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Values or Interests? Japan's Relations with European Countries under the Abe Administration

Abstract

Both during his first (2006–2007) and second administrations (since 2012) Prime Minister Abe Shinzō emphasized the gravity of value-oriented diplomacy based on promotion of democracy, free-market economy, human rights, and rule of law. At the same time, however, his foreign policy has been very pragmatic and focused on hard-power-like measures, such as an increase in the deterrence capacity of the Self-Defense Forces. On the one hand, the Japanese government declared its attachment to universal values on the international scene, but on the other hand there were doubts whether it lived up to those values on domestic ground. For that reason, Tokyo has been accused by neighboring countries of treating value-oriented diplomacy as an empty slogan in order to realize national interests. The aim of this paper is to evaluate the role of this dichotomy in relations with Europe. It is examined to what extent Abe declared his adherence to the universal values, and to what extent he really promoted them in Europe. Special emphasis is placed on the discrepancy between Tokyo's narrative on values in relations with the European Union (EU) on the one side and with Moscow and other un-democratic regimes in Europe on the other.

Keywords: *Japan-EU relations, Abe administration, foreign policy of Japan*

1. Abe's Value-Oriented Diplomacy

Value-oriented diplomacy (*kachikan gaikō*) has been one of the foundations of Abe Shinzō's foreign policy ever since his first prime ministership in 2006–2007. At the Japan Institute of International Affairs Seminar in November 2006, Foreign Minister Asō Tarō, who shared the ideological leanings of the prime minister, emphasized that the “universal values” of “democracy, freedom, human rights, the rule of law, and the market economy” were of grave importance in Japan's diplomatic endeavors. Moreover, he declared that Tokyo would support the development of these values in the countries forming an “arc of freedom and prosperity,” that is, “the successfully budding democracies that line the outer rim of the Eurasian continent” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2006). Asō stressed that some of the elements of democratic values, such as the rule of law, observance of contracts or easily accessible education had been inculcated in Japanese culture and civilization long before the Meiji Restoration in 1868. He emphasized that after the Second World War, Japan added to this set of universal principles the rule of pacifism, which made the Self-Defense Forces one of the least aggressive military organizations in the world (Asō 2008, pp. 29–32). In order to promote Western values in the unstable peripheries of Eurasia, Asō promised to cooperate with befriended democracies, such as the US, Australia, India, or EU and NATO member states. As he emphasized, Japan's role was to assist the developing countries in “the first five kilometers” of “a never-ending marathon” of democratization processes (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2006). Asō emphasized that the fact that Japan generally enjoyed a cheerful, warm, and cool image among other nations would help Tokyo in fulfilling this task. After all, according to him, Japan possessed large deposits of soft power, such as rich traditions of *zen*, *bunraku*, *kabuki*, or tea ceremony, but also an attractive popular culture based on *manga*, *anime*, J-pop, and J-fashion (Asō 2008, pp. 283–286).

One day after returning to the post of prime minister in December 2012, Abe announced a concept of “Asia's democratic security diamond” that encompassed Japan, India, Australia, and the US state of Hawaii. Pointing to the China threat, he emphasized that the four states should “safeguard the maritime commons stretching from the Indian Ocean region to the western Pacific” (Abe 2012). In mid-January 2013, the prime minister disclosed “Five New Principles for Japanese Diplomacy” that

were planned to be announced during his visit to Jakarta. They included: 1) "protecting freedom of thought, expression, and speech in this region where two oceans meet;" 2) "ensuring that the seas, which are the most vital commons to us all, are governed by laws and rules, not by might;" 3) "pursuing free, open, interconnected economies as part of Japan's diplomacy;" 4) "bringing about ever more fruitful intercultural ties among the peoples of Japan and" ASEAN; 5) "promoting exchange among the younger generations" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2013a). Reference to common values was equally strongly emphasized in Abe's Policy Speech to the Diet at the end of the same month: "Fundamental to our diplomacy will be for us to develop a strategic diplomacy based on the fundamental values of freedom, democracy, basic human rights, and the rule of law, and we view the world as a whole, as if looking at a globe, rather than look only at bilateral relations with neighboring countries" (Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet 2013a).

In subsequent months and years Abe mentioned universal values whenever he visited democratic countries. For example, during his visit to Mongolia in March 2013 he compared Mongolia's successful democratization and adoption of free-market rules with the transformation of the Japanese political system during the Meiji Restoration in the second half of the 19th century (Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet 2013b). He recalled "the universal values of freedom, democracy, the rule of law, and human rights" during his visit to the Philippines in July 2013 (Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet 2013c), and referred to them when visiting the US and Canada in September 2013. During his address to the Australian Parliament in July 2014 he stressed: "Yes, our countries both love peace. We value freedom and democracy. And we hold human rights and the rule of law dear" (Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet 2014a). When Abe visited Latin America and the Caribbean Region in August 2014, he added: "I firmly believe that we, who furthermore share universal values, will be able to develop together, and contribute to the world together, and together offer each other mutual enlightenment" (Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet 2014b). In his speech to the US Congress in April 2015, in turn, he emphasized that: "we can spread our shared values around the world and have them take root: the rule of law, democracy, and freedom" (Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet 2015a).

Moreover, at the "Shared Values and Democracy in Asia" Symposium in Tokyo in January 2016, Abe explained that "Asia's democracy has

a distinct mark engraved in it from ancient times, reflecting the values we have held dear for generations. (...) I have renewed my belief that, within the veins of water that have run continuously since ancient times under the ground upon which we stand, there is endless nourishment fostering democracy and imparting value to freedom and human rights, namely tolerance and loving kindness" (Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet 2016).

During his policy speech to the Diet in January 2017, Abe reiterated that Japan would cooperate with ASEAN members, Australia, and India as the countries who "share fundamental values such as freedom, democracy, human rights, and the rule of law" (Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet 2017a). Moreover, at a press conference after his visit to the Philippines, Australia, Indonesia, and Vietnam in the same month, he stressed that "All of these nations share the 'open seas' of the Pacific Ocean and are important neighboring countries that share fundamental values," such as, in the case of Vietnam, "the rule of law" (Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet 2017b). Also when sending a congratulatory message to US President Donald Trump on the occasion of his inauguration, Abe did not forget to remind him that the Japan–US alliance was "bound in universal values such as freedom, democracy, human rights, and the rule of law" (Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet 2017c).

The abovementioned excerpts from the Japanese prime minister's speeches indicate that universal values played an important role in the declarative dimension of his foreign policy vision. Nevertheless, in order to fully understand the concepts of the "arc of freedom and prosperity" and "Asia's democratic security diamond," it is necessary to put them in a broader context of national interests espoused by the Abe administration.

2. Abe's Strategic Interests

While constant reference to values by Abe may create an impression that he represented an idealist approach to foreign policy, in fact his activity on the international scene has been very pragmatic. As such, values have been employed by Abe selectively with some countries, while omitted in relations with others. The declaration on adherence to "universal values" has been used in particular to strategically encircle China, strengthen the alliance with the US, and expand cooperation on security issues with India, Australia, and Western Europe.

Taking advantage of “universal values” in diplomacy towards democratic states did not preclude Abe from strengthening ties with authoritarian regimes. Abe did not mention “universal values” in his speeches delivered during visits to Saudi Arabia and Turkey in May 2013. Instead, in Ankara he used three different keywords: “collaboration,” “coexistence and prosperity,” as well as “tolerance and harmony” (Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet 2013d). Analogously, during his visit to Qatar in August 2013 he referred to a “comprehensive partnership towards stability and prosperity (...) based on the three pillars of collaboration, coexistence and co-prosperity, and tolerance and harmony” (Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet 2013e). It was evident that he did not want to jeopardize relations with strategically important gas and oil exporters in the Middle East, and thus omitted the delicate topics of democracy and human rights.

In his address to the UN General Assembly in New York in September 2013, Abe announced the new concept of Proactive Contribution to Peace. As he explained, “It is now impossible for any one country, no matter which it may be, to safeguard its own peace and security acting entirely by itself. This is why Japan is working to garner trust from the world as a creator of added value and a net contributor for regional and world peace and stability” (Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet 2013f). The new policy signified that Japan would intensify its participation in peacekeeping operations and more assertively rely on collective security measures.

Within the framework of Proactive Contribution to Peace, Abe continued the discrepancy regarding emphasis he put on values depending on the political regime of the country he visited. For example, during his trip to Oman, Côte d’Ivoire, Mozambique, and Ethiopia in January 2014, he failed to mention the issues of democracy and human rights. Instead, Abe used the expression of “diplomacy that takes a panoramic perspective of the terrestrial globe based on strategic approaches” (Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet 2014c).

The concept of Proactive Contribution to Peace was most strongly reflected in Abe’s desire to legalize Japan’s participation in pacts of collective self-defense. In July 2014, he issued a cabinet decision that changed the interpretation of the Constitution on that matter. The new interpretation, in turn, was included in the guidelines of the US–Japan alliance announced in April 2015. The guidelines significantly broadened the scope of alliance by allowing Self-Defense Forces to “conduct appropriate operations involving the use of force to respond to situations where an armed

attack against a foreign country that is in a close relationship with Japan occurs and as a result, threatens Japan's survival and poses a clear danger to overturn fundamentally its people's right to life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness, to ensure Japan's survival, and to protect its people" (Ministry of Defense 2015).

For Abe, the most crucial interest was strengthening Japan's deterrence capability against China. In 2010 and 2012 Sino-Japanese relations deteriorated severely due to two diplomatic crises caused by incidents in the East China Sea and nationalization by Japan of three of the Senkaku/Diaoyutai Islands that are disputed between both countries. In this light, constant appeal by Abe to the values of the rule of law and respect for maritime commons was a part of a wider strategy of building an anti-Chinese coalition in the region. While the rule of law was mentioned in Abe's contacts with almost all the countries he visited, democracy or human rights were simply added to the list of promoted values if they were shared by the country in question. This tactical flexibility attests to the instrumental approach towards value-oriented diplomacy by Tokyo.

3. Mixing Values with Interests: Relations with Europe

Just as with diplomacy towards East Asian states, Prime Minister Abe's attitude towards European countries may be analyzed through the prism of interests and values. Abe was convinced that it was in Japan's interest to strengthen ties with Europe in all fields, particularly in the spheres of security and economy. However, he diversified his policy depending on the political regime of the country in question. While he brought to the fore "universal values" during meetings with the leaders of Western European states, he used different arguments when negotiating with authoritarian or hybrid regimes at the peripheries of the continent. In 2013 Japan started negotiations on a Free Trade Agreement and a Strategic Partnership Agreement with the EU. In parallel, in the first year of his second term, Abe met as many as four times with President Vladimir Putin and launched Foreign and Defense Ministerial Consultations with Russia. Moreover, he held three meetings with Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan. In negotiations with both leaders he focused on economic cooperation and security issues without mentioning human rights.

The head of the Japanese government put emphasis on developing contacts with Central European countries as well. In June 2013, he held his first-ever summit with Visegrad Group leaders: Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk, Czech Prime Minister Petr Nečas, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, and Slovak Prime Minister Robert Fico. Abe "reaffirmed the importance of universal values and principles such as democracy and the rule of law and, on the basis of this recognition, agreed to work together in order to ensure greater regional stability based on democracy, economic integration and convergence of European Union (EU) policies in Eastern Europe and the Western Balkans" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2013b). The summit was followed by a visit of Maritime Self-Defense Force Training Squadron ships to Poland.

Soon after announcing the concept of Proactive Contribution to Peace in September 2013, Abe attended the Conference on Rejuvenating UK-Japan Relations for the 21st Century in Tokyo. He used this opportunity to stress that both countries were "a priori partners" as two maritime powers who uphold the Law of the Sea and cooperate in counter-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden (Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet 2013g). To commemorate the 400th anniversary of establishing bilateral contacts, in July 2013 a Maritime Self-Defense Force Training Squadron paid a visit to Portsmouth (Royal Navy 2013). In the same month, Japan and the UK signed agreements on defense equipment cooperation and information security. Moreover, in December 2013 HMS Daring paid a port call to Tokyo where it took part in anniversary festivities. At that time the navies of both countries cooperated in providing humanitarian aid to the Philippines after the destruction caused by Typhoon Haiyan (British Embassy Tokyo 2013).

Abe put much emphasis on developing cooperation with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). During Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen's visit to Tokyo in April 2013, the Japanese prime minister signed a Joint Political Declaration between Japan and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. Japan upgraded its contacts with the alliance by designating its ambassador to Belgium as official representative to NATO. Both sides admitted they were "dedicated to the values of individual liberty, democracy, human rights, and the rule of law" (North Atlantic Treaty Organization 2013).

More progress was observed during Abe's tour of Germany, UK, Portugal, Spain, France, and Belgium in April and May 2014. In London, the head of the Japanese government agreed with Prime Minister David

Cameron to regularly hold Joint Foreign and Defense Ministerial Consultations. Abe expressed his opinion “that world peace and international public goods such as freedom of aviation and navigation are best safeguarded through the efforts of nations that value the rule of law and uphold democracy and freedom” (Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet 2014d). At the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD)’s Ministerial Council Meeting in Paris, the prime minister appealed for strengthening ties with Europe through an economic partnership agreement based on commonly shared values. He agreed to cooperate with the EU on promoting peace in Mali and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, to hold joint exercises with NATO and the EU on combating piracy in the Gulf of Aden and off the coast of Somalia, as well as to cooperate with the UK and France in the field of defense technology and equipment (Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet 2014e). In Brussels, in turn, Abe visited North Atlantic Council Headquarters where he signed the Individual Partnership and Cooperation Programme between Japan and NATO that broadened mutual exchange to a wide range of fields. As stressed by Abe, both sides were “natural partners that share fundamental values” (Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet 2014f).

During a special summit of the G7 in the Hague in March 2014, Abe agreed with the policy of expelling Russia from the G8 due to its annexation of Crimea. On the one hand, he confirmed that cooperation of seven nations, four of which were European (UK, France, Germany, Italy), was based on commonly shared democratic values, such as “the principles of the rule of law and of compliance with international law.” On the other hand, he appealed for self-restraint in solving the Ukrainian issue (Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet 2014g). During the next summit in German Schloss Elmau in June 2015, Abe noted once more: “We in the G7 have certain words and phrases we share in common—freedom, democracy, fundamental human rights, and the rule of law. Our sharing of these fundamental values forms the foundation of our unity” (Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet 2015b). Moreover, when visiting New York to participate in the UN General Assembly in September 2015, the Japanese prime minister remarked that being “a partner that shares fundamental values, Japan declares its solidarity with Europe” regarding the migration problem (Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet 2015c). Also after terrorist attacks in Paris in November 2015, Abe did not fail to mention that “Japan, as a nation which shares the same values as France,

stands together with the people of France" (Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet 2015d).

Meanwhile, Tokyo attached much importance to developing ties with the EU. In January 2015 Foreign Minister Kishida Fumio met High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and Vice-President of the European Commission Federica Mogherini in Brussels. According to Kishida, bilateral contacts should be based on three pillars: 1) "cooperation for global peace and stability;" 2) "cooperation for contributing to addressing global challenges;" 3) "promotion of economic partnership" (Sabathil 2015, p. 80). In May 2016, Abe paid a visit to Italy, France, Belgium, Germany, UK, and Russia to prepare the ground for the G7 summit in Ise-Shima that was scheduled for the same month. In Brussels he met European Council President Donald Tusk as well as European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker, to whom he appealed for an early conclusion of the Economic Partnership Agreement and Strategic Partnership Agreement between Japan and the EU. Abe argued that as G7 countries shared common values, they should together strongly respond to the problems of terrorism and refugees (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2016a). At the meeting with German Chancellor Angela Merkel, in turn, the Japanese prime minister agreed to continue dialogue between foreign and defense ministries from both countries and start bilateral cyber security talks by the end of 2016. As stressed by Abe, "Japan and Germany are global partners which share fundamental values and have important roles to play in addressing the issues facing the international society as major leaders in Asia and Europe" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2016b). It is symptomatic, however, that Abe ended his European tour in Sochi. Despite the Ukrainian crisis, the Japanese prime minister agreed with President Vladimir Putin to re-launch peace treaty negotiations and bilateral top-level political dialogue (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2016c).

In fact, Abe had eagerly promoted relations with Russia from the very beginning of his term in office. When he visited Moscow in April 2013, he agreed with President Putin to expand economic exchange, re-launch bilateral talks on reversion of the Northern Territories (South Kuril Islands) to Japan, as well as commence regular meetings between foreign and defense ministers of both countries in a so-called 2+2 formula. Rapprochement with Russia was also aimed at drawing Russia away from a strategic alliance with Japan's main rival, China. Nevertheless, Abe's

cordial relationship with Putin was exacerbated by economic sanctions introduced by Tokyo on Moscow after the already mentioned annexation of Crimea in March 2014. On the one hand, the Japanese prime minister had to demonstrate his solidarity with the US regarding the Ukrainian crisis, but on the other hand he envisaged using this crisis as a trump card in negotiations on territorial issues with Russia. This is evidenced by frequent unofficial visits by Abe's special emissaries to Moscow, such as National Security Advisor Yachi Shōtarō's in May 2014 or former Prime Minister Mori Yoshirō's in September 2014 (Tōgō 2015, pp. 186–234). It seemed that faced with economic problems and international isolation Russia would become more willing to strike a deal on the Northern Territories in return for a financial contribution from Japan. Due to the election of Donald Trump, who during the electoral campaign had displayed a pro-Russian attitude, as US president in November 2016, however, the significance of Tokyo's accommodating posture towards Moscow waned. As a result, President Putin's visit to Tokyo in December 2016 did not bring any breakthrough in bilateral relations.

Backstage talks with an authoritarian regime who had just violated international law did not discourage the Japanese prime minister from continuing to stress the importance of universal values in relations with Western European countries. For instance, during a meeting with Chancellor Angela Merkel at CeBIT computer expo in Hanover in March 2017, Abe emphasized that both Japan and Germany owed their leading positions in trade and investment to "rules that are fair and can stand up to democratic appraisal." He added that "Japan and Europe, as those who value freedom and human rights and respect democratic rules, must act in cooperation" and appealed for an early adoption of the Japan–EU Economic Partnership Agreement. As pointed out by Abe, strengthening mutual economic ties would enable reinforcement of "the free, open, and rules-based system that has propelled us to where we are today" (Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet 2017d).

4. Living Up to the Promoted Values?

What weakened Abe's credibility in referring to values in relations with Western European countries was the fact that the Japanese prime minister did not seem to live up to these values domestically. Perhaps except for free-market orientation, all "universal values" to which Abe de-

clared attachment, such as freedom of speech, democracy, human rights, and rule of law were actually weakened, not strengthened, during his second term.

According to Press Freedom Index, Japan was ranked 72nd in 2017, as many as 50 positions down from its rank in 2012 when the LDP came back to power. As indicated by Reporters Without Borders:

Media freedom in Japan has been declining ever since Shinzo Abe became Prime Minister again in 2012. What with controversial dismissals and resignations, growing self-censorship within the leading media groups and a system of “kisha clubs” (reporters’ clubs) that discriminate against freelancers and foreign reporters, journalists have difficulty serving the public interest and fulfilling their role as democracy’s watchdogs. Many journalists, both local and foreign, are harassed by government officials, who do not hide their hostility towards the media. Members of nationalist groups on social media also intimidate and harass journalists who dare to question the government or tackle “controversial” subjects. (Reporters Without Borders 2017)

The above description illustrates the international community’s opinion on the Japanese government’s real approach towards the value of freedom of speech. Even before assuming their offices in 2012, Prime Minister Abe Shinzō and Chief Cabinet Secretary Suga Yoshihide had been known for their extensive interference in media policy. In 2001 Abe, as deputy chief cabinet secretary in the Mori cabinet, apparently exerted pressure on the main national broadcaster, NHK, to request revision of news contents on “comfort women” – sexual slaves exploited by the Imperial Army until 1945. Despite numerous testimonies by victims from South Korea and other countries invaded by Japan, Abe has been known for his denial that the Japanese military had ever forcefully conscripted women to serve in “comfort stations.” While Chief Cabinet Secretary Suga did not hold convictions as right-wing as the prime minister, when he was minister of internal affairs and communications in the first Abe cabinet in 2006–2007, he stirred controversy by frequently issuing detailed instructions on program contents to media corporations (Mori 2016, pp. 187–220).

The Japanese government took full control over state media. In 2014 conservative businessperson Momii Katsu was appointed as president of NHK. Momii overtly stated that NHK should keep its programming in line with the government’s policy. Moreover, in February 2016 Minister of Internal Affairs and Communications Takaichi Sanae, who was one of many right-wing politicians in Abe’s closest entourage, threatened that broadcasters who aired “biased political reports” should be shut down. The pressure was exerted both on public and private media corporations.

As a result, presenters and journalists who wanted to maintain objectivity, such as Kuniya Hiroko from NHK, Kishii Shigetaka from TBS, or Furu-tachi Ichirō from TV Asahi were dismissed or forced to resign (Reporters Without Borders 2016). Moreover, pressure was applied not only through governmental institutions, but also by the ruling party. For instance, in April 2015 NHK and TV Asahi executives were summoned by the LDP Research Commission on Information and Communications Technology to explain themselves for having staged programs critical of the government (Mulgan 2017, p. 19).

Other “universal values” that were actually weakened under the Abe administration included democracy and the rule of law. According to The Economist Intelligence Unit’s Democracy Index, in 2015 Japan fell from the category of “full democracy” to “flawed democracy” and remained there in 2016 (The Economist Intelligence Unit 2017). One of the reasons was the fact that while Abe declared adherence to some subfields of international law, such as Law of the Sea, he did not pay much respect to the Constitution of his own country. Initially, he planned to revise the Constitution, but he had to postpone this idea due to a lack of sufficient popular support. Instead, Abe chose to circumvent the problem. Despite strong protests by the opposition parties, in 2015 he forced through the Diet security bills that changed the official interpretation of Article 9 that prohibits Japan from possessing any military potential. Until then, the official stance of the government had been that the Constitution banned participation in collective self-defense agreements, though it did not prohibit individual self-defense. Abe revised this interpretation by allowing collective self-defense, despite the fact that a majority of constitutionalists in Japan warned that the new bills violated the law.¹

In addition, the project of a new Constitution prepared by the LDP in 2012 showed that the ruling party in Japan did not really adhere to the concept of human rights as understood in modern liberal democracies. The draft put greater emphasis on collectivism and citizens’ obligations than their individual rights. In Article 12 (“All the people shall be respected as individuals”) the expression “individuals” (*kojin*) was changed to “persons” (*hito*). Moreover, Article 97 that stresses the inviolability of

1 According to an *Asahi Shinbun* opinion poll from July 2015, as many as 104 out of 122 constitutionalists considered acknowledgement of the right to collective self-defense as unconstitutional, while only two of them claimed that the new law did not violate the Constitution. See: Tahara 2016, p. 237.

fundamental human rights was completely deleted (Liberal Democratic Party 2012). According to a booklet issued by the LDP, "big human rights" should be distinguished from "small human rights." In this light, some individual rights might be temporarily restricted in the time of emergency, such as social disorder or domestic turmoil, in order to "protect the people's lives, bodies and properties" (*Mainichi Japan* 2016). This state-centered approach runs counter to democratic values.

Violation of "universal values" in Japan has been noticed abroad, especially in the US and Europe. In November 2014, Tokyo ordered the Japanese New York Consulate General to request from McGraw-Hill revision of the description of "comfort women" in its textbook *Traditions and Encounters: A Global Perspective on the Past*. When the publisher refused, Prime Minister Abe criticized the textbook during Diet session in January 2015. In response to this attempt at censorship, a group of American historians expressed their "dismay at recent attempts by the Japanese government to suppress statements in history textbooks" (Dudden 2015). This initiative was followed by an Open Letter in Support of Historians in Japan, signed by 187 scholars of Japanese studies who condemned political interference in historical research in Japan (Harvard College 2015). The letter was subsequently supported by scholars from other countries than the US, especially Europeans, and the number of signatories rose to 457.

5. Conclusion

Japan's policy towards European countries since 2012 has been characterized by the same discrepancy that could be seen in Abe's diplomacy towards other regions in the world. It is the real interests, not intangible values, that lay at the foundation of Tokyo's diplomatic endeavors. Although Europe is a remote continent for Japan, it became instrumental in providing credibility to Abe's concept of Proactive Contribution to Peace. During numerous visits to the western part of the continent, the Japanese prime minister emphasized his commitment to the values of democracy, human rights, the rule of law, and free-market economy. According to this discourse, security cooperation with European powers, such as the UK or France, as well as with NATO, was to enhance Japan's capabilities of participating in rescue and peacekeeping missions.

Nevertheless, it is not in these noble ends that the real interests of the Abe administration lay. Lack of any reference to universal values during

Abe's visits to authoritarian or hybrid regimes at the peripheries of Europe, such as Russia or Turkey, proves the purely instrumental usage of value-oriented diplomacy. Appeals for respecting international law, aimed at containing China, did not discourage Abe from attempting to strike a backstage deal with Russia on the Northern Territories after the annexation of Crimea. An even more evident discrepancy between the slogans of respecting "universal values" and reality appeared on domestic ground. This "ideological flexibility" of Abe did not immediately lead to a deterioration of governmental-level contacts between Tokyo and European democracies, but it started exacerbating Japan's positive image among the cultural and academic elites. If continued, this discrepancy between the promoted values and the real interests may undermine credibility of Japan as a reliable partner of the European Union.

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