving trend in the bilateral relations
solid” in promoting “mutually beneficial strategic ties” (Abe 2015), signaling Japan’s desire to remedy the relations that had become critical during the Democratic Party of Japan-led government (2009-2012) and promote a reconciliation. This stance remained unchanged. When Abe visited Beijing in October 2018, Abe told Prime Minister Li that “[s]witching from competition to collaboration, I want to lift Japan-China relations to a new era” (Abe 2018b) with his expectation of Xi to visit Tokyo reciprocally. Therefore, it can be assumed Abe builds on its Chinese strategy on dual pillars, i.e. engaging with China while balancing its power, although it seems to be contradictory at a glance.

2.3 US Expectations of Japan
The US welcomes Abe’s approach, including some of the changes he has made. Japan answers to the US expectations that it is now ready to play more active roles in promoting peace and stability in the Asia and Pacific region. US statements seem to reflect this perception that the US has raised its expectation of Japan as a reliable security partner. In this regard, Ambassador Kennedy made the following statement of support of Abe’s promotion of collective self-defense in an interview in the Japanese press:

“Whether Japan should reinterpret its Constitution is an issue for the Japanese people and their elected representatives to decide, after genuine and informed debate. However, the U.S. understands why some in Japan would like to revise some of the restrictions. Japan will be a more effective alliance partner if its Self-Defense Forces are able to help defend American soldiers or sailors if they are attacked while, for example, participating in a peacekeeping operation, or if they are targeted by a hostile missile strike” (Kennedy 2014).

Thus, the US thinks that changing the decades-old interpretation of the constitution to allow to exercise its right of collective self-defense can help Japan to play more constructive roles with the US regionally and globally. As for the scope of the Japan-US alliance, Obama expects Japan to widen it to become a global partner to cooperate on a wide range of issues. He placed importance on Japan as US’s global partner and his 2015 remark shortly after the legislation of security bills reflected this eagerness: “I want to congratulate Prime Minister Abe on his recent legislation related to bolstering Japanese capabilities and it will give us a chance to talk about a wide range of threats, both regionally and internationally” (Obama 2015a).
The US’s support of Japan’s security strategy remains unchanged even after Trump took power. He followed Abe in using the term the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) instead of Asia-Pacific during his speech at the US Air Force Yokota Air Base in Japan: “We will seek new opportunities for cooperation and commerce, and we will partner with friends and allies to pursue a free and open Indo-Pacific Region” (Trump 2017). In this line of thought, the name of the US Pacific Command changed to the US Indo-Pacific Command in May 2018 (Asahi Shimbun 2018). The content analysis reveals that Japan gains support from the US as a whole because the US has always asked Japan for expanding its involvement in international stability and peace and Abe generally responds well to the demand as he began to expand its security contribution. As statements expressing dissatisfaction with Japan’s security contribution are not to be found, it can be said that Abe has succeeded in preventing US accusations that it is not sharing the military burden by making efforts to improve its defense capabilities and buying US military equipment.

2.4 Chinese Expectations of Japan

China shows a strong reservation in respect to Japan’s role of a reliable security partner. Abe’s argument that Japan will remain a peace-loving country despite the changes in security policy is received with skepticism. As the China Daily (2013), a government-run newspaper, stated “[t]he catchy but vague expression of ‘proactive pacifism’ is Abe’s camouflage to woo international understanding of Japan’s move to become a military power”. In a 2014 interview with Lesotho Times, Chinese Ambassador to Lesotho Hu (2014) stated: “[o]n the one hand, Abe preaches peace and democracy but on the other hand lobbies for militarism by pushing to change its pacifist constitution and textbooks to increase the military budget and war capability in Japan”, pointing out Abe’s double standard.

China does not want Japan to have a strong military capability and to emphasize universal values such as the rule of law that may be used as a pretext to intervene in China’s politics and engage in the territorial dispute in the SCS. From China’s point of view, Japan’s self-restraint in the use of force is necessary and that is why China voices resentment against Japan’s proactive pacifism and wants to proscribe it. Chinese Premier Li Keqiang stated that Japan “should exercise caution in its own words and deeds and stop hyping up and interfering” because Japan is not a state concerned in the SCS’s territorial issue (Li 2016).

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1 For example, the 2000, 2007 and 2012 Nye-Armitage Reports (Kawasaki & Nahory 2014).
Nevertheless, China does not want to quarrel with Japan. Xi emphasizes his political will to mend political ties with Japan partially. He sends signals indicating that China wants to avoid regional conflict and expects Japan and China to become “partners that do not impose a threat to each other” (Xi 2015a). Chinese willingness to improve relations led Prime Minister Li in a meeting with Abe in October 2018 to argue that ‘now that relations between the two countries have returned to a normal track, we would like to achieve win-win outcomes by stably developing our ties in the long term’ (Li 2018). Abe and Li agreed that military authorities held a meeting within the year regarding “sea-air liaison mechanism” to avoid contingencies between the SDF and Chinese army in addition to an agreement on a cooperative search and rescue in the ECS (Nihon Keizai Shimbun 2018).

However, it should be noted that China is not satisfied with Abe’s role performance. Fundamentally, Abe’s security policy, which aims to involve non-Asian countries for Asian security stands in direct opposition to Xi’s regional security view: “It is for the people of Asia to run the affairs of Asia, solve the problems of Asia and uphold the security of Asia” (Xi 2014).

Abe and Xi did not conduct bilateral summits in Tokyo and Beijing, i.e. each country’s capitals, in the same year until the end of 2018. Until the end of that year, they had only used several occasions to meet briefly during multilateral forums and conferences (Lam 2017) except for Abe’s visit to Beijing in October 2018.

Abe’s FOIP is a developed version of containment of China from China’s perspective. China understands Japan and the US changed the international environment first and it just takes countermeasures, for example, by creating the Belt and Road Initiative to US rebalancing policy (Castro 2018). Chinese Ambassador to Japan Cheng criticized Japan and the US for increasingly strengthening the security alliance: “It sounds as if Japan and the United States are purposely taking China as their enemy and saying ‘Let’s join hands and go at China’” (Cheng 2017a). Thus, the gap between the two countries is still evident today. While showing that it privileges dialogues and communication as instruments for building up trust and reducing misunderstanding, China does not view Japan as a security partner at all.
3. Japan Is a Pacifist Country Based on Non-Militarism

3.1 Abe’s Attempt to Replace Traditional pacifism with Proactive Pacifism

During his term of office, Abe promised that Japan would not be a “military power” (Abe 2013a) or a “country that would go into war” (Abe 2014a). To avoid stirring fear among neighboring countries, he views the pledge to the invaded countries as an important role. However, Abe wants to change the concept of pacifism. He criticized the current pacifism as “one-state pacifism” (Abe 2014b) for its insular attitude which is only interested in Japan’s peace. In the same statement, he claims:

“Now is the time for Japan to hoist the banner of ‘Proactive Contribution to Peace’ and play an even greater role in fostering world peace and stability. I firmly believe that therein lies a path that is more suited to the principle of a peace-loving nation set forth in the Constitution of Japan” (Abe 2014b).

This speech reveals that Abe is not satisfied with the conventional concept of pacifism and wants to change its content in order to be more proactive. Japan seeks to create an image of being influential in the international society which is not overly constrained by the past under the Abe administration. For Abe, a deterrent is more and more important than self-regulation in using military force. Self-regulation was born after the war to ease concerns of those Asian countries that suffered from Japan’s past colonization and invasion. Abe thinks that increasing deterrent effect is necessary for Japan’s survival.

In a different speech, Abe claimed: “I perceive that precisely by having the ability to respond to every possible situation and developing a legal system which enables such responses, deterrence will be enhanced, and thus conflict will be prevented and Japan’s embroilment in war will be eliminated” (Abe 2014a). Abe’s conception of pacifism thus attempts to replace the one-sided view promoted by traditional pacifism according to which Japan is always presented as an invader violating international law and jeopardizing peace and stability. Rather, his concept of proactive pacifism contains the meaning that Japan may be a victim and it has to prepare for threats to avoid tragedy. This tendency can be found in the efforts he has taken on in the building of new security policies.
3.2 US Expectations of Japan

While the US does not show any opposition to Abe’s desire to change Japan’s pacifism, it proscribes him from raising historical issues that challenge the postwar accepted view on war responsibilities. The US wants Japan to be a role model of a successful democratic country. Obama pointed to it in this statement:

“There are times where when we speak out on these issues we are told that democracy is just a Western value. I fundamentally disagree with that. (Applause.) Japan, Taiwan, South Korea, they have built thriving democracies” (Obama 2014a).

Thus, the US considers Japan to have been a peaceful country firmly rooted in democratic value during the postwar era and thus today’s Japan must be different from prewar Japan. Therefore, the visit of Japanese leaders to the Yasukuni Shrine raises a question concerning Japan’s recognition of its militaristic, aggressive and colonial history. When Abe compared official visits to the Yasukuni Shrine with those of US leaders to Arlington National Cemetery to justify his visit as a moral responsibility to the spirits of the dead, the US expressed its disagreement with the idea. In October 2013, the US Secretary of State Kerry and Defense Secretary Hagel visited Chidorigafuchi National Cemetery in Tokyo, where unidentified Japanese soldiers’ remains are enshrined (The Japan Times 2013). This gesture was an apparent attempt to make Japan understand that the US did not accept Abe’s idea about the Yasukuni Shrine. They wanted to express the viewpoint that the right comparison with Arlington National Cemetery is with Chidorigafuchi and not with the Yasukuni Shrine.

In addition, troubles in East Asia go against US national interests. When Abe visited the Yasukuni Shrine in 2013, the US Embassy made the following statement:

“The United States is disappointed that Japan’s leadership has taken an action that will exacerbate tensions with Japan’s neighbors. […] The United States hopes that both Japan and its neighbors will find constructive ways to deal with sensitive issues from the past, to improve their relations, and to promote cooperation in advancing our shared goals of regional peace and stability” (A US Embassy in Tokyo 2013).
This indicates that the US expects Japan to foster stability and to avoid making troubles in East Asia. In a 2014 speech in South Korea, Obama said: “[w]hat we’re going to have to do is to continue with a consistent, steady approach. And the single most important thing is making sure that there’s strong unity of effort between ourselves, the Republic of Korea, Japan, and other like-minded countries in the region” (Obama 2014b) to deal with North Korea which continued nuclear development. For the US, displaying unity and shared determination provide the means to overcome the threat. Considering the Senkaku territorial dispute, the US expects Japan and other parties to solve the issue through peaceful, diplomatic means. As Obama demanded in the same speech: “We will continue to encourage all the parties concerned -- whether it’s Japan, China, the Republic of Korea, or with respect to disputes in the South China Sea -- to use the law and diplomacy to resolve these disputes” (Obama 2014b). Those statements show that US opposition to coercive behaviors is not only directed toward China but also toward its ally, Japan, because East Asian stability equals US national interests.

Regarding Japan’s pacifism, the US considers Japan to observe pacifist principles well. This appreciation appears in Obama’s statement during a joint press conference with Abe in the US: “We have seen over multiple decades now that Japan is a peace-loving country having absorbed some very difficult lessons from the past. Japan does not engage in aggression on the international stage, or in its region” (Obama 2015b). Therefore, the US wants to convey the message that it does not think Japan has the ambition to be a militaristic country again. As stated by Obama in the same conference: “Japan does not engage in aggression on the international stage, or in its region. And that the alliance that has been built with the United States is principally one that seeks to defend our countries from potential attack or aggression. So, new defense guidelines and the collective self-defense are simply for that purpose” (Obama 2015b).

The US’s speeches reveal that antagonism no longer exists and Obama expects Japan to remain a model of democracy and a reliable partner as ever. The Trump administration is also satisfied with Japan’s pacifist and non-military role. Trump is pleased with Abe’s decision to buy US weapons such as Ground-based Midcourse Defense System Aegis Ashore, F35A stealth fighter and Vertical Take-Off and Landing Osprey, etc (Wall Street Journal 2018). However, Trump does not say Japan should use them. The Trump administration does not push Japan to remilitarize and does not desire Japan to get involved more deeply in the SCS or North Korean issues, let alone to develop its nuclear armament. Similarly to Obama,
Trump does not regard Japan as a threat either, emphasizing the reconciliation as he says “today, nations that once waged war now stand together as friends and partners in pursuit of a much better world” (Trump 2017). The US perceives Japan as qualified to pursue proactive foreign policy without hesitation but it continues to expect reconciliation with neighboring countries and it remains intransigent in its opposition to historical revisionism.

3.3 Chinese Expectations of Japan

From China’s statements, it is clear China does not want to see proactive pacifism play roles in the region. It arouses anxiety from neighboring countries and so China wants Japan to keep a low-profile. Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hong expressed in 2014 a distrust of Japan when asked about reinterpretation of Article 9 to exercise collective self-defense: “We urge the Japanese side to face up to and earnestly reflect upon its history, respond to the concerns of its Asian neighbors and the international community, follow the path of peaceful development and play a constructive role for regional peace and stability” (Hong 2014). The statement proves confrontational viewpoints still linger between Japan and China due to historical reasons.

After Abe visited the Yasukuni Shrine in December 2013, a symbol of Japanese past militarism from China’s viewpoint, China’s Ambassador to the UK Liu declared: “We do hope that they will change their course, show remorse and make apology not only to Chinese people, but also to Asian people, to all the peoples they have caused casualties and damages, and to start a new life, a new Japan” (Liu 2014). From China’s viewpoint, a visit to the Yasukuni Shrine equals paying homage to the war criminals and China wonders whether Japan is trustworthy when it claims to keep committed to peace.

In an Asian-African summit in Jakarta in April 2015, Abe met with Xi. Xi stressed that the history issue is fundamental in the political relations between China and Japan (Xi 2015a), expecting Japan to consider Japan’s neighbors and send out positive signals on the issue. The statements indicate that China wants Japan to renounce permanently military might as an instrument of politics. China was consistently dissatisfied with Abe’s approaches to security and historical issues. It reacted without positive appreciation to Abe’s statement on history in August 2015 that “the Chinese side has taken note of the statement made by the Japanese leader” (Hua 2015). It also criticized Japan’s effort to improve Izumo to convert it
into a “de facto aircraft carrier” as Japan was abandoning its exclusive defense posture (Kyodo 2018).

However, this does not mean that other things in the bilateral relationship are put aside. Japan and China cannot ignore the increased importance of the bilateral economic relations in which they need each other. With regard to economic policy, China expects Japan to work together to make more contribution to economic prosperity in the region. In May 2015, Nikai, Chairman of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP)’s General Council, visited China with about 3000 members of financial, economic and cultural circles. He met with Xi, who delivered a speech at the meeting, in which he declared: “The China-Japan friendship is rooted in the people, and the future of the bilateral relationship is in the hand of the people of the two countries” (Xi 2015b). Xi’s thinking is featured by his favor of stable economic development and therefore he is interested in ensuring peace and friendship.

As seen above, China expects Japan to maintain a mutually beneficial relationship. For example, in an interview with Japanese newspaper Asahi Shimbun, Ambassador Cheng remarked:

“We hope that Japan can move in the same direction with China by taking practical actions and finding appropriate methods to settle the issues through dialogue, and push the bilateral relations back on the sound track of development as soon as possible. Under the current situation, China and Japan should further strengthen mutually beneficial cooperation. China welcomes Japanese enterprises to continue to invest in China. Japan has quite a lot of experiences and technologies in fields such as energy conservation and environmental protection, green economy, health care and sanitation, and elderly care, so there is great potential in exchanges and cooperation between the two countries” (Cheng 2013).

On a different occasion, he also insisted on keeping close human interaction to increase mutual understanding. For example, he reminded that 6.37 million Chinese people visited Japan in 2016, showing the constant and fast increase of Chinese tourism in Japan again (Cheng 2017b). Improvement of the bilateral relations is all the more important when Trump favors economic protectionism and targets China along alongside Japan. The emergence of Trump encouraged China to strengthen ties with other countries (Kyodo News 2018).
As for the Senkakus, Abe maintains the status quo of the Senkaku Islands not to stimulate China by stationing official workers he promised in the manifesto for the 2012 general election (The Japan Times 2012) because China perceives them as stolen by imperialist Japan at the end of the 19th century and this fact can transform into a historical issue easily (Berger 2014: 10).

Thus, Chinese policy-makers conceive of the economic dimension of the Japanese concept of a non-military country as an important foreign policy that contributes to Japan-China relations, ensuring peace and stability. This is not to say that Chinese political leaders are oblivious of history issues and accept Japan’s historical viewpoint as it is. Indeed, they stress it time and again. Overall, China wants Japan to manage historical issues and reduce stumbling blocks.

**Conclusion**

Role expectations are diverse: sometimes compatible with the Abe administration’s NRCs, sometimes not. The US and Chinese statements indicated that the two countries’ decision-makers have different expectations regarding Japan’s behavior in security and pacifism-related role conceptions. A most noticeable difference was found regarding the question how Japan should ensure stability in the region and the world. Japanese statements emphasized deterrent and the deepening of the cooperation with the US are the key to Japan’s and regional peace. In this regard, Japan perceived itself as pressured by the US to cross the line of the geography and the size to take more responsibility for the international order. Japan has two options: 1) expanding security role to the extent that role conflict does not happen with China, and 2) dismissing China’s expectations to keep the exclusively defense-oriented foreign policy. Whether and how much Japan will live up to US and Chinese expectations is determined by the weight of their importance. For the time being, Abe obviously supports the US by emphasizing that Japan will act together with the US and other like-minded countries and disappointing China’s expectations in terms of reinterpretation of Article 9, collective self-defense and the visit to the Yasukuni Shrine. Furthermore, Abe emphasizes the importance of universal values in his foreign policy. Thus, it is unlikely Abe will listen to China, which emphasizes renunciation of military instruments in its foreign policy, at the expense of its relations with the US and other like-minded countries. As a consequence, Abe’s NRCs indicate there is a security dilemma between Japan and China and Abe perceives it can be overcome with security cooperation with the US. The analysis
suggests Abe’s security policy reflects a realist mindset regarding the relations with China. Only if Japan became more cautious by not emphasizing values and exercising self-restraint in security roles, would Japan be able to avoid role conflict with China.

My analysis does not reveal any serious role conflicts for the time being. Japan’s proactive pacifism is welcomed by the US. Although China does not welcome the concept at all, it wants to avoid exacerbating the relations. Both Japan and China seem to seek mutually a beneficial relationship and dialogue, helping foster stability in the region.

Noticeable evolution is not found in “reliable security partner” and “non-military pacifist state” NRCs. Although Abe has relaxed the legal constraints that limited Japan’s ability to contribute proactively to regional stability as a necessary step for roles he wants to play, he does not abandon traditional pacifism completely. Instead, Abe attempts to introduce gradual change. The historical aspect of the Japanese conception coincides with expectations and proscriptions focused on historical revisionism. Abe refrained from historical revisionism in considering possible role conflict.

There is historical role conflict between Abe’s NRC of inherent conservatism manifested in insisting that Japan’s political leaders have to visit the Yasukuni Shrine, against US and China’s expectations that he would not do so, but he has managed the issue well. He has not visited the Yasukuni Shrine since December 2013. Likewise, he does not stir up a territorial dispute over the Senkaku Islands.

However, this article cannot make an ultimate judgement on the results of Abe’s diplomacy. It focuses only on the statements of Abe and of American and Chinese leaders, excluding those of leaders in other countries, such as Australia and India, and putting aside domestic politics where the LDP’s coalition partner New Komei Party (NKP) must play important roles. So, it is necessary to examine to what extent there is consistency between Abe’s roles and those countries (Yes) and the NKP’s expectations not discussed in this article.

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