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# Humanitarian Intervention and the Religious Ethos of Japan

**Abstract**
*The recent military coup d'état in Myanmar has triggered widespread indignation and concern in the international community. The Tatmadaw have deposed a freely elected government led by the National League for Democracy, interrupting a decade-long process of democratization and repressing the ensuing civil protests with violence. Liberal democracies worldwide issued joint statements of condemnation as well as sanctions targeting the economic interests of the Burmese military. Among them, Japan has been a notable exception in taking significant measures against armed violence. Despite being a democracy pledging to pursue a diplomacy based on freedom, the rule of law and basic human rights, Japan tends to assume passive stances towards violence perpetrated abroad. Drawing from ontological security theory, the article tries to explain this attitude by taking into account Japan's religious ethos. It is shown that the normative framework underlying Japan's religious traditions is in stark contrast with the Western, individualistic principles on which humanitarian interventionism is based.*

**Keywords:** *Japan, Myanmar, security, humanitarian intervention, religion*

## 1. Introduction

Among the recurring patterns in Japanese foreign policy, the ambiguous stance over human security issues is surely a most controversial one. According to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Japan is a democratic political system upholding the highest standards of human rights and developing policies for their promotion (MOFA, 2019, p. 1). Moreover, Japan has consistently

acted as a member of the United Nations Human Rights Council, serving for fifteen non-consecutive years since the Council's creation in 2006 (MOFA, 2019, p. 2). Human rights are also reserved attention in the Constitution of Japan, where several articles stress the importance of fundamental human rights as eternal and inviolate ones, which have to be maintained by the constant endeavor of the people (The Constitution of Japan, 1947). Indeed, Japan's endeavors in enacting a human security policy abroad, revolving around the tenet of 'freedom from want' (Prantl & Nakano, 2011, p. 216), have been the cornerstone of Japanese foreign policy since the end of the Cold War (Huda, 2016, p. 21).

However, the recent Myanmar coup d'état laid bare some fundamental ambiguities regarding Japan's approach to human security in targeting international violence. Tokyo has been harshly criticized both domestically and abroad for its lack of commitment in protecting people in conflict situations (see Honna, 2012, p. 100). In the violent aftermath of the coup d'état carried out by the Tatmadaw, the Myanmar military, the Japanese government had expressed deep concern over the ongoing situation, but these formulaic expressions were not met by concrete policy countermeasures. The late condemnation of the military coup (Sasamori, 2021) and the unwillingness to apply sanctions (Kasai, 2021) are seen as unbefitting moves by the international community.

Scholars and pundits have advanced different hypotheses to explain this persistent ambiguity. A prevailing view is that Japan's 'silent engagement' is part of the strategy to counterbalance China's looming aims in South-East Asia (Gaens, 2018; Akimoto, 2021; Kasai, 2021), fearing that sanctions would push the Tatmadaw closer to Beijing. The aim of this paper is to offer a different explanation for this foreign policy stance by exploring the ethical framework that enabled a discourse on humanitarian interventionism in the Western world, which is characterized by strong reductionist individualist values. Japan's religious ethos shows instead a polar opposite view, based on collectivism and the importance of relationships in social nexuses.

The present research will be structured in the following way. First, Japan's ambiguous endorsement of humanitarian interventionism will be presented and contextualized in light of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) paradigm, with subsequent literature introducing the problematic aspects of it. A discussion of ontological security theory in IR will follow in order to shed more light on Japan's ambiguity. From that, there will be an investigation of the individualist ethics of interventionism, which will

be shown to be in contrast with Japan's religious ethos and collectivist predisposition. The paper will end with an analysis of Japan's foreign policy discourse on the Myanmar coup d'état, as articulated by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and its cognate organs. A conclusion will then summarize the findings of the research.

## 2. The Responsibility to Protect: its reception in Japan and implementation challenges

Humanitarian intervention has always been an object of controversy. Sovereign states and political communities retain their own right to self-determination, preserving order and providing justice according to their own legal frameworks. Yet, members of the international community agree upon a shared set of norms, such as the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which are aimed at combating injustices at the global level. After the end of the Cold War, ethnic genocides happening in Bosnia and Rwanda prompted a response in moral engagement against massive human rights violations. In response to these tensions, the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty introduced the concept of 'Responsibility to Protect' (R2P) in 2001, which was eventually endorsed by the UN in the 2005 World Summit Outcome document (UN, 2005). The notion of R2P advances an understanding of sovereignty no more as mere right, but as an actual responsibility towards the whole international community. One of the core principles of R2P states as follows:

> Where a population is suffering serious harm, as a result of internal war, insurgency, repression or state failure, and the state in question is unwilling or unable to halt or avert it, the principle of non-intervention yields to the international responsibility to protect (ICISS, 2001, p. XI).

The concept of R2P, at least in its early formulation, entailed an undertaking of military interventions in order to protect people suffering from violence. Still, deploying an army for the sake of peace also implied another series of principles to be followed, either before or after the intervention. The International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty (ICISS) stressed the importance of prioritising prevention in the R2P debate, and in the necessity of an intervention a major focus on peace-building processes would be necessary. For these reasons, the R2P

would incorporate not only a responsibility to react, but also a responsibility to prevent and a responsibility to rebuild (ICISS, 2001, pp. 69–70).

However, the implementation of R2P norms is replete with risks and difficulties, and in some cases powerful actors can take advantage of their position and engage in forms of neo-imperialism or adventurism (Valentino, 2011). The consequences of one's own intervention can bring about unforeseen or even undesirable circumstances, like the prolonging of internal struggles or the empowerment of local authoritarian actors. Moreover, states can also be willing to engage in intervention in order to reinforce their sense of belonging to a specific group of influence. American scholar Brent Steele contended that NATO powers felt a strong sense of shame for not having been able to avert genocides like Rwanda, as could be observed in the remorse expressed in those states' official discourses (Steele, 2008, p. 70). Hence, the greater the power of a state is the greater its responsibility will be, and in turn the greater the international shame when incapable of addressing international violence.

R2P and interventionism are not limited to the sphere of the military. Rising controversies in the use of force, especially in the limited capacity to avoid either direct or indirect civilian casualties (Wyatt, 2019, p. 38), have urged states and non-governmental actors to consider new modalities for intervention (Zhu, 2019, p. 12). Since R2P is *per se* a broad concept, it should also include actions aimed at the prevention of violence and efforts towards post-conflict reconstruction (Chandler, 2012). Measures can also extend to, among others, diplomatic pressure, arms embargoes, and financial sanctions. Avoiding the use of force can be more successful than direct military intervention, and non-forceful measures are also likely to be implemented more promptly, since the approval of military intervention can only be legitimated by the UN Security Council (Zhu, 2019, p. 12).

The reception of R2P norms in Japan has been unquestionably problematic. Tokyo's human security foreign policy revolves around the tenet of 'freedom from want' rather than 'freedom from fear' (Prantl & Nakano, 2011, p. 216), which translates into the preeminence of economic diplomacy and development assistance over interventionism (Honna, 2012, p. 96). Japan has already deployed token contingencies of Self-Defense Forces (SDF) abroad in the past, but they were involved in non-military roles of humanitarian assistance (MOFA, 2011). Besides that, Japanese domestic consensus for R2P norms is rather fragmented. As both Honna (2012) and Kassim (2014) have pointed out, there are four

different ideological stances over R2P: a conservative one, exemplified by Fukuda's statement (Fukuda, 2008), which tends to passively support the R2P; a revisionist one, advocating for a more robust role of the SDF and the normalization of the constitution; a liberal stance, supporting the pacifist constitution and seeing the R2P as problematic due to potential instrumentalization; lastly, pacifist activism, strongly opposed to R2P as it obscures the international causes of failed states.

Up until now, Japan has maintained a passive posture towards intervention abroad. Several scholars have explained the lack of direct engagement with R2P in terms of Japan's pacifism. The pacifist argument, albeit not directly linked to humanitarian intervention, started to gain traction in the first half of the 1990s, when anti-militarism was seen as the backbone of Japan's postwar pacifist identity (Berger, 1993; Katzenstein & Okawara, 1993; see also Oros, 2015). More recently, Prantl & Nakano (2011, pp. 216–217), borrowing Amitav Acharya's concept of norm localization (Acharya, 2009), argued that the unwillingness to endorse R2P stems out of a preexisting normative framework, where anti-militarism and Japan's pacifist identity are incompatible with norms of intervention. Honna (2012, p. 110) holds a similar view on pacifism, but concludes that Japan has potential to incrementally adjust its position by adhering to the first two out of the three pillars of R2P (i.e., a vague pledge to protect peoples from mass atrocities, and the responsibility to encourage and assist states to meet that pledge), while keeping in check revisionists' efforts towards normalization of the military.

Nonetheless, the reformist government of Abe Shinzo has indeed shaken the image of a 'traditionally' pacifist Japan by establishing a National Security Council, approving record military expenditures (Reuters, 2016), and attempting at revisioning Article 9 of the Japanese Constitution (Blum, 2014). It becomes then difficult to categorize Japan as a 'culturally' pacifist country, or at least to consider Japan's pacifism as an obstacle to remilitarization efforts. Indeed, Hagström and Hanssen (2016) have demonstrated how both pacifism and rearmament are not mutually exclusive, and that the concept of peace can be articulated according to the ruling political ideology. Moreover, Gustafsson et al. (2019) have stressed how Japan's new 'proactive pacifism' does not merely entail tougher defence strategies but could also imply pre-emptive moves towards those who are deemed 'unpeaceful'.

Demistification of Japanese pacifism notwithstanding, Tokyo has maintained a stance of strict non-interventionism following events of international violence and human rights violations. Pacifism might not

be the explanation for this tendency, but there is possibly some degree of truth in those scholars that argue for cultural factors to have a major influence. This paper supports the view that those factors relate to Japan's religious ethos and its political implications, which will be shown as being diametrically opposed to R2P's normative framework.

## 3. Japan's non-interventionism and ontological security theory

In the aftermath of the coup d'état, Japan's stagnant attitude towards military violence has been strongly criticized by commentators worldwide (Heijmans & Tan, 2021; Kasai, 2021; Sasamori, 2021). According to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Japan is a democracy that developed and consolidated policies for the promotion and protection of human rights and universal freedoms (MOFA, 2019). Furthermore, the role of Japan as second largest donor to the UNDP calls for a significant degree of responsibility over international matters (UNDP, 2020). Japan's pledges to the international community are also enshrined in the Free and Open Indo Pacific policy plan, which revolves around the rule of law, stability and prosperity (MOFA, 2021). Despite this, Tokyo struggles to condemn explicitly a military junta that has been killing hundreds of civilians, and some have even argued that the unwillingness to put financial pressure goes against Biden's strategy to defend democracy in East Asia (Heijmans & Tan, 2021).

This seemingly irrational foreign policy stance of Japan has been read by several pundits as a 'passive diplomacy' aimed at withholding China's influence in East Asia (Kasai, 2021; Sasamori, 2021; Sugiyama & Osaki, 2021). They claim that excessive pressure on Myanmar's military would turn the country more towards Beijing, and Tokyo would then lose influence over a nation to which it has been the greatest donor in recent years (UN, 2020). Surely, the passive involvement strategy might be geopolitically efficacious, but costs Japan a heavy toll as a foremost member of the international community in East Asia. While not rejecting either geopolitical strategy or Japan's efforts as a donor country, we can better disentangle this ambiguity by drawing insights from ontological security theory applied to IR.

The ontological security theory paradigm has considerably evolved since its rise to academic renown in the 2000s (Mitzen, 2006; Rumelili, 2014; Lupovici, 2016; Steele, 2008). At its core, the theory endorses an

epistemological stance based on state-level identities and narratives. States are considered like individuals that can pursue actions which steer away from rationality and reasonableness even at the cost of physical harm or loss of approval. This happens because they tend to develop a 'biographical narrative' where cultural identity, shared values, and social hierarchy enable and constrain specific policy choices. The way this is carried out in practice is object of debate among scholars: some think that states achieve ontological security externally, i.e. by establishing a routinization of relations with significant others (Mitzen, 2006; Rumelili, 2014), while others claim that the accomplishment of a stability continuum is reached by being as coherent as possible with one's own pre-established narrative (Steele, 2008).

When thinking about Japan and its foreign policy, we can see how both these theoretical strands somehow converge to provide a powerful explanatory picture. Following Zarakol (2010), it can be observed that Tokyo maintains a state of constant security anxiety by being split between the East and the West. Through the Meiji Restoration, Japan aimed at proving to the West that they did not belong to a still 'uncivilized' Asia, with political élites bolstering a sense of superiority that would ultimately legitimize imperialism. Japan, as a great power frustrated by the incapacity to anchor itself in either the Western or the Eastern world, is split between efforts that keep it away from both the Asian community and the international system (Zarakol, 2010, pp. 16–19).

In the case of the Myanmar coup, Japan is struggling to live up to its role as a prominent liberal democracy. The hypothesis advanced by this paper is that Tokyo is adhering to a line of non-interventionism as part of its policy identity narrative, rooted in values stemming from its religious background rather than from a professed pacifism. The adoption of ontological security as a theoretical paradigm might sound problematic, as it resorts to typically Western concepts such as 'sense of self', 'identity narratives', and 'significant others'. Still, this has already been applied successfully in the analysis of Japan's foreign policy issues (Gustafsson, 2019, 2020; Kumagai, 2015; Zarakol, 2010), even though studies in the field have yet to focus on the influence of religious aspects in Japanese diplomacy and bilateral relations.

## 4. Human security and the ethical origins of interventionism

Interventionism in human security has been seen by some as a reflection of Western ethos (Prantl & Nakano, 2011, p. 216). This claim can be better illustrated as follows:

> Intervention is no longer understood politically or challenged on such grounds but is understood in terms of a moral-ethical framework in which powerful states and international institutions have a moral obligation to intervene on behalf of citizens of other states (McCormack, 2008, pp. 124–125).

To understand this moral-ethical framework, we should first investigate the ethics behind cosmopolitan human protection and intervention. Wyatt (2019, pp. 26–27) pinpoints the three basic premises behind it. First, is the idea of individualism, which tends to reduce collectivities down to the single individual and sees the state as acting on behalf of individuals' fundamental rights; Secondly, an egalitarianism according to which every human being has the same moral status compared to others; lastly, a universalist view of collective agency and global responsibility.

However, both in Wyatt's and other scholars' ideas, we can see how the notion of individualism appears to be the one having logic primacy over the other two. The tenets of egalitarianism and universalism can be understood only when one accepts the ethics of intervention as the protection and advancements of *individual* human rights. Wyatt (2019, p. 37) defines the concept of human security as a search for the strengthening of human development and the protection of *individuals*. Others, for example Robert Fine (2007, p. 79), claim that *individuals* must be safeguarded from murderous governments, and that the principle of non-intervention has to be suspended in front of grave violations of human rights. Patrick Hayden (2005, p. 34) purported instead that *individuals* are at the very heart of the moral claims to basic liberties, needs and interest. Even in David Held, one of the forefathers of cosmopolitan thought, the reduction of collectivities to individual units echoes as the regulating principle for global responsibility:

> The first principle is that the ultimate unit of moral concern are individual human beings, not states or other particular forms of human association. (…) To think of people as having equal moral value is to make a general claim about the basic units of the world comprising persons as free and equal beings. This notion can be referred to as the principle of individualist moral egalitarianism or, simply, egalitarian individualism (Held, 2005, p. 12).

Presenting this from a Western religious standpoint, we can draw a parallel between individualism as the first principle for humanitarian intervention and its parallel in Christian symbolism. Durkheim affirmed that the development of the individualistic spirit has underlied Christianity since its inception, as the essential conditions of piety and human dignity were internal, and not external, to the single individual (Durkheim, 1973, p. 52). Thus, the center of moral life finds place in the inner tension between the individual and a transcendent divinity, with the former being ultimate sovereign over its own conduct and accountable only to itself and God.

The notion of egalitarian individualism also entails a reformulation of the very concept of sovereignty. Indeed, so-called sovereign states have well-defined political borders, but in the case of a state failing to protect its people this notion decades and is superseded by individual rights (ICISS, p. 13). Hence, from a conceptualization of sovereignty as territoriality, the ethics of interventionism introduces sovereignty as *responsibility* (Wyatt, 2019, p. 98), one to be borne by the international community at large. This reformulation of sovereignty has not been left unscathed from criticism. Bartelson (2016, pp. 186–189) observed that several academics indulged in historicizing sovereignty as a contingent and malleable concept. As such, this would pave the way to unbridled practices of interference and intervention. The perils of intervention are also discussed by Fukutomi (2021), a scholar advocating for what he calls a 'minimalist-institutional' approach. Drawing from Michael Ignatieff, he claims that universal standards for human rights are problematic insofar as having a well-defined one might lead to political crusades (Fukutomi, 2021, p. 18). Humanitarian intervention is thus seen as in need of a minimalist core to be identified through dialogue and cultural pluralism.

In the end, a human security framework based on an individualist ethics of egalitarianism strides with approaches which tend to favor pluralism. The following section will introduce Japanese collective ethics as it emerged from its religious and cultural background.

## 5. Japan and religious ethos: collectivism and self-negation

Among what defines the ethical structure of a social group, one can single-out shared norms, belief systems, and cultural practices. In the case of Japan, such a framework has been shaped by different religious

traditions (Itō, 1998), which managed to coexist peacefully and influence each other's rituals and practices. It is difficult to identify a religion that has prevailed upon the others, but one can claim that Shintō, Buddhism and Confucianism are those deserving more scholarly attention. All of them are divided into different schools, which in turn enshrine different fundamental values, but what can be said of all is that they share an essential symbolic reality based on *collectivism*. This part will offer a cross section of collective values and tendencies in Japan's religious ethos, which will show a stark contrast to the values and ethics that informed the discourse around interventionism and human security in the West.

It has been shown how the notion of egalitarian individualism underlies the morals of global responsibility. According to advocates of humanitarian intervention, a collectivity has to be understood by reducing it to its basic unit, i.e. a single human individual. Only a global commitment to empowering and emancipating individuals can prevent brutal states to commit human crimes in the name of sovereignty (McCormack, 2008, p. 115). Such a view contemplates human security as something to be achieved without the use of force and transforms the subjects of intervention from mere passive recipients to active agents of change (Chandler, 2012, p. 223). However, the perception of single individuals as the ultimate recipients of rights and recognition is not ubiquitous. Nakamura suggested that in Japan social relationships take precedence over individuals, in a way echoing the development of Japanese society from small, localized farming communities (Nakamura, 1964, p. 424). A limited social nexus, usually reducible to familial ties, is thus considered the smallest social unit, where not individual freedoms, but the intimacy and stability of social bonds are defining the strength of a group of people. According to him, this trait evolved out of traditional Shintō practices during *matsuri*, or festivals. The community is the center of Shintō festivals: invidual s put aside their own preoccupations and cooperate as a group, praying for the manteinance of peace and prosperity (Picken, 2004, p. 342). Moreover, the role of social nexuses is not only prevalent in daily life, but also regulates the symbolic universe of Shintō mythology. There lies no concept akin to individual salvation: in the afterlife, individuals lose their identity and merge into a community of ancestral spirits that, besides other human beings, is made of trees, plants, beasts, mountains, seas, and so on (Nakamura, 1964, p. 522).

Is is also worthy to point out how the concept of *kokusaika*, or Japan's internationalization, reflects the collectivism of Shintō values. To

explain this concept, Picken (2004, pp. 340–341) resorts to the insights of Asoya Masahiko, who defined *kokusaika* as the development in the exchange of goods, information, and interaction with people from other nations, carried out in a way to promote a mutually beneficial state of coexistence. *Kokusaika* stands on four precepts: first, that the mutual exchange is understood not only in quantitative terms, but also in terms of mutual prosperity; second, the strict condemnation of the use of force when complications arise during interaction; third, emphasis on financial stability and development for the exchange to be beneficial; lastly, a genuine enthusiasm and diligence for innovation. In these four principles is evident how relations, even at the international level, tend towards collectivism instead of self-gain. Still, this mindset implies a promotion of stagnation patterns rather than exceptionalism or freedom of action.

Confucianism, unlike Shintō, does not contemplate the existence of a transcendental realm. It heavily emphasizes social morality and the use of virtues in this world. More specifically, the symbolic order of Confucianism exactly overlaps the one in which we currently live. As put in the Analecta:

> Ji Lu asked about serving the spirits. The Master said, "While you are yet not able to serve men, how could you be able to serve the spirits?" "May I ask about death?" "When you do not yet understand life, how could you understand death?" (Eno, 2015, p. 53).

Filial piety and harmony are considered essential virtues in Confucianism, since the family is regarded as the basic unit of the earthly microcosm. Therefore, inasmuch as the microcosm reflects itself into the symbolic order, to respect one's own ancestors and taking care of family members is to attain the ultimate goals of reality (Itō, 1998, p. 626). We can here again refer to what is found in the Analecta:

> Master Zeng said: Devote care to life's end and pursue respect for the distant dead; in this way, the virtue of the people will return to fullness. (…) The Master said: When the father is alive, observe the son's intent. When the father dies, observe the son's conduct. One who does not alter his late father's dao for three years may be called filial (Eno, 2015, pp. 2–3).

Hence, it is clear how the notion of individualism finds no appreciation in Confucian cosmology, as it contradicts its fundamental symbolic values.

Western individualism is also opposed by Buddhist ideas. Maruyama (2008, p. 178) states that a Buddhist view on the role of humanity in nature is in sharp contrast with the anthropocentric epistemology of the West. According to the *hongaku* principle of Japanese Buddhism,

everything in nature has the same existential value and lives through symbiotic relationships (Maruyama, 2008). The dichotomy subject/object is thus denied, as are denied relationships of material belonging. The monastic life is a perfect metaphor to explain this position. In what might be seen as the individualistic practice *par excellence*, we should highlight that the individualism underlying it is merely a means to an end. The monk, following the path of Gautama Buddha, renounces everything and detaches from the rest of the world to attain enlightenment, which is a state where the individual realizes about the illusions engendered by the self: there are no essential differences in the phenomenal world, i.e. all things are one and become part of the whole that is the universe (Itō, 1998, pp. 624–625).

However, the pursuit of enlightenment has been object of criticism, even from within Buddhist movements. The so-called Critical Buddhism scholarship, a trend peaking in the late 1990s, defined *hongaku* enlightenment as an ideology supporting the *status quo* and legitimizing social injustice (Hubbard & Swanson, 1997, p. 290). When looking at the Myanmar coup, this is readily observable in Japan's non-interventionist tendencies even in the case of harmful violence, and in the uncritical acceptance of the junta as a legitimate governing body (Sasamori, 2021).

## 6. Japan's Myanmar discourse and foreign policy

Due to the recent nature of the events in question, the choice of available data is obviously limited. However, it can be useful to trace back in time some overlapping patterns of foreign policy discourse, and not only regarding Myanmar diplomacy. A useful starting point can be to reinstate the formula adopted by then Prime Minister Fukuda during the 2008 World Economic Forum in Davos:

> Japan does not intervene by force, as a matter of national policy, in such conflict situations where the international community may have to seriously consider fulfilling their 'responsibility to protect'; we are a nation that has primarily focused on humanitarian and reconstruction assistance (Fukuda, 2008).

Fukuda's position reflects an understanding of peace and security as long-term challenges, stressing the importance to develop institutional frameworks and ensuring the rule of law in order to achieve them. This attitude is the most widespread among traditionally conservative politicians,

who wanted to distance interventionism from the concept of human security in order not to appear as too assertive internationally (Honna, 2012, p. 98). Among the different views on R2P in Japan, revisionist politicians such as Koizumi Junichirō and Shinzō Abe are those who encourage the most a robust interventionism in order to bolster the reach of the SDF (Honna, 2012, pp. 98–99). However, this has not been the case for international violence and human rights abuse. The Rohingya crisis of 2017 saw Abe's cabinet as ruling government, and throughout the crisis' years-long aftermath Japan's position has been staunchly non-interventionist. Maruyama Ichirō, long-standing Japanese Ambassador in Naypyitaw, had claimed that Japan would not agree to the pressure from the international community in taking actions against Myanmar, as things could become more complicated (Kasai, 2019). Through a joint effort with then Myanmar's president Aung San Suu Kiy, Maruyama instead co-organized the Rakhine State Investment Fair in 2019, with the scope of preventing futher conflict by stimulating economic development.

On February 1 2021, a military coup d'état overthrew the freely elected government of the National League for Democracy. The junta led by general Min Aung Hlaing interrupted a decade-long process of democratization and repressed violently the ensuing civilian protests. The former state counsellor Aung San Suu Kiy and president Win Myint had been arrested (Goldman, 2021). According to the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners, a non-profit human rights organization based in both Thailand and Myanmar, early numbers told of more than one thousand persons killed, and several thousands more either arrested or charged with a warrant (AAPP, 2021).

The official response of Japan, albeit critical, was far less condemning compared to other Western liberal democracies. In the words of Foreign Affairs Minister Motegi Toshimitsu:

> Japan has grave concern over the situation in Myanmar, where a state of emergency was declared on February 1 and the process of democratization is being undermined (…) The Government of Japan has strongly supported the process of democratization in Myanmar and opposes any action which goes against such process. Japan once again strongly urges the Myanmar military to swiftly restore Myanmar's democratic political system (Motegi, 2021a).

Originally, Japan had made three official urgent requests to the Myanmar military: to immediately stop resorting to violence and restore democracy, to release political prisoners, and to ensure the safety of

every Japanese national in Myanmar. Nonetheless, the Ministry avoided to directly condemn the junta as the perpetrator of bloodshed, and kept insisting on mutual dialogue as the foremost means to deescalate violence (Motegi, 2021b).

Given the preeminent role of Japan as donor to Myanmar, discussions about the suspension of ODA to the country rapidly ensued. At first, Motegi limited himself to evade direct positions by stressing again the necessity of communication and negotiation (Motegi, 2021c), claiming that Japan's stance in the aftermath of the coup had been highly appreciated by the international community (Motegi, 2021e). However, the situation started to change in May. Soon after the news of the release and repatriation of a Japanese journalist arrested in Yangon in April (Reuters, 2021), Motegi claimed that Tokyo might be compelled to review ODA and stop companies from investing even if they wanted to (Motegi, 2021f). However, a final decision was never taken, and the provision for an Emergency Grant Aid was created in half July. It would have provided a total of 5.8 million US dollars in humanitarian assistance to the populations of Myanmar affected by the coup, to be disbursed with the assistance of international organizations (Motegi, 2021g). Again, no specific accusations were made against the Tatmadaw, conveying the impression that the occurring violence amounts to a side-effect of unfortunate domestic conditions.

Japan has also been reluctant to impose sanctions on Myanmar's military government (Akimoto, 2021; Heijmans & Tan, 2021; Kasai, 2021; Sugiyama & Osaki, 2021). When prompted on the possibility for applying some to Myanmar, Motegi carefully drew a line between the kind of sanctions directed towards an irreconcilable enemy like North Korea and those aimed at disciplining a violent, yet friendly, state:

> If we think about sanctions, there are various kinds. For example, there are severe sanctions restricting all transactions such as the complete sanctions on North Korea based on the United Nations Security Council Resolutions, and sanctions that are not like that. Amidst this, what would be most effective to urge or, to put it another way, pressure the Myanmar military? I believe it is extremely important to consider what would be most effective from the perspective of what we want Myanmar to become, as I stated earlier (Motegi, 2021d).

This is a point on which Tokyo has never even discussed to change its policy line. The Japanese government has always stressed the importance of mutual communication and dialogue to restore democracy and stop violence. In this respect, Japan proactively encouraged the endorsement of the Five-Point Consensus, an agreement reached during the ASEAN

high-level summit of 24 April (Motegi, 2021h). However, the tentative agreement has quickly been valued as a failure by international observers. No call for the release of political prisoners, including Aung San Suu Kiy, had been made, as well as no condemnation of military violence against civilians and other ethnicities (Lee, 2021). Nonetheless, Motegi reiterated Japan's support for the Five-Point Consensus in August, leaving intact the non-interventionist line. Myanmar's coup d'état has since lost political attention, due to the huge impact on the international scenario of the soon-to-follow US retreat from Afghanistan.

## 7. Conclusion

Despite widespread criticism and pressure from the international community, Japan tended to keep an almost unchanged foreign policy line towards Myanmar's repressive junta government. As observed in official discourse, Japan's diplomatic approach retained much of the religious values discussed earlier in the paper. First, an adherence to principles of financial stability and mutual prosperity with the provision of emergency aid grants, alongside a condemnation of the use of force. Secondly, a passive acceptance of the *status quo* and the tacit legimization of the Tatmadaw as the *de facto* governing authority. Lastly, a general ambiguity serving as a compromise to maintain harmony with both the junta and the international community.

The religious ethos of Japan is higly syncretic and varied, but the three major religious traditions of Shintō, Confucianism and Buddhism share a collectivist symbolic universe that is in sharp contrast with the one in which Western humanitarian interventionism was conceived. In fact, Tokyo not only found it difficult (if not impossible) to embody the military side of R2P, but also shied away from much softer measures such as sanctions or diplomatic pressure. The case of the Myanmar coup showed that, regardless of the amount of criticism from the West and human rights observers, Japan has never changed its foreign policy line.

Ontological security theory shows how state-level narratives and policy attitudes are built upon shared values and cultural identities, and how states can either resist or succumb to external pressure in order to attain a continuum of stable mindsets. Japan is a case for the former, where deeply internalized social norms, conceivably matured from religious backgrounds as cultural underpinnings, can exercise influence in constraining interference in international affairs.

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