

The Emptiness of Japan's Values Diplomacy in Asia

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Abstract: Although Prime Minister Abe Shinzo repeatedly touted Japan's values-oriented foreign policy in Asia there was little substance to this agenda. Like other nations, Tokyo downplays human rights and democratic values in favor of maintaining trade ties and securing geo-strategic advantage. It is thus a values-free diplomacy of pragmatism and expediency, dealing with regional governments as they are, not as one might wish them to be. Japan is certainly not unique in this regard, but Abe invites scrutiny of the government's record due to his rhetorical grandstanding. Colonial and wartime legacies have made it problematic for Japan to lecture and pressure regional governments on their political systems and practices. Moreover, the escalating rivalry with China for regional influence reinforces Tokyo's hesitation to promote democratic reforms for fear that it will lose clout by driving governments into Beijing's unconditional embrace.

Key Words: Abe Shinzo, Japan, shared values, democratic backsliding, human rights, JICA, human security, Arc of Freedom and Prosperity, Free and Open Indo-Pacific.

Introduction

Although Prime Minister Abe Shinzo (2006-07; 2012-2020) repeatedly touted Japan's values-oriented foreign policy in Asia, there is little substance to this agenda. Like other nations, Tokyo downplays human rights and democratic values in favor of maintaining trade ties and

securing geo-strategic advantage. (Brown and Kingston 2018) It is thus a values-free diplomacy of pragmatism and expediency, dealing with regional governments as they are, not as one might wish them to be.

Japan is certainly not unique in this regard, and takes its cues from Washington, but Abe invites scrutiny of the government's record due to his persistent rhetorical grandstanding on shared values and democracy. (Harris 2020, 130, 198, 223, 304) Just as in his first New Year policy speech back in 2007, at the outset of 2013 Abe emphasized that he would, "develop a strategic diplomacy based on the fundamental values of freedom, democracy, basic human rights and the rule of law." (Kantei 2013). He reiterated this commitment frequently during his premiership, for example in his 2018 New Year policy speech (Kantei 2018a) and in comments at the "Shared Values and Democracy in Asia Symposium" in 2016 (Kantei 2016), and again in 2018, where he called for, "a new era for Asia, an era in which we make freedom, human rights, and democracy our own and respect the rule of law." (Kantei 2018b)

The Asahi Shimbun agreed that, "it is a sensible option for Japan to deepen ties with other countries with which it shares universal values," but added, "Unfortunately, however, the diplomacy of the Abe administration did not come with matching action." (Asahi 2020) In the US, the political obituaries on the Abe era often extol his foreign policy (Ignatius 2020; Cooper and Hornung 2020), but in terms of promoting shared values and democracy in Asia, Abe achieved little beyond empty gestures.

There is considerable tolerance for authoritarian governments and muted criticism of repressive regimes because Tokyo does not want to risk maintaining good ties and strategic interests for the sake of promoting democratic values and civil liberties. Proponents see this as sensible and invoke the principle of non-interference while critics assert that Japan is betraying its ostensible principles in supporting despots and working with illiberal regimes. Flashpoints across contemporary Asia are illuminating about this debate.



Trump, Abe and Modi at 2017 ASEAN Summit

For example, Prime Minister Abe Shinzo is a conservative nationalist who cultivated a close relationship with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi. The potential of the Indian market and the strategic goal of offsetting China's hegemonic ambitions in Asia are driving Japan's embrace of India. Modi has won two elections in the world's largest democracy (2014 and 2019) so at one level Japan's closer ties with India during this period might highlight shared values. However, the Modi government's Islamophobia, the surge of majoritarian intolerance and his remarkable

tolerance for Hindu vigilantes murdering and harassing Muslims, render him an awkward partner. (Kingston 2019) The 2019 crackdowns on Islamic minorities in Kashmir and Assam are more troubling signs of malevolent majoritarianism in India, but the Japanese government has refrained from condemning any of this despite Abe's lavish grandstanding on shared values.

Across the region there are ample opportunities for Tokyo to speak out on behalf of minorities, anti-democratic practices and the shrinking space for civil liberties, but the silence has been deafening. From the 2019 democracy protests in Hong Kong to the mass incarcerations of Uighurs and ethnocide waged against Tibetans, Japan has been circumspect with China on human rights. Japan's diplomats have also been prominent apologists for the mass expulsions of Rohingya by the Myanmar military in 2017-18 and registered no disapproval of Sheik Hasina's dubious 2019 landslide election victory in Bangladesh. President Duterte has been feted in Tokyo despite unleashing death squads on alleged drug dealers while Indonesia's President Jokowi has also not been censured for escalating violence against ethnic Papuans. The 2014 military coup d'état in Thailand? Cambodia's fraudulent 2018 elections? Time after time Japan has averted its eyes, closed its ears and spoke no evil, providing succor to Asia's despots through its inaction and thereby facilitating authoritarian creep.

It is striking that the only Asian nation to endure Japan's venom in 2019-2020 was South Korea, a nation that shares democratic values and a market-oriented economic system. The shared past of these frenemies is a constant source of tension and politicization on both sides due to unresolved grievances relating to Japanese colonial rule 1910-45. In post-

independence South Korea, the history issue was hastily buried under authoritarian rule, but with democratization in the late 1980s civic groups and politicians have exhumed ‘forgotten’ traumas such as the comfort women and forced labor that currently bedevil bilateral relations. Shared values here have taken a back seat to a fraught shared history.

This paper examines Japan’s passivity in addressing the gradual and incremental erosion of democratic institutions, practices and norms in 21st century Asia and the processes of authoritarian creep evident in the region. This phenomenon, what Lührmann and Lindberg term “autocratization”, appears to be gaining momentum in Asia involving a decline in both the quality and characteristics of democratic practices. (Lührmann and Lindberg 2019) Much of the relevant literature on democratic regression elucidates the internal dynamics of this process, but here the focus is on how Japan influences this trend. China is notorious as the patron of Asian autocracy, providing a model of authoritarian governance, and generous support to autocratic regimes and backsliding democracies without conditions. (Kroenig 2020; Bader 2016; Bell 2015) Less well known is Japan’s role as a prominent partner of Asian autocracies and illiberal democracies.

The questions that animate the following analysis are: 1) why has Tokyo proclaimed support for democratization, human rights and the rule of law with increasing intensity over the past two decades?; 2) why does Japan fail to substantively support these values and ostensible priorities?; and 3) what are the consequences of Japan’s ambivalence about democratization and a values-oriented foreign policy?

Although rhetorically Japan supports democratization, it pursues a foreign policy where economic and geopolitical interests dictate against a values-driven statecraft. This pragmatic engagement is similar to trends in western foreign policy where many policymakers believe that, “In the disordered world of states, para-states and failed states, policies based on an abstract ‘international community’ that promotes universal norms of conduct cannot achieve coherence, let alone order.” (Jones and Smith 2015, 952)

Colonial and wartime legacies have made it problematic for Japan to lecture and pressure regional governments on their political systems and practices. Moreover, policymakers are skeptical about the transformative consequences of democracy and prefer to focus on promoting infrastructural development and institutional capacity building in order to improve living standards and governance. As such, Tokyo works with existing governments, including autocracies, and tries not to antagonize them through political meddling. Significantly, the escalating rivalry with China for regional influence reinforces Tokyo’s hesitation to promote democratic reforms for fear that it will lose clout by driving governments into Beijing’s unconditional embrace. (JCIE 2019a) Thus, Japan is not an advocate of autocracy, but does nothing to impede it, empowers repressive regimes and remains ambivalent about democratization. In this sense it is implicated, and a silent partner of backsliders and autocrats. The focus here is on the Japanese government’s policies in Asia, but prominent non-state actors such as the Sasakawa Peace Foundation and Nippon Foundation tend to complement rather than challenge government policies and try not to make waves. (Ismail and Ismail, 2019)

Democratization

Overall, despite recent backsliding, Asia has become more democratic over the past four decades with the exit of strongmen, a somewhat more vibrant press, more space for dissent, less trampling of civil liberties and transfers of power through elections. Japan can take little credit for this trend because it has been reluctant to intervene politically and remains equivocal about democratization. Japanese government officials and political leaders regularly invoke shared values, universal values, and democracy as background music to a foreign policy driven more by pragmatism. China's accommodating approach to autocratization and Japan's desire to counter Beijing's growing regional influence limit Tokyo's room for maneuver even if it were inclined to become more interventionist, which it isn't. Japan engages with the governments in power regardless of how repressive they are and channels development programs through state institutions, minimizing interaction with civil society and liberal activists. Some Asian states may share Tokyo's anxiety about a rising China, but also leverage Japan's yearning for their support and its abiding unwillingness to intervene in their internal affairs. Asia's democratic recession over the past decade is not Japan's fault, but it has done nothing to counter this trend and seeks to remain an "all-weather" partner of regional regimes.

Mechanisms of vertical, horizontal, and diagonal accountability are crucial to maintaining democracy, but in recent years appear to be receding as autocratization surges globally. (V-DEM 2020) In liberal democracies, governments are held accountable in elections (vertical), through institutionalized checks-and-balances (horizontal) and by the media and civil society (diagonal). Over the past two decades, Japan has escalated its rhetorical support for such mechanisms in Asia, but this bombast has

not translated into significant funding or substantive action to advance this agenda beyond the recipient state's comfort zone. As elaborated below, Japan's development assistance targeting democratization has been miniscule, but through a variety of programs under the umbrella of human security it does work to nurture stability, development and government institutions that are necessary to democracy. Certainly, these building blocks are crucial to sustainable democratization and thus this long-term, pragmatic approach merits some kudos, but there are few signs that Japan aspires to go beyond strengthening these foundations to foster democratic institutions, norms and practices.

In some limited ways, Tokyo supports free and fair elections (vertical) but refrains from criticizing or penalizing states that don't conduct fair elections. Tokyo also funds institutional capacity building and human resource training to promote the rule of law and good governance, but is careful not to cross the line by insisting on judicial autonomy, independent oversight or watchdog institutions with teeth to boost checks and balances (horizontal). Additionally, Japan's emphasis on regime compatible policies that entail marginalizing civil society while nurturing state media undermines diagonal accountability. Japanese officials prioritize maintaining harmonious relations and boosting recipients' economic development over political advocacy. Ironically, although the Japanese government claims it promotes universal values, Tokyo's accommodating stance towards Asian despots and democratic backsliders undermines this agenda and as a result Japan's impact on democratization in Asia is quite limited and awkwardly similar to that of China. Indeed, Japanese experts openly worry that the impact of, "China's foreign aid resembles that of Japan, as both emphasize noninterference and noninterventionist principles." (JCIE 2019a, 14)

Although this paper focuses on the emptiness of Japan's values diplomacy in Asia, clearly the US has far more to answer for as it has supported a rogues' gallery of despots in post-WWII Asia when this suited Washington's purposes. Its 21st century track record on democracy and human rights promotion is also deeply flawed and, like Japan, it genuflects at the altar of universal values, talking a better game than it plays. The US is far more aggressive in blasting non-democratic governments and imposing sanctions, but only leverages its influence very selectively to encourage reforms while cozying up to repressive regimes like Saudi Arabia.

National security concerns drive US assistance policy and Washington works comfortably with useful autocrats. Moreover, nearly one third of US development aid is earmarked for military assistance, making it both a security and export promotion scheme. The top five recipients of US aid in 2016 were Iraq (US\$5.3 bn), Afghanistan (US\$5.1 bn), Israel (US\$3.1 bn), Egypt (US\$1.2 bn) and Jordan (US\$ 1.2 bn) and in each the vast majority of assistance is military related. (McBride 2018) This aid tends to strengthen repressive governments and insulates them from political pressures to reform. It is, therefore, important not to censure Japan as uniquely hypocritical in its meek democratization efforts. In terms of foreign policy, Tokyo has long taken its cues from Washington, a client-state deference that helps contextualize its feeble record on promoting human rights and democracy.

Cold War Asia

During the US occupation (1945-52), Washington made common cause with the conservative elite that ruled wartime Japan and

helped insulate Tokyo from accountability for its rampage across Asia between 1931-45. (Dower 1999) The US wanted to retain bases in Japan and transform it into a showcase of the American system. Conservatives could deliver on this agenda even if their indelible links with the wartime rulers were somewhat inconvenient. One of the enduring ironies in postwar Japan is that this conservative establishment that waged war on the US became a bedrock of support for the US security alliance and hosting of American military bases.

The Cold War bargain that transformed Japan into a US client state helps explain much about how Japan engaged with Asia until the collapse of the Soviet Union. (McCormack 2007) The foundations of that engagement were established in the 1952 Treaty of San Francisco and the US-Japan Security Treaty. (Dower 2014) As part of the deal ending the formal US Occupation (1945-52), Japan was compelled to recognize Taiwan as the legitimate government of China and thus diplomatically distanced from Mao's China. This US-imposed quarantine constrained trade ties, and postponed progress on China-Japan bilateral relations or reconciliation with Beijing until the 1970s following Richard Nixon's normalization gambit. Instead, Japan's ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) nurtured close ties with Taiwan's Kuomintang (KMT) government under Chiang Kai-shek. The KMT had done most of the fighting against the Japanese from 1937-45 but in the kaleidoscope of Cold War machinations Japan's conservatives cozied up to their former adversaries. They remained staunch supporters of the authoritarian KMT from the late 1940s despite the White Terror (1949-1987) when Taiwan was a police state under martial law, crushing dissent and severely curbing civil liberties.

In the early 1970s, Joyce Lebra wrote admiringly of Japan's wartime legacy in Asia, pointing to a trio of political leaders who had been trained and influenced by the Japanese military—Burma's Ne Win, South Korea's Park Chung Hee and Indonesia's Suharto. (Lebra 1977) Since then their reputation has declined, but even in the 1970s, none could be described as avatars of democracy or human rights. Lebra pointed to the discipline and organizational skills imparted, but Ne Win is remembered for his erratic economic policies—the Burmese way to socialism that transformed one of Southeast Asia's leading economies into a basket case. Park proved a much better poster boy for Japan's regional legacy, helped considerably by Tokyo's \$500 million in loans and grants as part of the 1965 agreement on normalization of bilateral relations that was negotiated at Washington's behest. In Cold War optics it was crucial for South Korea to overtake North Korea and become an exemplar of capitalism and Park delivered the "miracle on the Han" with dollops of help from Tokyo. As with Japan, favorable access to the US market was a key factor in this successful export-led development model. Park's rigging of elections and repression of dissent did nothing to diminish his stature in Tokyo or Washington. He was also a useful despot in keeping a lid on unresolved grievances from the Japanese colonial era that have since erupted. Authoritarian rule stifled South Korean civil society, but with democratization in the late 1980s it has become a robust force seeking accountability for the comfort women and forced laborers, embarrassing Tokyo and roiling bilateral ties as the Cold War bargain of money for silence has unraveled.

Tokyo also refrained from criticizing the mercurial Sukarno who derailed democracy in the late 1950s and subsequently presided over Indonesia's economic chaos in the early 1960s. In the wake of an alleged communist coup

attempt in 1965, Japan quickly pivoted to supporting General Suharto who placed Sukarno under house arrest and seized power. On Suharto's watch, several hundred thousand Indonesians, allegedly communists, were massacred in 1965-66 with the complicity and active involvement of the army. (Roosa 2006) Subsequently, Tokyo led a bailout by donors under the auspices of the Inter-Governmental Group on Indonesia (IGGI), rolling over loans and providing fresh financing crucial to stabilizing the economy. (Kingston 1993) This too was inspired by Cold War calculations as the Vietnam War was going badly for the US and it feared the prospect of resource-rich and strategically located Indonesia joining the communist camp.

During Suharto's New Order (1967-98) Japan was a leading investor, trading partner and donor of economic assistance, while averting its eyes from extensive corruption and human rights abuses. (Honna 2018) Tokyo remained supportive until the very end and was critical of the 1998 IMF bailout that imposed tough austerity measures that proved Suharto's undoing. Since his ouster in 1998, subsequent Indonesian leaders have also enjoyed Japan's strong support, not so much because they consolidated democratization but because Indonesia's strategic and economic importance remains compelling, and the escalating regional rivalry with China raises the stakes.

Japan has also maintained good relations with a succession of governments in Burma/Myanmar from the time of independence until now. Tokyo has always been wary of imposing sanctions, reluctantly doing so only under US pressure. Thus, when the military mowed down pro-democracy protestors in 1988 and arrested thousands of dissidents, Tokyo didn't denounce Yangon's junta, maintaining economic assistance and good relations. When the

generals held elections in 1990 and lost by a landslide to Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD), Japan did nothing to nudge the generals into recognizing the results despite having enormous economic leverage. Japan also lobbied against US sanctions and only reluctantly abided by them.

Post-Cold War Democratic Transitions

Tokyo's tolerance of authoritarian repression, human rights violations and corruption in Asia during the Cold War did not abate in the post-Cold War era. Japan was supportive of Suharto until his ouster in 1998 despite his glaring shortcomings and remained close to the military-led governments of Myanmar until Aung San Suu Kyi's NLD won the 2015 national elections. Since she assumed power, Tokyo has worked to cultivate closer ties with Naypyidaw to the extent that Japan's ambassador to Myanmar has been an ardent apologist for the military's ethnic clearance operations targeting the ethnic Rohingya and cheerleader for Aung San Suu Kyi's abortive effort to seek vindication in the International Court of Justice. (Kasai 2020) During Sri Lanka's long civil war 1982-2009, Japan remained circumspect about human rights violations, and relations with the government of Mahinda Rajapaksa (2005-2015) were very good despite rampant nepotism and the horrific finale of the civil war on his watch in 2009 when security forces slaughtered some 40,000 civilians. Subsequently, Tokyo has refrained from criticizing Colombo for not pursuing accountability or reconciliation measures as it promised the international community. Countering China's influence makes Tokyo reluctant to admonish repressive leaders or sanction states who prefer Beijing's unconditional support. In the wake of the Tiananmen Square crackdown in 1989, Tokyo was also a reluctant participant in the US policy of isolating and condemning Beijing for its harsh treatment of pro-democracy activists

while Japanese firms are remembered for quickly shedding scruples and making the most of opportunities opened by rivals' withdrawal.

In most cases, Japan's economic and strategic interests trump its values, but there are some notable exceptions. For example, in 1993 Japan dispatched troops to Cambodia to monitor and ensure free and fair elections. This was the first time the Japanese military had been sent overseas since WWII and required special legislation in the Diet authorizing their participation in the United Nations Transitional Authority for Cambodia (UNTAC) due to constitutional constraints on the military. Japan was a major donor and a Japanese diplomat, Akashi Yasushi, was installed as the head of UNTAC, an organization established with the mission of helping Cambodia transition from civil war and one-party rule to a peaceful multiparty polity. Despite various challenges, the elections went relatively smoothly. However, the party that won the vote was forced into a power sharing agreement with Hun Sen's more heavily armed party. Akashi's decision to broker this compromise may have been pragmatic, but this also constituted a betrayal of the democratic values that inspired such a high turnout. Having gained shared power, Hun Sen subsequently sidelined all rivals, suppressed dissent, muzzled the media and activists and became an authoritarian dictator. He has prevailed in a series of rigged polls ever since and has remained in power longer than any other leader in Asia. Even so, Tokyo has been silent about his transgressions and continues to provide support even as other donors have downgraded relations to protest his undemocratic and repressive practices. In countering China, which has no problem with authoritarian leaders as long as they are pliable, Tokyo only sees the downside of holding Hun Sen accountable and withdrawing support for one of Asia's most notorious autocrats.

East Timor is a more encouraging example of Japan's support for a successful democratic transition, but there the situation was more promising. The public's enthusiasm for democracy after 24 harsh years of Indonesian occupation was evident in the UN referendum on independence in 1999 when an astonishing 98.6% of eligible voters turned out and 78.5% voted in support of independence. Japan also sent a PKO contingent to East Timor where they engaged in various infrastructure projects that won admiration and gratitude from locals. The Japanese Embassy was proactive in cultivating good relations with various factions while promoting human security initiatives and reconciliation efforts. (Interviews 2004 and 2007) Yet, there is also resentment about Japan's unwavering support for Indonesia's New Order regime that brutalized East Timor for nearly a quarter of a century. (Gorjau 2002)

Since 1998 Japan has supported Indonesia's democratic transition under a succession of leaders. Marcus Mietzner argues convincingly that this assistance played a crucial role in the establishment of professional political polling organizations and this has had a very positive influence on Indonesia's democratic transition and consolidation. (Mietzner 2009) However, Tokyo did not pressure Jakarta about the escalation of sectarian conflict under President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (2004-2014) or ongoing security forces' abuses in West Papua under President Joko Widodo (2014-). For Japan, Indonesia is too important to risk bilateral ties for a crusade on human rights and as elsewhere in the region, China's growing influence makes Tokyo even more reluctant to rock the boat.

Japan has also been supportive of Taiwan's democratization, engaging in para-diplomacy

that stops short of violating the one China policy, but offers moral support through symbolic gestures. (Kingston 2018) This shadow boxing is welcome in Taiwan, demonstrating it is not alone. Japan is also a major trading partner and investor while tourism has flourished. Nowhere else in the region is there such a mania for all things Japanese and this plays well in Japanese public perceptions. Unlike in South Korea, the colonial past is not a divisive issue and democratization has modified narratives of the past in Japan's favor. (Vickers 2007) In 1997, moreover, Japan agreed to defense guidelines with the US that extended to Taiwan, suggesting that Tokyo offers more than just rhetorical support for its neighboring democracy, although this commitment remains untested.

Despite significant democratic backsliding in Thailand under a military junta that seized power in a 2014 coup, this has not had any discernible impact on bilateral ties. Furthermore, Vietnam's one-party state also gets a pass as it shares Tokyo's anxieties about China's hegemonic ambitions. This rivalry has spurred Tokyo to provide Vietnam with US\$20 bn over the past 2 decades despite a lack of progress on democratization and human rights. (Kliman and Twining 2014, 22)

JICA's Ethos

The Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) operates the nation's Official Development Aid (ODA) programs under the auspices of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA), providing technical assistance, loans and grants focusing mostly on Asia. In contrast to other members of the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) that operates under the aegis of the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), Japan has provided relatively little aid

for promoting democratization because it is ambivalent about a values-oriented foreign policy. (JCIE 2019a; Ichihara 2013)

Table 1. Percentage of aid for government and civil society in total ODA, 2007–2016

	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	Average
Australia	25.1%	21.4%	20.9%	20.3%	18.7%	19.7%	17.7%	16.9%	17.3%	19.6%	19.5%
Sweden	16.6%	15.8%	17.6%	18.6%	18.7%	20.0%	19.9%	18.7%	12.9%	18.7%	17.7%
United States	11.7%	11.5%	15.4%	12.7%	13.1%	15.3%	11.1%	13.2%	9.7%	10.4%	12.4%
United Kingdom	15.3%	17.7%	10.4%	10.1%	10.0%	10.7%	9.4%	9.4%	9.5%	8.1%	10.7%
Canada	16.3%	13.1%	12.7%	9.7%	9.5%	7.8%	6.5%	7.3%	6.6%	7.3%	9.4%
Germany	7.5%	8.0%	11.4%	10.8%	9.3%	10.9%	10.2%	9.0%	6.7%	6.9%	8.7%
Korea	16.2%	10.4%	9.7%	5.2%	5.0%	7.4%	8.2%	5.8%	5.8%	5.7%	7.1%
Italy	4.7%	5.5%	4.0%	4.6%	2.4%	2.8%	3.8%	5.3%	6.4%	2.1%	4.1%
Japan	2.3%	1.5%	0.8%	1.0%	3.3%	2.1%	2.1%	2.4%	2.6%	2.5%	2.1%
France	1.0%	1.5%	1.3%	0.9%	1.8%	1.3%	1.7%	1.4%	1.6%	5.1%	1.7%

Source: OECD, Creditor Reporting System; modified from table in Ichihara (2018), 44.

Japan's democratization initiatives have been inconspicuous and mostly rhetorical. (Ichihara 2019, Sugiura 2006)) Overall, from 1990-2008, Japan spent just 0.7 percent of its total foreign aid budget on democracy promotion efforts, compared to an OECD average of 5.8 percent, and 98 percent of that amount was allocated to state institutions, the highest in the OECD. (Ichihara 2013) From 2007-2016 Japan allocated just 2.1% of overall aid to democratization-related programs, ranking 26 out of 29 donor nations. (JCIE 2019a) Much of this recent increase is due to a sharp boost in aid for Afghanistan from 2011.

Disbursing almost all democracy-related aid to state institutions and sidelining civil society is favored by JICA because it emphasizes government capacity building to improve governance. This priority translates into strengthening tax and customs collection, improvement of statistical data gathering and auditing practices, and rule of law-related efforts such as promoting private property rights and regulations on trade and investment. Indirectly these efforts may contribute to democratization, but JICA does not intervene, bypasses civil society and prioritizes smooth

relations with recipient nations. Its police-training programs are emblematic of this indirect and tentative approach.

Like other areas of Japan's aid for strengthening state institutions, Japan's police assistance tends to be only indirectly related to democratization and democratic consolidation. For the most part, it does not directly target democracy issues such as public accountability, corruption, and human rights violations by police. Instead, the hope is that technical assistance to improve police functions like criminal investigations and traffic management will contribute to a general improvement in police capabilities that will help further democratic consolidation. (Ichihara 2013)

The 1992 ODA Charter established principles for Japan's development assistance policies and priorities, but these guidelines are not legally binding. More importantly, the charter does not mandate JICA to engage in democratization efforts, assist in building democratic institutions or work with civil society organizations. (MOFA 1992) Instead, it vaguely suggests that Japan *should consider* the state of democracy, market-oriented economic policies, military expenditures and human rights in recipient nations. Nonetheless, some of the largest recipients of Japanese democracy assistance are Cambodia, Jordan, Laos, Pakistan, and Vietnam, hardly paragons of universal values. In 2003 the ODA Charter was amended to include human security and peace building as key objectives, but due to the request-based nature of Japan's development assistance Tokyo remains reactive rather than taking the initiative, limiting the impact on the ground.

There are strong historical reasons for Japan's

tepid commitment to using ODA as a tool for promoting democratization. It has treaded carefully in Asia where memories of Japanese wartime depredations make it difficult for Tokyo to lecture governments on how to behave. Moreover, from the 1950s Japan's development assistance to Asia began as reparations, linking aid to war responsibility in ways that constrained Tokyo from attaching conditions or demanding specific political outcomes.

Despite Abe's sustained posturing on shared values and democratization, it is apparent that Japan has yet to achieve significant tangible results. In contrast to Abe's pronouncements, JICA officials voice skepticism about democratization, and don't think that democracy itself should be the main goal because it won't solve pressing problems and could have unintended negative consequences. (GPAJ 2019) JICA asserts that, "Unlike the United States, Japan does not aim at the expansion of democratic government itself," while also insisting, "Japan provides assistance to protect the democratic progress of developing countries as a part of developmental aid through the protection of basic liberties and the promotion of human rights." (JICA 2004)

At a 2019 workshop in Washington, DC., JICA official Shiga Hiroaki explained that Japan stresses non-interference and that, "JICA does not support democracy promotion due to an entrenched belief among officials that development aid should be apolitical." (GPAJ 2019) A colleague emphasized that, "Japan is interested in long-term capacity building of state institutions rather than strict adherence to the values and principles of democratic governance. Japan's basic approach is to maintain inter-governmental relationship with any governments in spite of negligence to

political and civil rights." He added, "For the Japanese people, the most important value is harmony, i.e. to keep harmony among community members. Freedom is also important value but probably after harmony." In Shiga's view, this policy has been beneficial, helping Japan maintain good relations with autocrats like Suharto, Marcos and Mahathir.

Japan's regime compatible non-interventionist approach to development assistance may well be more effective in mitigating some critical problems in recipient nations but is equally a recipe for bolstering the status quo regardless of universal values. Aid without conditions is welcome by recipients, whether from China or Japan, but this means it is not being used to promote democratization or human rights.

Human Security and Democratization

In the 1990s, the concept of human security became prominent in international development discourse. This concept stresses the need to promote freedom from fear and freedom from want. The primary aim is conflict prevention and reducing threats to human rights and as such human security has very clear political implications. In the 2003 ODA Charter, Japan embraced human security as central to its development assistance agenda although its emphasis differs. (Sato 2017, 38) Prioritizing freedom from want, Japan's ODA targets poverty reduction and incrementally fostering conditions favorable to political stability rather than emphasizing a more explicitly political agenda of democratization or human rights. (Ichihara 2013) As one JICA official commented, the "Asian timeframe is different from that of Western countries", suggesting that a gradualist approach to the democratic transition is better suited to prevailing conditions and maintaining stability. (Ichihara 2016) Constitutional constraints on

Japan's military also militate against humanitarian intervention to protect human security and are another factor driving Tokyo's emphasis on a development-based approach.

Unlike Japan, other donors do advocate for political reforms and partner with CSOs even if they share some of Tokyo's skepticism about the potential for democracy to catapult nations on a trajectory of development. Thomas Carothers examines the divergence between a developmental approach to assisting democracy (as embraced by Japan) and a more overtly political strategy. (Carothers 2009) In his view, the political approach is based on a relatively narrow conception of democracy that focuses on elections and political liberties and seeks to promote democratization by supporting pro-democracy parties and CSOs in their struggle against nondemocrats. In contrast,

the developmental approach rests on a broader notion of democracy, one that encompasses concerns about equality and justice and the concept of democratization as a slow, iterative process of change involving an interrelated set of political and socioeconomic developments. It favors democracy aid that pursues incremental, long-term change in a wide range of political and socioeconomic sectors, frequently emphasizing governance and the building of a well-functioning state." (Carothers 2009, 5)

There is robust debate on the merits of each strategy, with critics of the political strategy arguing that it is too confrontational and risks triggering a counterproductive backlash from recipient governments. In contrast, critics of the development first strategy maintain that it

is too regime friendly and bolsters repressive governments. As Carothers argues,

the developmental approach sometimes produces democracy programs that are indirect to the point of being toothless. Such programs allow democracy promoters to claim that they are supporting democracy in a country when all they may be doing is helping to burnish the specious reformist credentials of entrenched strongmen. (Carothers 2009, 10)

Japan's human security approach to democratization is developmental and suffers from wishful thinking, relying on a "grab-bag of aid programs" in the hope they will somehow coalesce and catalyze political change. (Carothers 2009, 11) Channeling almost all democracy aid through government institutions explains why JICA's record on promoting transparency and accountability is not inspiring, reinforced by an abiding reluctance to confront governments and urge political reforms consistent with these goals. Confronted with widespread democratic backsliding and authoritarian repression, Japan remains cautious and silent. As Ichihara bluntly argues, Japan remains, "reluctant to criticize Asian countries about a lack of democratic reform for fear of risking friendly relations with them." (Ichihara 2014)

Although between 2000 and 2015 Japan spent US\$4.5 billion on "democracy and governance" projects broadly defined, the government's exceptional tolerance of human rights abuses, intrinsic to Japan's regime compatible approach, raises questions about its actual commitment to human security and provokes domestic criticism. (Ichihara 2019) The efficacy

of this low key, regime compatible approach attracts criticism because it often means no tangible reforms and little incentive for authoritarian governments to democratize or refrain from the repressive measures that ensure many Asians do not enjoy freedom from fear.

JICA also tends to shun civil society and promoting democratic values has not become a central feature of Japan's regional diplomacy. Unlike other DAC members, JICA refrains from working with democratization activists and their organizations. DAC members allocate about 40% on average of their democracy aid to civil society groups compared to 1.1% by Japan. (Ichihara 2013) More recently, the Japan Center for International Exchange noted, "almost no funds were allocated to categories such as civil society development." (JCIE 2019a,10)

Understandably, the US interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan have given democracy promotion a bad name. Critics contend it serves as an ideological fig-leaf for regime change and in both cases political developments have been uninspiring. Proponents maintain that, "Democracy assistance does not focus on determining *outcomes* but on nurturing democratic culture, practices and institutions" (Gershman and Allen 2006, 49) This view is consistent with JICA's long-term perspectives although there are significant differences in how to nurture such processes and what role development assistance can play in incrementally laying the foundations of democratization. JICA works with the governments in recipient nations in a deferential manner even when undemocratic practices prevail and where liberal norms and values are flouted. Unlike other donors, Tokyo doesn't work with those seeking political reforms.

Advocates maintain that aside from free and fair elections, democracy aid is essential for strengthening an independent media, promoting the rule of law and judicial independence, defending human rights, freedom of expression and association and empowering civil society. Japan, in some key respects, endorses this view, but fails to act accordingly. JICA finds common ground with critics that elections are no panacea and that procedural democracy doesn't guard against repression. Japan's longstanding ambivalence on democratization is somewhat vindicated by growing skepticism elsewhere about the benefits of democracy assistance. (Gershman and Allen 2006) Additionally, there are concerns that human rights-related aid generates a negative backlash for donors and aid workers. (Carothers and Brechenmaker 2014) The assault on democracy promotion has made it a more difficult and dangerous space to operate in as aid workers are subject to harassment and worse by repressive regimes that sometimes resort to deportations or revoke/deny visas. As a result of such tough operating conditions, democracy promotion has been in retreat and dictators have had success in taming such efforts. (Bush 2015)

It is intriguing that despite growing skepticism about democracy aid, Japan has increased its rhetorical support for it as a soft power play while not substantively doing very much. True, various capacity building and human resource projects may be sowing seeds of change, but there is no evidence that this is happening and JICA shies from more direct involvement and takes a timid stance on challenging anti-democratic governments. (JCIE 2019a) In helping nations improve their media and judicial systems, the key missing ingredient is autonomy because regime-friendly aid programs are channeled through the state,

enhancing its capacity while largely ignoring civil society and dissidents. (Ichihara 2012)

The main strategic reasons why Japan pursues a regime-compatible approach to democracy are: 1) to maintain access to regional markets and resources while countering China's growing influence, and; 2) strengthening relations with the US by espousing the rhetoric of shared values. This means walking a tightrope of not doing too much to displease recipients and not ignoring Washington's professed preference for democratization. Japanese officials believe that Asian nations value Japan taking a principled stance on universal values that distinguishes it from China and that this will boost its soft power and political influence, but this may be little more than wishful thinking. (Ichihara 2017) However, if they are right, then it would behoove Japan to close the gap between its lofty rhetoric and meager efforts because not doing so reinforces perceptions that Tokyo is just going through the motions.

Democratic Branding and Outreach

Under PM Abe Shinzo (2006-07; 2012-2020), there clearly has been far greater rhetorical support for supporting democratization. In 2006, during Abe's first stint as premier, Foreign Minister Aso Taro unveiled the Arc of Freedom and Prosperity (AFP), a grand gesture towards democratic values that faded quickly without a trace, jettisoned along with Abe in 2007 after an unremarkable year in office. (Taniguchi 2010) Following his political comeback in 2012, Abe touted universal values as the centerpiece of his foreign policy, but it is hard to discern any substantive support for democratization or human rights in Asia. Although he routinely endorses the rule of law, this mostly serves as coded censure of China's conduct. Moreover, Abe's stance is

compromised by double standards, and there is, "a glaring disconnect between the Japanese government's preaching and its practice on the issue of universal values." (George Mulgan 2016)

In a speech launching the AFP, Foreign Minister Aso Taro said, "when it comes to talk of 'universal values' that are commonly held in the world in general, whether it be talk of democracy, or peace, freedom, or human rights, Japan will no longer hesitate to state its views." (Aso 2006) Taking the very long view, he added that Japan must patiently nurture, "freedom and democracy, market economies, the rule of law, and respect for human rights expanding bit by bit, *growing in the same way that a mere reef over time becomes an island, and later even a mountain range.*" (emphasis added)

The AFP was a declaration of Japan's aspirations and vision, a bold but vague statement of purpose rather than a detailed blueprint. A team of Japanese experts concluded that, "the concept of an Arc of Freedom and Prosperity represents an example where democracy support was linked to security concerns. In light of China's rise to become a major power and its increasing influence in the region, Japan hopes to strengthen its ties with allies." (JCIE 2019a) This aborted diplomatic foray aligned with the Bush Administration's (2001-2009) ideological agenda and raised Japan's regional profile in the hope of rekindling a sense of national purpose and marshalling support for containing China. (Zakowski 2018, 117-136) The AFP enjoyed strong support in the Bush Administration and followed the advice of key influencers in the bilateral relationship who pressed Japan to become more engaged on security issues. (Armitage and Nye, 2007)

The AFP had a very short lifespan, however, because there was strong opposition within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) where many officials regarded the AFP as overly confrontational towards China, and Abe's successor PM Fukuda Yasuo (2007-08) agreed. (Zakowski 2018) In addition, the Arc was also abandoned because it never got any traction in Asia where it was seen as a containment strategy targeting China. Beijing's hegemonic ambitions have provoked an arc of anxiety across the region, but that doesn't mean governments are eager to openly oppose a nation that has enormous and growing leverage over their economies. While some Asian governments may regard China as a grave threat and welcome the US and Japan as strategic counterweights, they don't want to have to choose sides.

For Japan, the hollow pontificating about promoting democracy and other universal values embodied in the AFP invites criticism, raising the question - why does it bother? As China's economy surged and eclipsed Japan, policymakers sought to recast national identity and regional diplomatic strategies. What does Japan have to offer an Asia suddenly drawn by trade, aid and investment inexorably closer to China's orbit of influence? What are Japan's distinguishing characteristics beyond its economic strengths and how should these be projected in what amounts to a nation branding strategy? This branding strategy was a response to China's growing regional influence and aimed at building Japan-friendly networks in Asia, while currying favor with President George W. Bush and his neo-con advisors. (Taniguchi 2010)

One of the spin doctors involved in promoting the concept maintains that the spirit of the AFP

continues to inspire a values-oriented foreign policy. (Taniguchi 2010) Indeed, the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) that Abe launched in 2016 is a reincarnation of the AFP, an equally nebulous vision designed to gild the Quad security cooperation between the US, Japan, Australia and India aimed at countering China. (Brown 2018) Notably, democracy is not included in the three pillars of the FOIP while related ODA is focused on connectivity (a counter to China's Belt and Road initiative) and non-traditional threats to security. (Sahashi 2019) As a vision, FOIP represents a retreat from AFP on democracy, instead focusing on realizing the rule of law, prosperity, peace and stability with the Quad security partnership at its core. (Hanada 2019)

Democracy outreach provides a basis for strengthening ties to other nations and perhaps more importantly, provides useful packaging for Abe's domestic audience. The Japanese public has grave reservations about Abe's security agenda but by boosting security ties and joint military exercises with the US, India and Australia under the banner of a concert of democracies, Abe puts a soft power gloss on hard power ambitions. Given his well-known views on revising the Constitution to remove the pacifist Article 9 and his shredding of such constraints in 2015 with upgraded US-Japan Defense Guidelines and enabling legislation, the posturing on democratic outreach has been politically useful, creating an ideological fig-leaf for a more robust security posture.

The nostrums of shared values are thus invoked by Japan like background music to establish an appealing identity and to provide useful political cover for expanding security ties with other democratic nations. (Yachi 2013) The main goal of brandishing democratic commonalities is not about spreading or supporting universal values but rather is to

facilitate a shift in Japan's security policies and shrug off constitutional constraints under the banner of what Abe terms "proactive pacifism".

New Charter, Old Thinking

In 2015 PM Abe's government introduced the Development Charter, a new set of ODA guidelines that relaxes restrictions on military-related aid to allow funding for recipients' armed forces provided that it is used for public-interest related functions such as disaster relief and reconstruction. (MOFA 2018a) However, it is very difficult to ensure that the money and equipment aren't diverted to other military purposes. Under the new guidelines aid can be used to fund anti-terrorism activities and to upgrade maritime, space and cyber security capacities. The new Development Charter includes only a perfunctory nod towards democratization and human rights, mentioning them at the end of a long list of universal values, emphasizing instead stable development. (MOFA 2018a) Democratization remains merely a factor to "take into consideration" as opposed to a guiding principle or goal.

Dropping the ban on disbursement of ODA funds for military purposes overturns the 1992 ODA Principles and undermines Japan's post-WWII pacifist identity enshrined in Article 9 of the Constitution prohibiting Japan from going to war and maintaining armed forces. This initiative is consistent with a series of changes in the nation's security policies packaged as "proactive pacifism". In mid-2014, Abe unilaterally reinterpreted Article 9 to allow for Japan to engage in collective self-defense (CSD), overriding his own party's longstanding position and the prevailing consensus among legal scholars. Then in 2015 Abe agreed to new US-Japan Defense Guidelines that expand what Japan is committed to do militarily in support of

the US in conflict zones and later that summer rammed CSD legislation through the Diet that provided a legal basis for Japan to do what it had already promised to Washington. This context is critical to understand the shift in Japan's ODA policy in favor of funding military-related programs.

This broadening of the scope of Japan's ODA guidelines followed the halving of the overall ODA budget between 2001-2014, intensifying competition for a shrinking pot of funding. (Ichihara 2016) In terms of democracy aid, the budget headline figure has doubled since 2003 to about \$300 million in 2016 but includes funding for programs that are only tangentially relevant. (Ichihara 2019) Old habits persist as much of the ODA included under democracy aid is actually for governance rather than democracy and is still channeled through state institutions. Japan justifies this reticence in terms of keeping channels of communication open with authoritarian governments but is even more concerned that if it exerts too much pressure, Asia's despots and backsliders will turn to a more accommodating Beijing. Thus, Tokyo appears to be more concerned with reassuring repressive regimes than nudging them towards political reforms, music to the ears of Asia's autocrats and illiberal leaders.

There is a continuing blind spot when it comes to engaging civil society and promoting press freedom. Under Abe, ODA support for elections and civil society remains limited. Ichihara concludes, "Japan has also intentionally avoided strengthening civil society in a manner that bypasses governments, in order not to cause lowered trust in governments or to destabilize governance." (Ichihara 2019) Similarly, Japan's media assistance is mostly technical in nature and exclusively targets state-owned broadcasters and thus doesn't foster an independent media.

The 2018 White Paper on Development Cooperation affirms that “it is important for Japan to actively assist developing countries, which are taking proactive steps toward democratization, and support their efforts to shift to democratic systems, including electoral assistance.” (MOFA 2018b) Support for the Cambodian elections in 2018 is the only example cited of such efforts, while there is far more detail on a vast array of programs related to security and military matters. Despite Sato’s (2017,40) assertion that JICA electoral assistance, “helps ensure the most fundamental democratic mechanism in Cambodia functions properly,” this ignores glaring irregularities in a series of rigged elections over the past two decades. Moreover, Cambodia remains an unseemly example as the 2018 elections were widely viewed as fraudulent. Nonetheless the LDP Secretary General Nikai Toshihiro sent a letter to President Hun Sen congratulating him on his dubious victory.

The apparent increase in Japan’s overall ODA in 2018 is not as encouraging as it seems. (DAC 2019) Significantly, the DAC agreed to change how ODA is calculated using a method that inflated Japan’s development assistance by 41%. The top five donors in 2018 were the US (\$34.3 bn), Germany US\$25 bn), the UK (19.4 bn), Japan (14.2 bn) and France (12.2 bn). According to DAC, using the previous methodology, Japan’s ODA in 2018 was US\$10.2 billion, down 13.4% from 2017, the sharpest drop among the top five donors. (DAC 2019) Japan’s ODA also has by far the lowest grant component, less than half the DAC average. The upshot is that Japan’s democracy outreach is on a tight budget, competing with military support, and recipients have to do more with less under relatively ungenerous conditions.

At a 2019 US-Japan bilateral conference involving legislators and experts, participants expressed a shared sense of crisis about democracy’s global retreat. While Japan’s regime compatible approach is often criticized, participants agreed that the US also tends to defer to host governments in disbursing development assistance. Undaunted, American participants expressed their hopes that Japan would become more proactive in promoting universal values as “a core element of the Open and Free Indo-Pacific Vision.” (JCIE 2019b) However, shared anxieties with Washington, Canberra and New Delhi regarding China explain why Japan is ramping up security ties in Asia while shared values appear to have become more of a mantra than a lodestar.

Conclusion

Japanese development assistance has done a lot of good in Asia but the ethos of JICA militates against any sort of political initiative to promote democratization, human rights, civil liberties, press freedom or accountability. This means that JICA is not suited to carry out the values-oriented diplomacy PM Abe advocated. Moreover, the government remains wary about pressuring autocrats and democratic backsliders to promote political reforms consistent with that ostensible agenda due to the potential geopolitical and economic risks of doing so. This essay is not arguing that JICA should refocus its efforts or that Tokyo should be browbeating regional despots, but rather aims to expose the calculations behind Abe’s empty preaching on values. He talked up a values-oriented diplomacy, but this grandstanding has never really gained much momentum as Tokyo prioritizes a pragmatic foreign policy focused on securing its economic and geostrategic interests. Championing shared values is a gambit to bolster relations with the US, gain influence in Asia and to counter China’s growing regional clout.

Paradoxically, precisely because Japan pursues this diplomacy as a geopolitical strategy to maintain a favorable balance of power and contain China's expanding influence, it does little to promote those values. Japan has a track record of non-interference and values an apolitical approach to development assistance, meaning it has no carrots or sticks to induce reforms even if it wanted to. Containing China is more important to Japan's leaders than expanding or defending democracy in Asia, and thus it refrains from actions that would jeopardize relations with authoritarian or illiberal governments. In addition, Tokyo is ambivalent about promoting universal values in Asia because the ravages of Japanese imperialism in Asia 1895-1945 continue to make it difficult for Japan to lecture its neighbors about human rights abuses and political reform.

While touting universal values, Tokyo steadfastly supports Asian despots and democratic backsliders. There is considerable posturing on human rights, civil liberties, the rule of law and democracy, but assistance to civil society and activist groups under repressive regimes is negligible. The crux of the problem is that Tokyo believes that its relations with undemocratic nations might be undermined to the extent that Tokyo insists that they embrace such values because China offers unconditional support. Thus, Japan's rivalry with China reinforces Tokyo's longstanding reluctance to use aid as an instrument of democratization and ensures that it averts its eyes from human rights abuses, electoral fraud, corruption and suppression of fundamental freedoms. Regional governments know the score and act accordingly, safe in the knowledge that Tokyo won't cause them trouble. Japan's emphasis on human security can't hide the sobering reality that universal values and democracy are low priorities and that freedom from fear, ostensibly a key pillar

of this doctrine, is ignored so as not to offend.

Japan has made very modest contributions to nurturing accountability in recipient states because it is committed to a regime-friendly approach. Very little of Japan's aid goes to anything remotely related to democratization or promoting universal values. Japanese development officials are skeptical about the merits of democratization and value harmony and stability over political reform. Thus, they work through existing state institutions in ways that contribute to the capacity of authoritarian regimes, while shrinking from reform-friendly engagement by marginalizing civil society and shunning dissidents and activists in Japan's development endeavors. In short, officials are not opposed to liberal democracy but also not prepared to risk anything to support it.

In the politics of the pragmatic, what is to be gained by promoting democratization and pressuring regional governments? This is an untested proposition since, with the exception of South Korea and North Korea, Japan doesn't do pressure. Perhaps Tokyo has more leverage than it imagines, and, if properly incentivized, autocrats and backsliders might become more amenable to reforms if only to retain Japan as a counterweight to China. Substantive support for values is not necessarily incompatible with national interests, but Tokyo has not explored the possibilities. The costs of a values-free diplomacy in terms of these interests and nation-branding are probably underestimated in Tokyo as are the risks of maintaining harmonious relations with nasty regimes that abuse human rights and derail democracy. Corrupt dictatorships and illiberal democracies may appear stable, but such nations are potential volcanoes that might suddenly erupt and spew disorder, undermining Japan's interests. Deploying development assistance in support of democratization might also enhance

Japan's regional standing and take advantage of China's often clumsy and domineering diplomacy, but Tokyo apparently regards that as too quixotic. Regime compatible diplomacy may offer little upside for democratization but represents the type of risk averse strategy Japan favors.

Japanese politicians brandish values as a branding strategy, aligning Japan with the US and other democracies. Tokyo has expanded security ties with the US, Australia and India, the so-called Quad, as part of its balance of power strategy to contain China, but position this as part of a broader agenda of advancing shared values under the banner of a Free and Open Indo-Pacific. The Japanese public has been wary of PM Abe's agenda of boosting security alliances and easing constitutional constraints on Japan's armed forces so emphasizing the shared values of a concert of democracies has provided useful political cover. This discourse represents the velvet glove on Abe's hard power aspirations, a legacy that his successors are likely to embrace.

Competition with China for influence in Asia, and anxiety in Tokyo that its clout is ebbing, ensures that it will continue to accommodate democratic backsliding in Asia and work with whomever is in power without conditions. In Myanmar, for example, Japan's ambassador has strongly defended the military's ethnic clearance operations targeting the Rohingya and supported Aung San Suu Kyi's failed attempt to seek exoneration in the International Court of Justice. The Rajapaksa clan has regained power in Sri Lanka, but it is business as usual with no fuss over past human rights abuses or sidelined transitional justice mechanisms. Nepal's leader prorogued parliament in July 2020 and state security in Bangladesh is running rampant under PM Sheikh Hasina whose landslide reelection in

2019 was described by the New York Times as "farcical" and a sign of "a precipitous slide toward authoritarianism". (New York Times 2019) India's PM Modi found time in August 2020 while bungling his government's pandemic response to lay a foundation stone for a controversial Hindu temple at a razed mosque site, stoking communal tensions and encouraging anti-Islamic vigilantes. In the Philippines, President Duterte is responsible for numerous extra-judicial killings under the pretext of a drug war, and the anti-terrorism law he enacted in July 2020 grants extensive powers to curb democracy and crackdown on dissent that is reminiscent of the Marcos-era martial law. Despite all of these developments antithetical to the values Japan touts in its diplomacy, Tokyo remains reticent and relations with these nations are unaffected. Since the Japanese government doesn't seem to really care what happens, what is the point of pretending that it does?

Japan at times offers mild expressions of regret such as over China's 2019 crackdown on pro-democracy protestors in Hong Kong, but this muted handwringing probably reassured Beijing more than the battered protestors. After initially refraining from joining the US, UK, Australia and Canada in condemning Beijing's imposition of a national security law in June 2020 aimed at stifling Hong Kong's pro-democracy movement, Abe belatedly supported the subsequent milder rebuke in a G7 statement expressing "grave concern" and urging China to reconsider its decision. However, given corporate Japan's huge stake in China, Tokyo is reluctant to confront it even as Japanese lawmakers urged Abe to abandon his "weak kneed diplomacy" toward Beijing. (Kyodo 2020) Abe's emphasis on easing of bilateral tensions since 2014 despite crackdowns in Xinjiang, Tibet and Hong Kong exemplifies the sway of economic interests and the emptiness of Japan's values diplomacy.

Asia's democratic recession is gaining momentum during the ongoing pandemic as leaders use the crisis as political cover to undermine democratic checks and balances, stifle dissent and entrench emergency powers. (Kingston 2020) If past is prologue, Japan will remain the silent partner of these autocrats, despots and backsliders across Asia while feigning support for democracy and universal values.

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