

# Michal Kolmaš: National Identity and Japanese Revisionism

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Michal Kolmaš, the head of the Department of Asian Studies at the Metropolitan University Prague, presents the book *National Identity and Japanese Revisionism* as the outcome of his more than a decade long fascination with Japan (Preface). Kolmaš was, in a way, lucky because this period allowed him to observe the society while it was led by a strong-willed conservative leader with clear revisionist goals. Kolmaš was presented with material suitable for his in-depth case study on Japanese national identity, in which he follows up on his past research interest in the role of Japan in international relations, and the way national and collective identities are formed.

Before his resignation in September 2020, Shinzo Abe was a central political figure of Japan as “*his comprehensive election victories have granted him the capacity to propose and pass legislature [sic] that significantly alters Japan’s postwar trajectory*” (p. 4). Abe served as the Japanese prime minister between 2006 and 2007 and then assumed the office again in 2012. As a result, he became the longest serving prime minister in Japanese history, surpassing the second longest serving prime minister, Katsura Taro (1901–1913), by nearly a year. Abe’s conservative (or outright right-wing nationalist) views regarding constitutional and historical revisionism were well-known. Both Japan’s post-war constitution (mainly its Article 9, which is preventing Japan from maintaining its armed forces) and the issue of its historical guilt for the atrocities it committed during World War 2 were of crucial importance for Abe’s politics. Similarly, he was understood as a hardliner with regard to the People’s Republic of China’s (PRC) rising military potential and the North Korean nuclear program. As such, he systematically pushed to modify the post-war *status quo* of Japan.

According to Kolmaš, the interaction between the motivated political will of Abe and the popular and institutional pushback against his revisionist agenda creates a discursive framework forming the Japanese national identity (p. 3). This interaction affects not only Japanese foreign policy, but also domestic issues, such as internal security, the perception of history and the reflection of the past in the state-provided education. Kolmaš endeavours to analyse these two discursive forces – Abe’s revisionism and the institutional and popular reaction to it – and thus contributes to the understanding of the contemporary Japanese identity. To fully realise his goals, he divides the book into four distinct chapters, which I will outline below.

The first chapter, “National identity and the study of contemporary Japan” (PP. 7–31), provides a theoretical overview. Kolmaš focuses on two approaches to studying national identity, namely social constructivism and the post-structural approach. He is well aware of the practical limitations of both of these methods. To bridge these two methods and to account more accurately for the forces shaping the Japanese identity, Kolmaš opts for what he calls *pragmatic synthesis* and turns to Waever’s identity sedimentation. Waever posited that “*deeper structures are more solidly sedimented and more difficult to politicize and change*” (WAEVER 2002: 32). This provides Kolmaš with a basic descriptive and analytical tool for mapping the discourse between Abe’s administration (the least sedimented level) and the post-war pacifist identity of Japan (the most sedimented level). As such, Kolmaš is able to better understand why Abe’s appealing 2012 election call to “*take Japan back from the postwar history*” (P. 25) was met with a post-election restraint from the public and institutions, but also from coalition partners.

“Sedimentation of the pacifist identity”, the second chapter of the book (PP. 32–49), focuses on the process of sedimentation of the post-war pacifism in the Japanese society and its institutions. The pre-war Japan was formed by its perceived superiority *vis-à-vis* other Asian countries and its inferiority *vis-à-vis* European countries and the USA. Japan has been seeking to put itself into a more favourable position during the war (PP. 34–35). However, because of its defeat, the subsequent US occupation, the instalment of American-based ideas (liberal democracy, free market individualism), and the enactment of the peaceful Constitution, Japan found itself in the inferior position once again (P. 35). This played an important part in the identity of Japan during the Cold War. However, the Gulf War (1991), the collapse of the Soviet Union (1991) and the crisis following the missile test in North Korea (1993) have demonstrated the absence of a clear Japanese strategy of how to deal with the new security environment (P. 46). Kolmaš describes the pre-Abe response to these changes as culminating in the person of Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi (2001–2006). Koizumi’s views of Japanese foreign policy were, as Kolmaš puts it, “*tougher and more assertive*” but at the same time “*emotional*” rather than “*rational revisionist*” (P. 48).

We encounter Shinzo Abe for the first time in the third chapter, “Abe’s convictions and ideological background” (PP. 50–67). Kolmaš frames the replacement of Koizumi by Abe as an uneasy transition because Koizumi

commanded high popular support and was well accepted by the masses. Abe, on the other hand, came from a conservative family that was well-established in the upper echelons of the society. Abe's grandfather Nobusuke Kishi was the ruler of the Japanese puppet state Manchukuo, a member of the wartime cabinet, and a suspected class A war criminal. He also served as the prime minister of Japan (1957–1960) and resigned in 1960 during the popular Anpo Struggle (p. 52). Understandably, the ideological connection between Abe and Kishi is not based solely on family ties. Kishi founded the *Seiwa Political-Analysis Council*, a nationalist and conservative faction of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP). Abe later joined the faction and led it himself (p. 52). Similar to Kishi in many other accounts, Abe called for a revision of the Japanese pacifist constitution “*in order [for Japan] to become a tier one country and a leader in Asia*” (p. 53). In a similar tone, Abe's long-standing view is that “*a self-confident nation should not need to apologize forever*” for its historical transgressions (p. 55). This, in my opinion, closely mirrors past statements made by some of the West German politicians, such as Chancellor Helmut Schmidt or the CSU-leader Frank-Josef Strauss. Kolmaš explains Abe's ideological background in great detail, as I believe many readers who are interested in Japan but oblivious to Japanese faction politics will appreciate. Abe's first stint as prime minister, which ended when scandals and his overt revisionism led to his resignation in 2007, is covered in this chapter. However, as Kolmaš closes this chapter, he states that Abe rose to power for the second time in 2012 in response to a call for a more confident and experienced leader (p. 67).

In answer to this call, and after his election victory in December 2012, Abe “*reinvigorated his conservative and revisionist agenda*” (p. 68), to which Kolmaš dedicates the fourth chapter “*Deconstructing Abe's narrative on constitution change, school education, security polity and regional leadership*” (pp. 69–119). Here, Kolmaš goes beyond simply stating that Abe's agenda is conservative and overtly revisionist. He explains how exactly Abe's revisionism manifests in terms of public appearances, multilateral foreign policy initiatives and specific steps undertaken to alter the standing practice of deployment of Japanese Self-Defense Forces. Kolmaš then presents four case studies focusing on (1) the history of Japan and the revision of its historical guilt, (2) the constitution and the revision of the pacifist constitution, (3) the internal security and the revision of Japan's liberal stance, and (4) foreign policy and the revision of Japan's bilateral reliance on the USA. In each case study, Kolmaš outlines

Abe's narrative and the popular and institutional pushback which creates constraints on Abe's revisionism. Kolmaš provides plenty of specific examples of both of the discursive forces. Again, I must commend Kolmaš for explaining the context. To those "only" interested in Japan and its politics and policy, Abe's statement on the 70<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Japan's defeat in World War II (2015) might seem without any controversy. However, Kolmaš explains well its relation to the Kono Statements of Remorse (1993) and the Murayama apology (1995). Even readers without an in-depth knowledge of the subject are then readily able to understand why Abe's statement damaged Japan's relationships with the PRC and South Korea, and why it drew criticism from the former prime ministers Yohei Kono and Tomiichi Mirayama (p. 72).

Because of the limited space of this review, I cannot engage more with these case studies, but Kolmaš has gathered enough evidence to warrant the book's conclusion, titled "A limited change for Japan" (pp. 120–128). Abe's strong-willed and forward-looking approach has met its match in the lower sedimented level of the Japanese identity. As a result, Abe's revisionist activities met with only limited success. Yet, as Kolmaš mentions in the case study dedicated to the change of the security policy, "*the Abe government has initiated a set of reforms that transform Japan's security posture and allows for measures that were unfathomable before*" (p. 92). However, Kolmaš concludes that "*the change is much slower, more complicated and nuanced than generally anticipated*" (p. 121).

In the subchapter "Looking to the future", Kolmaš further states that "*the postwar pacifist identity has created a significant set of brakes on this revisionism*", but "*the identity is under constant pressure from the Abe administration*" (p. 127). Abe's goal to change the pacifist constitution has met with a strong opposition from his coalition partner (p. 88) and Abe could not rely on popular support in this regard (pp. 89–92). However, Abe hinted that he would like to see the Constitution changed in 2020 (pp. 60, 80).

The book is thin and dense. It is also timely in its focus, although to a large extent inadvertently. Kolmaš has, unknown to him, drawn a sort of a memento to Abe's administration. In July 2019, the LDP won the election to the House of Councillors (the upper house of the Diet). However, it has lost the two-third majority necessary to pursue the change of the pacifist constitution. Shinzo Abe has thus lost the political power to pursue his

lifetime political goal. At the beginning of 2020, the worldwide pandemic hit. Abe's government was thus forced to focus on more pressing issues, and the constitutional revision (lacking popular support) became side-lined. As in 2007, Abe resigned from the position of prime minister shortly after the disappointing election results, citing health issues, in September 2020 when it was clear that he could not fully realise his dream of a self-confident Japan following the constitutional change. In spite of the great plans that he pushed forward with a strong resolve, his effect was limited, as Kolmaš aptly demonstrated in his book. Inadvertently, Kolmaš might have written a book that will form the way we think about Shinzo Abe for years to come. *National Identity and Japanese Revisionism* covers Abe's origin and his political activity (both in- and out-of-office), but also, as a trick of fate, its legacy.

As a whole, the book is an in-depth case study of forces that shaped the Japanese identity during the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It is beneficial not only for those studying Japan but also for those studying how a collective identity is formed and how it responds to political pressures.

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