

Refereed article

## Japan's National Role Conception and its Perceptions of China in the Region and World: The View of Prime Minister Abe Shinzō's Administration

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### Summary

The return to power of Abe Shinzō at the helm of the victorious Liberal Democratic Party in December 2012 heralded the opening of a new chapter for both Japan as well as the wider East Asia region. Despite the fact that in 2006–2007 he was credited with improving the relationship with Beijing after the preceding period of diplomatic freeze during the rule of Prime Minister Koizumi Junichirō (2001–2006), the policies of PM Abe's second administration in fact turned out to be far less reconciliatory — further souring the already strained relationship between the two neighbors. This paper aims to investigate the evolving perceptions of and approach to China of two PM Abe administration periods from a role theory perspective. We suggest that changes in the international environment during the five years between PM Abe's first and second tenures of office led to a higher level of uncertainty concerning Japan's international role(s) — resulting ultimately in a more proactive role taking by the Abe administration since 2012.

**Keywords:** Sino–Japanese relations, Abe Shinzō, role theory, international relations, Japan, China

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## Introduction

The return to power of Abe Shinzō at the helm of the victorious Liberal Democratic Party in December 2012 heralded the opening of a new chapter for both Japan as well as the wider East Asia region. Prime Minister Abe came to power with an ambitious agenda to enhance Japan's role within the international community, which he had not managed to realize during his first stint as the leader of the government (2006–2007). PM Abe's policies, designed to achieve the abovementioned aim, in fact contributed to the rise of tensions between Japan and mainland China, further souring the already strained relationship between two important players in the East Asia region.

This article aims to investigate the recent evolution of Japan's stance vis-à-vis its rising neighbor from a role theory perspective. This particular perspective is applied to analyze the following: first, how PM Abe Shinzō and his respective administrations (2006–2007, 2012–present) have understood and envisioned Japan's role in the international community; second, how they have perceived China's economic and geopolitical rise and that country's subsequent behavior in regional and global affairs; and, third, how these two factors have interplayed in PM Abe's plan for both shoring up and then expanding Japanese influence and significance internationally. This analysis will contribute to a better understanding of the development of PM Abe's foreign policy and help to explain how and why Sino–Japanese relations are now once again deteriorating despite the fact that Japan is led currently by the same policymaker who in 2006 was credited with improving relations with Beijing after the period of diplomatic freeze experienced during the preceding rule of Prime Minister Koizumi Junichirō (2001–2006).

The main argument presented here is that PM Abe perceives China — with its rising economic clout, international aspirations, and increasingly assertive behavior — not only as a challenge to Japan's identity as a peaceful tier-one country, but also as a contestation of its role as the regional economic leader and *the* representative of Asia in the global community. The consequence of all this is to rob Japan of its purpose in the international arena. The uncertainty stemming from this development promotes a more proactive role taking approach by Japan, reflected in PM Abe's bold foreign policy behavior. The shift in the power balance between Japan and China brought about by the former's declining economic situation and the latter's economic as well as political ascent in the global arena have necessitated the adjustment and redefining of Japan's international role. In the case of the second PM Abe administration, this is being done by way of increasing emphasis on normative leadership and by enhancing the country's military capabilities. It has also prompted attempts to modify the standards of the international community concerning what constitutes the appropriate role performance of a leader, specifically in a way that makes this role more compatible with Japan's position and less feasible for China. The article demonstrates that the process of promoting and taking the role of

“proactive contributor to peace” for Japan, as advocated by PM Abe, and resting on the country’s democratic credentials is intrinsically linked to the purposefully negative representation of China that has surfaced during his second period in office. This marks a strong departure from the more engaging approach taken in 2006–2007.

The article has two main objectives. First, it aims to add to the growing — yet still small — body of research that applies role theory to the explanation of Japan’s international relations and behavior. Despite its successful introduction into the general Foreign Policy Analysis and International Relations scholarship in the 1970s, so far not many scholars have looked into the application of role theory to this particular subject. However there does now seem to be a growing academic community focusing on applying this particular approach to China (see, for example, Gottwald and Duggan 2011; Harnisch et al. 2015). Regarding Japan, the most prominent such attempts are, to the best of our knowledge, those represented by the works of Edström (2004), Catalinac (2007), Sakaki (2013), Maslow (2015), and Hirata (2016). Edström presents a comparative analysis of Japan’s foreign policy doctrine before and after 1993, drawing on role theory concepts to explain the changes in it. Catalinac (2007), in turn, focuses on Japan’s different policy responses to the Gulf War and the War in Iraq, while Sakaki (2013) ventures into a cross-country comparison discussing the evolution of foreign policy in Japan and Germany respectively. Finally, Maslow (2015) and Hirata (2016) both highlight Japan’s security policy as a particularly fruitful area for role theory application. While Hirata chooses an internal angle by discussing domestic role contestation of Japanese security policy, Maslow investigates rather the China–Japan role relationship. He demonstrates how historical roles such as victim/aggressor and partner/rival (Maslow 2016: 190), as well as recent role-taking behavior in regional institution building and with regard to territorial demarcation, shape Sino–Japanese relations and nurture their increasing securitization. This article expands on the latter approach and discusses in more detail the evolution of PM Abe’s China policy, highlighting and explaining both change and continuity between his first and second prime ministerships.

Although this study is firmly embedded within the role theory framework and consequently uses the corresponding terminology thereof, the general approach — as well as the findings — are actually closely related to the arguments of recognition theorists and of other scholars working within the broader identity theory framework (e.g. Gustafsson 2015, 2016; Schulze 2015). In fact all these approaches seem to share a very similar and highly overlapping set of concepts that sometimes differ in name only, making it extremely difficult to classify the various contributions. A good indication for this lack of differentiation is the general “concept permeability” existing between these thought schools (e.g. Maslow 2015: 190). Thus, the second objective of this article is to encourage further dialogue between role theory and

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identity approaches in order to move forward toward a more integrated and consistent theoretical framework.

### Theoretical arguments

Role theory originates in the social sciences, and was adopted into FPA and IR scholarship in the 1970s. Broadly speaking, it is designed to study and explain human attitudes and behavior within a given social framework. It builds on a dramaturgical metaphor whereby *roles* are understood to be social positions that provide the individuals occupying them with a certain set of associated characteristics and behavioral patterns that are supposed to guide their actions within an organized group (Solomon et al. 1985; Thies 2010). Although the *role enactment* (sometimes also referred to as *role performance*) — meaning the actual displayed attitudes and behavior — may vary depending on the individual performing the role, there have to be some collectively agreed upon standards as to what constitutes appropriate role performance. These standards are constantly being produced and reproduced through the interactions between the different members of the group, as well as with outside observers (Solomon et al. 1985: 102). Therefore, roles are not static. They are in fact responsive to the actor's as well as the respective group's visions and needs, and thus evolve with time.

An actor's role performance is based on their understanding of the role that they are supposed to play, the *role conception*. That includes an idea about what kind of role they should assume, as well as the way in which this particular role needs to be performed. Role conceptions are formed when taking into consideration the actor's own expectations concerning their purpose and function within the group (*ego expectations*) and the expectations that they believe the other members of the group to have (*perceived alter expectations*) (Elgström and Smith 2006: 5). However, not all alter expectations are equally important. Those partners of interaction whose expectations matter most for the actor's role conception and performance are considered *significant others*. The choice or constitution of a significant other is often based on past experiences (Harnisch 2011: 12) and reflects the material interests as well as the immaterial "needs" that derive from the actor's identity (Wendt 1999: 328). According to relational identity and recognition theories, identities — just as with roles — are constructed through interaction with others. By stressing sameness with or difference from others (including the past self), the current self creates a narrative account of who it is — which in turn determines the agent's chosen behavior. This narrative has to be recognized by others in order for an agent to be able to act confidently. If this recognition is denied, the identity cannot be stabilized — and is then reconstructed until recognition is eventually achieved (Gustafsson 2015: 120–121). However while identities focus on the *being* alone, roles — and consequently also role conceptions — rather emphasize the

*function* and *purpose* of an actor within a particular group. The same roles can thus be assumed by different actors, and they may actually *compete* over particular roles.

Moreover roles often need *complementary* or *commensurate roles* that support their function, and *counter roles* to defend their purpose (Thies 2016: 98). The role of a leader, for instance, is meaningless unless it is complemented by followers, as much as the role of a defender is only feasible if there is someone to take on the counter role of the aggressor. Actors can use this particular nature of roles to manipulate the other actors' *role taking* (meaning the assuming of a particular role). This strategy is referred to as *altercasting*. It can be understood as the process of "projecting an identity [or a particular role in role theory terms], to be assumed by other(s) with whom one is in interaction, which is congruent with one's own goals" (Weinstein and Deutschberger 1963, quoted in Thies 2016: 98). Thereby the agent may either explicitly prompt the alter to adopt a certain role or, more subtly, take on a role that requires counter or commensurate role taking by the alter (Thies 2016: 98). While altercasting may only be directed toward a bilateral relationship, *socialization* implies the internalization of behavioral rules or standards that apply for a particular role as set by a certain group (Harnisch 2011: 13). To "educate" the newcomer the group (or a designated member of the group who is performing the role of "teacher") may resort to immaterial persuasion and/or use material reinforcement (Harnisch 2011: 13), in the sense of adopting a "carrot and stick" approach. Socialization and altercasting are two prominent means of active external role modification that may induce *role change*. This adaptation is usually preceded by internal or external *role contestation*, and is often closely linked to the destabilization and possible reconstruction of established identities. Thus "the relationship between roles and identities [is] a two-way process that reflects the reciprocity of agent and structure" (Nabers 2011: 83), whereby the actor's identity determines his role conception — while the roles that he actually performs reflect back on his identity, by shaping the recognition of others.

By providing the additional dimension of function/purpose to the framework used by other constructivist approaches to Japan's international relations, role theory offers some new insights into the underlying dynamics of PM Abe's China policy. Particularly, it helps us to better identify and understand the shift occurring between his first and second tenures of office. It may also contribute to the development of a broader and more consistent theoretical framework, as it can arguably help to bridge the gap between agency and structure by simultaneously acknowledging the importance of both individual beliefs and actions as well as structural needs and constraints.

## **Research methods**

The empirical data used for the purpose of this study is gathered from official statements delivered by PM Abe during his first and second periods in office (2006–

2007, 2012–present) as well as from the Diplomatic Bluebooks that cover the analyzed years. Overall, over 20 speeches were analyzed for the purpose of this article. The chosen policy speeches deal with political, security, and diplomatic matters, providing information on PM Abe's role conception in regard to Japan and his perceptions of and attitudes toward China. Additionally the article also refers to a book published by Abe Shinzō in 2006, entitled *Toward a Beautiful Country* (*Utsukushii kuni e*), as a source of empirical data. The rationale behind this decision is that analysis of foreign policy speeches delivered by members of political elites allows us to collect information on — or at least indications of — how they perceive and reflect on the “behavior, functions, and responsibilities of their country” (Sakaki 2013: 7). Moreover, it also provides insight into their (declared) understanding and evaluation of the conduct of other states.

Methodologically speaking, the presented study draws on (qualitative) content analysis. In broad terms, content analysis can be described as “any technique for making inferences by systematically and objectively identifying special characteristics of the message” (Holsti, quoted in Sasaki 2013: 18). In this article, a qualitative content analysis approach is used to provide a subjective interpretation of analyzed texts and their meaning — through the identification of themes relevant to our chosen research problem (Hsieh and Shannon 2005: 1278).

First, we focus on identifying any recurring themes concerning PM Abe's role conception for Japan and his assessment of China's behavior within the international community. Here, we also pay close attention to the broader sociopolitical context and circumstances in which a given statement was delivered. Second, we concentrate on investigating the presence (or absence) of any specific expectations (or already existing characteristics that are based on specific expectations) enumerated by PM Abe when addressing the matter of Japan's role in the world and China's conduct. Third, we present broad categories that capture the national role conception for Japan and perceptions of China as voiced by PM Abe. These categories are not predefined, rather emerging only from analysis of the empirical data (following an inductive approach; see Mayring 2000). On the basis of our findings, we proceed to critically evaluate the meaning of PM Abe's political communication acts through role theory lenses.

The first dimension of our analysis aims to present how PM Abe perceives and defines Japan's role within the international community, including the issue of how the current representations of “self” are linked to both the past and to the aspired to future. This part of the paper also briefly addresses changes in Japan's international environment and the alter expectations of the United States toward its ally as factors reinforcing the role-taking drive of PM Abe's current administration. The second analytical dimension demonstrates PM Abe's own understanding of China's behavior in the wider international arena, and addresses in greater detail the question

of how it affects Japan's role taking in both the East Asia region and the world at large.

## **Prime Minister Abe Shinzō and his national role conception for Japan**

### **Japan as a “poster child” for democratic transition and responsible membership of the international community**

The picture of postwar Japan that emerges from PM Abe's speeches is largely a story of success and pride in the nation's ability not only to rebuild itself but also to become one of the leading democratic players in both East Asia and the world at large (e.g. Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet [Kantei] 2007b, 2013a, 2015a, 2015b, and 2015e). This particular narrative account provides normative and ideational grounding, as well as discursive support for PM Abe's role conception of Japan being a proactive contributor to peace (as discussed in detail below). As such, it merits a brief elaboration.

Especially poignant assertions concerning Japan's success and leadership credentials, ones relevant to PM Abe's role conception for Japan, were presented in his widely publicized speech that was delivered on the highly significant occasion of the 70th anniversary of the Asia-Pacific War, in August 2015. In his speech, PM Abe underlined Japan's successful modernization efforts in the 19th century, the country's ability to resist Western colonialism, and the fact that “Japan built a constitutional government earlier than any other nation in Asia” (Prime Minister of Japan and his Cabinet [Kantei] 2015d). This, of course, is supposed to distinguish Japan from the other East Asian countries that summarily failed to do so, and to testify to Japan's superior capabilities at this particular point in time. The bitter lessons of the war, in turn, became a foundation on which “a free and democratic country abided by the rule of law” and its deep commitment to never again waging a war was built. The experiences of war and defeat have also strengthened Japan's commitment to upholding international norms and values. PM Abe proclaimed that: “Japan will continue to firmly uphold the principle that any disputes must be settled peacefully and diplomatically based on the respect for the rule of law and not through the use of force, and to reach out to other countries in the world to do the same.” Furthermore, he strongly reasserted his country's commitment to “unyielding values” of freedom, democracy, and human rights and pledged that Japan will cooperate with other nations that subscribe to these values (Prime Minister of Japan and his Cabinet [Kantei] 2015d).

The latter points can be read not only as an affirmation of Japan's commitment to international norms and values, in other words as an expression of it being a responsible member of the international community, but also as a thinly veiled jab at China. The current PM Abe administration pursues “values-oriented diplomacy”

focused on freedom, democracy, human rights, and the rule of law, painstakingly underlining that these principles have consistently guided its role-taking behavior over the years. This, naturally, draws attention to the differences between Japan and its important authoritarian other, mainland China — with its increasingly assertive manner of pursuing its interests, including territorial claims. We will return to this particular matter later in the article.

### **Japan as a tier-one country and “proactive contributor to peace”**

When in December 2012 the Liberal Democratic Party took over the reins of power from the Democratic Party of Japan, PM Abe received a second chance to put forward and implement his agenda concerning the boosting of Japan's international profile. During his first term as Japanese Prime Minister (2006–2007), his basic policies included a number of items pertaining to strengthening the country's diplomatic standing. Yet, despite the whirlwind of diplomatic activity, the majority of his political capital and time in office were spent on domestic struggles over the shape of education and efforts to construct a basis for the revision of Article 9. In 2006 PM Abe spoke about creating a “beautiful Japan” (Prime Minister of Japan and his Cabinet [Kantei] 2006a) “[...] that is trusted, respected, and loved in the world, and *which demonstrates leadership*” (Prime Minister of Japan and his Cabinet [Kantei] 2006c, italics added for emphasis). Strengthening the US–Japan alliance for the benefit of Asia as well as improving relations with China and the Republic of Korea were encompassed in this larger vision of Japan promoted by PM Abe (Prime Minister of Japan and his Cabinet [Kantei] 2006a). Consequently, in 2006 PM Abe spoke about the necessity for Japan to practice “proactive diplomacy” in international affairs, the country's obligations toward the region and the world, and the need to exercise leadership (Prime Minister of Japan and his Cabinet [Kantei] 2006b).

This attests to the fact that already during his first term in power PM Abe had envisioned the greater involvement of Japan in international affairs, thus charting a bolder course for his foreign policy. Yet, due to PM Abe's short time in power his ability to engage in role taking and enact foreign policy steps concomitant with the role that he conceived for his country was ultimately limited. Furthermore, as will be demonstrated later, the first PM Abe administration did not engage in the repeated altercasting of China and the discursive pressing of it into a counter role — one that could serve as a negative case against which a more robust national role conception for Japan could be favorably compared.

During the years separating the two PM Abe's administrations structural changes in Japan's international environment led to an increase in uncertainty about Japan's international position and role. According to Gustafsson (2016: 2), a (perceived) loss of status resulting from the belief that the other's claim to a certain key identity has become similarly strong or even stronger than one's own claim is a scenario that



results in an increased level of anxiety. This in turn prompts the agent to take actions intended to reduce said anxiety to a more acceptable level. This assertion helps to explain the shift in PM Abe's foreign policy toward China, which will be discussed in detail in due course.

For now, however, let us briefly outline the key changes occurring in Japan's international environment. In the years between 2007 and 2012, China overtook Japan as the world's second-largest economy (2010/2011) and its centrality to Asia's economic affairs in terms of trade and production links grew steadily — at the expense of Japan. Additionally, China's influence in global economic governance increased in the wake of the 2008 global financial crisis, despite the fact that it was Japan who had demonstrated a high level of diplomatic and financial commitment to shoring up the global economy by making substantial contributions to the International Monetary Fund (Duggan and Szczepanska 2016). Furthermore China became increasingly assertive in handling territorial conflicts in the South China Sea and in pursuing claims to the Senkaku (Diaoyu) Islands, which PM Abe's administration has perceived as indisputably Japanese territory.

These recent economic and geopolitical shifts have produced a new international environment, one wherein Japan's former roles are now being contested. China is thus now competing for the same, or at least very similar, positions and functions within the international community that Japan is, thus making PM Abe anxious regarding his country's future purpose in regional and global affairs. This in turn has resulted in the further crystallization of PM Abe's role conception for Japan and provided a strong impulse for the country's more proactive role taking in its foreign policy behavior. Crucially, signals coming from the US — Japan's most important significant other — concerning its expectations of its East Asian ally have served to further reinforce role-taking behavior on the side of PM Abe's current administration.

In his speech entitled *Japan is back*, which was delivered in February 2013 at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) in Washington, PM Abe expressed clearly what sort of functions, in his opinion, Japan must play internationally. These were specified as “*rules promoter, a commons' guardian, and an effective ally and partner to the US and other democracies*” (MOFA 2013a, italics added for emphasis), and delineated the PM's ambitious role conception for Japan and the country's envisaged purpose as an actor within the international community. In this manner, PM Abe took the opportunity to respond to those who questioned Japan's role in contemporary world affairs.

In August 2012 Joseph Nye and Richard Armitage published a new report reviewing the current state of the US–Japan alliance and its importance for stability in Asia. This report issued by the two influential figures within US foreign policy circles contains useful information on the alter expectations of alliance managers toward Japan. In the report, they ask a pertinent question regarding the subject of Japan's

role and standing in the world — which were eroded by two decades of economic difficulties and weak domestic political leadership. In short, Armitage and Nye muse whether Japan is (still) a “tier-one nation,” a classification that they understand to apply to those states that “have significant economic weight, capable military forces, global vision, and [that have] demonstrated leadership on international concerns” (2012: 1). They ask rhetorically whether “Japan desires to continue to be a tier-one nation, or is she content to drift into tier-two status” and warn that their “recommendations for the alliance depend on Japan being a full partner on the world stage.” Armitage and Nye looked at Japan and found it deficient as an ally of the US (labeling it a “time of drift” for the alliance) and felt it necessary to remind Japan’s leaders of what is expected of their country, indicating that they need to step up their game in a number of areas in order to remain a reliable partner for the US and indeed for other countries. As the report was written and published under the auspices of the CSIS, during his speech PM Abe categorically stated that “Japan is not, and will never be, a tier-two country” (Ministry Of Foreign Affairs [MOFA] 2013a). Hence, as noted earlier, the US’ alter expectations toward Japan’s international role have added urgency to the task of promoting both a robust role conception for Japan and the strengthened role-taking drive of PM Abe’s administration. As Pyle rightly observes, “thanks in good part to growing Chinese assertiveness” the second PM Abe government has been “more amenable to American policy” (2012).

PM Abe’s conception for Japan’s enhanced role in the international arena has been neatly brought together under the already cited term of “proactive contributor to peace.” This phrase first appeared in the National Security Strategy that was formally adopted by the Japanese government in December 2013, which delineated directions for the country’s foreign and security policies. According to this document:

Japan will continue to adhere to the course that it has taken to date as a peace-loving nation, and as a major player in world politics and economy, contribute even more proactively in securing the peace, stability, and prosperity of the international community, [...] as well as peace and stability in the Asia-Pacific region (Cabinet Secretariat 2013: 4).

Since then, the role conception of Japan as a proactive contributor to peace was promoted on multiple occasions and in various forums, including the 13th IISS Asian Security Summit Shangri-La Dialogue meeting in May 2014, where PM Abe promoted his vision for Japan’s enhanced leadership role among other Asian nations. During this event, he strongly underlined Japan’s commitment to a peaceful and prosperous Asia — as well as to protecting the rule of law (MOFA 2014a).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This particular trope of Japan’s long-term commitment to Asia and its peaceful development regularly appears in a number of other speeches delivered by PM Abe (see MOFA 2013b and Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet [Kantei] 2014).

In sum, the current Japanese administration intends to strengthen the country's credentials and position within the international community through advancing PM Abe's role conception for Japan as a proactive contributor to peace. The country's postwar success and respect for international norms and values are repeatedly invoked so as to boost this claim to leadership and, at the same time, positively distinguish Japan from China, which is represented as increasingly revisionist and a potential threat to the existing international order.

### **Prime Minister Abe Shinzō's perceptions of and approaches to China**

So far, Japan's perception of China in the 21st century has been dominated by a sharp sense of threat — one derived from China's rapid economic growth and the accompanying increase in its regional and global political power. Consequently Japan is highly skeptical about China's increasingly active participation in global governance. According to Shin'yo (2015: 44, 52, 81, 107), a former Japanese ambassador to the United Nations (2006–2008), China is shirking its global responsibilities and engaging in rent-seeking activities instead, which makes its contributions inherently untrustworthy. Albeit in less drastic words — for obvious reasons — the annual Diplomatic Bluebooks of the MOFA paint a rather similar picture. While formally acknowledging its neighbor's efforts to contribute to global society, Japan's administration continuously criticizes China for its lack of compliance with international rules, standards, and norms, for its Official Development Assistance (ODA) policy, as well as for the lack of transparency in its military's modernization and increase in defense spending (MOFA 2007b: 5, 2008: 4).

The escalation of the territorial conflict surrounding the Senkaku Islands in 2012 arguably enhanced this threat perception, shifting the focus toward security issues. The souring of the Sino–Japanese relationship in the aftermath thereof is reflected by the stronger and more explicit criticism made in more recent Diplomatic Bluebooks. They point out that “China's moves to strengthen its military capabilities without sufficient transparency and its increased maritime activities are causing concern in the entire region” (MOFA 2014c: 12), and insist that China needs to “exercise self-restraint over its ongoing unilateral attempts to change the status quo” (MOFA 2015c: 188). Its lack of compliance is further emphasized by highlighting Chinese Premier Li Keqiang's specific rhetoric used in the *Report on the Work of the Government* in 2014. According to this document, China expresses “great determination” to follow its “vested interests,” “stick to [its] development path, social system, cultural traditions and values,” and strive for a “rule of law with Chinese characteristics” (MOFA 2015c: 47–48).

The main source of worry in this context is arguably the growing anxiety about the impact this development might have on Japan's own role(s) within the international

community. According to Gustafsson (2016: 7), anxiety functions as a driver of change by pushing actors to redefine previously stable identities. This redefinition process is also closely related to adjustments made in the national role conception, of which identity constitutes an important part, and consequently in role-taking behavior too. Thereby, the higher the degree of incongruity between the actor's original role conception and the structure provided by international environment then the higher the level of anxiety and the bigger the pressure to induce change will be.<sup>2</sup>

With its relative economic decline, Japan is no longer able to preserve its regional leadership by the same means as before. China's economy, on the other hand, remains relatively strong even despite the recent slowdown; its engagement in development assistance is growing meanwhile, thereby enhancing its influence in what Japan conceives to be its own backyard. Simultaneously trade patterns are shifting. While in 1996 "China accounted for 8.2 percent of Japanese foreign trade [and] Japan [...] accounted for over 20 percent of Chinese foreign trade" (O'Shea 2015: 558), the pattern reversed after 2003 — paving the way for China's irrevocable breakout of the carefully groomed "flying geese" pattern (see Hook et al. 2012: 228). China's economic success also triggered a surge of interest therein from the US and the European Union, making it clear that Japan is no longer considered the only "gateway to Asia." Shin'yo (2015: 16) describes his time spent as ambassador to Germany (2008–2012) "in the shadow of the China boom" as "frustrating." During this period Japan arguably experienced a notable surge in anxiety that resulted not only in the increasing securitization of Sino–Japanese relations but also in a general tightening up of the second PM Abe administration's foreign policy. Drawing on its new found economic statecraft China has grown to contest Japan's roles as "regional economic developer" and "mediator between Asia and 'the West'," thereby prompting Japan to pursue more active role-taking behavior (as reflected by the Abe administration's role conception in the previous part of this article) in order to clarify its function and preserve its purpose within international society. At the same time, Japan also now seeks to manipulate China's new role-taking behavior in such a way that it no longer conflicts with the role conception that the Japanese government has for its own country.

### **China as a rising power and challenging newcomer to international society**

The fact that PM Abe's new comprehensive book on his political thought *Atarashi kuni e* [*Toward a New Country*], published in 2013, is mostly a reprint of his earlier work *Utsukushi kuni e* [*Toward a Beautiful Country*] from 2006 seems to indicate

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2 Gustafsson (2016: 8) essentially presents the same argument from the perspective of identity theory. Here, this approach was adapted to fit the role theory framework.

that both his role conception for Japan as well as his perceptions of and expectations toward other states have not changed through the years. However, a close review of his public statements and behavior in fact suggest a shift in dealing with the “China problem” over time. In his first administration period of 2006 to 2007, PM Abe seemed to make serious attempts to socialize Japan’s neighboring state by establishing the bilateral ties that presumably would permit it to positively influence China’s role taking, steering the latter toward the needs and expectations of the US-led international society. In order to achieve that, PM Abe not only refrained from making controversial visits to the Yasukuni Shrine but also launched cooperation initiatives between the rival states concerning the history issues — most notably the Japan–China Joint History Research Committee. Thereby he made sure to present himself as the initiator and main driving force behind the reconciliation process. “*I suggested and we agreed that we shall raise our bilateral relations to a mutually beneficial cooperative relationship, and we agreed to conduct joint studies on history issues. By so doing, we would like to further deepen mutual understanding between Japan and China*” (MOFA 2006, italics added for emphasis).

It is noteworthy that during this period he largely avoided making both explicit as well as implicit accusations about China in his public proclamations. Instead, he focused on the strategic importance of China for Japan, stressing the need to improve neighborly relations. China is thus described as “extremely important for the Asian region and the international community” (Prime Minister of Japan and his Cabinet [Kantei] 2006c). The mentioning of China along with Japan’s other neighboring states in the policy speeches given before the Diet, as well as emphasizing its key participation in solving issues concerning North Korea (see Prime Minister of Japan and his Cabinet [Kantei] 2006c), further reinforces Japan’s seeming perception of China as a member of regional society. Rather than openly talking about a China threat, even (or precisely) in the context of criticism, PM Abe chose to characterize that state’s rise instead as an opportunity (see MOFA 2007a; Prime Minister of Japan and his Cabinet [Kantei] 2007a). He made it clear, however, that this “opportunity” rested on the premise of the successful socialization of the rising power.

We need to pay close attention to the future of this nation. *And we should continue to have dialogue with the Chinese government for increased responsibility it can share with us to improve the regional security environment.* Partners sharing fundamental values should enhance cooperation to this end (MOFA 2007a, italics added for emphasis).

### **China as the regional troublemaker and Japan's antagonist in international society**

By the time he takes up the office of prime minister for the second time in 2012 Abe’s approach to China has clearly changed. One very likely reason for that is the major escalation of tensions within Sino–Japanese relations during the preceding

five years, which essentially put him even further back than to square one. Hughes comments that PM Abe appeared “to have little energy compared to 2006 to devote to engaging with these neighbors [China and South Korea]” (2015: 81). In addition, China has by now become the world's second-largest economy, has overtaken Japan in terms of military spending, and is pursuing its national interests with a rapidly growing assertiveness. Japan, on the other hand, continues to struggle. The Japanese economy has been hit relatively hard by the financial crisis of 2008 and, as mentioned earlier, despite its efforts to contribute to global recovery through international forums such as the IMF, it has not been able to counter China's rising influence (and subsequently its own relative decline) in the domain of global economic governance.

Against this background, it is probably safe to say that the increasing strictness of Abe's behavior in respect to China stems largely from an enhanced sense of crisis. While being actively encouraged to keep up its role as the regional leader by its most significant other, the USA, Japan's leverage to socialize its neighbor in a way that does not interfere with this role conception appears weaker than in 2006 and 2007. This perceived loss of capability relative to the soaring alter expectations is, then, most likely what prompted PM Abe's administration to shift to a more uncompromising approach vis-à-vis China.

The second Abe administration has dedicated its efforts to the encirclement of China in the security as well as economic arenas by expanding and enriching Japan's own security and economic networks. All in all, PM Abe appears to have shifted away from his initial socializing strategy vis-à-vis China. Instead, he is now altercasting China into an antagonist role by presenting Japan as the victim of China's unjustified aggression and of the betrayal of their mutually beneficial partnership. In his keynote speech to the Shangri-La Dialogue in 2014, PM Abe expressed his regret about the failure to implement the commitments made by both parties during his first period in office. Further, he accentuated his disapproval of the “dangerous encounters by fighter aircraft and vessels at sea” and demonstratively urged the uncooperative neighbor to return to “exchanging smiles as [they] sit down to have discussions” (MOFA 2014a).

On the other hand, he stressed that he himself had “never ceased to pursue” said relationship (MOFA 2013a) and was “looking forward to the day when [he could] have amicable discussions with the leaders of China, an important neighboring country for Japan” (MOFA 2013b). Equally, the Japanese people warmly welcome dozens of Chinese high school students each year who “head back calling Japan their second home” (MOFA 2014a). Although he refrained from explicit criticism of the Chinese public, the implicit reference made to certain well-known and broadly discussed issues — such as China's “patriotic education program,” which is perceived to nurture anti-Japanese sentiment among young Chinese people, or the violent anti-Japan movements of 2012 during which China-based Japanese

companies and other such institutions were repeatedly attacked — is plainly obvious.

This perception of China as the main aggressor in the Sino–Japanese relationship is, of course, not a new one. *Toward a Beautiful Country* already presents a similar account of the two neighbors. Abe (2006: 148–149) argues that Chinese leaders purposefully use anti-Japanese ideology as a replacement for the failed communist ideology. On the other hand, he portrays Japan as “inherently virtuous” — a country patiently trying to reach out to its neighbor and repeatedly apologizing for the course of history. He stresses that, in spite of the aggression on the Chinese side (for instance during the demonstrations of 2005), the Japanese public remains peaceful and friendly, much like the Japanese government is still willing to support China’s development — for example in the field of clean energy (Abe 2006: 150–151, 154–156). While *Toward a Beautiful Country* was meant primarily for a domestic audience, the proclamations of the Japanese prime minister are also invariably scrutinized by the broader international community. Thus, although there has arguably been little change over time in PM Abe’s national role conception for Japan as well as his general perception of China, the more open proclamation of his views in the years since 2012 indicates more proactive role-taking behavior as compared to his first period in office.

PM Abe complements his altercasting of China with attempts to influence alter expectations of other countries in a way that would favor his role aspirations for Japan and counterbalance the role contestation of China. Consequently, he clearly differentiates Japan’s regional leadership from that of China (see also, Gustafsson 2016: 19; Hughes 2015: 80). During his visits to various different countries he has persistently pointed out that Japan’s regional and local involvement entails more than just money and “physical things,” but also develops human resources and fosters “strong ownership within those communities” — cultivating friendships “in which reunions are welcomed with tears 30 years later” (MOFA 2014b).

His emphasis on immaterial benefits seems to implicitly contrast Japan’s commitment with that of China. This impression is further reinforced through the additional emphasis placed on the high quality of Japan’s assistance and goods. PM Abe’s announcement of a “Partnership for Quality Infrastructure” on the occasion of the 21st International Conference on the Future of Asia in 2015 appeared to rival China’s “One Belt, One Road” initiative, offering an alternative to the seemingly prevailing “cheap but shoddy” approach hitherto in Asia (MOFA 2015a; Prime Minister of Japan and his Cabinet [Kantei] 2015c). In this context, and especially against the backdrop of the newly established Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), PM Abe has also attempted to increase Japan’s role in the realm of finance by announcing plans to strengthen and improve the Japan Bank for International Cooperation as well as the Asian Development Bank. Again, he is ensuring here that Japan is “committed to sharing the responsibility, not just the return” (MOFA

2015b). These efforts to aggressively demarcate and actively promote Japanese engagement in the East Asia region correspond well with PM Abe's proclaimed commitment to upholding international norms and values and his aforementioned national role conception for Japan as a proactive contributor to peace. They seem to be directed toward creating new standards of appropriate role performance regarding leadership, thus helping Japan to regain its competitive advantage and thereby defend its regional role as the leader of development.

## Conclusion

This article has investigated the recent evolution of Japan's stance vis-à-vis China using the example of the two PM Abe administrations (2006–2007, 2012–present), from a role theory perspective, and demonstrated a shift in PM Abe's approach to Japan's neighbor that has been observable ever since he returned to power in 2012. To this end the article has analyzed both Japan's national role conception as conceived by PM Abe and also his perceptions of China, thereby contributing to the better understanding of Japan's foreign policy development in the recent years — and its influence on Sino-Japanese relations. Public statements and speeches made by the first and the second PM Abe administrations were used to divulge their national role conception for Japan, as well as their perception of China's international standing and behavior.

The article has shown that elements of PM Abe's more robust national role conception for Japan were already envisioned during his first term in power; however due to the short period in office he was not in a position to engage more proactively in role taking. During his second term, Japan's national role conception has been spelled out more concretely under the term "proactive contributor to peace" and efforts to successfully perform this particular role have thus been strengthened. Furthermore, there has been a visible change in PM Abe's approach to China. While his first administration strived to socialize the perceived role contender, these attempts seemed to have been discarded by the time he took office in 2012. Instead, PM Abe has chosen second time around different tactics to defend Japan's role. Specifically, by seeking to reshape the shared expectations of the international community toward the (regional) leader and, at the same time, by also altercasting China into a counter role that is not compatible with those expectations. These developments are largely rooted in China's continued rise and in Japan's relative decline during the five years between PM Abe's first and second terms in office, changes complemented by the increasingly explicitly signaled alter expectations of Japan's most significant other, the US. Because of these economic and geopolitical shifts in the international environment, Japan's old routines seem to have gradually ceased to work — forcing it to find different means of legitimization for its role claims. Thus, rather than perceiving the leader as a mere driving force of the regional economy, PM Abe encourages other states to consider as well further



functions — such as the promotion of favorable values. Japan — with its credentials as a responsible member of the community of nations and an exemplary case of successful democratic transition, and with its proven track record of abiding by international law and its commitment to being a proactive contributor to peace — is arguably more suited to fulfilling these than China is.

All in all, PM Abe clearly sees China's behavior as a contestation of Japan's own national role conception. China has been steadily outgrowing its postwar and reform period position in the world, which was largely complementary and commensurate with Japan's roles in the international arena during that time. China has also recently been increasingly infringing on what PM Abe considers to be Japan's territory — literally and figuratively. The rising level of anxiety stemming from these developments has gradually pushed the Japanese leadership toward more proactive and refined role taking. Particularly, a surge in incongruity between Japan's national role conception and the international environment in the five years between PM Abe's first and second period in office can be perceived. As a result, PM Abe has abandoned his earlier attempts to recreate a complementary role for China and instead turned to ascribing a suitable counter role to it in order to reinforce Japan's own newly customized role taking behavior.

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