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**Revisiting the Reactive State: Japanese
Foreign Policy and Beyond**

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Abstract

States may be considered 'reactive' when they are capable of action (as opposed to being 'autistic'), but oriented toward responding to prior external stimuli rather than making policy directly (Calder, World Politics, July, 1988). Post-World War II Japanese foreign policy has exhibited this 'reactive' pattern to a pronounced degree. Over the past decade, nation states generally have grown more reactive, under pressures of globalization . Japan, however, has been an outlier , with a strengthened Prime Ministerial office allowing that country to move in a converse direction to the global trend.

Keywords

Europe in the World

Twenty-five years ago I wrote a piece for the July 1988 issue of *World Politics* on the concept of the 'reactive state' in foreign policy.¹ In the article I presented a typology of foreign policy behaviour and argued that states might be considered 'reactive' when they are capable of action (as opposed to being 'autistic') but oriented toward responding to prior external stimuli rather than making policy proactively. I maintained that post-World War II Japanese foreign policy exhibited this 'reactive' pattern to a pronounced degree and attempted to explain why this pattern prevailed.

This *World Politics* article provoked significant controversy, both in international-relations theory generally and among analysts of the Japanese political economy in particular.² A quarter century has now passed and it is time, I believe, for a re-assessment – of both the robustness and empirical relevance of the concept today, and its particular heuristic relevance to a current understanding of the Japanese political economy.

Alternative Formulations

It is important to note that few analysts in the late 1980s, or indeed in the following decade, contested my empirical observation that Japan tended to formulate foreign policy in response to outside stimuli – particularly from the United States – rather than proactively creating policy in the absence of outside pressure. The counter-arguments to the assertions in my *World Politics* piece – actually refinements, I would argue – were primarily two-fold and not directed against the core premise per se. One author contended that Japanese foreign policy amounted to "reactive realism" – procedurally reactive but nevertheless driven by strategic domestic calculations.³ A second alternative formulation was that Japan is a "refractive" state in foreign policy – reactive perhaps, but nevertheless purposeful in responding to external stimuli.⁴

Neither of these alternative formulations contradicts the fundamental insight of the 'reactive state' argument. They do not refute the notion that some nations habitually and systematically wait for external signals, particularly from hegemonic partners, and then respond, rather than proactively defining their own course. The 'refractive state' argument, in particular, contributes useful insights about how states respond to external stimuli without contesting the notion that they do in fact wait to respond, rather than blazing a proactive course. The reactive state argument also has the virtue of being empirically testable.

'Reactive realism' similarly fails to question the core insight of 'reactive state' analysis – the proclivity to be passive in policy generation. It adds a proposition (that states are 'realist'), however, that is extremely difficult to test. What constitutes state 'interests' is a subjective matter and hence empirically difficult to determine, especially as nations become increasingly pluralist and structurally complicated internally.

'Reactive realism' thus appears attractive as a means of justifying reactive behaviour *ex post*. Its predictive value in social-science analysis, however, is problematic, as there are no objective criteria for identifying what is 'realism' or to whom the referent should apply. And there are clearly a range of cases that explicitly contravene the 'reactive realism' argument – in which nations like Japan fail to act due to structural inadequacies even when their objective identifiable interests demand action. The early 1990s, for example, were replete with such cases, both in international finance⁵ and also in response to strategic opportunities available to Japan at the onset of the 1991 Gulf War.⁶

1 Kent E. Calder, "Japanese Foreign Economic Policy: Explaining the Reactive State," *World Politics*, July 1988, pp. 517-541.

2 See, for example, Gerald L. Curtis, *The Logic of Japanese Politics: Leaders, Institutions, and the Limits of Change*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1999; Michael J. Green, *Japan's Reactive Realism: Foreign Policy Challenges in an Era of Uncertain Power*. London: Palgrave, 2001; and Kent E. Calder, "Japan as a Post-Reactive State?" *Orbis*, Fall, 2003, pp. 605-616.

3 Green, *Japan's Reactive Realism*.

4 Gerald Curtis, *The Logic of Japanese Politics*.

5 Japanese Finance Minister Kiichi Miyazawa, for example, had insights into debt relief in the early 1990s, packaged as a 'Miyazawa Plan,' which he did not pursue globally even though Japan was the largest global creditor. Japan deferred to the United States, rather than pursuing its own ideas despite its global financial leverage, resulting in the 'Brady Plan' being adopted globally.

6 Japan's Prime Minister Toshiki Kaifu, for example, had the opportunity to be the first G-7 leader to visit the Middle East after Saddam Hussein's invasion of Iraq, with Japan being the industrial nation with greatest energy reliance on the region. The Japanese govern-

Reactive-state analysis maintains that states respond to external stimuli – they are not, in other words, ‘autistic.’ In that sense, it comes in direct contrast with another prominent historical interpretation of Japanese foreign policy behaviour – James Fallows and Karel van Wolferen’s revisionist argument that Japan is incapable of action on important global policy issues.⁷ Empirical evidence, however, vindicates the reactive state argument, as it is clear that Japan does in fact generally respond to external pressure, albeit often in an un-systematic and seemingly non-strategic way. Trade policy is a case in point, with the structural impediments initiative (SII) negotiations between Japan and the United States during the 1990s being an important illustrative case.⁸

Reactive State Analysis in the Cross-National Context

In contrast with ‘reactive realism,’ which cannot specify or rigorously test either clearly conforming or counter-factual behaviour, reactive state analysis has proven to have concrete cross-national applicability. It specifies sub-national structural characteristics (executive branch structure, political-party structure and so on) that impede proactive policymaking, thus allowing tests of how policymaking actually operates and why it tends to be reactive. Italy’s foreign-policy process, for example, long had structural features such as weak executive/legislative dependence, strong ruling party factions and a geopolitical relationship with the United States similar to Japan’s, which produced similar reactive policymaking to that observed in Japan, thus validating the reactive-state hypothesis.⁹

France, in contrast with both Italy and Japan, can provide counter-factual validation of the reactive-state argument. While France adjoins Italy, and is a similarly advanced industrial nation, since 1958 it has had a strong presidential system under the Fifth Republic. Under this system, its foreign policy has been notably more proactive than Italy’s. Similarly, under the Fifth Republic France’s foreign policy has been much more proactive than it had been under the Fourth Republic, when the French national executive and French political parties were much weaker than they became after 1958.

Reactive State Analysis and International Relations Theory

The reactive state argument is principally concerned with comparative political behaviour – how individual nation states behave in the international system. However, it also calls into question what has been a fundamental premise of realist-IR theory since Hans Morgenthau, if not before, that nation states can be plausibly presented as rational, interest-maximising actors.¹⁰ In contrast with typical realist contentions, the reactive-state argument suggests that nation states at times act in response to initiatives by others, often due to structural constraints unrelated to and in tension with self-interest.

In short, reactive-state analysis (RSA) calls into question the unified rational actor model in international relations, and aids the study of domestic politics and foreign policy, which is typically obscured by over-simplified realist assumptions.¹¹ In particular, RSA leads to the study of two-level games – of how domestic and international transactions are configured, and how they constrain or facilitate one another.¹² RSA can therefore contribute in a systematic way to the study of how domestic politics and foreign policy relate to each other in ways that ‘reactive realism’ cannot, since it makes no falsifiable claims about domestic politics.

ment, however, did not take this opportunity to take proactive global leadership.

7 Karel van Wolferen, *The Enigma of Japanese Power: People and Politics in a Stateless Nation*. New York: Vintage Books, 1990; and James Fallows, “Containing Japan,” *The Atlantic*, May 1989, at <https://www.theatlantic.com>.

8 See, for example, Leonard Schoppa, *Bargaining with Japan: What American Pressure Can and Cannot Do*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1997.

9 See, for example, Joseph Lapalombara, *Democracy, Italian Style*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987.

10 See Hans Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*. New York: McGraw Hill, 1948.

11 See, for example, Kenneth N. Waltz, *Man, The State, and War: A Theoretical Analysis*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1959.

12 Robert Putnam, “Diplomacy and Domestic Politics: The Logic of Two-Level Games,” *International Organization*, Summer, 1988, pp. 427-460.

Reactive State Analysis and the Test of Time

As suggested above, RSA has comparative relevance outside Japan, particularly in Western Europe, and relates to important theoretical debates that have been emerging in the study of international relations. There is also an important empirical question, however, of how meaningfully it relates to foreign-policy decision-making in the real world – especially in Japan, but also more broadly in the international system as a whole.

If a set of concepts lacks both predictive and heuristic value, it is clearly of dubious value for analytical purposes.

Certainly, there are important respects in which Japanese foreign policy-making has grown less structurally constrained, and less compelled to be reactive, over the past decade. The steady growth in the power of the Prime Minister's office (*kantei*) under Prime Minister Shinzo Abe (2012-2020) was one important dimension of this phenomenon.¹³ Behind this development, of course, was also the sustained tenure of Abe, the longest serving Prime Minister in modern Japanese history, and of Abe's Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoshihide Suga, who succeeded him as Prime Minister.

Clearly Abe conducted less reactive foreign policy than his immediate predecessors. He proactively initiated the Indo-Pacific concept, for example, and stimulated US participation, rather than the other way round. When Donald Trump left the Trans-Pacific Initiative, Abe reformulated the regional trade agreement and proactively reconfigured it as the CPTPP.¹⁴ However, even Abe remained highly reactive to US interests on most national-security and economic issues, such as cyber-security and digital trade.

Looking to the future, there is also the question of how enduring the proactive steps that Shinzo Abe took, and the new institutions to support Japanese proactive foreign policy, will ultimately be. Prime Minister Suga, who only lasted a year in Japan's top office (2020-2021), proved much less proactive than Abe, and the verdict remains unclear regarding Fumio Kishida. In early 2023 he began to express support for the Global South that transcended US-centric agendas.¹⁵ However, funding, domestic political resistance and lack of intelligence information and regional expertise remain constraints.

In short, Japan remains constrained and hence inevitably reactive in its foreign policy to a more pronounced degree than similar nations with more centralised and better developed foreign-policy structures. However, it is part of a volatile and increasingly uncertain international system in which all nations are increasingly subject to parallel constraints. Even as Japan grows marginally less reactive, most nation states and a broad variety of non-government actors are growing more so.

13 Tomohito Shinoda, *Koizumi Diplomacy: Japan's Kantei Approach to Foreign and Domestic Affairs*. Seattle, Washington: University of Washington Press, 2007.

14 Michael J. Green, *Line of Advantage: Japan's Grand Strategy in the Era of Abe Shinzo*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2022.

15 "Prime Minister Kishida's Speech at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies," January 13, 2023, on the Ministry of Foreign Affairs website, at: <https://www.mofa.go.jp>.

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