War as Peace: Japan’s Proactive Pacifism

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Japan’s spatiotemporal relation to the thought figure of a Pacific Century is at least threefold: geographical, ideological and hauntological. Geographically, peace in the Pacific evolves out of the war of which Japan came out as the predominant loser. Ideologically, Japan is constitutionally bound by pacific ideals. Hauntologically, Japan played the additional role of victimiser and this haunts its historical legacy by challenging its pacifistically proclaimed ideals. This paper inquires into Japan’s current Prime Minister Shinzo Abe’s notion of Proactive Pacifism, a rhetoric aimed at legitimising military intervention on the basis of Japan’s pacifism. It does so by scrutinising the spatiotemporal assumptions that lay the groundwork for Abe’s claims from the vantage point of Kantian and Derridian political thought and suggests that the peace that Abe promotes necessarily must be based on colonial logic and that it, as such, may not only impede peace, but additionally work counter-productively for conciliation regionally. By way of illustrating an alternative, it discusses three museum narratives that each present a different version of peace.

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Japan at a crossroads: ‘Proactive Pacifism’ between ‘the East’, ‘the West’, war and peace

Geographically, Japan is surrounded by neighbours who all seem to identify with ‘the East’. In ideational terms, Japan has been suggested to belong as much in ‘the West’ (Borton 1976). Ideologically, its leadership is constitutionally bound to pacifism (Oros 2014). At the same time, Japan remains haunted by legacies of the (Asia-)Pacific War. This position between ‘the East’ and ‘the West’ on the one hand and pacifism and military intervention on the other, I suggest, is particularly illuminated through Japan’s current Prime Minister Abe Shinzo’s notion of ‘Proactive Pacifism’.

Abe’s Proactive Pacifism

Military intervention is commonly understood to be a principled last resort when mass atrocities are being committed and other options have proved futile. As long as implementations are carried out within the mandate of the UN system, focus tends to be on those in need of being secured rather than on those responsible for actual implementation. ‘Proactive Pacifism’ turns the tables of this common-sense usage by instead focusing on Japan’s possible role as a member of the international community that implements military intervention. In addition, this is being legitimised on the basis of pacifism.

Methodology

Security strategy is commonly explored from the viewpoint of agency as a question of a particular change that it is intended to invoke. This change may be understood in relation to status, regional dynamics or any other desired impact. As such, security policy is evaluated according to its successes or failures within a particular domain. This paper turns the tables on this assumption by suggesting a mode of inquiry that abandons such a tracking of changes and shifts to instead trace continuities. Methodologically, such an endeavour holds the benefit that spares having to evaluate whether or not a particular change has indeed taken place as well as the criteria that were used to track such changes. To instead tracing continuities, I suggest, carries the additional benefit of leaving room for the actual changes that are taking place in a particular context. I further suggest that Japanese security strategy proves particularly suited for this mode of inquiry, since it, more than anything, works to maintain the regional status quo.

Security strategy

The argument forwarded in this paper builds on the assumption that a security strategy cannot be understood apart from its contextual specifics, that is, from its inside/outside dynamics of discourse (cf. Walker 1993). As such, a security strategy must be viewed in light of its constraints. This moves shift foci from the general tracking of changes to instead tracing the continuities that were outlined above. The main continuity in Japan’s case is, of course, its constitutional pacifism. I suggest that this is interesting per se, but will for the purposes of this paper focus not on pacifism as a constitutional restraint, but on the relationship that the currently most central legislator, Prime Minister Abe Shinzo, is taking towards it in his politics
of Proactive Pacifism. The continuities in Abe’s policy may be understood not in the form of the alleged pacifism that it expresses, but as an expression of his way of manoeuvring the constraints that it imposes on his politics.

**Historical legacies that condition Japan’s post-war**

Japan’s pacification on the part of the US-led Allied Occupation forces at the end of the (Asia-) Pacific war, that was legitimised on the basis of the Peace Narrative (Kersten 2004) and constitutionalised in the so-called Peace Constitution unequivocally puts restraint on any attempt to make security legislation in Japan still today (Oros 2014). As such, legislators ought to relate to said Peace Paradigm no matter what their political inclinations are.

What is interesting in this is not pacification per se, but the uses of abuses of it in actual policy. That is to say, what is interesting is to ask what kinds of dynamics that it generates if pacification is taken as the point of departure. By this, alternatives might be opened up for exploration and different solutions drawn. To enable this, the paper suggests that Japan’s pacifism is unpacked through the separation of pacifism from peace. By this, Japan’s de facto post-war peace acquires empirical status and pacifism is singled out from an ideological vantage point. As ideology, pacifism constitutionally has to be abided by; however, with room for creative manoeuvring. A second move separates pacifism from pacification, that is, the legacy of neutralisation that separated the pre-war and wartime from the post-war.

By understanding strategy to be inseparable from the continuities/pacifism/pacification that determine its conditions of possibility, it is shown how continuity and change exist side by side. Paradoxically, such a focus turns the tables on continuity and change by enabling assessments of change from the viewpoint of continuity and, vice versa, through hampering assessments of change by intentionally making it the targeted object of analysis. As such, changes in security strategies, I suggest, are properly accounted for only against the constraints that work to balance them. That is to say, a focus on strategy only demonstrates how status quo is upheld while a focus on continuities instead enables the analyst to account for actual changes. This move is imbued with important consequences for International Relations Theorising (IRT), because it questions the very foundations of the mainstream tenets of the discipline, that is, the clear-cut demarcation between realism and liberalism.

**Security policy**

The very definition of a policy is an intended change (Bacchi 2009). Security policy, along these lines can, accordingly, be understood as a measure of change or enhanced security. Policy is in this paper understood as an excuse to maintain status quo. Change, it suggests, takes place in different realms, by actors other than legislators. By way of an example, I point to the NGO sector in order to find the movements for change.
Life at the VAM

The Women’s Active Museum on War and Peace in Tokyo was established in an effort to preserve documents that were gathered in preparation for a mock tribunal to honour the women and children victims of the ‘comfort women system’ (Watanabe). The is one of the venues there change towards higher levels of security is Japan has taken place in recent time. What makes the WAM particular is their focus on the life of each person (woman, child or former soldier) that bears witness. All in the effort of overcoming the allegedly tragic necessities of power-political rivalries that have been stipulated in mainstream readings of the realist canon for a very long time already.

Conclusions

To rethinking Japanese security policy means to put it into its proper context as a part of a discourse that simultaneously builds on both continuities and changes. Continuities are here understood as the historical legacies that condition Japan’s post-war and changes as changes in policy that have materialised recently. The paper pointed to one such example in the form of Japan’s most recent apology for the ‘comfort women system’ that it suggested was brought about through NGO resistance against high politics. I thus made two moves: 1) to point to the importance to thinking about continuity and change at once and 2) to look outside conventional locations in order to find agents capable of producing change.

References

Bacchi, Carol, 2009. Analysing policy: What’s the problem represented to be?


