

Japan: The 'Normal' Pacifist

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TOM BARBER, AUG 21 2016

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Throughout Shinzo Abe's second Prime Ministership, debate surrounding Japan's nascent nationalism has intensified. Further reinterpretation of Article Nine, in conjunction with military reforms and budget increases, and a perceived embrace of more realist policies, have led academics and policymakers alike to conclude that Japan is embarking on an almost prophesied return from 'pacifism' to 'normalcy'. This growing chorus has reached crescendo, with many scholars regarding Japanese 'normalisation' as both imminent and inevitable.[1] However, such views have two major flaws; firstly, 'normalcy' is a socially constructed, innately subjective, and consequently indeterminate concept; and secondly, such an argument implies a radical shift in Japanese strategic thinking. Since World War II, Japan's *sui generis* constitution has fascinated International Relations academics, eliciting an extensive plethora of scholarship. But whilst constructivists, liberalists, and realists alike have made compelling arguments *vis-à-vis* Japan's strategic choices, no one paradigm offers a comprehensive explanation. Rather, each theoretical approach provides plausible explanations for different aspects and instances of Japanese behaviour, which are neither necessarily contradictory nor incompatible. This essay thus employs analytic eclecticism[2] in examining Nipponese strategic discourse, particularly its 'abnormal' pacifism, since World War II; concluding that it has been influenced by structural and material, as well as ideational considerations. This is evidently not a configuration unique to Japan, and calls into question vague characterisations of 'abnormality'. Similarly, the

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following suggests that while contemporary developments may challenge perceptions of a pacifistic Tokyo, they represent a congruence with, rather than divergence from, Japan's pragmatic strategic calculus of the past seven decades. Far from altruism, Japan's supposed pacifism has endured because of, not despite, the same material, structural and ideational dynamics that ostensibly subvert it today.

This essay will proceed as follows. Firstly, notions of (ab)normality will be critiqued both with regard to International Relations generally, and Japanese pacifism specifically. Secondly, Japan's persevering 'pacifism', as explained through the three paradigms of realism, liberalism and constructivism, will be analysed. Culminating in thirdly, a heuristic justification of analytic eclecticism, supporting the initial hypothesis that Japan's contemporary strategic calculus is historically congruous rather than divergent.

What exactly is normal? At its most rudimentary, "normality" is a social construction, which requires the 'abnormal' to demarcate the limits of its own domain."^[3] Put simply, normalcy is defined by what it is not. It follows then, that normality is an innately subjective concept coterminous with the process of othering.^[4] In an International Relations context, the term 'normal' typically connotes realist physiognomies:

"[A] 'normal country' has been defined by scholars as one that is constitutionally able and prepared to deploy military force for national and international security ends, in particular, for the purpose of collective self-defence ... [The 'normal state' is an] independent fully armed great power ... that can go to war."^[5]

The translation of economic heft into commensurate military power is thus considered orthodox, 'normal' state behaviour.^[6] It is little wonder then that Article Nine of the Japanese Constitution, for many, epitomises abnormality:^[7]

"Aspiring sincerely to an international peace based on justice and order, the Japanese people forever renounce war as a sovereign right of the nation and the threat or use of force as means of settling international disputes.

In order to accomplish the aim of the preceding paragraph, land, sea, and air forces, as well as other war potential, will never be maintained. The right of belligerency of the state will not be recognized."^[8]

In principle this constitution is unique,^[9] often almost verbatim conflated with an 'abnormal' reality. In practice however, as will be developed below, much of Japan's foreign and defence policy is arguably similar to comparable states, and can be considered relatively 'normal' in the realist sense. Equivalently, in eschewing military adventurism and "[w]ar-fighting for territory, honour or prestige,"^[10] Japan's constitution has proven prescient. As the norms governing the legitimate use of force have tightened, Japan's anti-militarism can arguably be regarded as the new 'normal', with the rest of the world catching up.^[11] In summary, Article Nine's impact on Japanese agency can be simultaneously construed as illegitimately abnormal, relatively malleable (and thus benign), or legitimately exceptional; dependent upon context and perspective.^[12] The point here is not to adjudge specific depictions, but rather to demonstrate that the 'normalcy' trope is a highly subjective, fluid, and hence indeterminate concept.

The second problem with the conventional normalisation narrative, is that it implies a radical shift in Tokyo's strategic calculus. By equating Japanese pacifism with abnormality, and economically commensurate military reform with normalcy, such a representation is inexorably dichotomous. Ergo, by this logic the process of 'normalisation' becomes synonymous with transformation.^[13] If Japan were previously a genuinely altruistic pacifist (abnormal) state, then Prime Minister Abe's recent initiatives, such as the creation of a National Security Council, military modernisation program, and constitutional reform and reinterpretation, could justifiably be considered radical strategic departures.^[14] But as will be expounded subsequent, rather than its principle impetus, pacifism has always been just one component of Tokyo's broader strategic calculus.

At a cursory realist glance, Japan is something of an enigma. According to defensive realist logic, the anarchic nature of the international environment compels states to purchase economically commensurate military security as indemnity against belligerency.^[15] Offensive realism goes a step further, depicting states as inherent revisionists, power maximisers, and regional hegemonic aspirants.^[16] Tokyo's continued dependence upon, and deference to,

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United States' military power as the cornerstone of its national security policy thus seems perplexing.[17] Similarly, in running four successive trade deficits with potential future adversary China,[18] Japan appears to contradict realism's emphasis on relative gains.[19] Despite this however, there are compelling realist explanations for Japanese behaviour.

Indeed, some analyses have interpreted Japanese agency as "totally consistent with the 'realist' theory of international relations." [20] Rather than the narrow military connotations that became institutionalised during the Cold War, realism at its core denotes rational, self-interested state competition.[21] In this sense, Japanese power can be defined technologically, industrially and economically; with "economic state organs ... [wielding] immense influence over the terms by which Japan's security interests are articulated." [22] Prosperity is Japan's principal objective.[23] At the same, and irrespective of Tokyo's "propensity for Orwellian doublespeak," [24] the Self Defense Forces (SDF) are one of the most formidable and technically sophisticated militaries in the world.[25] Despite remaining proportionally low at just one percent of Gross Domestic Product (GDP), [26] Japan had the sixth-highest global, and third-highest Asian defence budget in 2015, at over forty billion US dollars.[27] Japan's upward military trajectory under Abe is the most discernible manifestation of the growing schism between Article Nine and reality, [28] and often evinced within the conventional 'normalisation' discourse. But whilst obviously significant, overemphasis on military spending is nevertheless misleading, as it omits other critical determinants of Japanese agency, such as the US alliance.

At a rudimentary level, Japan's security alliance with the United States is the embodiment of neorealist, balance-of-power logic.[29] Immediately following its Pacific victory, and intent on containing Japanese militarism; the new US-drafted Japanese Constitution included Article Nine as one of three non-negotiable prerequisites.[30] As Cold War realities took shape however, and especially in light of developments on the Korean Peninsula, Japan's geopolitical importance grew conspicuous to US policymakers, culminating in the US-Japan alliance.[31] The dynamic between the Alliance and Article Nine has remained significant and fascinating ever since.

Within the realist paradigm, security-seeking does not always imply aggression, and (mis)perception can be a pivotal conflict determinant.[32] This point is especially pertinent in a Northeast Asian context, wherein the collective memory of Japanese military expansionism lingers.[33] Japanese decision-makers are acutely aware that significant and unjustifiable enhancement of Japanese military capability could destabilise a region already 'ripe for rivalry'. [34] Article Nine and the US-alliance 'tether' can thus be deciphered as costly signalling, intended to dissuade regional states from militarily balancing against Japan.[35] In this sense, "Japan's grand strategy, rather than reflecting an inward-looking pacifist culture, is in fact a rational response to the anarchical environment it face;" [36] and manifests as defensive realist buck-passing.

Balancing is a strategy countries pursue by "building military power, finding allies, and confronting aggressive states." [37] Buck-passing is a derivative of balancing which aims to share its benefits while incurring minimal costs, and is especially appealing to geographically secure states with powerful allies.[38] According to Jennifer Lind, Japan's unique constitution and relationship with the United States have been especially conducive to such a strategy.[39] In its initial Cold War context, the US-Japan alliance was attitudinally as well as militarily asymmetrical. Structural and material factors bestowed Japan confidence in outsourcing its security to the United States, which increasingly viewed Japan as indispensable.[40] Tokyo was free to pursue the Yoshida Doctrine of economic development, to "eschew the military shield in favor (sic) of the mercantile sword," [41] precisely because Washington comprehended East Asia through zero-sum realpolitik.[42] When the United States pressed Japan to contribute more, Tokyo could invoke Article Nine as a plausible rebuff.[43]

"[S]aying no because one can't and saying no because one won't are not the same thing and can have different consequences for alliance relations. In Japan's case, there is a particularly large difference between a refusal based on a U.S.-imposed constitutional provision dripped in tragic history and a refusal resulting from an active choice." [44]

Article Nine's bargaining utility as a "tool of alliance management" [45] thus constitutes a moral hazard; perversely incentivising Tokyo to under-produce security,[46] and exacerbating the alliance dilemma phenomenon wherein "bargaining considerations ... tend to favor (sic) a strategy of weak or ambiguous commitment." [47] From this

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perspective, the defensive realist strategy of buck-passing has ironically perpetuated a culture of antimilitarism.[48]

In this context, Japan's current military reforms can be understood as an alleviation of the alliance dilemma, with structural developments affecting the entrapment-abandonment equation.[49] The rise of China, a nuclearized Korean Peninsula, emergent non-traditional security threat milieu, and the relative decline of US hegemony have challenged Japanese complacency; yielding an alliance configuration more conducive to balancing. Just as in the 1970s, rather than pursuing strategic autonomy, Japan's increased defence expenditure aims to strengthen the Alliance; courting entrapment to hedge against abandonment.[50] If rational, self-interested realism equates with 'normalcy', then Japan has arguably always fitted the bill; notions of pacifism thus prove superficial, and contemporary portrayals of strategic divergence and 'normalisation' appear tenuous.

There are nevertheless aspects of Japanese agency that realism is ill-equipped to explain. For instance, Japan's contribution to the United Nations budget, despite not having a permanent Security Council seat, is second only to the United States.[51] For realists, this is tantamount to taxation without suffrage, and is inexplicable. For liberal institutionalists however, Japan's keen participation and aspirant leadership in both the United Nations and other international multilateral institutions, such as APEC and ASEAN,[52] supports "the neo-liberal argument that international cooperation[, as opposed to realist competition,] is possible even within an anarchic international system." [53] From this perspective, increasing international emphasis on human security, peacekeeping and peacebuilding can be conceptualised as a trend toward a new global 'normal'; one that has been enshrined in the Japanese Constitution from its inception.[54] Another dynamic that liberalism captures is domestic politics, especially its implications with regard to Japan's Article Nine longevity.

Constitutional amendment is a recurrent theme in Japanese politics. In the first revisionist debate of the 1950s, incumbent pragmatist Prime Minister Yoshida and his government were able to institutionalise their "constitutional ideas in government practice." [55] Due to the decentralised and bureaucratically inert nature of the Japanese political system,[56] this established an enduring pattern:

"[The Liberal Democratic Party] is essentially an alliance of centrists and right idealists, united by a common interest in the survival of the present economic system and the alliance with the United States. Whenever it has appeared, however, that a radical departure from the centrist Yoshida line was imminent, or that right idealists might succeed in linking nationalism with military issues, the political center has defected and supported opposition forces in blocking the new defense initiative (sic)." [57]

Consequently, constitutional amendment has remained practically impossible,[58] and Article Nine's longevity can be ascribed to tripartite Diet politics.[59] Failing revision, the Japanese Constitution has proven remarkably malleable; "Japan's informality is highly flexible and is subject to the prevailing political winds of the day to manipulate constitutional meaning[,] to fit a changing environment and to match the circumstances as needed." [60] In this respect, while Abe's policy of 'proactive pacifism' [61] has "explored the confines of existing security policy, probed its limits, [and] pushed them when possible, [such a strategy] ultimately demonstrates far more continuity than change in security, defence and foreign policy." [62] Thus from a liberalist perspective, the Japanese 'normalisation' trope also appears superficial.

Whilst the positivist International Relations theories contemplate material and structural factors in their explication, constructivism takes into account ideational concepts such as norms and identity. In a Japanese context, the psychological impact of losing World War II is seen to have catalysed the antimilitarist and pacifistic norms and identity that influence Tokyo's decision-making today:[63] "[B]ecause the Japanese people consider[ed] their military leaders the main culprits in bringing their nation to near ruin by pursuing an expansionist policy, they began to stigmatize military authority, which they continue to view with deep scepticism." [64] In this sense, Article Nine is "to the Japanese constitution what the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness is to the American constitution: more than mere written words on a piece of document, it has become the very essence of the Japanese regime or polity." [65]

The Japanese Constitution and US-alliance can, for constructivists, be analysed in terms of Japanese ontological

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security. Following World War II an identity of double-victimhood emerged in Japan; firstly, with regard to perceived cynical Western wartime opposition and the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki; and secondly in reference to the aforementioned perceived recklessness of Japanese military elites.[66] In assuming an identity of victimhood, and embracing Article Nine and the US alliance, Japan was able to conveniently redefine itself within the vanguard of a new era of peaceful international economic development.[67] From this perspective, any revision of Article Nine would challenge Japan's pacifist victim identity, and by extension its ontological security, by necessitating a remedial rearticulation of past military expansionism.[68] The post-war environment provided uniquely conducive for Japanese identity redefinition, but any contemporary equivalent incurred through Article Nine revision would be considerably trickier; constitutional reinterpretation therefore prevails. Constructivism nevertheless has its shortcomings; if Japan had truly embraced an identity of pacifism and antimilitarism, why then did it not adopt unarmed neutrality? And why has Tokyo gradually expanded its defence forces since 1950?[69] Similarly, critics contend that constructivism tends to "overemphasized the role norms play while downplaying the structural and material forces that often underlie normative factors." [70] While these critiques are valid, failure to explain everything does not denote failure to explain anything. Hence the case for analytic eclecticism can be made.

The origins of analytic eclecticism can be traced to the parsimonious and sometimes puritanical evolution of the International Relations theoretical discourse. Historically,

"[p]roponents of particular paradigms [have] proceed[ed] on the basis of specific sets of priori assumptions not shared by others. They pose research questions, establish boundaries for investigation, and evaluate research products in a manner that reflects these assumptions. Based on ontological and epistemological principles established by fiat, they posit clusters of theories or narratives that assign primacy to certain kinds of casual factors rather than others. In doing so, over time adherents of paradigms discover novel facts and generate increasingly sophisticated arguments. But this is understood as progress only by the adherents of a given paradigm." [71]

Dogmatic observance to arbitrary theoretical demarcations thus sacrifices explanatory power for analytical purity.[72] The preceding pages demonstrate such shortcomings, advocating Japanese strategy as especially apt a candidate for analytic eclecticism. For realism, Article Nine's self-imposed military restraints are inexplicable, but that does not negate the compelling logic of buck-passing. Similarly, liberalism can rationalise Japan's institutional participation and investment, and the endurance of Article Nine through domestic political dynamics; but it cannot account for apparent Japanese military recidivism. Constructivism provides valuable insights into the role of pacifist norms and antimilitarist identity formation in post-war Japan; but its assumptions are underpinned by structural and material factors. Ultimately, "[e]xtolling, in the abstract, the virtues of a specific analytical perspective to the exclusion of others ... [is counterproductive because] [t]he complex links between power, interest, and norms defy analytical capture by any one paradigm." [73]

This has implications for the 'normalisation' narrative so common in contemporary Japanese discourse. In terms of foreign and security policy, Japan has been characterised 'as the abnormal state' par excellence.[74] The assumptions underpinning this 'abnormality' however, namely disproportionate defence spending and pacifism, hold true only through tenacious and parsimonious theoretical exegeses. In staunchly equating economically commensurate military spending with 'normalcy', and pacifism with 'abnormality', the normalisation trope dichotomously reduces Japanese intricacies. Analytic eclecticism facilitates a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of Tokyo's behaviour. Rather than a divergence from, Japan's contemporary military reforms represent a congruence with the same ideational, normative, material and structural elements that have always influenced Japanese strategic discourse. Japan may be unique but that is not the same as 'abnormal'. Tokyo's pacifism is best understood not as a capitulating monolithic anomaly, but as one enduring component of a multifaceted and eclectic strategic calculus.

Endnotes

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