

Russia and Japan in 2012–2020: The Deadlock of Collective Identities

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Territorial disputes are complicated by the long-term vicious cycle of “rival” identities constructed by continuous interactions. The purpose of this study is to analyze how Japan’s commitments to certain types of collective identities affect bilateral relations with Russia, using two case studies that analyze how Russian political elites perceive Japan’s position on sensitive issues of international politics. By doing so, the study argues that Japan’s commitments to “Western” collective discourses in the international arena over the past decade have largely undermined relations with Russia, reducing the likelihood of significant progress on critical issues.

Keywords Russia’s foreign policy, Russia’s identity, international relations, constructivism, Japan

Introduction

In 2004, Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Lavrov announced that Russia was ready to consider the transfer control of two out of four islands in the Northern Territories, Habomai and Shikotan, that have been under Russian rule under the terms of the Soviet-Japanese Joint Declaration of 1956 (BBC 2004a). This proposal provided for the transfer of Habomai and Shikotan from Russia to Japan after the conclusion of peace treaty terms which are still under discussion. However, the Japanese government did not accept this proposal, demanding the return of all four islands, two of which were not included in the Joint Declaration (BBC 2004b). The following year, Vladimir Putin rescinded the proposal, stating that Russian sovereignty over the four islands was a “result of the Second World War” and that this fact would not change (Putin 2005). Due to a sudden change in the position of Russian political elites regarding the territorial issue in subsequent years, both governments reduced efforts to determine a reasonable solution to the dispute.

At the same time, this does not reflect changes in political thinking in the

Russian government, because Russia does not refuse to negotiate other territorial issues. In 2005, Russia resolved its second major territorial dispute with China, which indicated the possibility of a breakthrough and concessions under certain conditions. This article argues that Russia's political decisions in the two above-described situations differ due to the existing shared or common values between Russia and China, which played a role in creating preconditions for positive interactions. Nevertheless, the question of the failure of the Russian-Japanese territorial negotiations remains unanswered. Even after the positive bilateral steps taken by the Abe Shinzo (2012-2020) and Vladimir Putin (2012-) administrations over the past decade, the path to a settlement remains unclear. Thus, this article also argues that a commitment to a collective identity can significantly limit opportunities for positive bilateral cooperation.

Several researchers have contributed to the dialogue on the post-Soviet development of bilateral relations between Russia and Japan. At the same time, a realist approach is still dominant in the discussion of territorial disputes between the two countries (Kuhrt 2007; Brown 2015), particularly taking into account the predominance of realism in Russian foreign policy thinking (Lynch 2001; Sakwa 2007; Motomura 2014). As Streltsov and Lukin (2017) noted, Russia is building its foreign policy on *Realpolitik*, which is why the disputed islands are viewed primarily as a problem of strategic security and economic resources rather than as a matter of values, norms, and identities.

Partly because of the dominance of the realist approach, the number of papers devoted to identity issues in Russian-Japanese relations has remained limited. The tendency in research on the topic is to approach Russian-Japanese relations with a significant focus on history, which leaves a negative imprint that is not easy to overcome (Kimura 2008; Rozman 2016; Chugrov and Streltsov 2017). On the other hand, Paul Richardson (2018b, 108-109) examines Russian domestic discourse on the Russia-Japan territorial conflict and concluded that only a section of the Russian political elites attach great importance to history. Other researchers concentrate on the role of the local communities of Sakhalin and Hokkaido as regional centers of the territorial dispute (Williams 2007; Richardson 2018b).

More importantly for Russia's state identity—an identity reflected in relations with other states—several researchers note the importance of Japan's leaning toward the United States (Ferguson 2008, 141; Rozman 2016) or the West (Bukh 2009, 339), which directly affects Russian-Japanese relations. They note that Japan's association with the United States or the West is concerning to Russia not only because of the possible military threat, but also because of commitments to a certain collective identity which is “hostile” toward Russia. However, they call for collective identity constructions to be verified empirically (*ibid*, 340). From a constructivist point of view, “the West” represents one type of collective identity “to which states are trying to gain membership” (Wendt 1999, 341) by self-

imposed or forced engagement with similar understandings and interpretations of social practices or social constructions (Wendt 1992; Hopf 1998; Barnett and Duvall 2005; Searle 2010). However, the self-perception of a state as part of a collective is “continually produced and reproduced” by interactions (Wendt 1999, 36). Therefore, the purpose of this study is to analyze how commitments to certain types of collectives affect bilateral relations with other countries using the example of Russia-Japan relations.

Constructivism and Collective Identities

Prominent constructivist Alexander Wendt (1992, 406) argues that “systems of international relations where an atmosphere of suspicion and distrust prevails” can form a vicious cycle. Consequently, long-standing distrust takes root in identities and creates an atmosphere of mistrust that can undermine positive initiatives to create, restore, or strengthen bilateral relations. Russian-Japanese relations today display one of the few examples of attempts by governments to weaken the barrier of distrust through gradual positive interactions with the potential to break a “vicious circle” (*ibid.*, 418-419). At the same time, the repetition of mutual signals of trust and friendliness can overcome the previous vicious cycle of negative identification and lead to the institutionalization of the positive identification of mutual interests and common security.

Constructivists have also pointed out the existence of collective identities, which are important for states to act in the plexus of international relations, as they can impose discursive power—in other words, the power to imply a certain form of interpretation of interactions and narratives. As Wendt notes, “states are constituted by narratives of ‘We’ as opposed to ‘Them,’ which define individuals as members of collective identities” (Wendt 2004, 313). Collective identities can form because of different factors, including the existence of a common real or imaginary threat (Wendt 1992, 408; Stein 2002), “common history and political culture” (Schimmelfennig 1998, 217), “common fate” (Wendt 1999, 349-357), or a pragmatic choice to join a more advantageous group in relations with others (Kratochvil 2004, 9). In any case, the creation of a common identity implies the creation of certain power structures, which can limit the ability of a state to implement sovereign decisions.

The major theories of international relations are predominantly concerned with the notions of “power” and “power structures.” Constructivism considers “power” as an inevitable part of identity, values, and interest construction (Berger and Luckmann 1967; Wendt 1992; Adler 2019), or construction of reality (Barnett and Duvall 2005; Searle 2010). In contrast with realism’s focus on psychical manifestations of power, constructivists insist on the importance of the “discursive” dimension of power (Hopf 1998, 177). The main role of

discursive power is to “reproduce order and predictability in understanding and expectations” (ibid., 190). Moreover, it reveals itself in social interpretations, practices, and interactions rather than existing only as a tangible manifestation of state capacity. Collective identities tend to use discursive power that reproduces, disciplines, and polices the reality or interpretations of the reality of their members, that is to say, imposes certain discursive controls on them (Barnett and Finnemore 2004). Moreover, collective identities have power over discourses, commitments to which are accompanied by the granting or denial of legitimacy to a state included or wishing to be included in the collective.

States are not, however, undoubting followers of collectives. A state’s (voluntary or involuntary) commitments to collective forms are important for it to achieve the legitimacy to act internationally, which a “common lifeworld” (Risse 2000, 10) or a “relevant community of meaning” (Hopf 1998, 179) could provide. For example, after World War II, Japan maintained its commitments to an “antimilitarist” identity (Katzenstein and Okawara 1993; Berger 1998). However, its involvement in military campaigns abroad (in the Gulf War in 1991 and Iraq in 2003) illustrated the discourse of Japan as a “humanitarian power” as part of an international collective (Hook and Son 2013), or as a responsible ally to the United States as part of a US-Japan alliance collective (Hirata 2008). From a constructivist point of view, Japan derived legitimization to support its changes in identity from a post-war state to a “normal” state (Catalinac 2007, 90-91; Hagström and Gustafsson 2014, 16-18). Its evolution into a “normal” country may contradict norms and values imposed by “international” or “Asian” collectives (Bukh 2007; Tanji 2007). At the same time, the existence of various collective identities suggests the possibility for a state to choose which one can provide legitimacy for its actions.

From a constructivist point of view, collective identities and legitimacy to act at the international level are important. However, collective identities “do not imply collective agency or personhood” (Wendt 2004, 297). In other words, to act together does not necessarily mean “to subjectively understand the world of others” (Berger and Luckmann 1967, 150). Commitments to a certain type of collective discursive practices may be a temporary solution. However, this article argues that long-maintained commitments create a sense of predictability or an understanding of what a particular state might do if certain events were to happen.¹ In other words, adherence to certain “rival” discursive practices, even for a short period, may create prerequisites for further interactions with states outside the “discourse” of the collective identities. Consequently, collective identification can limit or expand opportunities for the development of bilateral relations and, more importantly, a resolution of territorial settlements. Thus, it is necessary to analyze the “repeated acts of reciprocal cooperation” (Wendt 1994, 390) that might represent existing collectives or lead to their creation.

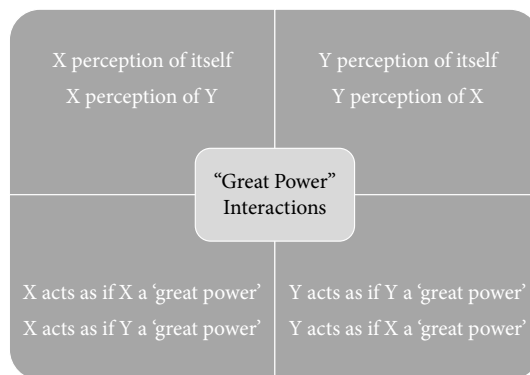
Methodology

This study is not concerned with defining Western, Russian, or Japanese identities based on historical accounts. Due to the constructed character of identities (“self” and “other”), individual states or collectives can be defined differently from one another. Russia’s perception of Japan as a part of the West may and will likely differ from Japan’s perception of itself as a part of the West or other collectives. According to its perception of what the “West” is and who is part of it, Russia will define its actions toward the collective. Thus, this article seeks to examine the dynamic of Japan’s position toward the recent international crisis (2012–2020) through the eyes of Russia.²

The perceptual dimension is crucial to understanding the international behavior of a state. As Pouliot (2010) highlights, two dimensions are equally important (Figure 1) for symbolic interactions: perceptual (country X is perceived by itself or country Y as a “great power”) and practical (country X acts or is allowed to act by country Y as a “great power”).³ The dimensional balance sustains and reinforces the identity of country X and its cooperation with country Y (*ibid.*, 238). Discrepancies (for example, X does not perceive Y as a “great power,” whereas Y perceives itself as one) lead to a conflict of identities.

In that context, if Russia does not perceive Japan as a state with sovereign power, but as part of the collective with delegated sovereign rights, it will eventually act accordingly. Therefore, it is necessary to look at the reflection of identities and common values to define how close or far they are from the discourses of Russia or the United States, which is, as a leader of the West, a significant other for Russian identity construction (Light 2003; Thorun 2009; Tsygankov 2012, 2016).⁴ Although the formal presence of collective values, which

Figure 1. Symbolic Interactionism



Source: Pouliot (2010)

can serve as one of the indicators of collective identities, may be traced by which values the countries proclaim to hold, the direct reflection of them may be seen in response to internationally important events. In that context, shared values will present themselves as consistent exact or similar actions by two or more actors.

Therefore, to understand how Russia perceives the Japanese position, a discourse analysis of statements by Vladimir Putin and Sergey Lavrov, as the main reflectors/producers of international political discourse in Russia, will be performed. The first step consists of examining the Russian-Chinese example of successful resolution of territorial conflict to illustrate the importance, for Russia, of commitments to collective identities. The cases were selected for their similarities as two major Russian territorial disputes, which may seemingly be resolved in the same way.⁵ The second step is to examine the actions taken by Japan to prepare for the Abe-Putin meeting of 2016, including an attempt to reduce tensions by adopting a relatively lenient stance on two cases of international disruptions. The third and last step is designed to illustrate how Russia perceived these actions and how Japan's positions eventually moved in the opposite direction, reaffirming Russia's views on bilateral relations.

The Case of the Russian-Chinese Territorial Dispute

Some Japanese researchers have argued that Russia could resolve the territorial conflict based on the Russian-Chinese border experience of 2004-2005 (Iwashita 2018). After the end of the Cold War and the restoration of relations with China, Russia began to pursue a more active foreign policy toward its neighbor. One of the turning points in Russian identity construction was the expansion of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) that "pushed Russia towards China" (Waltz 2000, 30). Rising antipathy continued the push (Rozman 2016, 132). China's position on major issues on the international agenda was and remains similar to that of the Russian government. At the same time, China had its national interests. For example, the Chinese government believed that the deterioration of relations between Russia and the United States occurred because of NATO's expansion while advocating for the normalization of relations between the two countries (Blasko 2009). Therefore, it adopted a more neutral position.

The importance of identities was brought into Russian political thinking by a new government. In Christian Thorun's opinion, Vladimir Putin initiated a turn to so-called "cultural geostrategic realism" (Thorun 2009, 46-48), a mode of thinking that perceives international relations not only as a military competition but also as a struggle between value systems. As Charles Ziegler (2012, 415) notes, Russia was more likely "to align with like-minded states" such as China. Because of this rapprochement, the similarity of identities, interests, and values was institutionally formalized.

A lengthy political dialogue between Russia, China, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan contributed to the establishment of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in 2001. In terms of territory and economic and human potential, the SCO was a powerful and promising organization which could maintain stability in the region. However, shared values and norms were given a much more important role by its members. The countries identified terrorism, separatism, and extremism as the main threats and highly evaluated sovereign rights and territorial integrity in the Declaration of Shanghai Cooperation Organization concluded in 2001. As Timur Dadabaev (2014, 110) argues, the formation of a collective identity is one of the most important conditions for the successful functioning and evolution of the SCO. Researchers have examined the principles and values of the SCO in the context of the “authoritarian” nature of its member states, as opposed to the “democratic” nature of the European Union’s identity (Ambrosio 2008, 1342). Nevertheless, through the SCO, Russia and China have created a basis for shared values and norms, taking a step forward in joining identities on a governmental level.

The territorial dispute was resolved in 2005 when both governments ratified an agreement. As a result, China received about 337 km² of territory. Despite the dissatisfaction of the local administration of Khabarovsk (Russia), the Russian government did not support the view that two of the three islands were ancestral Russian lands (Wishnick 2001, 65-67). It should be mentioned that in the Russian regions closest to China, public opinion and local elites perceived China differently, but still mostly positively (Lukin 2002, 97-98). As Maxwell (2007, 251) argues, the two governments shared a “mutual understanding and mutual accommodation.” Chinese academics explaining their country’s position agree: “knowledge, perception, and expectations inform the content of state identities and interest definitions, and these ‘ideational’ factors have great importance in explaining interactions within and between states” (Chung 2004, 165). Thus, despite disagreement over the concessions among some parts of the Russian population in the near abroad with China, common values within the framework of Russian and Chinese state identity contributed to the conclusion of a mutually acceptable agreement and the resolution of a long-standing territorial conflict.⁶

The successful resolution of a second territorial dispute should also be considered. In September 2010, Russia settled a long-standing dispute with Norway over a fishing zone in the Barents Sea (Harding 2010). It is clear that Russia would consider Norway, a member of NATO, to be a “rival” or at least not a “friend,” and that the territorial issue should have persisted. However, it is also necessary to consider the meaning of “territory.” In the realist view, territories are a stable attribute of a state. The loss of territory equates to a loss of sovereignty and power. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the war in Chechnya, and the actions of NATO in Yugoslavia, Russia became extremely sensitive to the issue of territorial integrity (Oldberg 2010, 10-11). However, it is not only the physical

reality that matters but also the meaning attached to it.⁷

Putin-Abe: Four Steps Toward a Collective Understanding

As noted in the introduction, the position of the parties on the territorial discourse has remained the same since 2005. However, at the start of Putin's third and Abe's second terms in power, both sides took symbolic steps toward each other. Regarding the position of Russia on the resumption of negotiations, Vladimir Putin stated in 2012 that the two sides had a chance to solve the problem of the territories "based on a mutually acceptable compromise" or "hikiwake." Some researchers have misinterpreted the notion of "hikiwake" as a "draw" in Japanese, or 50/50 (Hirose 2018, 3), or have attached extreme importance to it as a sign of a new Russian policy toward Japan (Richardson 2018a, 18). This phrase had a symbolic meaning only as part of "judo diplomacy" detached from significant political changes.⁸ In response, the Japanese side used "puppy diplomacy," and presented an Akita puppy to the Russian president (Sputnik International 2012). The first steps and "hikiwake" did not affect the division of the four islands into two equal parts but reflected the willingness of both sides to highlight the similarities that could supposedly create a sense of shared values.

In 2012, Abe Shinzo became prime minister of Japan for the second time and managed to consolidate relative political stability in the country. This opened up the possibility of resuming the negotiation process with Russia. Without diminishing Abe's personal involvement, it must be noted that he did not initiate the refreshment of bilateral relations with Russia. The previous prime minister, Noda Yoshihiko, also intended to visit Russia and renew the conversation, but he did not manage to obtain a new term in power (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2012).

During the election campaign, Abe Shinzo stated his desire to resolve the territorial disputes of Japan with China, Korea, and Russia. However, asserting that he placed equal focus on each conflict would be a mistake. The bulk of the attention went to the territorial dispute with China over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands. Abe played the Chinese card before his election (Harlan 2012) and immediately afterward (Sieg 2012) and continued to focus on the Senkaku Islands as a tool to attract public support (Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet 2012a). The dispute with Korea over Dokdo/Takeshima Islands came second in terms of importance, as presented by *The Japan Times* in the Abe cabinet profile (Japan Times 2012). There was no mention of Russia in Abe's official speeches in December 2012 and January 2013. However, at a press conference, Vladimir Putin confirmed that his administration had received a message from the Japanese side about intensifying dialogue with Russia through diplomatic channels after the

election (President of Russia 2012).

The first official statement on Russia occurred during Abe's Policy Speech at the 183rd Session of the Diet on February 28, 2013 (Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet 2013). Abe expressed his hope to visit Russia and give new meaning to bilateral relations. At the same time, he used specific patterns to describe the territorial problem. The previous prime minister, Noda Yoshihiko, used the expression "based on the principles of law and justice" concerning conflict resolution with Russia (Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet 2012b). In the above-mentioned speech, however, Abe described the situation around the territorial conflict with China with the statement that countries should act by international rules. However, he did not use the same wording for the Russia-Japan conflict. An appeal to international law would not have been conducive to negotiations, given that the territorial conflict between Japan and Russia is based on a divergence of interpretation of the 1951 San Francisco Treaty. This choice showed the new Japanese government's desire to achieve progress in the negotiations with Russia by changing the narratives around the issue.

The second step taken by Japan towards Russia was the exclusion of questions about the territorial dispute during press conferences from January to April 2013, ahead of Abe's trip to Russia. Even when a discussion about the meeting with Putin occurred, journalists did not ask questions about the territorial issue (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2013a). The situation repeated itself in May 2013, following a meeting between Putin and Abe (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2013b). The Japanese government once again did not publish information about the meeting on the official page for Russia-Japan relations. Taking into account the fact that questions about Russian-Japanese relations were actively asked during the same period of the previous year, it is clear that the Japanese side tried to avoid discussing upcoming meetings and negotiations with Russia in the press. This decision coincides with the position of the Russian government. As Togo Kazuhiko noted after the meeting, if Abe was not "able to preserve confidentiality, the negotiations [could] hardly be productive" (Kazuhiko 2013). Therefore, the second step was to reduce public discussion of the issue.

The Japanese side's choice to rely on Abe's personal diplomacy and interpersonal contacts with political leaders constituted the third step. Before Abe's official visit, former Japanese Prime Minister Mori Yoshiro, with whom Putin had established strong personal relations during the short period of 2000–2001 (Liberal Democratic Party of Japan 2020), arrived in Russia. Mori was supposed to set the stage for Abe's visit. In an interview with the news agency *RIA Novosti*, the former prime minister declared that he wanted to "restore the old friendship with President Vladimir Putin" and "hand over a personal letter from Prime Minister Abe" (RIA Novosti 2013). This approach recreated the positive narratives which existed under Mori, who called for preventing the isolation of Russia (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2000).

A significant event for Russian-Japanese bilateral relations took place on April 29-30, 2013. Putin and Abe reached an agreement on strengthening cooperation in the energy sector and accelerating the process of drawing up a peace treaty. Following the visit, the leaders signed more than fifteen documents, including a joint statement by the president of the Russian Federation and the prime minister of Japan on the development of the Russian-Japanese partnership (President of Russia 2013). The document is one of the most important manifestations of the attempt to conjugate the positions of the two countries on fifty-three points, including the Iranian nuclear program, the kidnapping of Japanese citizens, Afghanistan, Palestine, and Syria. The joint statement outlined the values and norms shared by Russia and Japan, thus creating a connection between identities in the international arena.

On many issues addressed in the document, Japan expressed a clear position correlated with Russian stances, which did not directly manifest in the international arena. For example, the document stated that a solution to the Syrian conflict must be found “through dialogue between the Bashar Assad’s government and various opposition groups following the provisions of the Geneva communique of June 30, 2012.” This position connects with Russian and Chinese statements, but not with the stance of Western countries (Meo 2012), including the United States (The White House 2011) which highlighted the need for Bashar al-Assad to renounce power. Thus, Japan expressed a “non-Western” position as a way to achieve progress with Russia. Therefore, the fourth step before starting a dialogue on the territorial issue was to bring the countries’ positions together to represent “collective” narratives.

Ukraine and Syria as a Challenge

Despite these positive initial steps, the Ukrainian crisis and increased military clashes in Syria challenged further development in bilateral relations. Both cases held foremost importance for Russia, not only because of the military and economic weight of both regions (Allison 2013), but also because of their connection with its collective identities.

The Ukrainian crisis represented a significant challenge for Russian identity. One of the leading American constructivists, Tedd Hopf (2016, 248), wrote: “Ukraine was becoming an increasingly intrinsic constitutive part of the Russian Self, one whose separation from Russia was increasingly understood as unnatural, unthinkable, and, indeed, dangerous.” In the case of Crimea, Russia had two options to choose from regarding the type of identity it would adhere to, that of a responsible international actor or the center of the Russian world. As it followed, Russia preferred to receive legitimization of its action from the domestic sphere, resurrecting nationalistic ideas of a common destiny of the Russian people.

In the Syrian case, Russia used different narratives to represent a wide range of collective identities. The first narrative centered on Russia's intent "to fight against terrorism" (TASS 2015) as a responsible international actor, a narrative that was in large part formulated during the Chechen Wars and after 9/11. The second narrative concerned "protecting international law" (Putin 2013), which Putin invoked in an op-ed published in the *New York Times*. As the territorial conflict with Norway demonstrated, the Russian authorities used a narrative presenting Russia as a norm-following country, standing in contrast to the United States. The Syrian conflict also reflected this fundamental difference in Russian and US approaches to international law and the principle of intervention (Charap 2013, 36). On the fight with terrorism, the difference lay in the fact that Russia had prepared in advance a legal basis for its actions, having received an invitation from the official authorities of the Syrian state and signed the corresponding agreement. One may argue that Russia used a "respect to sovereignty" narrative and allied with "authoritarian" identities (Heydemann 2013; Leenders and Mansour 2018).

As part of the ongoing negotiation process with Russia, Abe Shinzo found himself in a difficult situation, stretched between the political gains associated with alignment with Russia on the one hand, and alignment with its collective led by the United States on the other. During the Winter Olympics in Sochi, the Japanese Prime Minister decided to attend the opening ceremony (Walker 2014), while many Western countries refused to participate—although the reason for this decision was not, officially, related to the situation in Ukraine (Epstein 2014). Therefore, in a relatively non-confrontational pre-Ukraine crisis environment, Abe awarded political points to Putin by acknowledging the self-promotion and power demonstration efforts represented by the costly Olympic Games.

However, after the eruption of the Ukrainian crisis, the Japanese government did not recognize the legitimacy of the referendum held in Crimea (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2014) and opposed Russia's violation of Ukraine's sovereignty, alongside the other G7 members (G7 Leaders Statement on the Situation in Ukraine 2014).⁹ In addition, Japan suspended negotiations with Russia on several investment agreements and imposed a ban on issuing visas to twenty-three Russian political figures.

Researchers generally agree that sanctions had a demonstrative "signaling" effect, rather than acting as a visible, effective tool to curb Russia's ambitions (Koike 2014; Kitade 2016, 3; Brown 2016). However, this description of the sanctions fails to measure the perceptual dimension of their impact. For Russia, the issue of state sovereignty remains one of the key factors in international politics, which is also enshrined in the SCO documents. As formulated by Lavrov in 2016, Japan tried to make excuses to Russia for joining the sanctions, which outlines the inevitability of Japan's decision to follow the United States (RIA Novosti 2016).

During the Valdai discussion in 2018, Putin expressed an emotional position regarding the Japanese sanctions, with visible notes of outrage: “this is a step towards increasing confidence, do you think? Where is Syria, where is Crimea, where is Japan? Why did you do this? To increase trust?” (President of Russia 2018). In another statement, Putin argued that sanctions raise doubts about Japan’s ability to make independent decisions (President of Russia 2016). From Russia’s perspective, Japan has little influence on global issues, and the sanctions affirm its commitments to the Western collective. Therefore, despite their limited implications, the sanctions have reaffirmed Russia’s concerns about Japan’s sovereignty.

Regarding events in Syria, Japan supported the joint efforts of the United States and Russia to resolve the conflict (Paramonov and Puzanova 2018, 681). In addition, according to reports by Russian officials, Japan did not support the position of the G7 countries in Syria (TASS 2016). However, this attempt to maintain neutrality in the Syrian conflict preceded Putin’s 2016 visit. This situation revealed the low efficiency of Japan’s short-term attempts to adopt a neutral stance in the context of a general long-term policy of commitment to the Western collective.

Consequently, during a meeting in December 2016, Putin and Abe released a joint statement in which they noted that an important step toward a peace treaty could be the start of consultations on the joint economic activities of Russia and Japan in the South Kuril Islands (Mie 2016). The parties entered into sixty-eight agreements, with a total investment from the Japanese side of 300 billion yen (US\$ 2.8 billion), with no success on the central issue.

The Agile Change in Position

Despite the achievement of significant results, Russian-Japanese relations between 2017 and 2019 did not bring the two countries any closer on the issue of the territorial dispute. An increase in the number of mutual exchanges in various spheres (youth, education, arts, etc.), the easing of the visa regime, and the discussion of joint development of the disputed territories represented, without a doubt, important changes. They were aimed at gradually constructing a positive image between the nations, which can take a significant amount of time. During this process, a sense of collectivity, or at least a decrease in the indifference characterizing the Russian attitude toward Japan, may arise. However, the crucial question remains to what degree the Russian population will be able to influence their government’s decisions.

From a positive perspective, Japan has continued to make two important steps to lower the intensity of its collective identity’s commitments. First, recent Japan-Russia summit meetings have consistently demonstrated the interest of

both sides in security cooperation. It includes “2+2” defense ministers meetings, joint anti-piracy drills, and dialogue between coast guards. Although it still does not include the United States, the crucial part of Russia-Japan relations, in the dialogue, less public and more traditional security-oriented talks help to slow down the erosion of trust. Second, Japan continues to discuss the idea of Russia rejoining the G8, which indicates an attempt to bring Russia back into some form of collective identity.

At the same time, Japan’s attempts to support collective Western discourse with reduced levels of interference have largely ended. Unlike during the previous period, Japan fully supported the joint resolution of the G7 in 2018 which condemned Russia’s actions in Ukraine and Syria (G7 Foreign Ministers Joint Communiqué 2018). Japan also demonstrated the uncertainty of its position on the Skripal case. On March 4, 2018, several Western countries accused Russia of involvement in the alleged poisoning of the Skripal family and expelled Russian diplomats. Japan initially called for a full and credible investigation to be carried out before jumping to conclusions, but eventually joined the other G7 states for fear of being isolated from its collective (Brown 2018, 3). Furthermore, the country sided with G7 critics of Russian actions in the Kerch Strait (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2018a) and with the G7’s position on Venezuela (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2018b) and the Softbank espionage incident (Furukawa 2020).

In two recent interviews, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov highlighted the importance of Japan’s commitments to the Western collective. In the first interview, he asserted that to build friendly relations, Japan and Russia need “to remove all irritants,” referring to US influence on Russian-Japanese bilateral relations (Embassy of the Russian Federation in the Socialist Republic of Vietnam 2018). In contrast to realism, which concentrates on the military dimension of the alliance between the United States and Japan, constructivism focuses on the discursive aspect of their relations. In this case, the problem of sovereignty relates not only to independent political decision-making but also to compliance with discourses. The most neutral position adopted by Japan concerned the Yugoslavia conflict in 1999, when former Foreign Minister Katsuya Okada declared that Japan had its “own considerations” on the issue (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 1999), thus rejecting alignment with NATO’s position and controversial statements against the Chinese and Russian stance.

During the second interview, Lavrov stated that Japan’s current support for the sanctions and concerted actions with the United States at the United Nations contradicts the agreements reached in 2016 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russia 2019). Despite “the new approach” which Abe offered to Russia, long-term commitments continued to lean “west.” As James Brown noticed, Japan made the “promise that no US troops would be permitted on the transferred territory” (Brown 2020). However, commitments to Western identity undermine

Japan's ability to act independently and to gain the trust of Russia's government. So do Japan's alignments with the Western block, which Russia perceives as untrustworthy due to broken promises on the issue of NATO enlargement in the 1990s. As Iwashita (2019, 131) notices, because of that Putin will not trust any promises that Japan could make about the possible establishment of the US military bases on the disputed territories in the future.

Alexander Wendt (1994, 390) argues that if one side of the discussion shows a willingness to cooperate, the other side is expected to respond to "[change] the intersubjective knowledge in terms of which their identities are defined." However, collective identities impose certain intersubjective knowledge shared by members about the "others." Japan's commitments to imposed discourses ensure its legitimacy among the members of the Western collective, which provides discursive protection or support at the international level. In contrast with military support, discursive support relies on a tribal distinction between the "good" (members of a group) and the "bad" (members of the opposite group). Consequently, a state does not need to be directly involved in a "bad" state's wrongdoings to criticize it or support other members of its collective against it.

As for the Russian position on the territorial issue, it cannot be fully argued that it has not changed since 2005. Despite the continued position on exclusive and unchanged sovereignty over the islands, between 2012 and 2020, the discourse has changed. The emphasis on the domestic political significance of the territorial conflict, for the use of which the Russian leadership blamed Japan, gradually shifted to foreign policy. The main reason for Japan's refusal to cooperate is perceived by the Russian elites to be US pressure or intervention. Thus, there has been a noticeable decline in the level of sovereignty that Russia recognizes for Japan.

Consequently, despite some researchers positively evaluating the apparent changes in Abe's stance on the territorial issue following the "two plus alpha" formula in November 2018 (Kireeva 2019, 89), an analysis of the discursive changes is crucial to understand Russia's foreign policy. Russia's refusal to reciprocate positively by softening the position shows a degreasing influence of concession, which Japan could make to contribute to the negotiations.

It follows that Russia's perception of Japan as a part of the Western collective will affect the direct connection of positive and negative signals, which Wendt emphasized. Japan's past and future positive signals will unlikely overcome the influence of growing negative interactions between Russia and the West. Japan's belonging to the West, which is assumed by Russian political elites, will limit the initial theoretical possibility of positive signals to penetrate through the wall of distrust. Consequently, the breaking of the "vicious circle," which involves collective identities, will require collective mutual signals of trust and friendliness instead of bilateral. However, further investigation is needed to understand what extent the perception of bilateral signals can be decoupled from collective

identities.

Conclusions

According to Russia's 2016 Concept of Foreign Policy, there is a "struggle for dominance in the formation of key principles for the organization of a future international system." This implies a struggle between the systems of values and identities, which is largely underlined in the literature on Russia-Japan relations. As analysts around the globe predict,¹⁰ the New Cold War will feature values-based confrontation rather than take on an ideological character. In this regard, the discrepancy between "self/we" and "others" is becoming more acute.

As noted above, collective identities bind their members with discursive power and form specific interpretations of reality through narratives and discourses. From Russia's perspective, Japan's positions on the international stage are linked to its commitments to Western identity rather than the result of its sovereign actions. As noted on the Russian Embassy's Facebook page, Japan joined "anti-Russian speculations fashionable in the West on the hackneyed theme of spy mania." Consequently, Japan's adherence to similar positions as the West on international issues, its use of the same discourse, and commitment to joint statements construct a negative image of Japan's state identity in the eyes of Russia.

To repeat the Russian-Chinese success, a political decision is necessary. This implies that to achieve significant concessions from Russia, it is important to act as a "friend" or at least not to align with "the rivals." However, despite its significant contribution, the alignment on a governmental level is unlikely to be solely decisive for territorial concession without taking into account the domestic sentiments of the Russian people. In other words, the construction of a "friendly" identity should be insured both at the domestic and governmental levels. In recent years, Russia and Japan have continued to work on the people-to-people level, but repeated criticisms against Russia by Japan have contributed to the failure of efforts to build bridges between the two governments.¹¹

The 2012-2020 period shows that Japan's government has tried to avoid expressing positions that differ from Russia's on the issue of Syria and has favored the implementation of less effective sanctions against Russia in the Ukrainian crisis. However, without constant commitments to neutrality or expressed support, such actions will not lead to a change in perception. The "other" is constructed in a long process of interactions between historical events, current practices, and competing discourses, which cannot be rewritten simply through limited demonstrative actions. As Putin constantly reminds Japanese reporters, more than forty years were necessary to build strong ties between China and Russia, with constantly reassured neutrality or support, and to achieve a level

of trust at which major steps seem possible. Today, with the new constitutional changes, Japan is as likely to achieve concessions from Russia as it is to sever its discursive ties with the United States.

Notes

1. The idea is derived from discussions on ontological security as a desire to maintain predictable relations among social identities. See Berger and Luckmann (1967); Manners (2002); Kinnvall (2004); and Mitzen (2006).
2. This period was chosen in connection with the beginning of Putin's and Abe's political terms in 2012 and is limited by the data available for 2020.
3. "Great power" here is used only as an example and is changeable.
4. For this article, it is more important to understand how Russia perceives the West than to deconstruct what the West actually is. Arguably, it does not matter how the West defines itself for Russia to act toward it in accordance with its own understanding. In my understanding, Russia purposefully does not define the international reflection of "the West" (not in a historical sense, as the Western civilization) in order to reduce criticism for certain countries whose position may diverge from the collective.
5. For example, Japanese reporters frequently asked Putin why Russia does not want to resolve the territorial dispute with Japan as it did with China.
6. Many different factors are involved in the resolution of each territorial conflict, but the importance of the "friend" construction as a factor for concessions cannot be ignored.
7. Unlike the maritime territorial dispute with Norway, territorial problems with China and Japan are associated with the Russian population living on or near the disputed islands, which can "keep alive" the memories.
8. "Judo diplomacy" is a reference to Putin's proficiency in martial arts, which he uses to promote some features shared by the two countries. The notion of "judo diplomacy" emerged following the Russian meetings with Mori Yoshiro, Koizumi Junichiro, Noda Yoshihiko, and Abe Shinzo.
9. G7 positions are particularly important as an example of "collective actions" and discursive practices (see Wendt 1994).
10. See, for example, Legvold (2014); Karaganov (2018); and Polyakova (2019).
11. The question is not how justifiable the criticisms were, but rather how they were perceived by Russia, which helps to understand the government's behavior.

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