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Global IR and Japan: What the Absence of the Debate Implies

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To start the recent G-7 summit in Hiroshima on 18 May 2023, the Japanese PM Fumio Kishida invited his counterparts to the Peace Memorial Park. The image of leaders of countries, who fought on opposing sides during the Second World War, laying wreaths at the cenotaph for the atomic bomb victims was impressive, but at the same time bewildering as its connotations are, potentially, a double-edged sword. Having the Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky making a surprise visit, Kishida seemingly tried to claim that, with regard to the growing global divide, their side is on the right side of history, which means countries that support Ukraine, and not Russia and potentially even China. In an article published online with *Foreign Affairs*, Kishida (2023) insists that the past of his hometown, Hiroshima, is 'a reminder of what can happen when peace and order break down and give way to instability and conflict'. He emphasises that Japan, together with the other G-7 countries, is a guardian of the 'free and open international order based on the rule of law' which is evidently represented in the idea of the Indo-Pacific, a regionalism initiated by Japan. However, one cannot help but wonder if the story is that simple.

In the last century, Japan broke the rule of international law by invading China, wielding a similar logic of self-defence with today's Russia. The atomic bomb was dropped by the United States in 1945. Most of the 140,000 victims were civilians, including twelve American prisoners of war (The City of Hiroshima 2019; Mori 2016). In his book *Just and Unjust War*, Michael Walzer argued that the bombing as a means of conducting war was immoral and unjustifiable with the fact that Japan's war was an invasion with no declaration of war. In Hiroshima in 2023, some countries like India, that has presented different opinions regarding the war in Ukraine, also appeared. Then, what can be the 'new meaning of Hiroshima' (Kishida 2023)?

The G-7 summit in Hiroshima has another implication for students of IR, which is the topic of this article: why the debate of Global IR is still largely absent in Japan. By bringing back the past, Kishida seemingly wanted to convey another message: a re-confirmation of Japan's national identity as part of the West. The identity simultaneously indicates that Japan is the leader of Asia in the modern Western world order. Since the beginning of this century, Japan has been in decline vis-à-vis China's rise. The recent hasty depreciation of Yen in contrast to the US dollar, in addition to the relatively slow economic recovery from the Covid-19 pandemic, was a final blow in this regard. As Thuy T. Do (2020) has argued, the majority of Japanese IR scholars customarily rely on mainstream International Relations Theory (IRT) and engage with area studies or diplomatic history. This is in contrast to Chinese IR, which has been even assertively engaging theoretical discussions by drawing on its own intellectual tradition, particularly Confucianism. In other words, Do argues, Japanese IR is analogous to Japan's foreign policy as a follower of the West. However, given its history, she claims, Japanese IR has a potential to create a space of dialogue in which how IR can be globalised is productively discussed (also Röscher and Watanabe 2018).

Keeping her suggestion in mind, this article, from an intellectual historical perspective, discusses how Japanese IR has underwritten the Euro-/American-centric IR, and why this tendency is persistent to date. My interest is not presenting a distinctive national school. As I have claimed with Felix Röscher, I do not believe there is such a thing as uniquely Japanese IR (Watanabe and Röscher 2018). Rather, I want to consider in what sense IR can be pluralised and therefore, globalised. This article engages the question of a Japanese contribution to Eurocentric IR, drawing on two debates. First, in line with recent contributions on globalising IRT that focus on what is neglected, silenced,

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and/or not heard (Bilgin 2016; Çapan and Zarakol 2018), the article explains how and why post-war Japanese IR has largely overlooked its own voices.

To understand the self-negligence, this article re-visits the Japanese intellectual historian Masao Maruyama's concept of *basso ostinato*, which Rösch and I introduced to Anglophone IR in 2017. The second debate is on a forgotten origin of IR as an imperial discipline (Davis, Thakur, and Vale 2020; Thakur and Smith 2021). Japanese IR, by forgetting its own origin of wartime Greater East Asia geopolitics (Watanabe 2018; 2019), has contributed to reduce the racial constitution of IR. Hence, this article claims, as Japanese IR has elided its past in the two ways—oversight and forgetting, the debate of globalising IR is essentially absent in Japan.

Basso Ostinato: Oversight of Local Knowledge, But in What Sense?

Basso ostinato is a concept developed by Maruyama during the 1960s. By relying on this musicological term, he aimed to unearth “something” that subtly mutates foreign socio-political knowledge in Japan to fit into its local context. According to him, this mutation itself is not identifiable most of the times. However, the “something” occasionally surfaces like the bass part of a piece of music, which concretely supports the melody. Rösch and I termed the gap generated through the intellectual exchange between the self as the active recipient and the other as the producer of knowledge ‘unsynthesizable cognitive void’ given its imperceptible character. Although it is incessantly transformable as a community that holds the tradition has new members joining in, Maruyama argued, because of Japan's geography, the bass notes had been relatively stable to that date (Rösch and Watanabe 2017).

Maruyama developed *basso ostinato* as he experienced the Second World War, the subsequent US occupation of Japan, and the transmutation of Japan's post-war democracy during the Cold War. As a Japanese citizen rather than a scholar, he wished for a healthy re-birth of the Japanese nation-state, whose nationalism during the war he called ‘ultra’ because of its highly authoritative character that made people submissive to the state (Maruyama 1969). However, the post-war development disappointed Maruyama as the patriarchal system, whose pinnacle is the emperor, was transposed to smaller social groups such as village, family, corporations, and even organized crime groups. The hierarchical power structure remained intact as it was reproduced in smaller social organisations everywhere in Japan. From his point of view, democracy, and consequently, the nation-state in Japan were after all ‘foreign goods’ as the new development of nationalism was always justified as something pro-establishment, rendering any social movements almost sterile and revolution impossible (Maruyama 1995). However, at the same time, modern Japan's success would not have been possible without these foreign goods. In fact, many essential socio-political terms, for example, territory, society, conference, peace, and discussion were absent in Japan until the late nineteenth century, and Japanese intellectuals translated them by creating new words to establish their nation-state. Superficially, modern Japan was known as a model student of Western knowledge.

However, for Maruyama, the failure of post-war democracy suggested that the Western learning had been far from enough, or at best contained lots of misunderstanding. Rather, the basis of successful learning had to be something local as the Meiji Japanese nation-state was not created out of nothing. It was not a revolution, but to restore the emperor's political power, who had been only a cultural power for centuries. Moreover, it was led in part by the same ruling *samurai* class. He thought the shortcoming was actually ‘multi-productive’ as it paradoxically facilitated the appropriation of knowledge, rendering Japan a different kind of nation-state in comparison to European states. Then, in what sense, and to what extent, can foreign ideas be imported? At least in the case of Japan, which had not been colonized, the process was more of creation than of mimicry. Framing the ‘something’ which rendered Japanese people (mis)understand foreign knowledge as ‘style of thought’, Maruyama invited his Japanese coevals to rethink what was the misunderstanding and what it meant for their present. For him, the rethinking was necessary as he wished the Japanese to become ‘free subjects (*jiyuu naru shutai*)’ by correcting the misunderstanding to be truly modernised (Rösch and Watanabe 2017).

Despite his wish, contemporary Japanese IR scholars and area specialists who work on Japan are not interested in reinvestigating Japan's learning of Western knowledge for several reasons. First, in Japan, research is conducted largely in native language, while at the same time theories elaborated by scholars, whose base is in Europe or in North America, are being employed. Second, the domestic scholarly community is wide enough to remain self-

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sufficient and internationally exclusive. They pursue their own debates according to local interests. Third, translation (mostly from English to Japanese) is recognized as an important academic contribution. Accordingly, delays are likely between domestic theoretical debates and international ones. All this, together with the continuous Cold War political structure in East Asia, hinders Japanese IR scholars revisiting Maruyama's question. The fact that Maruyama identified himself as an intellectual historian contributed to this indifference among the IR community. As Maruyama himself mentioned, in Japan, the disciplinary divide is much deeper than in Europe as scientific knowledge was imported in the late nineteenth century, when sciences were subdivided into contemporary disciplines (Maruyama and Kato 1998).

Last but not least, as we mentioned in 2017, Maruyama did not conclude the concept of *basso ostinato* as it was heavily criticised. The 1960s Asia saw the Vietnam war (beginning 1955) which continued until 1975, deepening ideological divide among intellectuals. Japan fought the Asia-Pacific War not just for natural resources but also in an attempt of taking over the intellectual hegemony in the world of Western domination. In this context, particularly for liberals, emphasising the uniqueness of Japanese thought was unacceptable as it invoked the still-fresh war memory at that time (Rösch and Watanabe 2017).

However, it should be noted that the difference Maruyama wanted to pin down with *basso ostinato* was not the one that is easily comparable and contrastable like differences between national schools, ideologies, or perspectives, but something more subtle and fundamental. Heavily drawing on Karl Mannheim's sociology of knowledge, he was interested in collective styles of thinking that are covertly reflected in knowledge travelled from abroad. He wanted to make the system of conversion visible through which exogenous thought is adapted into local one. For Maruyama, knowledge is constrained by space and time as one never can have a view from nowhere. The difference generated by (mis-)conversion is easily overlooked because not only the conversion is operated under unconscious consciousness but also the conditionality is not clarified. In other words, he did not distinguish exogenous from indigenous. Maruyama did not believe there was such a thing that was uniquely Japanese knowledge because, in Japan, historically, knowledge has always come from external places like China, Korea, India, Europe, and the United States. Hence, it is misleading to envisage the border as the site of conversion. Then, as we elaborated in our 2017 paper, *basso ostinato* as a system of conversion is better conceptualized as a nodal point, a point of assemblage. Refined knowledge like theory and concepts are a product of abstraction and generalisation. However, as Maruyama argued, although the everyday is discarded through the procedure, it does not mean that the everyday means nothing anymore to the generalised knowledge, but it still supports our understanding of it. For the knowledge to be transplanted in a foreign community, the procedure must be *ex post facto*, meaning that foreign knowledge has to make sense in a different everyday of its destination through, say, de-abstraction. In other words, *the basis* of knowledge is replaced. Here is where the misunderstanding takes place (Rösch and Watanabe 2017).

We presented an example of the mutation using the concept of security in the 2017 paper. In my own work, though I did not necessarily refer to *basso ostinato*, I have discussed Japanese conceptions of space and place (Watanabe 2017), the international (Watanabe and Shanguan 2018), territory (2018), and ocean (2019). Despite that, honestly speaking, I do not think I have fully understood what *basso ostinato* is. It is a difficult concept that contains a wide range of issues. To take over Maruyama's aspiration, we should depart from it. We need to analyse the conversion in terms of less 'what', but more 'how', and probably, 'where'. As stated, foreign knowledge is de-abstracted according to local experience, and then, re-abstracted. What is converted is the basis of the idea. The basis is related to our everyday practice, to how we experience and understand reality, and not which reality we are talking about. The question of 'how' is confirmed, for example, in a comparative study in primatology in Japan and Canada by the anthropologist Pamela Asquith. She examined the difference in conducting research on monkeys in these two countries and argued that, whereas Japanese researchers focus on groups and its relations, Canadians are more interested in the behaviour of individuals (Asquith 1996). The question of 'where' is more difficult. It is deeply related to the questions of 'how', as our action is to a certain extent conditioned by, say, terrain and perhaps, climate of where we are. The 'where' does not merely mean geography, but how we understand and construct our space (Agnew 2007). For social sciences, the space of analysis is usually posited as Newtonian and Cartesian absolute space. Relying on David Harvey (2006), the space is fixed and calculable. It is the space of Euclid. By contrast the space where knowledge is translated is a relational space that evolves as events happen (Smith 2003; see also Harvey 2006).

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I do not suggest that looking into *basso ostinato* is the only way to thinking about difference. There must be different kinds of difference to think about to globalise the discipline. Moreover, the insularity of Japanese IR potentially contributes to the debate in a unique way. Still, uncovering subtle difference is, I believe, important to better understand the process of global circulation of knowledge. At least, the oversight in Japanese IR has brought another crucial consequence to the disciplinary knowledge, to which now I turn in the following section.

An Origin of Japanese IR

In their introductory piece for a special issue titled “The Multiple Births of International Relations”, Vineet Thakur and Karen Smith (2021: 573), drawing on an Indian example, argue that only ‘a colonial bureaucrat or pro-government sympathiser could be a “scientific expert”, capable of producing knowledge on international relations; the anti-colonial intellectual was merely a “political” partisan.’ Following them, I argue that post-war Japanese IR re-joined into what Amitav Acharya and Barry Buzan (2019: 4) call ‘Western core’ as the producer of knowledge of IR as it depoliticised itself by forgetting its own origin. The origin was wartime anti-West Japanese geopolitics that is called Greater East Asia geopolitics (Watanabe 2019). Of course, Japan’s case is more complex as it itself was a colonial power. However, frequently forgotten in the context of IR is that Japan fought the Asia-Pacific war as it opposed a Western-led world order. This anti-Western attitude is likely to be understood as wartime propaganda, and this understanding tends to be supported by the fact that Japan was an empire and formed an alliance with Germany and Italy. However, as stated in the introduction, Japan invaded China as it insisted on its special interest in China. For Japan, it was for self-defence. This point cannot be thoroughly argued due to the space constraints; however, for the purpose of the present article, it suffices to say that the insistence of Japan alludes that there should have been some crucial gap between Japanese understanding and, Western understanding of, say, interest, sovereignty, and territory.

Some frustration generated by the potential gap can be identified in wartime Japanese geopolitical debates, which had been forgotten until the 1970s (Takeuchi 1974). Since then but largely in the last decade, human geographers have revisited the topic (Shibata 2016; Takagi 2020). By contrast, in IR, almost no historical investigation has appeared to this date (a notable exception is the work of Nobuo Haruna), despite geopolitics being popular in 1940s Japan (Watanabe 2019). For example, in an edited volume titled *The Study of International Politics in Japan*, Akihiko Tanaka, a well-known IR scholar delineated the history of the discipline in Japan visited a disciplinary origin in the Meiji Period as a ‘forgotten debate’ (Tanaka, Nakanishi, and Iida 2009). However, his narrative of the discipline then leaped to 1945. In 2020, a group of scholars published a book titled *New Geopolitics*, but it does not almost at all refer to the old Japanese geopolitics (Kitaoka and Hosoya 2020).

However, it was rather political scientists than geographers who enthusiastically employed German geopolitics in the last century. Although some geographers showed interest in the 1920s, it did not become popular. It became a fad only in the 1930s when political scientists such as Masamichi Rōyama and Hikomatsu Kamikawa started to employ geopolitics (Watanabe 2019). For geographers who were familiar to Friedrich Ratzel’s theory in the nineteenth century, theory of geopolitics was rather obsolete (Iizuka 1975). In fact, it was in the 1920s, when Karl Haushofer developed his theory of geopolitics after staying in Japan for more than a year. The popularity of geopolitics during the Asia-Pacific war was however remarkable, and it was rather among people than scholars. Even a journal of geopolitics was published (Takagi 2020).

Drawing on Haushofer, Japanese geopoliticians supported the policy of Greater East Asia Co-prosperity Sphere which was conceived of as an anti-Western Asian world order. As I argued in my book in 2019, Japanese scholars employed geopolitics because Haushofer maintained that it is a study of subjectivity to understand the environment, whereas political geography sees it objectively. Going back to the discussion of Maruyama, we can infer that Japanese scholars realised the gap between their everyday and Western everyday, and for that reason, employed geopolitics to establish their subjectivity. However, unfortunately, subjectivity was not free from space-time constraints as Maruyama had hoped, but caught in their own past. In this incoming order, Japanese geopolitics argued, European type of nation-states would disappear to become truly co-prosperous (Watanabe 2019). The Japanese theory of geopolitics was in many senses surprisingly similar, but at the same time, different with the world order suggested by the 21st century Chinese school of IR. Wartime Japanese geopolitics opposed the racial aspect of

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the world order as it was anti-West, if not anti-colonial. However, once the war was over, geopolitics fell into oblivion, together with their understanding of subjectivity. Contemporary Anglophone IR scholars now consider geopolitics as an origin of International Relations (Ashworth 2014), but the same move has not happened yet in Japan. Thus, this forgetting of their origin endowed post-war Japanese IR with a “scientific” view as they abandoned their own subjectivity, in conformity with Japan’s foreign policy as a follower of the West.

Conclusion

Why did the leaders of Japan wish to confirm their identity as part of the West in Hiroshima? This question is deeply related to the puzzle of why in Japan, the debate of globalising IR is unpopular. In fact, the idea of Indo-Pacific, which for contemporary Japan, is a symbolic space of the free and open Western world order, was first brought into Japan by Karl Haushofer (Li 2021). However, interestingly, this fact is rarely mentioned in Japan, but the idea is treated as an invention of the late Prime Minister Shinzo Abe. The geographically-incongruent identity of Japan as part of the West is plausible only when specific pasts are neglected and forgotten. No doubt, modern Japan’s successful Western learning, which made the country ultimately the second biggest economic power, was a vindication of the universality of Western social theory. In this narrative, the intellectual revolt that led Japan to fight the Second World War was a mere detour. The narrative was powerful until quite recently. However, it is high time for us to review this world historical role of Japan, given not only ongoing global conflicts and tensions but also the increasing diversity in world politics.

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