

## **Japan as a Civilizational State: Rethinking Abe Shinzō’s Global Vision**

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### ***Abstract***

The article revisits the policies of Abe Shinzō, Japan’s longest-serving prime minister, and places them in the context of the current trend of civilizations advancing as a major factor in international affairs. We briefly examine the development of the influential concept of a “civilizational state,” today most often exemplified by China, and suggest that this concept can be used to elucidate Abe’s vision of Japanese polity and its position on the global arena. Based on the review of the relevant scholarly literature, we argue that Japan’s traditional self-identification as a mediator between Asia and the West also conforms to the idea of a civilizational state.

We highlight that the key factor influencing the international situation over Abe’s second administration (2012–2020) was the rise of China in the aftermath of the 2008–2009 financial crisis, which exposed the West’s relative economic decline. In these circumstances, Japan attempted to assume a position of a mediator between the two poles of power, a position that we relate to Abe’s political aspirations such as his quest for Japan’s greater political autonomy and his appeal both to Asian identity and universal values. In certain respects, this tendency continues after Abe’s resignation in 2020 as well, though whether current and future leaders of Japan will continue with his general approach is a complicated question.

We conclude by arguing for urgency of the discussion of the political ideas that mediate between the universal and the local values and identities – a task for which Abe’s legacy appears to us to be particularly relevant.

**Keywords:** Abe Shinzō; civilizational state; foreign policy; civilizations; Japanese identity; Japan's security policy; Asian values; universal values.

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## Introduction

The policies of Abe Shinzō have been discussed thoroughly in both media and the academic literature, which is only natural considering his immense impact, as the longest-serving prime minister in the post-Meiji restoration history, on the contemporary Japanese polity and economy. The discussion of his political ideas and principles, on the other hand, has often been insufficiently sophisticated, with numerous observers resorting to simplified clichés of “nationalism” and “right-wing conservatism” to describe his vision. This tendency, of course, is not without significant exceptions:<sup>1</sup> e.g., Michael Green’s book *Line of Advantage* presents Abe’s global strategy as guided by the geopolitical logic of “the maritime framework” [Green 2022, p. 42], at the core of which lays the alliance with the U.S. to protect the liberal order from

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<sup>1</sup> It is worth noting that Tobias Harris, drawing from various sources, lists José Ortega y Gasset, Japanese public intellectual Nishibe Susumu and, above all, Max Weber as Abe’s proclaimed philosophical influences [Harris 2020, pp. 47, 49].

potential threats (first and foremost, China).<sup>2</sup> Green traces the line of development of Abe's strategic thinking from Meiji era's statesmen such as Sakamoto Ryōma [Green 2022, p. 11].

The aim of the following article is to present a different conceptual framework to approach Abe's global vision: the notion of a civilizational state. This notion has gained prominence since the publication of Martin Jacques' *When China Rules the World* [Jacques 2009]. In fact, Jacques himself used the term "civilization-state"<sup>3</sup> to describe China, a "continental-sized" nation that is "not just a nation-state" but also "a civilization" [Jacques 2009, pp. 196, 424]. In Jacques' understanding, "the civilization-state generates... a very different kind of politics from that of a conventional nation-state, with unity, rooted in the idea of civilization rather than nation, the overriding priority" [Jacques 2009, p. 201]. Jacques's idea was further developed in Zhang Weiwei's book *The China Wave*, which presents contemporary China as "the only country in the world which has amalgamated the world's longest continuous civilization with a huge modern state" [Zhang 2012, p. 2] – that is, as the "civilizational state." Zhang contrasts "civilizational state" with "civilization-state," suggesting that the latter term "reflects the tension

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<sup>2</sup> In Green's own summary, Abe's global strategy was a strategy "focused on alignment with other maritime powers aimed at reinforcing global standards for commerce and protection of the sea lane" [Green 2022, p. 12]. There are several major objections that can be made against such characterization, such as Abe's supposed pursuit of "strategic independence" from Washington [Harris 2020, p. 301] and his attempts of "maintaining normal relations with Beijing" [Panov 2024, p. 16]. However, Green's point on the centrality of the U.S. and China for Japan's strategy [Green 2022, p. 14] is hardly debatable.

<sup>3</sup> Today, the terms "civilizational state" and "civilization-state" (or "civilization state") are typically used as interchangeable, with "civilizational state" being used perhaps more often. In this article, we use the term "civilizational state" without necessarily implying any meaningful difference between this usage and the wording "civilization-state" (as Zhang Weiwei does in the case considered further).

between” the concepts of civilization and nation-state, rather than their “amalgamation” [Zhang 2012, pp. 2, 53].

Nowadays, the concept of a civilizational state is increasingly popular in China, Russia, India, Turkey and other countries [Lukin 2023, p. 85]. Japan is very rarely invoked in this list, perhaps on the ground of its persistent association with the “Western” liberal camp in global politics.<sup>4</sup> There are, however, important reasons to consider Japan in connection to this concept, and particularly with respect to the political trajectory envisioned by Abe. Doing so, we could hopefully both contribute to the more profound understanding of the political philosophy of one of the twenty-first century’s most remarkable statesmen and help better elucidate the concept itself.<sup>5</sup>

## **Japan: A Civilizational State?**

One of the rare yet nonetheless important instances of Japan considered as a civilizational state is found in the article by an influential sociologist Göran Therborn, who asserts that “civilization(al)-states have recently and suddenly become a central phenomenon of international politics” [Therborn 2021, p. 226].<sup>6</sup> Therborn calls Japan

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<sup>4</sup> It is very telling that Jacques in his book dedicates significant attention to Japan, comparing Japan and China’s trajectories of modernization, while making a (somewhat over-generalizing) statement that Japan, in its post-World War II history, “always sought to assert its Western credentials and play down its political and cultural distinctiveness” [Jacques 2009, p. 10].

<sup>5</sup> The second task is particularly urgent for Russian scholarly community, as the concept of civilizational state now appears prominently in Russian strategic documents.

<sup>6</sup> Therborn’s article provides a useful discussion of what a “nation-state” is and how exactly it relates to a “civilizational state.” Importantly, though centrality of a cultural tradition is usually emphasized in connection to the

“the best example of political understanding being illuminated by the concept of civilization state,” arguing that the country’s successful modernization occurred through the employment of “a political system topped by something well captured by the concept of a civilizational state” [Therborn 2021, p. 238]. He specifically refers to the notion of “a unique Japanese polity (*kokutai*), centred on an emperor... in whom sovereignty resided due to his belonging to ‘a line of Emperors unbroken for ages eternal’”<sup>7</sup> [Therborn 2021, p. 238].

Samuel Huntington, whose thesis of the “Clash of Civilizations” has popularized civilizational problems among observers and practitioners of international politics, also included “Japanese” civilization in his list of civilizations existing in the contemporary world (in addition, the list includes “Sinic,” “Hindu,” “Islamic,” “Western,” and “Latin American” civilizations) [Huntington 1996, pp. 45–47]. In fact, Huntington emphasizes that Japan is distinct in that it is “a civilization that is a state,” while, for instance, “Sinic” civilization “transcends China as a political entity” [Huntington 1996, pp. 44–45].

In his book *Civilization, Nation and Modernity in East Asia*, Chin-yu Shih explicitly refers to Japan as a “civilization”; though he never uses the term “civilizational state” (which had not been as popular when the book came out in 2012), he invokes a similar term “civilizational nation” [Shih 2012, p. 1]. Shih suggests that the identity of modern Japan has been historically defined in reference to the West and Asia, principally represented by China, with Japan supposedly being able to mediate between these two opposing poles

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concept of civilizational state, Therborn highlights that “nation-state” is itself a culturally charged concept [Therborn 2021, p. 226].

<sup>7</sup> Such conception of the (post-Meiji restoration, pre-American occupation) Japanese polity is strikingly similar to the way Zhang presents China as the “longest continuous civilization” that “has a strong capability to draw on the strengths of other nations while maintaining its own identity” [Zhang 2012, pp. 2–3].

[Shih 2012, p. 2].<sup>8</sup> Arguing that the underlying assumptions of the Western international relations theories are insufficient to account for the complexity of today's world,<sup>9</sup> Shih refers to Japanese (first of all, Nishida Kitarō) and Chinese theoreticians to present an alternative vision.

In sum, there are significant reasons to consider Japan in connection to the concept of a civilizational state. Today, China has overtaken Japan as a paradigmatic example of such a state, though the reasons why China is considered in such a way – the long and distinct cultural-political tradition, the ability to accommodate modern technology and institutions while maintaining the distinct identity and modes of governance – are the same reasons why Japan was or could be considered a civilizational state on its own right. One is free to ask, of course, whether it makes sense to set Japan or China (or India, Russia, etc.) aside from a larger list of nations with rich cultural and political traditions and peculiar trajectories of modernization. Possible answers to this question would

<sup>8</sup> See also [Iwabuchi 2002, pp. 53–59] for a literature survey and an argument on the ability to assimilate foreign technology and cultural elements as a persistent feature of Japan's self-identification.

<sup>9</sup> As Shih puts it elegantly, “mainstream international relations (IR) scholarship does not deal with human death, not to mention civilizational death, as human death is not about analysis at the state or systemic level” [Shih 2012, p. 4]. Here, he points not just to the phenomenon of death in the everyday sense of this word, but rather to the assumed disadvantages of the modern Western (e.g., Cartesian) conception of subjectivity, which risks overemphasizing one's self-sufficiency and, correspondingly, downplays the dimension of alterity related to death. As Shih phrases it elsewhere: “death of human beings” is “ontological death... to appreciate lives of seemingly no significance [in the light of death] is to respect an ‘Other’” [Shih 2012, p. 100]. On the problem of subjectivity, alterity, and death, see also [Han 2021, pp. 1–14]. Finding the political subjectivity that is more fundamental than one's immediate decision-making is arguably at the core of the civilizational state discourse.

include the cultural and intellectual tradition of self-identification vis-à-vis other civilizational centers (the West and China or Asia, in Japan's case), and, importantly, size. In addition to the perceived lack of political autonomy<sup>10</sup> and leadership in international rules-making<sup>11</sup> in its post-World War II history, it is Japan's relative decline in international influence – perhaps most evidently, in terms of its share of the global economy – which accounts for Japan being less readily considered a “civilizational state” today than even in 1996, when Huntington listed it among the world's major civilizations.

It is also important to highlight that the intellectual legacy (particularly, in the field of political ideas) associated with Japan's civilizational self-identification is not merely a relic of the “imperialistic” past to be disposed of. On the contrary, this legacy grows in value and relevance, as civilizational matters come to the increasingly prominent place in global politics. For one example, the thought on civilizations of Nishida Kitarō<sup>12</sup> is compared favorably to Huntington's by Christopher

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<sup>10</sup> For an argument that seeks to make sense of the destruction of the sovereign Japanese polity in World War II (and to see it, in a way, as an event that opened up possibilities for moral and social progress) while retaining the importance of the distinctly Japanese collective identity, see [Tanabe 1986]. In our assessment, Tanabe's emphasis on Pure Land Buddhism-inspired concept of *tariki*, “Other-power” (which strongly differs from the ideas of sovereignty discussed by the proponents of the civilizational state discourse) offers rich conceptual resources to avoid the inevitability of the “clash of civilizations.” This is, of course, a topic that warrants a detailed separate discussion.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Zhang's claim that “one of the major characteristics of a civilizational state is its innate ability to create... international political standards” [Zhang 2012, p. 110].

<sup>12</sup> Although Nishida was a “pure” philosopher, IR scholar Inoguchi Takashi lists him among the three foundational thinkers in Japanese IR theory [Inoguchi 2007]. Inoguchi particularly emphasizes the importance and contemporary applicability of the ideas of Nishida as a “precursor

Goto-Jones, who argues that Nishida captures the strengths of the concept of civilization as a source of meaning and identity while minimizing the danger of political competition among civilizations accentuated by Huntington [Goto-Jones 2002].

### **Abe’s “Civilizational State” Strategy**

In the literature on Abe’s leadership and public image, it is a common thread that his political approach was significantly different in his second government (2012–2020) from the first (2006–2007) one. In the words of one observer, “Abe’s first term as prime minister... focused on fulfilling his conservative and revisionist political goals of ‘restoring national pride,’” whereas, during the second term, “Abe embraced Abenomics and later womenomics, as branding exercises... aimed at softening his hawkish image and showing concern about the public’s welfare” [Nakahara 2021, pp. 3, 11]. In the words of another scholar, Abe had lost the public approval over his first term because, while he was “focused on his revisionist agenda, the public was largely concerned with economic and social issues”; however, “as Abe returned to power... he immediately redirected his focus to reforming Japan’s ailing economy,” thus winning the public support [Maslow 2015, pp. 746, 748]. According to these observers, the increased prominence of economic objectives for Abe’s second government was a pragmatic measure, aimed at preserving his position in power. In our view, the divorce of Abe’s pursuit of revitalization of the Japanese economy (so-called “Abenomics”) from his ideological goals in such analyses simplifies the situation.

The key difference in the international environment between Abe’s two governments is the unfolding of the global financial crisis since 2008. The crisis had shaken the stability of the U.S.-led global (neo-)liberal

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to [constructivist] identity analysis” [Inoguchi 2007, p. 380]. Again, it is noted that, in Nishida’s view, “Japanese identity emerges through a coexistence of opposites, Eastern and Western” [Inoguchi 2007, p. 379].

order and revealed the rise of the alternative poles of power (first of all, China), while also making it increasingly obvious that the resilient and dynamic economy is an indispensable pillar of international influence. The increasing tension between the U.S. and China, with the latter becoming the economic heart of the region,<sup>13</sup> determined the complexity of the situation which Abe navigated during his second term.

The rhetoric of “national pride,” as Abe’s biographer Tobias Harris explains, connects him to his grandfather, Japan’s prime minister (1957–1960) Kishi Nobusuke. In Harris’s words, Kishi, who aspired “to uproot the institutions that he believed had reduced Japan to a humiliating dependence on the US,” was “a living symbol of the culture war” [Harris 2020, p. 19]. Giulio Pugliese also admits that Kishi’s “desire to recover full autonomy for Japan as a Great Power” made him “Abe’s role model” [Pugliese 2015, p. 46]. In Harris’s assessment, Abe’s ideological “inheritance from Kishi” includes what he calls a “vision of a ‘deep Japan’” or “essential Japan,” and, to illustrate this view, he quotes Abe writing: “my grandfather firmly believed that Japan, as an Asian nation, should exist as a country in which a tradition centered on the imperial household is maintained” [Harris 2020, p. 52].

Abe’s main fronts of action during his second tenure included revitalizing Japan’s economy, strengthening its defense capabilities, and advancing its position in the international political arena, particularly through enhancing the existing and making new alliances [Harris 2020, p. 229]. Abenomics is usually considered a moderate success, at least in its initial phase [Patalano 2020, p. 10; Harris 2020, p. 215]. When it comes to Abe’s unrealized goals, the prime minister himself, as quoted by Tōgō Kazuhiko, listed the North Korea abduction issue, the revision of the constitution, and the unconcluded peace treaty with Russia – out of which, in Tōgō’s assessment, the third point is the really important one, since, in the abduction issue, there was a severe “limit of what he could have done,” and, in regard to the constitution, Abe “has actually made

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<sup>13</sup> As noted in [Bu & Wu 2022, pp. 3, 5], China is the most important trading partner for every single country in East and Southeast Asia.

a fundamental change by changing the interpretation of Article 9”<sup>14</sup> [Tōgō 2024, pp. 34–35]. Tobias Harris calls Abe’s pursuit of the peace treaty with Russia an attempt “to overcome the legacy of the Second World War” [Harris 2020, p. 302], and it can be said that these words apply to all three of Abe’s self-proclaimed unfulfilled goals (if one sees the tense security situation on the Korean Peninsula ultimately as the outcome of the war).

The key features of Abe’s strategy – references to the Japanese cultural-political (“imperial”) tradition,<sup>15</sup> his quest for greater political autonomy of Japan,<sup>16</sup> and strengthening of the country’s defensive capabilities (something of a reversal of its post-World War II trajectory) and economy – appear to us to be reasonably summed up by the concept of a civilizational state. In this connection, it should also be noted that, as Alessio Patalano observes, “Abe established a more direct link between economic policy and foreign and security policies,” and Abenomics, to gain popular support, “drew in fact upon an ideological resonance with the Meiji era slogan ‘rich country, strong army’” [Patalano 2020, p. 10].

Through a detailed analysis of Abe’s speeches and his administration’s official documents, Dmitry Streltsov uncovered

<sup>14</sup> Article 9 of the constitution renounces Japan’s right to wage war or maintain war potential. Its reinterpretation, proposed by Abe’s administration and formally approved on the 1<sup>st</sup> of July, 2014, broadens Japan’s rights for self-defense, including its capacities to aid allies. On the reinterpretation of Article 9, see [Green 2022, pp. 92–95].

<sup>15</sup> The views of the strand of Japanese conservatism associated with Abe have been described as a “seeming flirtation with a revival of the state Shinto” [Harris 2020, p. 53]. Again, it should be highlighted that, at the forefront of civilizational politics, is decision-making influenced by the distinct cultural traditions, typically associated with religion [Huntington 1996, p. 47; Therborn 2021, p. 230].

<sup>16</sup> Even in cases when his actions were not welcomed in Washington, such as his May 2016 trip to Sochi, motivated by his pursuit of peace treaty with Russia [Tōgō 2024, p. 38].

a tension between the prime minister's self-stated allegiance to "Asian values" and "universal values" [Streltsov 2019, pp. 46–47]. However, this apparent duality of thinking need not necessarily be considered a strategic weakness. On the contrary, it may indicate the conscious intention both to obtain benefits from the economic rise of Asia, driven first of all by China, and to play a role in the construction of the renewed system of global governance in a way that would not alienate Japan's Western allies. The rise of China as an economic juggernaut and a politically assertive power has re-actualized the situation familiar for the Japanese strategic thought, with its proclivity to balance between "Asia" and the "West." On the one hand, Abe pursued a "[democratic] value-based diplomacy" which corresponded to strengthening Japan's defensive capacities, supposedly to counter the nations opposed to "democratic values," and thus effectively achieved the same objectives as desired by those whom Junghwan Lee calls Japanese "historical revisionists" [Lee 2024, p. 189]. On the other, he carefully balanced between the U.S. and China, defying certain politicians' "appetite for a new Cold War" and exploring "new forms of political, economic, and financial cooperation" with Beijing, as signified, for instance, by negotiations for the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership [Harris 2020, p. 300].

Such mediation between Asia, which emerges today as not only an economic but also a political powerhouse, and the "West" – a traditional aspect of Japan's civilizational self-identification – need not necessarily express itself in pre-World War II formulas like "Japanese spirit, Western technology" (*wakon yosai*). It is expressed, for instance, in the way Japan handles its investment and development aid in Asian countries. As Kanti Bajpai and Evan Laksmana put it, "Japan refuses to endorse liberal democracy as an exclusionary principle in order-building": when "Tokyo provides developmental aid and capacity-building," "it does not seek to condemn and punish" (for the supposed deviations from liberal democracy and related socio-cultural values) [Bajpai & Laksmana 2023, p. 1375]. This approach makes Japan a particularly reliable partner for Southeast Asian countries, where it

is seen as a “vital hedge against rival powers.”<sup>17</sup> Abe’s lasting role in Japan’s positioning as a mediator between Southeast Asia and the global institutions is vividly exemplified by him launching the Southeast Asia Regional Program (SEARP) in 2014, aimed at “support of Southeast Asia’s national priorities, policy reforms, and regional integration” and “strengthening relations between the OECD and ASEAN through policy dialogue, where Japan has acted as a bridge.”<sup>18</sup>

### **Japan’s Civilizational Course After Abe**

Whether Japan would continue with what we called Abe’s “civilizational state” strategy, characterized by the quest for greater autonomy and assertiveness on the global arena and a complicated mediation between the global and the regional identities, is difficult to access, as the nation’s political future is today decided through a heated domestic competition<sup>19</sup> and in turbulent international circumstances. However, here we intend to make several remarks on the ways Tokyo’s recent and possible future steps relate to the global vision laid out by Abe.

First, Abe consolidated the prime minister’s executive and legislative power, leaving for his successors “powerful instruments” [Green 2022, p. 217] to control bureaucracy and policy-making. Among other measures, he established National Security Council “that would enable the prime

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<sup>17</sup> Japan is a cuddlier friend to South-East Asia than America or China. *The Economist*, 14.12.2023. <https://www.economist.com/asia/2023/12/14/japan-is-a-cuddlier-friend-to-south-east-asia-than-america-or-china>.

<sup>18</sup> Sukegawa, S. Japan as a Bridge Between ASEAN and the OECD. *The Diplomat*, 20.06.2024. <https://www.thediplomat.com/2024/06/japan-as-a-bridge-between-asean-and-the-oecd>.

<sup>19</sup> That the public approval rate of the ruling LDP declined to the record-low levels in early 2024, eventually leading Prime Minister Kishida Fumio to resign, indicates that today’s Japan is far from the degree of political stability characteristic for Abe’s second tenure.

minister to command foreign policymaking” [Harris 2020, p. 212], made the Prime Minister’s Office (*Kantei*) “the command centre for... foreign and security policy” and created the Cabinet Bureau of Personnel Affairs to oversee the appointment of top bureaucrats [Patalano 2020, pp. 9–10]. In this regard, Abe’s legacy will continue to define Tokyo’s future actions, though the way this relates to the “civilizational” aspect of politics is highly ambiguous: the centralized power he acquired under the banners of revitalizing Japan and making it more independent and conscious of local traditions could just as well be used to advance the agenda of the global neoliberal institutions and interest groups.<sup>20</sup>

Second, the Abe era’s pursuit of economic revitalization and military capacity-building has evolved and reached a new quality with the development of the new economic security strategy, formally adopted in 2022 through the Economic Security Promotion Act and the updated National Security Strategy, which dedicates significant attention to the economic matters. This trend means that Abe’s strategy of balancing between the political alliance with the U.S. and the beneficial economic relations with China is becoming less viable, as the economy is increasingly approached through the lens of military and geopolitical competition,<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> On the seemingly paradoxical possibility of symbiosis between liberal internationalism and statism or nationalism, see [Deneen 2018, pp. 43–90]. Deneen’s communitarian perspective unites what is usually thought of today as political left and right under one umbrella term “liberalism,” though a term “capitalism” (with either private owners or state leadership as the primary capitalists) could be used just as well. Note in this connection Therborn’s observation that many of today’s conflicts supposedly engendered by cultural or “civilizational” factors are in fact motivated by geopolitical or economic reasons [Therborn 2021, pp. 238, 240].

<sup>21</sup> Consider, for instance, an argument by the government of Japan’s adviser on economic security Suzuki Kazuto: today, civil commercial activities generate data that can be used to train artificial intelligence with possible military applications, which is why civil technology (particularly, information technology) must be considered a security factor [Suzuki 2021, p. 5].

and, at the same time, that the state apparatus expands its control over the economy, and thus its own power.

Last but not the least, Abe's active diplomacy and efforts to advance Japan's international presence (particularly, in Asia) also enhance the possibilities of his successors, who would likely maintain the positioning of Japan as a mediator or a bridge between Asia and the "West," between the developing and the developed world. For one example, in May 2024, Prime Minister Kishida, building upon SEARP, initiated by Abe, initiated the Japan OECD-ASEAN Partnership Program (JOAPP), aimed at promoting OECD's economic standards in Southeast Asia.<sup>22</sup>

After all, the future will decide whether Abe's legacy (including the increased capacities for Japan's military forces and defense industry) will be used to expand Japan's strategic options and its impact as a mediator between the various political and civilizational poles or to fuel the tension between the "liberal" and the "revisionist" camps. In any case, Japan has to respond to the increasingly complicated and conflict-ridden international environment, with pressures and difficult choices it presents.

## Conclusion

Culture and civilization are nowadays increasingly understood as a decisive factor in international affairs. In this connection, it is useful to consider the case of Japan – in some assessments, historically the paradigmatic "civilizational state" – and to examine its relevance for today's advance of civilizational politics. As we attempted to demonstrate, the policies of Abe Shinzō can be reasonably related to this global trend.

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As virtually any economic transaction generates such behavioral data, it is possible to expand security considerations limitlessly, to any sector of the economy of an "unfriendly" country.

<sup>22</sup> Sukegawa, S. Japan as a Bridge Between ASEAN and the OECD. *The Diplomat*, 20.06.2024. <https://www.thediplomat.com/2024/06/japan-as-a-bridge-between-asean-and-the-oecd>.

Samuel Huntington's influential book *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* suggests that the rise of civilizations as a factor of global politics will be marked by "often... antagonistic" "relations between states and groups from different civilizations," with "the dominant division" laying "between 'the West and the rest'" [Huntington 1996, p. 183]. This vision of a sort of a new Cold War between the formerly dominant Western civilization and the emerging challengers is based on the assumption that the "values of democracy, free markets, limited government, human rights, individualism, the rule of law" are characteristically Western,<sup>23</sup> and any attempt to promote them as universal shall provoke "in non-Western cultures" reactions ranging "from widespread skepticism to intense opposition" [Huntington 1996, pp. 183–184]. However, the idea that the values of civility and rule of law, and capacity for universal thinking belong exclusively to the "West" is highly dubious. In particular, Japan has traditionally defined itself as a mediator between the Western modernity and the Asian societies – a truly universal vision, one that is particularly relevant today, as the activity of such mediators is necessary for the world not to plunge into the division between the two antagonistic camps. To uncover the ways of thinking that responsibly address the global challenges while accommodating the local and traditional sources of meaning and community is the task that, in our view, is urgent in Japan and elsewhere.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> It is easy to notice that this list in fact contains values that hardly define the contemporary West. In the era of neo-protectionism, "free markets" and "limited government" appear particularly irrelevant.

<sup>24</sup> As Thorsten Botz-Bornstein notes in his comparative study of the thought of Nishida Kitarō and Russian philosopher Semyon Frank (who both, in his assessment, cut through the "dichotomy of reasoning against feeling, of the rational against the familiar, of the modern against the archaic"): "it is... more important to think about... the formation of human communities dependent on the contact with the 'outer' world... than to define 'civilizations' as self-sufficient and egocentric entities" [Botz-Bornstein 2013, p. 1567–1568].

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