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# Deconstructing Abe Shinzo's "Take Back Japan" Nationalism

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***Abstract:*** *This study investigates how former Prime Minister Abe Shinzo and his Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) tried to reproduce and reinforce their conservative and nationalist ideologies from 2012 to 2020. Conducting critical discourse analysis on official statements, speeches, and remarks at press conferences highlights the strategies that Abe and his sympathizers used to promote and legitimize the idea of "Take back Japan (Nippon wo torimodosu)." This study also elucidates the implications of the party's efforts to reproduce and disseminate its campaign slogan in official narratives.*

***Keywords:*** *Nationalism, Abe Shinzo, LDP, Take back Japan, ideology, hegemony*


## Introduction

In early January 2013, Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzo and members of his Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) kicked off their first meeting of the year by proudly singing the national anthem *Kimigayo*, known for its lyrics honoring the Emperor. Campaigning on the slogan "Take back Japan (*Nippon wo torimodosu*)," the LDP scored a decisive victory in the 2012 Lower House election despite winning 1 million votes less than when it lost power in 2009 and went on to win the 2013 Upper House election. The conservative LDP, which Abe asserted was "a party that can stoutly sing *Kimigayo* at the start of business" (*Reuters* 2013), "took back" power from the liberal opposition Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ). The DPJ, once seen as a progressive alternative to the LDP, lost its popularity after struggling with managing the impact of the global economic recession, natural and nuclear disaster, and tensions with regional neighbors (Pope 2017).

The LDP's (2012) campaign platform "Take back Japan: Core Policies 2012," emphasized the reconstruction of local regions affected by the Great East Japan Earthquake and nuclear disasters in 2011, rejuvenation of the economy, re-establishment of diplomacy built upon a robust Japan-US alliance, and revival of education that promotes Japan's traditions and history. Significantly, the party presented its vision for a "new" Japan that is strong (*tsuyoi* or *takumashii*), kind (*yasashii*), and proud (*hokoriaru*) At the same time, it emphasized the country is in "crisis (*kiki*)" (LDP 2012). The slogan and vision were not merely powerful catchphrases to win the election and regain



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ruling power. They also reflected the idea of what the nation should look like and how the LDP, the long-dominant party, should show its leadership in building and maintaining a desirable nation (LDP 2012).

"Take back Japan" was anything but a new campaign pledge, and its prototype can be found in Abe Shinzo's books, *Toward a Beautiful Country* (2006) and its second edition *Toward a New Country: Toward a Beautiful Country Complete Edition* (2013). In his books, Abe described his political beliefs and agenda, including constitutional reform, nationalistic/patriotic education, and rewriting Japan's wartime past. He argued that the Postwar Regime (*Sengo Reji-mu)* formed under US Occupation prevented Japan from becoming a strong, autonomous country (Abe 2006). In his view, it was imperative to *revise* the shared vision for his country, particularly among conservative political and opinion leaders. Abe's first term as prime minister from 2006 to 2007 focused on fulfilling his conservative and revisionist political goals of "restoring national pride" (Abe 2006).

The content of Abe's 2013 book was identical to the original 2006 edition except for the newly added preface and epilogue. This new edition nevertheless tried to clarify the meaning of the slogan "Take back Japan." According to Abe, the slogan not only meant taking back Japan from the DPJ government; it urged "a battle to take back the country of Japan from post-war history by the hands of the Japanese people" (Abe 2013, translation by Dian 2015, 365). Despite his focus on revising the Postwar Regime (or history) this aspect was obscured and marginalized in the party's manifesto. This downplaying of Abe's vision indicates concerns that his ideological agenda would impede consolidation of public support.

Focusing on the discourse of "Take back Japan," this study investigates how Abe and the LDP tried to reproduce and reinforce conservative and nationalist ideologies from 2012 to 2020. The application of critical discourse analysis to official statements, speeches, and remarks at press conferences facilitates understanding of the discursive strategies used in nurturing public support for Abe's ideological agenda. The analysis extends beyond lexical styles to take account of the contextual and structural factors that might shape those discourses. This study also traces the process of mainstreaming the LDP's campaign manifesto.

Abe's comeback and his nationalist/revisionist agenda were often recognized by critics and foreign media as the symbolic revival of prewar imperialism and militarism that would ultimately isolate the country in international society (*Reuter* 2013; Mesmer & Pons 2017; Kingston 2019). However, some media and scholars highlighted Abe's "pragmatic realism," noting that it contributed to Japan's political stability domestically and internationally (Filippov 2017; Johnston & Sugiyama 2020; Nilsson-Wright 2020). How then did Abe and his LDP try to discursively construct and reinforce their nationalist ideology by using the "Take back Japan" slogan?

## *Theoretical/conceptual framework for this study*

Neo-Marxist theorists such as Gramsci (2006 [1930]) and Althusser (1970) critically explained the ways in which the ruling class produces dominant ideas to control people's actions and maintain the status quo without overt coercion in capitalist societies. Gramsci characterized this dominant cultural and political order as hegemony, or cultural hegemony (Zompetti 1997). This study borrows from the works of Stuart Hall and Laclau and Mouffe, who developed the theory/concept of hegemony, to discuss nationalism and national identity as ideologies that are constructed and contested in different times and contexts.



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According to Hall, ideology can be defined as "mental frameworks" and "systems of presentation" that individuals use to understand and interpret the idea of "nation," society, and their lives (Hall 1986; Chan 2012, 366). This approach facilitates understanding of how Abe and the LDP sought to make sense of the nation, society, and culture from 2012 to 2020.

This study also relies heavily on the post-structuralist analytical approach to examining the process in which official narratives are discursively reconstructed for structured totality in different contexts (Laclau & Mouffe 1985; Sutherland 2005; Jacobs 2018). The aim of top-down creation and maintenance of hegemonic interpretation(s) of the nation and nationalism is to achieve *banality*, in other words, to become "common-sense" among the public (Sutherland 2005). Political and social actors face the necessity of constantly reconstructing and reinforcing their discourse because of its contingent nature (Sutherland 2005, 191). The recent rise of nationalist/populist leaders demonstrates how political leaders deploy a discursive strategy aimed at creating and popularizing explicitly nationalistic and even "chauvinistic" ideologies (e.g., "Make America Great Again," "Brazil Above Everything, God Above Everyone," and "India Shining"). Their ideologies have achieved banality among everyday people, mostly due to media amplification (Brubaker 2017; Krämer 2017; Stier et al. 2017).

The "Take back Japan" slogan has much to do with (new) hegemony creation. However, this framework cannot fully explain the ideology that Abe and his LDP propagated. It is also vital to discuss whether there was enough pre-existing consensus that allowed the seemingly new ideology to achieve banality. Although Abe (2013) clarified the slogan in his book, this is not the primary media channel for top-down political messaging. His nationalist/revisionist argument urging "a battle to take back the country of Japan from postwar history by the hands of the Japanese people" (Abe 2013, translation by Dian 2015, 365) can hardly be found in the party's official election manifesto, a gap that complicates Abe's messaging. A nuanced analysis of official statements, speeches, and remarks at press conferences, along with contextual factors, reveals how this gap was overcome.

### *Postwar Japan's identity seeking and "new" nationalism*

In the pre-WWII era, national identity and (ultra)nationalism centered on the ideas of Japan's "uniqueness," racial/ethnic "purity," and "superiority" to the rest of Asia (Lu et al. 2005; Kang 2014; Nagy 2014), playing a crucial role in promoting and rationalizing Imperial Japan's colonial expansion and war across Asia. After the defeat in the Asia-Pacific War, surrender, and US-led democratization and demilitarization, Japan acquired a new identity as a *pacifist* country and sought economic partnership with neighboring countries under American hegemony (Berger 2012; Dian 2015; Glosserman & Snyder 2015). Postwar Japan's foreign policy decision-making was shaped by the Yoshida Doctrine—postwar pacifism and prioritization of economic recovery in the "embrace" of Cold War America (Dower 1999). Importantly, the postwar identity shift did not, however, highlight decolonization and reconciliation with colonized Asia, hindering Japan from becoming a good neighbor in Asia (Berger 2012).

Meanwhile, having experienced the disastrous war driven by (ultra)nationalism, the media and intellectuals in postwar Japan have often used the term nationalism with a negative connotation (Akaha 2008). The general public's anti-war and anti-militarism sentiments have also kept national leaders from overtly promoting nationalism or patriotism (Dower 1999; Iokibe 2005; Kolmaš 2020). Nonetheless,



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it does not mean that Japan and Japanese people in the postwar era lost their sense of national pride altogether, as today's conservative nationalists, including Abe, tend to argue. As McVeigh (2003) argues, ideas of the nation and nationalism were not only diversified but also reconstructed as a complex interplay of economic, ethnic, educational, cultural, and religious nationalisms among different social, economic, and political actors. Therefore, the promotion of nationalistic ideologies in the 1990s, often studied as Japan's neo/new nationalism, was not necessarily a new hegemonic creation but an attempt to integrate those plural nationalisms (Matthews 2003; Penny & Wakefield 2008/2009).

In the 1990s, a hawkish group within the ruling conservative party Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), including Abe Shinzo, Nakagawa Shoichi, and intellectuals close to them sought to reconstruct the idea of Japan as a *normal* country. The original idea of a normal country, or a full-fledged, independent nation that can play a leading role in international society, was promoted by prominent conservative lawmaker Ozawa Ichiro (Komiya 2016, 10-12). Ozawa emphasized the economic and social revitalization of post-WWII Japan and its new responsibilities as a "developed" country (Komiya 2016, 19). Ozawa was responding to criticism of Japan's participation in the Gulf War, sending money rather than troops, and wanted Japan to be able to assume a role in UN peacekeeping missions in order to be eligible to join the UN Security Council.

His vision of a normal country has been embraced and rearticulated by Abe and his cohort, especially after he took office for the first time in 2006. They contested the Postwar Regime, exemplified by the Yoshida Doctrine of security minimalism and Japan's pacifist identity. Their agenda also included war memory remembrance and history education, which they attacked for being "masochistic" and damaging Japan's national pride and reputation (Kim 2014). Abe challenged the widely accepted historical view that recognizes Japan's war/colonial responsibility and expectations that its leaders apologize to the victimized countries (Berger 2012; Lawson & Tanaka 2010). To him, war memory contestation has long been a critical component in the project of "restoring" Japan's national identity, which he often describes as "nation-building (*kunizukuri*)" (Abe 2006, 2013). The core idea is embedded in the "Take back Japan" discourse, even though Abe and his party did not overtly emphasize revisionist historical views in this narrative.

Akaha (2008), conducting an in-depth analysis of conservative intellectuals' accounts, explained that they employed discursive tactics to give postwar pacifism a negative meaning or a nuance of abnormality to legitimize their political goals such as constitutional revision and implementation of patriotic (history) education. They focused on the argument that the Postwar Regime and history education have prevented Japan from becoming a strong, autonomous country that Japanese people can be proud of (Akaha 2008). To these conservatives, constitutional revision is crucial to legitimize Japan's engagement in collective self-defense as a proactive contribution to world/regional peace (Pope 2017). Claiming that patriotism should be taken for granted among "normal" Japanese people, they attempted to mainstream their version of nationalism.

Despite sustained efforts by Abe and likeminded conservatives to shift from a pacifist identity to a "normal" country, success has been elusive. (Kolmaš 2020). Abe has attacked the Yoshida Doctrine and pacifist identity as eroding Japan's autonomy and pride. However, pacifist identity, cultures of anti-militarism, and public sentiments such as fear of war are so deeply embedded that they prevent his nationalist/revisionist project from being



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realized (Kolmaš 2020). Since LDP leaders are aware of those cultural constraints on top-down national identity (re)construction, this study examines how these perceptions are reflected in their discursive strategies.

## Data collection and analysis

First, using the web-based news database Factiva, archived news articles that mentioned the slogan "Take back Japan (*Nippon wo torimodosu*)" published by all news outlets were collected. Since the data size was not manageable, only 625 articles that also included the words "Abe," "LDP (*Jimin-tou*)," or "the Cabinet (*Naikaku*)" were selected. The purpose of the media data collection was to identify who used the slogan or phrase and how they talked about its implications. The data facilitated a preliminary discussion of the national identity (re)construction processes.

To analyze the discursive strategies used to promote "Take back Japan," I collected official documents, including Abe's policy speeches delivered to the National Diet, Abe and his party's official statements (also known as *danwa*), speeches at annual war memorial events and commencement ceremonies of the National Defense Academy, and remarks at press conferences, from 2012, the year of his inauguration, to 2020, when he resigned. These documents were archived by the Prime Minister's Office and the party. The data collection excluded Prime Minister's statements and speeches made outside Japan, for example, during the United Nations' assembly and international visits/conferences. While it recognizes the significance of foreign policy for national identity construction, the study limits the scope to examine how diplomatic objectives, achievements, and losses were (re)framed and communicated to domestic audiences. After reviewing the 261 collected documents, those including the frequent keywords found in Abe's books and campaign pledges, such as "Take back Japan," "take back/bring back," "restore," "normal country," "beautiful country," "pride/proud," were selected for more detailed analysis.

This study examines how Abe and his LDP tried to construct and reinforce their nationalist ideology by using the "Take back Japan" slogan "to reveal the deeper structures and power relations behind the phenomena it investigates" (Akşak 2020, 295). The analysis pays close attention to the discursive strategies employed to represent and legitimize particular national identities while delegitimizing opposing ideas.

## Political and social actors participating in the process

The media coverage indicates that former Prime Minister Abe was the hegemonic actor in the construction of the "Take back Japan" nationalism. He kept repeating the slogan/phrase during party meetings, campaign rallies, and many official settings from his inauguration to the day of resignation. The consistent use of the slogan suggests Abe's confidence about a positive public reception. Other LDP leaders, including Secretary General Ishiba Shigeru (2012-2014), Deputy Secretary General Hagiuda Koichi (2017-2019) and Inada Tomomi (2019-2020), Head of Policy Affairs Research Council Amari Akira (2012) and Motegi Toshimitsu (2016-2017), chanted the slogan at party meetings and their own campaign rallies during and after the 2012 House of Representatives election.

Also, as Amari did on YouTube, some of those leaders tried to reiterate and reinforce Abe's political agenda as a collective goal. But they never went beyond the election manifesto; none of the prominent figures in the party mentioned or articulated Abe and his party's discursive challenge to the Postwar Regime/Yoshida Doctrine. It is also noteworthy that they continued using the slogan even after they



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regained power in the 2012 elections (*Izu Shimbun* 2013; *Shimotsuke Shimbun* 2014). In 2019, Hagiuda claimed that the Abe Cabinet and his party had made progress in "taking back Japan from the 'nightmare-like' DPJ rule and restoring pride and hope" (The House of Representatives 2019). Thus, the slogan was also used to emphasize that the project of "taking back Japan" was an ongoing process in order to legitimize the LDP's continuous rule.

Conservative opinion leaders, including Sakurai Yoshiko (journalist), Momochi Akira (scholar/member of the conservative Japan Conference), Abiru Rui (journalist), and Hasegawa Michiko (philosopher/member of the Japan Conference), shared their views about the political slogan "Take back Japan" and rearticulated it through government-friendly news outlets such as *Sankei Shimbun*. They used the slogan to promote more overt nationalistic and revisionist ideas to complement the LDP's official manifesto that obscures its reactionary agenda. For example, Abiru defended Abe's visit to the Yasukuni Shrine "as a means to take back Japan's national pride" (*Sankei Shimbun* 2013). Sakurai criticized the polices that support women's entry into the workforce as contradicting Abe's vision of restoring a beautiful Japan (*Sankei Shimbun* 2014).

Several opposition lawmakers, such as Shii Kazuo, the head of the Japanese Communist Party, asserted that the slogan promoted a revival of prewar/wartime ideology (Japanese Communist Party 2014). Former Okinawa Governor Onaga Takeshi also questioned "whether Japan (that Abe and LDP tried to take back) would include Okinawa or not" (*Asahi Shimbun* 2015), rebuking the government's ignorance of the military base problem and increasing burden on the prefecture and residents due to the reinforced Japan-US alliance. Liberal and anti-Abe/LDP news media such as *Asahi Shimbun* and its tabloid outlet *Nikkan Sports* (2015) not only criticized the slogan but also appropriated it into, "Take back Japan from the current regime/Abe Shinzo regime." It is also noteworthy that this new "slogan" became a trending hashtag for anti-Abe/LDP users on Twitter. Thus, the slogan and concept of "Take back Japan" were used and reproduced not only by Abe and LDP leaders but also by many government-friendly actors as well as those opposing them. The ambiguity of the catchphrase allowed different ways of (re)articulating the related ideas to either reinforce or challenge the Abe/LDP agenda and legitimacy. This contested space pressured LDP leaders to consolidate their disparate supportive narratives while marginalizing and invalidating counternarratives.

## Discursive strategies

Based on analysis of Abe and the LDP's official statements and speeches, this section elucidates three major discursive strategies used by them to reproduce the idea of "Take back Japan" as a common-sense banality among state actors, the media, and the public.

### *Theme-specific strategy and "gradation of clarity/ambiguity"*

As stated above, the slogan "Take back Japan" did create a certain degree of ambiguity by allowing different interpretations. However, analysis of official statements and policy speeches suggests that this explanation does not necessarily help explain Abe's discursive strategies and his political intentions behind them. He and his party used multiple levels of clarity/ambiguity, or what I call "gradation of clarity/ambiguity" to describe how they would achieve the goal. On the economy, they regularly presented a concrete plan to bring back the country with a strong economy by overcoming the long-term stagnation and deflation. Abe's policy speeches at the Diet



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included the names of new or rebooted institutions dealing with fiscal and economic policy (e.g., the Headquarters for Economic Revitalization and the Council on Economic and Fiscal Policy) and numerical data (e.g., job placement rates of college graduates) to emphasize the structural strengths of his plan as "the only way (*kono michi shika nai*)" to achieve the goal. He invoked two major successes to validate Abenomics: Japan's post-WWII reconstruction (1945-1951) and the era of high economic growth (1955-1973) to provide a more vivid image of hope. These references, evoking older generations' collective memory as well as young people's imagination, reinforced the vision of a restored and "confident" Japan overcoming the stagnation of the Lost Decades. While those accounts emphasized the Japanese people's industriousness, they selectively omitted the US's strategic and structural assistance for postwar Japan's recovery in the context of the Cold War.

In contrast, in the area of education, especially history education, vaguer words and phrases were deliberately chosen to obscure many conservative leaders' core revisionist ideas. Except for a brief mention of revising the criteria for textbook authorization (censorship) in the party's pamphlet, specific policies or systems to realize "education that nurtures respectful attitudes toward (Japan's) culture and history" were excluded from official remarks. Abe presented policies tackling the obvious school-bullying problem as his highest priority, while he focused on emotional or abstract terms such as "pleasure" and "pride" to describe "good" education in general. Unlike its economic policy, LDP's education policy was rarely justified by any numerical data or references to specific historical periods. Patriotic education, especially the promotion of history textbooks that teach positive aspects of Japanese history and challenge the "masochistic" views of war history, has been Abe's and many other conservative leaders' primary concern. To avoid a public backlash, these prominent advocates of historical revisionism deliberately obscure their patriotic education agenda to avoid evoking memories of wartime Japan.

### *Utilization of crisis rhetoric and sensationalism*

Throughout his eight years in power, Abe kept emphasizing the notion that the country is in the middle of a crisis or crises. From 2012 to 2014, the two phrases "critical situations (*kikiteki jo-kyo*)" and "breakthrough the crisis (*kiki toppa*)" were frequently used to signify what he framed as DPJ failures and LDP leadership in managing challenges and strengthening Japan. In his policy speech at the beginning of the 183rd Session of the Diet on January 28, 2013, Abe also described the declining confidence among the people as the greatest crisis confronting Japan. In emphasizing the significance of restoring confidence and pride, he stated:

> *The most important thing is to restore pride and confidence in yourself, is it not?... Let us share a readiness to break through the crises confronting us here and now and carve out our future* (translation by the Prime Minister's Office).

This tactical use of crisis rhetoric aimed not only to sensationalize political issues and problems facing the nation but also to reproduce the sense of crisis and urgency as a shared emotion among the general public. In these two years, LDP leaders took advantage of the opportunities to directly blame their predecessors for the political turmoil and economic stagnation that prevailed following the 2011 natural and nuclear disasters, shifting



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the collective gaze from the stagnation and growing inequalities that caused the LDP's ouster from power in 2009.

During the subsequent period from 2014-2016, Abe shifted emphasis to diplomatic and international "crises," including Japan's territorial conflicts with China and North Korea's missile launches. Abe reiterated that Japan had been deprived of the right to proactively tackle these "crises" due to the constraints of its pacifist constitution, specifically Article 9, on Japan's armed forces and the exercise of collective self-defense (CSD). The LDP had issued a draft revised constitution in 2012 aimed at lifting those constraints. From 2014 Abe and his party pushed constitutional revision and the exercise of the right of CSD, under the slogan "proactive pacifism." Their discursive strategy became prominent, particularly in the cabinet decision on reinterpreting Article 9 to allow for the exercise of CSD (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2014; Kingston 2012/2014). Abe's remarks at several SDF-related events employed the metaphor of "raging sea (*arekuruu umi*)" to signify and dramatize the threats and challenges to the country's territory posed by its neighboring countries.

The narrative of gathering crisis/ persisted even after the Diet passed the so-called Legislation for Peace and Security (CSD legislation) in September 2015 that provided a legal basis for Japan to fulfill greatly expanded military obligations under the new US-Japan Defense Guidelines announced earlier that year. At the press conference on September 25, 2017, right before the House of Representatives election, Abe first argued that the country's aging population and low birthrates constituted the primary national crisis (*kokunan*) in addition to North Korea's missile program. It is important to note here that although both *kiki* (used before 2016) and *kokunan* (used after 2017) can be translated into crisis, *kokunan* usually describes more serious and disastrous situations than *kiki*, such as war and natural disasters. Thus, crisis rhetoric was deployed by Abe in different contexts, depending on the political goals and needs at the time, to rationalize and re-legitimize the LDP's policy agenda, especially proactive pacifism.

### *Us/them dichotomy and invalidation of "criticism"*

At a 2017 campaign rally in Akihabara, a video of Abe condemning vocal hecklers in the audience, "Everyone, we must not be defeated by such people!" went viral. (Okabe et al. 2017). This rhetoric of othering opponents and detractors, especially targeting the DPJ, can also be found in many of Abe's official statements and speeches. At Abe's inaugural press conference on December 26, 2012, and in the new year's press conference on January 4, 2013, Abe repeatedly mentioned political turmoil/chaos and stagnation "caused" by the DPJ's "wrong" leadership. He continued by emphasizing that his party represented people's expectations to end the situation (created by DPJ rule). In the specific area of education policy, the party argued that it was impossible for the DPJ to implement a "genuine (*shin-no*)" reform because of the influence of the leftist Teachers' Union in the party (LDP 2012). Putting aside the validity of the accusation, the wording was chosen to stress that the LDP was the only party capable of truly reforming Japan's education system. This us/them approach to policy debates prevailed under Abe, a deliberate tactic of fostering simple dichotomies to mobilize support.

Blaming political rivals are common strategies in democracies but under Abe the LDP leadership continued to invoke the failures of the DPJ (2009-2012) even after the party collapsed and fractured in 2016. The dichotomy between the conservative LDP as the symbol of stability versus liberal opposition forces as the



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symbol of chaos and disruption was used to rationalize one-party dominance and the existing power balance between them. In addition, emphasizing the LDP's comeback and regaining power also projected the experience as a shared, collective memory of overcoming adversity; thanks to your support we led Japan back from the wilderness of incompetent governance.

Abe portrayed his LDP and its policymaking as pragmatic and realistic while the liberal opposition leadership was portrayed as impractical and idealistic, posturing instead of getting things done. Abe again nurtured public perceptions of a simple dichotomy to denigrate his opponents and portray his policies as the only way to regain power and pride. The words "criticism (*hihan*)" and "to criticize (*hihan-suru*)" were paired with the suffix "*bakari*" that means "-only" or "merely-," to insist that the liberal opposition was "irresponsible" and unable to play a constructive role. As he stated in his policy speech to the 190th Session of the Diet on January 22, 2016:

> *An attitude of spending all one's time simply criticizing, without putting forward any counterproposals, and expecting that everything will 'all work out somehow' is truly irresponsible towards the public. Instead, shall we not pit concrete policies against each other and hold constructive discussions? We, the coalition of the Liberal Democratic Party and Komeito, will never run from such matters. Under a stable political foundation, and upon our major achievements of the past three years, we will resolutely take on challenges, no matter how difficult the issue might be* (translation by the Prime Minister's Office).

In a speech at the Domestic and Foreign Affair Research Council on September 19, 2014, Abe called criticism that "impeded" his major policymaking "baseless arguments" or mere "labeling (*retteru hari*)." The frequent term "labeling," in most cases, has a negative connotation in the Japanese language. It was one of the ways to demonize and marginalize critical voices while avoiding scrutiny of his reactionary agenda. Overall, Abe treated criticism as an annoying obstacle to the LDP's effective policy/decision-making, motivated solely by the desire to undermine "stable" governance, while also attempting to convey his sincere and humble reactions to the persistent criticism. His vilification of opponents mobilized his base and fostered a sense of collective grievance.

## Discussion

This study focuses on the analysis of archived official statements. Future studies should include multimodal political discourse by collecting interviews, social media posts, and other unofficial remarks/comments to understand the top-down reproduction of nationalist ideologies more comprehensively. It is also crucial to investigate the role of mainstream media in reproducing and amplifying nationalist/revisionist propaganda. Finally, public/audience-centered research needs to be conducted not only to examine to what extent the LDP and Abe's promotion of "Take back Japan" was successful or well-accepted among the public but also to see if it was even recognized as nationalist propaganda. Computational analysis of social media (user-generated) discourse can help address the limitations of survey/poll research to better capture how everyday people receive and interpret political messages and how some of them also participate in the reproduction of particular political ideas/ideologies. Audience/reception studies are essential for understanding how and why political leaders



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revise their policies and ways of communicating them to the public in response to public reactions and sentiments.

The language of "Take back Japan" was not merely a political catchphrase but deliberately chosen and reconstructed in different contexts to legitimize the LDP's long-term rule and one-party dominance. Abe and his LDP used the slogan and the crisis rhetoric to create a sense of deprivation and build public support for "new" policies that were a recycling of what the conservative LDP had been pursuing before the DPJ interregnum. The ambiguity of the discourse was, to some extent, tactical; it allowed many different political and social actors, including government-friendly media and the general public, to interpret what needed taking back in their own terms. This discursive strategy sought to conceal the LDP's desire to normalize one-party rule and impose longstanding policy agendas in order to shape national identity. From 2012 to 2020, Abe and his party weaponized the DPJ's perceived failures in coping with the socio-economic fallout of the global economic crisis and the unprecedented natural and nuclear disasters in 2011 (Pope 2017).

Kolmaš (2020) explains that public sentiments can serve as constraints on national identity reconstruction by conservative leaders. Our findings provide some support for this proposition. The gradation of clarity/ambiguity and selective references to history in Abe's official communications indicated that there was a certain incentive for him to use vaguer terms to describe his political agenda and goals in particular areas such as history education. Abe understood that his revisionist history did not resonate with the public and thus remained somewhat reticent to avoid sparking a backlash and become an easy target for those wishing to portray him as a throwback to Japan's wartime leadership. As prime minister in 2006-07, Abe was criticized as being an uncompromising ideologue and left office in disgrace. Learning from that experience, Abe embraced Abenomics and later womenomics, as branding exercises, a product relaunch aimed at softening his hawkish image and showing concern about the public's welfare. Understanding the deep-rooted values and emotions among the public regarding pacifism, Abe sought to instrumentalize such sentiments to gain support for his security agenda by pitching it as proactive pacifism. Repeatedly, in promoting his CSD legislation in 2015, Abe invoked Japan's peaceful intentions and desire to contribute to global peace although the largest demonstrations in Japan since the 1960s protests against renewing the US-Japan Security Treaty suggest that many were not convinced by his rhetoric; polls at the time indicated overwhelming opposition to the CSD legislation.

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