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IS JAPAN A MIDDLE OR AN ABNORMAL POWER?

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Does contemporary Japan offer a relevant example of what one defines as a middle power? To the contrary, does its “abnormal status” challenge its inclusion into such a category? Although constantly exposed to various definitions and interpretations, the concept of a “middle power” usually embraces three aspects of diplomacy: behavior, status and strategy. However, one may consider that Japan does not fit in these characteristics, or more precisely that it does not equally balance them. At the same time, Japan’s post-World War II interpretation and practices of middle power have been closely associated with its pacifism and internationalism. As Keio University’s professor Yoshihide Soeya points out, “Japan’s diplomatic behavior has essentially reflected ‘middle-power internationalism’, while its status has been uncertain and its strategy confused or non-existent” (Soeya, 2012). This singularity most often describes Japan as an “abnormal” power, a concept it has developed in the 1950s, in parallel with its political recovery and its economical spectacular resurgence. Japan renounced itself to being a “normal” power, which means more specifically that it chooses what characteristics it emphasizes on, and decides in which situations it will not assume any sort of responsibilities.

However, is this status of abnormal power – that one may consider a manifestation of middle power’s posture – still relevant in the 21st Century, seven decades after Japan’s humiliating defeat and occupation? Often presented as an economic giant while diplomatically and militarily limited, Japan is undoubtedly a middle power, not only in conceptual terms, but also when it comes to its relations with great powers, as well as regarding its capabilities. As Tobias Harris states, “Japan is settling into a position as a middle power in Asia, sitting uneasily between the U.S., its security ally, and China, its most important economic partner. In this it finds itself in a situation similar to Australia, India, South Korea and the members of Asean” (Harris, 2008, 45). But what does a middle

power exactly mean for a country like Japan, beyond a simple analytical approach based on its capabilities? The importance of history and historiography, as well as the relation of Japan with its neighbors and the representation within the society all have a significant impact on the formulation of Japan as a middle power (Higuchi and Vardama, 2013; Bouissou, 2014). Such questions appear particularly relevant, as Japan has been reconsidering its status over the past decade, especially on the eve of the perception of security developments in the Korean peninsula and China's economic, military and diplomatic rise.

This analysis focuses on Japan's characteristics as a middle power, and emphasizes on the particular status of "abnormal" power since its military defeat in 1945 as a key to understand Japan's posture and strategy. It therefore questions the pros and cons of being an abnormal power since the 1950s, but also the constant hesitation between isolation and involvement that has been a key to understand Japan's foreign policy at least since the Tokugawa period (17th Century). At a more contemporary and practical level, it explores the limits of Japan's military and diplomacy that have recently showed some manifestations of a more assertive posture, in a constantly changing security regional environment. Last, it develops two aspects of a Japanese attempt for going beyond the status of middle power, by developing soft power characteristics and an active environmental diplomacy.

THE PROS AND CONS OF BEING ABNORMAL

One of the main characteristics of contemporary Japan is the oscillation between the status of economic superpower – it currently stands as the third world GDP, behind the U.S. and China – and political dwarf, which is a consequence of its involvement in World

War II and the 1945 defeat and occupation by U.S. military forces. This abnormality is also Japan's deliberate choice, in parallel with the recovery of its political and territorial sovereignty after the 1952 San Francisco Treaty.

The Yoshida doctrine (a posture adopted post World War II, in the 1950s, under Prime Minister Shigeru Yoshida) and Japan's foreign policy after the end of the Korean War (1950-1953) emphasized mutual relations with the U.S. (Holcombe, 2011, 277-286). According to this doctrine, Japan relies on the U.S. military for security, because of Article 9 of the November 1946 Japanese Constitution, which denies the right to war-making potential. Repeated attempts by the U.S., in following years, to get Japan to increase its military expenditure were rejected by Prime Minister Yoshida on the basis of Japan's pacifist postwar constitution (Courmont, 2013a, 66-68). This doctrine shaped Japan's foreign policy in parallel with its economic development.

In the 1990s, after the end of the Cold War, most analysts argued that Japan would finally cast off the post-war constraints on its security policy that were derived from the "peace constitution" and its alliance with the US. Neo-realist analysts in particular predicted that structural pressure created by the end of the Cold War would possibly force Japan to go nuclear, even considering the strong popular opposition to nuclear weapons in Japan. Many other observers interpreted Japan's wish to become a "normal country" as an aspiration to play a "normal" military role in the game of power politics. The 1991 Gulf War, where Japan did not intervene militarily but supported a significant financial burden of the U.S.-led coalition, appeared to be a proof of a necessary adjustment. Other analysts came to believe that Japanese security policy had gradually reverted to that of a traditional great power, and that it was therefore time for structural changes.

However, since the end of the Cold War, the fundamental motive behind the participation of Japanese Self-Defense Forces (SDF) in UN peace-keeping operations and other international peace activities has been internationalism rather than nationalism, and the SDF's activities are still guided and constrained by the norms and legal framework embedded in the Constitution, and Article 9 in particular. Japan's efforts in the domain of national defense have been upgraded but the constitutional constraints remain unchanged (Soeya, 2012).

Mainstream constructivists who look at norms as the main components of national identity have focused on Japan's anti-militarist or pacifist identity (Katzenstein, 1993; Berger, 1998). While paying attention to the process of the emergence and institutionalization of the anti-militarist norms, their works have implied the existence of certain coherence between the intentions of the various actors that participated in this process and the final institutionalized norm. On the other hand, critical constructivists who construe identity of the national "self" as constructed in opposition to the difference of multiple "others" have focused on broad identity constructs of the Japanese "self" (Tamaki, 2010; Suzuki, 2015; Hagstrom and Hanssen, 2015). With few exceptions (Gustafsson, 2014), they have paid little attention to the role of concrete issues and events in the continuous reproduction of these discourses as well as the processes through which these identity discourses emerge. The question remains, however, whether this pacifist identity is, in the case of Japan, as solid as it seems, and where is the margin between isolation and international involvement in both the political discourse and the practice of contemporary foreign policy.

BETWEEN ISOLATION AND INTERNATIONAL INVOLVEMENT

Beyond its unique trajectory since 1945, Japan has a singular approach to international relations that dates back to its ancient history, the relations it has implemented with its neighbors (China in particular), as well as its insularity. For instance, the opposition between isolation and international involvement, as it appears nowadays as a major debate in Japan strategic circles, may therefore be analyzed throughout its historical development, particularly since the 19th century Meiji restauration, enhancing the characteristics of Japan as a middle power and the way this country has been considering middlepowermanship (Cox, 1989).

If the Tokugawa Shogunate has increased the isolation of Japan from its neighbors for two centuries from 17th-19th centuries, the restoration of the emperor's authority and the post-Second World War democratization process have had the effect of enhancing the involvement of Japan far beyond the archipelago. Within the past 150 years, Tokyo has experienced an imperialist expansionism, foreign occupation for the first time in its history, a “miraculous” economic development, and more recently an increasing implication in various development programs abroad that comes along with massive economic investments led by both public and private actors. In the past three decades in particular, Japan's foreign policy has also been based on a constant adaptation to the evolution of international relations, as well as the need to establish new and durable partnerships (Berger, Mochizuki, & Tsuchiyama, 2007). Japan has also increased its investments in other Asian countries, particularly in Southeast Asian emerging markets (Doherty, 1987), in parallel with its economic development, and in order to respond to its growing needs. It has also massively invested in China, from as early as in the 1960s, although the two countries had not yet implemented official diplomatic nor peaceful relations.

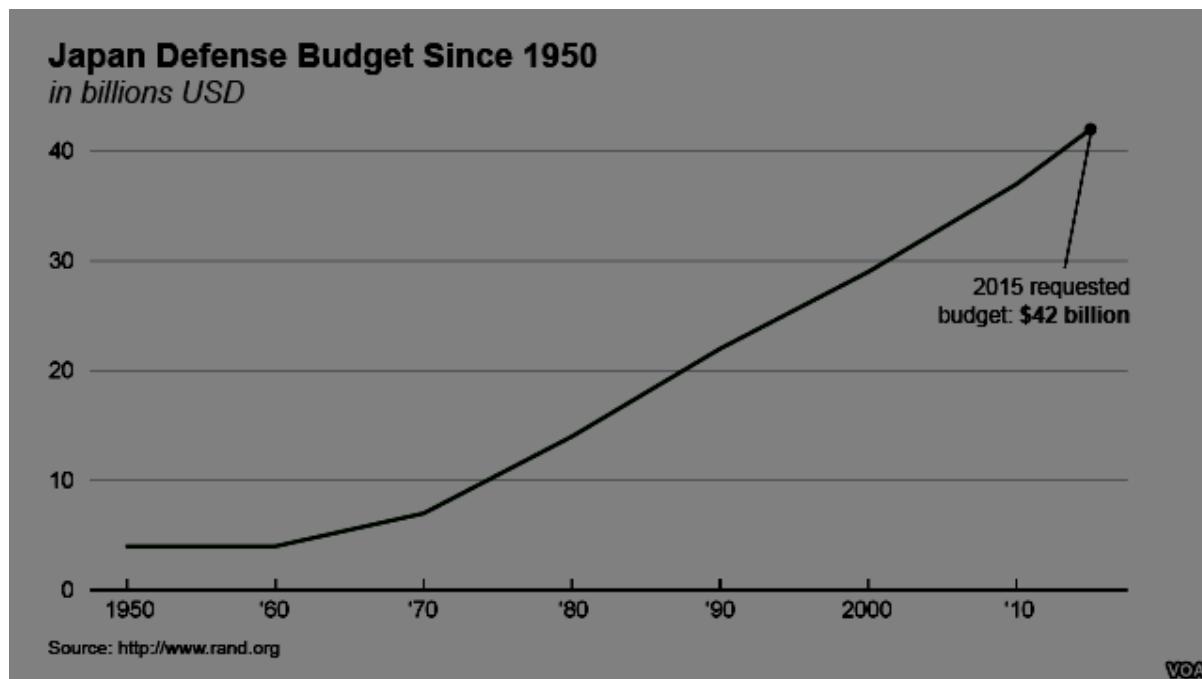
Although it has deliberately chosen to remain at the margin of international affairs in implementing a bandwagoning strategy with the U.S. as military and diplomatic ally, Japan did not isolate itself from the rest of the world. Instead, it became an indispensable ally for the U.S., despite a total lack of implication in strategic affairs (Hornung and Mochizuki, 2016). This diplomatic style allowed Japan to focus on postwar economic recovery, which eventually proved to be the key to the nation's rise as an economic power. But even as Japan achieved economic strength to the point of becoming in the early 1970s the second world economic power, it maintained a restrained posture in dealing with political and security issues, and concentrated instead on cultivating economic and cultural relations with Asia and the world. In that sense, Japan has been promoting its abnormal status in order to develop different levels of cooperation with various actors, and the end of the cold war did not change that paradigm, but instead increased an international involvement with Japanese characteristics (Soeya, 2008). The implications in the 1991 Gulf war is a relevant example. Tokyo participated to the operation without sending any combatting troops, reinforcing, along with Germany, its status of "civilian power" (Maull, 1990). Such an approach has been repeated since, notably during the 2003 Iraq war. Considering the evaluation of the perception of its environmental security in the past two decades, the question remains however whether Japan may change this paradigm and pursue a more active defense policy (Curtis, 2013). But at the moment, Tokyo still navigates between a will to play a more active role in world affairs, and a pacifist posture that restrains a more participative foreign policy, which defines quite constantly Japan's defense policy since the 1945 defeat (Delamotte, 2010).

A GROWING BUT STILL LIMITED MILITARY POWER

In parallel to its impressive GDP growth since the 1960s, the Japanese defense budget has raised rapidly however, to the point that Japan is now one of the major military budgets on the planet in terms of military expenditures. On August 31st, 2015, the defense ministry requested a military budget of 5.1 trillion yen for the 2016 financial year, a rise of 2.2 percent on the 2015 budget. This increase raises Japanese military spending to its highest level in Japan's modern history, although still leaving it in 7th place in terms of military spending world-wide, far behind its regional neighbor China. It also questions Japan's intention, although the official posture emphasizes on a need to boost the defense capabilities, without any particular will to change Japan's pacifist approach to foreign policy.

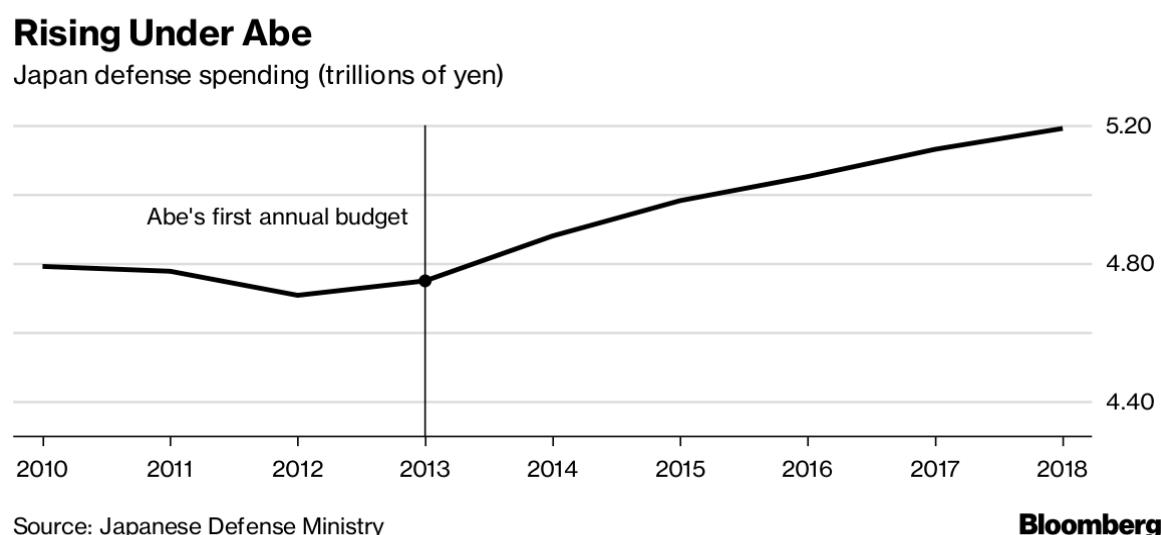
However, the constant, and rapid, growth of the defense budget comes along with new visions of Japan's participation in regional security, both in relation with Japan's main strategic partner, the U.S., and alongside alliances and coalitions in which Tokyo may not be constantly limited to an observer and non-combatant role. For these reasons, Japan is slowly evolving from a "weak" military power to a potentially significant actor in the regional strategic affairs (Kawasaki, 2009). Figure 1 indicates the rather impressive growth that may be interpreted as a shift from a military dwarf to a major power, at least at the regional level, where it is now only surpassed by China.

Figure 1: From Military Dwarf to Major Regional Power



Source: RAND, 2015.

This constant growth has also significantly risen in the past six years, under Abe Shinzo's leadership, and on the eve of national debates regarding the transformation of Japan's security and defense policy. Figure 2 indicates how the defense spending has jumped as early as in the 2013 annual budget, which coincides with Abe's return to power after three years led by Japan's Democratic Party.

Figure 2: Defense Spending under Abe

Source : Japanese Defense Ministry, 2018.

Although it is a mechanical growth rather than a political choice, since it is based on Japan's spectacular economic development in the past six decades, the current defense budget provides Japan new opportunities to evolve from a military dwarf to a regional power, to the point that it may automatically have an impact on its defense policy. Concerns about the security in the region, the perception of China's military rise, as well as the North Korean nuclear threat, are the most common arguments for a "use" of these important military capabilities (Meyer, 2006; Soeya, 2010). The rivalry with China appears to be, with no surprise, the main catalyst for changing threat perceptions in Japan and the possibility to adjust, if not change, Japan's pacifism (Boulanger, 2013). It is particularly noticeable among the conservative movements that have developed a singular perception

of Japan and its relations with its neighbors since 1945 (Courmont, 2015a). This new posture, alongside new capabilities, also has a potential impact on Japan's relations with its main strategic partner, the U.S., as well as other allies in the region, such as the Philippines or Australia (Mochizuki, 2004).

Yet, shall one consider that the evolution of Japan's defense budget is the main argument that explains an evolution of its defense policy (Pfimlin & Rozec, 2015)? Not necessarily. To the contrary, it seems that the growth of Japan's defense budget accompanies a new thinking regarding Japan's ambitions and will to play a more important role in security issues. Therefore, Japan's military capabilities should not be simply seen as an objective, nor a justification of new strategic orientations, but instead as a consequence of Japan's evolution from a passive power to a more active stakeholder (Seizelet and Serra, 2009).

MARITIME DISPUTES AND JAPAN'S NEW ASSERTIVE DIPLOMACY

On top of its evolving military posture, Japan is still involved in several maritime disputes with its neighbours that have the effect of both serving the construction of a national identity and disputing the status of abnormal power.

Northern Territories and Takeshima/Dokdo are two of the main markers of Japan's national identity construction, vis-à-vis Russia and Korea respectively. The territorial dispute between Japan and Russia revolves around the islands of Etorofu (Itrup in Russian), Kunashiri (Kunashir), Shikotan and the Habomai archipelago, which, combined, came to be referred to in Japan as the "Northern Territories". The islands are located in close proximity to and east of Hokkaido. Since September 1945 the Soviet Union (and from 1992 onwards Russia) has exercised de facto control over the islands. The San

Francisco Peace Treaty states that Japan renounces all rights and claims to the Kurile Islands but does not specify the scope of these islands. Thus Japan's official interpretation that emerged few years after the conclusion of the treaty states that these islands are not included in the Kurile Islands. A grassroots movement for the return of the Soviet occupied territories by former residents and residents of Hokkaido with vested interests in those territories had started already in 1945 (Kuroiwa, 2007). The rationale was mostly economic and had little to do with nationalist sentiments. The movement was comprised of various groups that differed in the scope of the territory they demanded to be returned to Japan (Bukh, 2012).

Takeshima (Dokdo in Korean) is a group of tiny islets located in the Sea of Japan (East Sea in Korean) approximately 150 km from Japan's Oki Island and 90 km from Korea's Ulleung Island. In the midst of the Russo-Japanese war and nine months before the conclusion of the Japan-Korea Protectorate Treaty, the islets were officially incorporated into Japan's Shimane Prefecture by a Cabinet Decree issued on the 8th of February, 1905. The islets were administered by Japan until its defeat in the Asia Pacific War. During the occupation period the islets were placed outside of the so-called "MacArthur Line" that limited the activities of Japanese fishermen but was not intended to demarcate Japan's borders. The final version of the San Francisco Peace Treaty does not carry any references to the islets. Thus both the Japanese and the Korean governments justify their rights to the islets by referring to various historical documents and interpretations of the treaty supportive of their respective positions. The Japanese government has continuously argued that the annexation of the islets in 1905 was unrelated to Japan's subsequent colonization of the Korean Peninsula while the Korean side has construed this as the first step in the colonization process.

Among Japan's maritime disputes, the case of the Senkaku/Diaoyu appears to be the most critical, as it engages Tokyo against its main challenger in the region on top of being an emerging superpower: China. The dispute (which also involves the Republic of China – Taiwan) has long been perceived as one most difficult territorial issue plaguing the contemporary regional order and security in East Asia. One factor contributing to its intractableness is the Sino-Japanese complex, which is comprised of both war legacies from the traumatized 20th century history, and the competition mindset of being no.1 power in Asia. In 1874, Japan took the Liu Chiu islands from China by force. The Senkaku/Diaoyu, however, seemed to have remained under the leadership of Taiwan until it was ceded to Japan in 1895 after the first Sino-Japanese War (Courmont, 2014). Originally, during the Japanese occupation of Taiwan (1895-1945), the Senkaku/Diaoyu archipelago came under the jurisdiction of Taipei Prefecture. After the end of the Second World War, when the U.S. troops were stationed on the Ryukyu and the Senkaku/Diaoyu archipelagoes, the Kuomintang (KMT) government which officially ruled China and had recovered its sovereignty over Taiwan did not ask the U.S. to include the islands (Chiu, 1999).

After Japan's 1945 surrender, the islands have been placed under the administration of the U.S. as part of the Nansei Shoto Islands, in accordance with Article III of the San Francisco Peace Treaty. The administrative rights were reverted to Japan in accordance with the Agreement between Japan and the U.S. Concerning the Ryukyu Islands and the Daito Islands signed on June 17, 1971. It was not until the question of the development of petroleum resources on the continental shelf of the East China Sea came to the surface that the governments of China and Taiwan began to raise questions regarding the islands (Sutter, 2013).

SOFT POWER WITH JAPANESE CHARACTERISTICS

Based on Joseph Nye's definition, Japan embodies several characteristics of a soft power (Nye, 1988). The Japanese mass culture receives a very positive and important echo in the world. Martial arts, Japanese literature, fine arts or movies have a positive impact, and contribute highly to a good image of Japan in other countries, particularly in the western world. This pattern has been particularly noticeable in the past two decades, which seems to indicate that Japan's soft power has been successful. It was not always the case however. Traditionally, and most significantly in parallel with its economic development, Japanese have been described negatively, not only by not well informed public opinions, but also by political leaders and intellectuals in the western countries. Sometimes bashed for its living standards and obsession with discipline and work, the Japanese society has been slowly embraced in its variety, and the shift has been particularly perceptible in parallel with a better knowledge of Japan's cultural assets and characteristics in the rest of the world, mostly since the 1980s. In East Asia, Japan's image still suffers from the brutality of the colonial period. Seven decades after the end of World War II, Japan is still facing difficulties in appearing as a benevolent actor in its own regional environment, which can be seen as a major challenge to its soft power.

Japan's soft power therefore remains limited (Peng, 2007), not only because of Japan's legacy, but also as Tokyo is facing a growing and fierce competition with other Asian countries, China in particular (Courmont, 2013b). Other Asian emerging powers, that are just like Japan identified as middle powers, such as Korea or India, have also been moving towards a soft power strategy in order to promote their values and models, and enhance their ability to influence other actors and impact global issues. Japan appears therefore as nothing but one of the Asian soft powers, even considering its strong assets as well as its positive image abroad, with the notable exception of its neighboring countries.

The other question regarding Japan's soft power is whether going soft appears to be sufficient in order to improve Japan's position as a middle power. Current debates, on defense policy but more generally on Japan's involvement in world affairs, indicate the difficulty to find a proper balance between hard and soft power in the case of Japan (Akaha, 2011). As a matter of facts, is Japan a soft power "by nature", considering its restrictive constitution and choice of being abnormal, or does its soft power come with Japanese characteristics, such as its pacifism (Chan, 2007) and its universalism.

JAPAN'S ENVIRONMENTAL POLICY AND ITS IMPLICATIONS AT THE REGIONAL LEVEL

In the 17th century, in parallel with the isolation ordered by the Tokugawa Shogunate, Japan was headed for an inevitable ecological disaster, as Kumazawa Banzan, a scholar of that period, noted than about 80 percent of the country's forests were gone and their exploitation would lead to the complete deforestation of the archipelago (Marten, 2005; McMullen, 1999). This alarming situation led to important reforms introduced under the leadership of the Tokugawa, and the implementation of what appears to be the first national reforestation plan in world history. Japan responded to this environmental challenge with a "positive tip" from unsustainable to sustainable forest use that began around 1670 (Marten, 2005), with the introduction of what Conrad Totman refers to as a system of "regenerative forestry" (Totman, 1989). Japan therefore adapted to a deforestation crisis as early as in the late 1600s by changing from unsustainable forest exploitation to managed and sustainable forestry. Adaptation featured a tipping point that turned the nation from ecological disaster toward ecological health, restoring a natural resource base that put Japan in a strong position for its economic development

that started in the second half of the 19th century. It also had the effect of reinforcing the role of the central government, nearly two centuries before the Meiji restoration, and put an end to local conflicts subsequent to the need to fight for resources.

As a result of this reforestation management, and its legacy until nowadays, about 67 percent of Japan's territory remains covered by forests (including nearly half consecutively to reforestation programs), mostly in the mountain areas, while the vast majority of the population and agricultural activities are concentrated in the remaining 20 percent of the land, composed of plains and coastal areas (Karan, 2005). Japan also currently has 30 National Parks (*kokuritsu-koen*) covering 20,869 square kilometers, or 5.5 percent of the land area; 56 Quasi-National Parks (*kokutei-koen*) covering 13,614 square kilometers or 3.6 percent of the land area; and 309 Prefectural Parks covering 19,608 square kilometers or 5.2 percent of the land area (Ministry of the Environment of Japan, 2012). Considering the extremely high density of population in the archipelago, above 360 inhabitants per square kilometer (International Monetary Fund, 2013), and its fast-growing economic development based on industrial production in the second half of the 20th century, the reforestation of Japan and its impact is a remarkable success-story that may serve as an example for other countries, and the legacy of the Tokugawa Shogunate therefore appears to be not only still extremely present in contemporary Japan, but also potentially relevant in other cases.

However, this tradition in protecting the environment in the archipelago has provoked increasing damages in external territories. As Jared Diamond accurately recalls, "part of the Tokugawa solution for the problem of resource depletion in Japan itself was to conserve Japanese resources by causing resource depletion elsewhere, just as part of the solution of Japan and other First World countries to problems of resource depletion today

is to cause resource depletion elsewhere" (Diamond, 2005, p. 309). The exploitation of the forests of Hokkaido Island – which was not officially considered a part of Tokugawa's Japan, but a territory under its control – replaced the deforestation of the rest of the archipelago until Japan expanded its domination towards other parts of Asia, including the Korean Peninsula, Taiwan and Northeast China. The situation in contemporary Japan has not fundamentally changed indeed, it has just been exported to foreign countries where Japan's involvement in the timber industry and forest management is particularly important, suggesting an "ecological shadow" in parallel with the implementation of international, national and even local measures. This "ecological shadow" can be evaluated as the environmental impact of one country's economy on the resources of another country. As Peter Dauvergne states in his book published in 1997, "all countries cast ecological shadows. But Japan's is perhaps the world's largest. This is in part because of limited Japanese natural resources and rapid economic growth since World War II. It is, however, also a result of the tactics and economic function of Japan's sixteen general trading companies" (Dauvergne, 1997, p. 5). The environmental damage caused by major Japanese companies is partly compensated for by the implications of the same companies within important ecological projects, but they offer a contrast between a nationalist, if not selfish, forest conservation policy at home and the lack of consideration for the countries where forests are overexploited (Knight, 1997, p. 711). Overall, this environmental damage also potentially affects the image of Japan, and its soft power's capacity in various countries (Peng, 2007).

At the same time, and in parallel with the political and strategic tensions previously mentioned, China and Japan remain close economic partners and have increased their cooperation in the past three decades in environmental protection initiatives, most notably through reforestation programs in China, where Japan has been highly involved.

Several obstacles remain, however, in the implementation of a “green detente” between Tokyo and Beijing. First of all, the political divergences and the legacy in reforestation in the two countries suggest a different approach regarding top-down and bottom-up solutions and the involvement of local public and private actors. Second, the commitment of Japan and China in strict forest conservation policies comes along with an increase in the exploitation of resources in other countries, particularly in Southeast Asia or Africa. China also imports massive quantities of timber from neighboring Russia. Finally, considering the level of competition between Tokyo and Beijing, the possibility of a “green detente” – which suggests a detente as a result of a comprehensive dialogue on environmental issues, comparable to the situation observed between Eastern and Western Europe in the 1980s (Ryle & Soper, 1989) – is challenged not only by other situations where the rivalry is more obvious, but also by the difficulties associated with implementing a regional dialogue on reforestation, instead of bilateral initiatives (Courmont, 2015b).

CONCLUSION

The critical task for Japan now and in the future is to match its strategy explicitly with typical “middle-power internationalism”. This is not a task that Japan alone can tackle. The virtue of middle powers is internationalism, where cooperation with like-minded states in order to strengthen a liberal and open international order is key to any aspect of strategy. Japan’s status may also be evolving into that of a middle power, in which the creation of a culturally rich welfare society, living in an increasingly interdependent and globalized world, is a natural goal of an aging nation (Soeya, 2012).

The question remains, however, whether Japan will abandon its bandwagoning principle, or simply choose to stand with another major power in order to guarantee its particular status. Since the Meiji restoration, Japan has constantly establishing alliances with the dominant actors, from the UK to the U.S., through nazi Germany. This attitude is more presumably explained by a pragmatic approach rather than a convergence of ideologies. One may therefore consider the possibility for Japan to slowly engage itself closer with the emerging superpower in the region (and worldwide): China. Although the two countries are often perceived as rivals, if not opponents, and although various contentious remain between Tokyo and Beijing (maritime disputes, as we have noted, but also historical disagreements), the possibility for a better cooperation in the future may not be excluded. Abe's recent visit to Beijing indicates that even the Japanese Prime Minister's cabinet considers such a move a relevant option. ■

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ASIA FOCUS #97

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ASIA PROGRAM

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