



**Longtime Democrat, Future Leader:
The Particular Logic of Japan's Values
Discourse**

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Introduction

In November 2006, Japan's then-Foreign Minister Aso Taro gave a speech to the Japan Institute of International Affairs in which he introduced two "new bases" and "new expressions" to Japanese foreign policy: "values-based diplomacy" and the "Arc of Freedom and Prosperity" (AFP). These would be the new pillars of the foreign policy of the 2006–2007 government of Abe Shinzo (Aso, 2006). In August 2007, Abe himself addressed the Indian Parliament in a speech entitled "Confluence of the two Seas". This speech was an introduction to the world of what has since developed into several national policy iterations of the "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" (FOIP), which has been described as positioning Japan against China (e.g. Soeya, 2020; Kawai, 2018), but also as an effort to uphold a materially beneficial international order (e.g. Funabashi and Ikenberry, 2020; Satake, 2019). This Brief explores how the discourse on values emphasizing democracy, human rights, the rule of law and freedom in Japanese foreign policy was constituted during the Abe governments of 2006–2007 and 2012–2020.¹

The brief analyses the discourse set out in Aso's seminal 2006 speech and in a widely read 2012 op-ed by Abe; the foreign minister's introductions to the Ministry of

Foreign Affairs' (MOFA) Bluebook, an annual publication that presents Japan's foreign policy to the public; and official descriptions of FOIP, the AFP and "proactive pacifism". It shows that while similar values discourses are widespread in international relations, the discourse analysed here has a particular logic, in which values sometimes appear directly together with the discourse that Japan is a leader on the international stage and the discourse that Japan is a country with a long history of support for democracy and peace. At other times, the values discourse refers to the same concepts as these two, namely stability, prosperity, and peace. Temporal othering is at play in both discourses, whereby Japan's past is described as something positive or negative in relation to the Japan of today. Values, leadership and democratic and peaceful continuity, as well as constant references to these three concepts of stability, prosperity and peace combined, represent an intense mix that makes it difficult to keep the discourses apart, and is indicative of the extent to which they constitute each other.

The brief argues that of the various ways to interpret Japan's values discourse, the most promising draws on the long-term presence in Japanese politics of the idea that the Japanese state lacks autonomy. Building on this, the values discourse – constituted as it is through the two other discourses – is seen as an effort to achieve an autonomous

¹ In this brief, I sometimes use the shorthand "Japan's values discourse" to refer to the emphasis on democracy, human rights, the rule of law and freedom. Competing values discourses in Japanese foreign policy can be found, for example, in DPJ Prime Minister (2009–2010) Hatoyama Yukio's emphasis on an Asian Community and respecting different values in different national regimes. This discourse has today

been rather marginalized in Japanese politics, while the values discourse analysed here is alive and well. This analysis could therefore go beyond 2020, but I have chosen Abe's last year in office as the cut-off point, given his governments' decisive role in advancing the discourse, and for reasons of manageability.



identity through international recognition as a long-time democrat and pacifist that is now being called on to take a leadership role on values.

Background

Aso's and Abe's speeches began a trend in which ideals were referenced as the values that guide Japan's foreign policy. The key values that reappear in this discourse are "democracy", "human rights", the "rule of law", and "freedom". This trend did not come out of the blue. As Kliman and Twining (2014) and Ichihara (2014) have argued, Japan has espoused a values-based discourse that emphasizes these ideals at least since its 1992 Official Development Assistance Charter. Aso was also careful to note his own view that the AFP and values-based diplomacy were simply "new names" for what Japan had already been doing since the end of the Cold War. What was new around 2006, however, was an increased tendency to talk about them in a security context. This saw the gradual introduction of a multitude of strategies and policies, such as FOIP, the AFP and Proactive Pacifism, that, as this Brief illustrates, constitute earlier and later iterations of the same values discourse.²

In line with this trend, the country's first-ever National Security Strategy in 2013 explained that Japan wanted to build global security based on universal values and rules, and described Japan as advancing "universal

values" such as freedom, democracy, respect for human rights and the rule of law (Cabinet Secretariat, 2013, pp. 2, 4). FOIP was launched in 2016 as a strategy that aims to uphold "freedom of navigation". In 2017, the government announced it would seek to relaunch the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), which was initiated by Abe in 2007 and comprises Australia, India, Japan and the US, but had since lost momentum. In its post-summit statement of 24 September 2021, Quad members committed to "promoting the free, open, rules-based order, rooted in international law", and to design, develop, govern and use new technologies in ways shaped by their "shared values" (The White House, 2021).

Setting the Tone: Aso's Speech and Abe's op-ed

At the end of Aso's speech in 2006, he explained that he thought these values should be emphasized because Japan needed a "vision for its foreign policy that all Japanese could be proud of and respect" (Aso, 2006). This is a case of a recurring discourse in conjunction with the values-based discourse: that of striving for a visionary leadership role for Japan on the world stage, or what I refer to as the Japanese leadership discourse. Another theme in Aso's speech is the connection he made between today's democratic Japan and a Japanese democratic history, which he argued stretches back at least to the

² It is difficult if not impossible to set a clear start date for this trend. The tendency to talk about values in relation to security issues was, for example, already visible under Prime Minister Koizumi Jun'ichiro when he talked about the need for universal values to

advance international peace (Koizumi, 2005). However, the intensity with which this was undertaken in Abe's first government, as exemplified by the slogans, policies and strategies discussed in this Brief, stands out.



Meiji Period (1868–1912). I call this the democratic and peaceful continuity discourse. These have both continually reappeared wherever Japan talks about universal values and refers to any of the concepts often referred to in the values discourse: stability, prosperity, and peace.³

One tool used to connect the discourses is temporal othering, or invoking Japan's past to construct its contemporary identity. In the democratic and peaceful continuity discourse, past figures are used as justification for advancing values – as a “fellow” temporal other with whom Japan wants to identify positively. One example is visible in Aso's description in the AFP of Japan's role as a long-time democrat. At other times, as part of the Japanese leadership discourse, Japan's post-war past is characterized as not quite “enough” to live up to supposed expectations of the international community that Japan should provide a lead. The past is in this case an “antagonistic” temporal other from which a certain distance should be kept.⁴ This is implicit in Aso's statement that Japan needs a vision for foreign policy that gains respect.

On 27 December 2012 – a day after he took office as prime minister for the second time – Abe penned the op-ed in *Project Syndicate* where he argued for a relaunch of the Quad. Entitled “Asia's Democratic Security Diamond”, it represented something of a new beginning for the values discourse in

Abe's second government. Even by the second paragraph, Abe is using the democratic and peaceful continuity discourse to describe Japan as one of the “oldest sea-faring democracies in Asia”. Abe argues that disputes in the East and South China Seas, and China's naval and territorial expansion require Japan to play “a greater role in preserving the common good in both regions [of the Indo-Pacific]” and that “if Japan were to yield [to China] the South China Sea would become more fortified”.⁵ Furthermore, Japan and India should “shoulder more responsibility as guardians of navigational freedom”.

What emerges is a picture of a Japan that has long been committed to “democracy, the rule of law, [...] respect for human rights” and “navigational freedom”, and of a Japan whose international role is growing, and indeed must grow for the well-being of the region. To illustrate the Japanese leadership discourse, he writes that the US needs Japan just as much as Japan needs the US (Abe, 2013). Fellow temporal othering is visible in Abe's descriptions of Japan as long committed to values, while there is antagonistic temporal othering in the idea that Japan's role must be expanded. Furthermore, the idea that Japan's leadership role “preserves” the common good and thereby provides stability is a red thread not only in the leadership discourse but also in the values discourse and the democratic and peaceful

³ I use the word “discourse” in a broad sense to mean language that creates meaning (e.g. Jørgensen and Phillips, 2002). In this sense, utterances can be seen as discourses in the way I describe above. Determining whether a discourse is hegemonic or dominant, and where exactly the boundaries are between discourses, would require further theoretical specification.

⁴ On temporal, fellow and antagonistic othering, see e.g. Waever (1996), Suzuki (2007) and Hanssen (2020).

⁵ This fortification is now a fact, a reminder that discourse and practice sometimes diverge.



continuity discourse, all three of which emphasize stability.

Combining Discourses: MOFA Bluebook Introductions

MOFA's annual Bluebook summarizes developments in Japanese foreign policy in the past year, providing useful insight into how the government talks about its foreign policy. The book begins with an introduction by the serving foreign minister. In this section, I use these Bluebook introductions from 2007 and 2013–2020 to show how the three discourses sometimes appear directly together, and sometimes refer to the same concepts of stability, prosperity and peace. These are woven together not just with reference to the same concepts, but also by temporal othering of Japan's past.

The 2007 introduction, during Abe's first government, features Aso writing about the government's aim to contribute to "stability and prosperity through universal values" through the AFP (Aso, 2007), in a case of how the values discourse references stability and prosperity. In the introduction to the 2013 version, then-Foreign Minister Kishida Fumio writes at length of the threats to Japan's security and the need to deepen cooperation with allies, and emphasizes that "free trade" is a pillar of Japanese foreign policy. The US-Japanese alliance is described as a strong "bond" that contributes to "world peace" and "stability", which through Abe's recent visit to the US has shown the world unity in the face of challenges – a case of the leadership discourse where Japan's increasing

international role is emphasized (Kishida, 2013).

The 2014 version begins on a strongly values-oriented note, where Kishida writes that he has "felt directly the broadening support of international society vis-à-vis Japan's efforts toward peace and prosperity through our emphasis on freedom, democracy, fundamental human rights, and the rule of law". Furthermore, 2013 was a year when Japan "brought back its strong presence and self-confidence to the world stage", the further pursuit of which was his mission as foreign minister (Kishida, 2014). In using the values discourse's core words and "strong presence and self-confidence on the world stage" in the same text, Kishida is directly combining the values discourse with the discourse on Japanese leadership, the premise of which is that Japan has not been enough of a leader but will be now – as it is now being asked to be one. The presence of the phrase "peace and prosperity" also works to unite the two discourses.

The 2015 text begins with a reference to how Kishida has worked to strengthen Japan's "presence" on the world stage, in another case of the Japanese leadership discourse where Japan is seen as needing a greater role (Kishida, 2015). Continuing the same line of argument, Kishida argues that there has been positive recognition by the international community of Japan's contribution, once again, to "peace and prosperity". These words also appear in the values discourse and are framed within a discourse in which Japan's "contribution" is viewed positively; and as a case of how the leadership discourse sees other countries



hoping that Japan will lead. He attributes this positive recognition to Japan's policy of Proactive Pacifism, which is effectively a curious combination of the discourse on democratic and peaceful continuity and that on Japanese leadership. As is shown below, it argues both that Japan has long been pacifist – a fellow, temporal other – and that it needs to take on a more proactive role than it has before – an antagonistic, temporal other.

The 2016 introduction, which reflects back on the 70th anniversary of the end of World War II, focuses on Japan's role as a "peace state" and the need to keep deepening its "contribution" to international peace and prosperity. Towards the end of the text, and in the 2017 Bluebook introduction, Kishida hopes that the Bluebook can highlight Japan's "true face" as contributing proactively to world peace and prosperity, an appearance of the discourse of democratic and peaceful continuity, as well as the key words of peace and prosperity that are also a staple in the values discourse (Kishida, 2016; Kishida, 2017). The "contribution" that needs to be "deepened" can also be connected to Abe's use of the phrase "expanding Japan's strategic horizon" in his 2012 op-ed, which implied that Japan needed to do more to secure international sea lanes. This constitutes a case of the Japanese leadership discourse, suggesting that what Japan has done until that point has been insufficient.

Then-Foreign Minister Kono Taro invokes a decidedly values-oriented discourse in his Bluebook texts of 2018 and 2019, combined

primarily with an imperative that Japan must take greater responsibility. Using virtually the same wording in both years, he states that "the international order built on fundamental values such as freedom, democracy, human rights and the rule of law is under threat. [...] [T]o preserve the existing international order [...] Japan needs to take on even greater responsibility and an even greater role than before" (Kono, 2018). This is a clear case of values being talked about not only as a security issue, but as a security issue that calls on Japan to take a leadership role.⁶ In 2018, moreover, Kono includes the telling passage that "in an international order in flux, Japan must not be a follower", wording that shows the importance ascribed to Japan having a greater role – the role of a leader.

In 2020, then-Foreign Minister Motegi Toshimitsu wrote of conversations with his international counterparts, from which he got the impression that Japan's "presence" on the international stage was strengthening, and that they hoped for a "consistent and stable" diplomacy from Japan in the face of a turbulent international environment. He also added a new item to his description of what Japanese foreign policy should seek to achieve: "economic relations built on new shared rules that are pioneered by Japan" (Motegi, 2020). By using "presence" and "pioneered by Japan", Motegi's Bluebook entry is an example of the discourse of Japanese leadership. In addition, by using the phrase "consistent and stable", a connection is made to concepts that also appear in the values discourse, such as when Kono says in 2018

⁶ In 2019, the latter sentence instead reads: "To defend and strengthen the rules-based international

order, Japan needs to play an ever-deepening proactive role" (Kono, 2019).



that Japan's values-oriented efforts are meant to "preserve" the international order, thereby indicating that Japan stands for stability. Kono's texts in particular are prime examples of when the values discourse and the leadership discourse blend together to such an extent that it is difficult to tell them apart.

Different Policies, Same Discourses: FOIP, AFP and Proactive Pacifism

MOFA has an entire subsection of its website dedicated to FOIP. The first document that appears in this section uses maps and images to explain what the policy is. The document, "Free and Open Indo-Pacific", states that it has three pillars: "the spread and solidification of the rule of law, freedom of navigation and free trade"; "the pursuit of economic prosperity"; and "ensuring peace and stability". This exemplifies how it advances the values discourse. The strategy is described as further developing the concepts of "diplomacy taking a panoramic perspective of the world map" and "proactive pacifism"; or, in other words, one concept that seeks to enlarge the scope of Japan's diplomacy and one that joins that same theme together with the ideal of pacifism, implicit in which is the idea that Japan has long been pacifist. The direct reference to Proactive Pacifism is also an indication of the connectedness of the policies. FOIP is further said to "open a new horizon for Japanese diplomacy", indicating the presence of a theme that emphasizes Japan's expanding leadership role and the key terms peace, stability and prosperity (MOFA, 2021a). These are identified above

as appearing in all three discourses on values: Japanese leadership and democratic and peaceful continuity, and also as appearing as a connection between the discourses.

The geographic focus areas of FOIP and the AFP are different: FOIP aims for collaboration with states in the Indian and Pacific Oceans, while the AFP stretched through Eurasia. What unites the two, however, is that they are both undergirded by the same values discourse: FOIP is a latter-day iteration of the values discourse present in the AFP. Aso's original AFP commitment was that Japan would support an "Arc" of states from Northeast Asia through Central Asia, the Caucasus, Turkey, and Central and Eastern Europe to the Baltic states in their "never-ending marathon" to democracy. He stated that no country is perfect, but Japan should be considered a "true veteran player" of democracy, and thus act as an "escort runner" to the "Arc" states (Aso, 2006) in a case of the democratic and peaceful continuity discourse. "Values-based diplomacy" and the AFP emerge as two sides of the same coin: the AFP provides the expanding geographic focus – and the theme of Japan's growing international role – while values-based diplomacy fuses this with attention to values. "The horizons of Japanese diplomacy" mentioned above was a term used by Aso to introduce the AFP in 2006, underlining the ambition in the values-laden AFP to expand the role of Japanese diplomacy on the world stage – the key ambition of the Japanese leadership discourse.



Proactive pacifism, also referenced by Kishida in the Bluebook, is another policy or strategy in which the values discourse figures prominently. In a 2016 MOFA pamphlet, *Japan's Security Policy: Proactive Pacifism*, Japan is described as having defended freedom, democracy, human rights and the rule of law throughout the post-war era, in a way that combines the democratic and peaceful continuity discourse with the values discourse. It continues that threats in the current international environment – as reflected in North Korea's nuclear and missile development, cyberattacks and international terrorism – make it impossible for states to ensure peace and security on their own. Therefore, the pamphlet argues that the international community expects Japan to play an even more proactive role in advancing peace and security in the international community – a case of the Japanese leadership discourse and a clear reference to the connecting concepts of "peace" and "stability". This will be done through "Proactive Pacifism built on international cooperation", whereby Japan will contribute even more than previously to the peace, security and stability of the international community. In the same pamphlet's section on Japan's "basic policy" on security issues, the "current situation" is characterized as one in which the international community is expecting more of Japan, and Japan is determined to be a "central player in the international community" in executing proactive pacifism (MOFA, 2021b). Like Kono's Bluebook texts, the stories put out on proactive pacifism exemplify the loose boundaries between the discourses, and how they refer to the same concepts and constitute each other.

Discussion

In sum, FOIP, the AFP and Proactive Pacifism, the Bluebook introductions, Aso's 2006 speech and Abe's 2012 op-ed contain all three discourses identified in this Brief – values, Japanese leadership, and democratic and peaceful continuity – bringing them together in one discursive package tied together through temporal othering. The concepts of stability, peace and prosperity appear across the discourses to the extent that it is difficult to tell them apart, indicating the great extent to which the discourses constitute each other.

One interpretation of what this means could see it as a conscious effort to effect material security policy change. As Hagström (2015) has shown, political actors in Japan have frequently described the country as "abnormal" owing to the restrictions placed on its military. Building on this, it is possible to see Japan's values discourse as mimicking other, "more normal" states that do not face the same restrictions. This could nudge the image of Japan in the eyes of voters, decision makers or whoever is judged to need convincing, the desired effect of which could be to nurture the view that Japan needs security policy change in order to live up to the role ascribed to it through the discourses. A similar analysis has been employed by, for example, Kingston (2020) who argues that Japan's values discourse in Asia is a "cover" for security policy change.

An argument against this is that similar values discourses could also be observed during the government of the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ), for example when



then-Prime Minister Noda Yoshihiko spoke at length about the rule of law as a guiding principle for Japanese foreign policy in the UN General Assembly (Noda, 2011). The DPJ had nowhere near Abe's enthusiasm for security policy change, and its successor parties built their entire *raison d'être* on opposing such change. More research is needed on whether the values discourse was constituted in the same way during the time of the DPJ as it was under Abe. However, the broad acceptance of at least some type of values discourse emphasizing democracy, human rights and the rule of law across the spectrum of Japanese politics does not seem to correspond to contentiousness around security policy change, which makes a strong connection between the two difficult to draw.⁷

These discourses can also be seen as effecting ideational change rather than material change. Here, recognition theory scholarship by authors such as Adler-Nissen and Zarakol (2021) argues that dissatisfaction with how they are recognized in the hierarchy of the international order motivates the actions of states.⁸ The values discourse could therefore be seen as an effort to construct an identity for Japan and convince others that this is the way that Japan should be seen. According to the findings of this Brief, this is as a champion of the values of freedom, democracy, human rights and the rule of law with long-standing democratic and peaceful credentials, and ready to play a leadership role. In addition, a "narrative

⁷ Unless, of course, the different political camps use radically different definitions in the seemingly similar values discourses they employ. This would be precisely the main task for future research to investigate.

ontology" might posit that all meaning emerges through storytelling narratives (Hagström and Gustafsson, 2019). In this view, actors have little power to break with the "master narrative" and have it their own way, since their very understanding of the world itself is based on the master narrative. Japan's values discourse then constructs the self in a way that makes sense within the master narrative. Such an approach would emphasize similarities across discourses or narratives, and could therefore be useful in explaining why values discourses are so widespread in contemporary international politics – provided that they are actually the same discourses.

One factor that speaks in favour of an ideational explanation is the tendency in post-war Japanese politics, particularly by the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), to see Japan as lacking autonomy and sovereignty. This has its roots in the view that the country's constitution was forced on it by the US, and can be observed, for example, in the founding declaration of the LDP, which states that "[...] patriotism and the spirit of autonomy is lost, politics are in a stupor, the economy is far from independent. [...] [A]n independent system [of sovereign rule] is still not in place [...]" (Liberal Democratic Party, 1955). This is also a main message in Abe's 2006 political manifesto *Utsukushii Kuni e* (Toward a beautiful country) (Abe, 2006). This background, along with scholarship by Suzuki (2015), who has argued that the construction of Japan as an "autonomous

⁸ The authors in question focus on explaining dissatisfaction with actors' places in the hierarchy of the Liberal International Order, but recognition as such can be used as a variable in other contexts as well.



state” is what undergirds contentious political issues such as constitutional revision, lends a certain credence to the ideational “recognition” approach. From this viewpoint, it is possible to see Japan’s values discourse – constituted as it is by a leadership discourse – as a continuation of a long-term struggle for recognition as a strong, autonomous actor in international politics. This time, the fully autonomous identity or status is hoped to be achieved by advancing a values discourse that looks similar to the discourses of other autonomous states, but that in addition emphasizes that Japan should be a leader among these values-oriented states by virtue of its long-term commitment to democracy and peace.

Values discourses that emphasize freedom, democracy, human rights and the rule of law are in vogue in international relations. This state of affairs makes it tempting to categorize states as “in favour of liberal values” or “against liberal values.” This brief has sought to deconstruct these categories

through a close reading of one such values discourse. It has shown how that discourse is constituted according to a particular logic that may or may not correspond with policymakers’ expectations when values are referenced. European and Swedish policymakers must make efforts to understand discourses in foreign policy in the context in which they appear because, as this brief has shown, values discourses in foreign policy can follow a logic that might not translate when transferred to the values discourses of other countries. Making inferences about the meaning of any particular discourse without examining the discursive context of what is being said, and without understanding the political and historical context in which the discourse is embedded, risks failing to understand the potentially different drivers of behaviour affecting different governments. In times when ministries of foreign affairs all over the world are sounding increasingly similar with regard to values, this is a more acute task than ever.



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