

What crisis? Japan, EU and Political Change in the Middle East and North Africa.

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Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to shed light on the implications of the Arab spring on EU external relations, with specific reference to the EU-Japan relation. Drawing on previous research related to the same issue,¹ I will show how the Arab spring has made more compelling the case for a deeper consultation between the EU and Japan on issues concerning the so-called MENA area, that is, the region including the Middle East and North Africa.² In order to do this, I will rely on the theoretical framework elaborated by Barry Buzan to analyse world politics since the end of the Cold war.³ Moving from the assumption that polarity “can only be useful if interpreted into the social structure in which it is embedded”,⁴ Buzan combines the concept of polarity and identity with the aim of investigating the interaction of material and social forces in the international system. Polarity is broadly defined as a materialist concept, based on the idea that the distribution of capabilities largely determines what the behaviour of the actors in the system will be. In examining mainstream theories, Buzan identifies the flaws affecting the conventional understanding of polarity and of the “great power” concept, and suggests an alternative interpretation. The concept of identity is defined in accordance with the constructivist literature on the topic. Hence, the social context is considered to be a key variable and the basic assumption is that the actors’ behaviour is shaped by the way they perceive themselves as well as in the way they construct their identities in relation to each other. Locating polarity within the social context, Buzan identifies the most likely combination of polarity and identity in future world politics.

In this paper, the interplay between polarity and identity theorized by Buzan will be used to analyse Japan’s regional diplomacy in the MENA area and the changes in Japan and EU identity prompted by the crises that unfolded simultaneously with the Arab spring. The concept of polarity will be employed to investigate how the changing distribution of capabilities in the international system has affected Japan’s MENA policy. Historically, Japan’s pattern of behaviour in foreign policy has been heavily influenced by the structure of the international system. The shifting edges of Tokyo’s role in international affairs have been the by-product of the varying distribution of material forces in the global arena. Japan’s interaction with the outside world throughout the Chinese,

¹ Noemi Lanna, “Japan and Europe in the MENA (Middle East and North Africa) Area: towards a New Bilateral Agenda?”, Sakamoto Chiyo (ed.), *Yōroppa ni okeru taminzoku kyōzon to EU. Gengo, bunka jendaa wo megutte. Oyobi Nichiō kankei no rekishi, bunka, seiji*, Kōbe Daigaku Daigakuin kokusai bunkagaku kenkyūka, Kōbe 2012.

² In this article, I will conform to the geographical designation of the MENA area that is currently used by the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The Gaimushō defines the “Middle East and North Africa region” (*Chūtō to Kita Afurika chiiki*) as a region stretching from the Northern part of Africa to the Persian Gulf. Afghanistan is the easternmost border of the area, whilst Pakistan is not included. This geographical definition has been systematically used in the Diplomatic Bluebook edited by the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs since the 2004 edition. See, for instance, the MENA area map included in the last edition. Ministry of Foreign Affairs (ed.), *Gaikō seisho* 2011, http://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/gaiko/bluebook/2011/pdf/pdfs/2_6.pdf, p. 102 (Accessed January 10, 2013).

³ Barry Buzan, *The United States and the Great Powers. World Politics in the Twenty-first century*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2004.

⁴ Buzan, *The United States and the Great Powers*, p. 15.

imperial and Cold war world orders provides evidence of this.⁵ The link between the pursuit of national interests and the systemic constraints impinging on it is particularly evident in Japan's involvement in the Middle East and North Africa. As it has been said, "MENA has been a prime site of contestation over Japan's role in international affairs and successive MENA crises have altered this role. Japan's MENA policy has been shaped by the demands, constraints and pressures emanating from the global, regional, intra-regional, and domestic contexts in which policy-makers must operate".⁶ For this reason, it is vital to establish the structure of the international system before considering Tokyo's strategic choices in the region. This is what I will do in the second section of the article. The post-September 11 global context will be analysed in order to identify the constraints and demands it has imposed on Japan's MENA policy. In the third section, Japan's regional diplomacy will be examined. In presenting Japan's diplomacy in the Middle East and North Africa as a response to the structural changes in the post-September 11 international environment, I will suggest that the reconfiguration of Tokyo's MENA policy is strictly related to China's growing presence in the international arena.

Finally, in the last section of this paper, Buzan's understanding of identity will be used to formulate some tentative thoughts on changes in Japanese and European self-perception. The timing of the Arab spring coincided with the acme of two crises that profoundly impacted the ideologies that Japan and the EU used to constitute themselves, legitimize their political processes and differentiate themselves from other actors. The reflection on Japan and the EU's role vis-à-vis the Arab spring cannot set aside this momentous factor.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to provide an analysis of the EU MENA policies. While taking into account the global and interregional context, I will focus my examination on Japan's position vis-à-vis Europe and the Middle East. Indeed, a comparative analysis would allow a full understanding of the prospects for a strengthened bilateral cooperation between Japan and Europe, but it is not my purpose to engage in such an investigation. The conclusions presented in this paper are not definitive. Rather, they are intended to offer a preliminary analysis in order to stimulate discussion and critical comments as well as pave the way for future research on the same issue.

The global context.

Drawing on Buzan's analysis, the post-Cold war international system can be defined as a structure with one superpower (United States) –and four great powers (China, Europe, Japan, and Russia). Because of the disparity of capability, role and status between the superpower and the group of great powers the system is not multipolar. Unipolarity is guaranteed by the US power and by identity factors as well. Buzan considers the absence of a counter-balancing coalition against the US, since the end of the Cold war, as the product of the deeply institutionalized role of the United States, based on supra-regional projects such as Atlanticism, Asia-Pacific and Pan-Americanism.⁷ The scholar does not dismiss the possibility that alternative structures could emerge. Indeed, two options for the future (two or three superpowers and a few great powers; no superpowers and several great

⁵ Glenn D. Hook, Julie Gilson, Christopher W. Hughes, Hugo Dobson, *Japan's International Relations. Politics, Economics and Security*, London and New York, Routledge, 2011, pp. 24-35; pp. 36-8.

⁶ Miyagi Yukiko, "Japan's Middle East Policy: 'still mercantile realism'", *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, vol. 12, no. 2 (2012), p. 308.

⁷ Buzan, *The United States and the Great Powers*, pp. 86-106.

powers) are thoroughly examined. Yet, the post-Cold war institutional framework is presented as a formidable support of the stability of the structure in the future as well.⁸

Whether China will rise to the status of “superpower” –in Buzan’s sense of the term- is to be seen.⁹ Nevertheless, no matter what the combination of polarity and identity will be, the rise of China will be a consistent actor in future scenarios. For the purpose of this article, the key point is that China’s enhanced rank in the international system has acted as a powerful systemic constraint, exerting a considerable influence on Japan’s diplomacy and, in particular, on MENA policy. Pressed by its growing interdependence with China and committed to its security alliance with the United States, Japan has entered an uncomfortable “era of torsion” (*nejire jidai*).¹⁰

Before we show the implications of this era for Japan, it would be useful to give an overall definition of the phenomenon. In East Asia, in the last decade, the “torsion” emerged as a consequence of the increase in commercial exchanges between China and its neighbours. The intensification of commercial and economic dependence on China prompted these countries to reconfigure their external relations in a manner compatible with the changed economic balance. Yet, since the alignment with the United States continued to be the benchmark for security policies, for these Asian countries, an “era of torsion” began. This “era of torsion” is characterized by non-correspondence between economic relations and political/security relations. The mismatching stems from the necessity to reconcile economic interdependence with China with the security needs granted by the United States. Not coincidentally, the phenomenon affects, albeit with different intensity, all the “spokes” of the “hub and spoke” system, namely the countries that as a consequence of the bilateral security agreements signed with the United States (*hub*) represented the linchpin of the *Pax Americana* in East Asia (e.g. Australia, Japan, South Korea, Philippines etc.). During the Cold War era, the Chinese factor was unimportant for these countries as far as the economic realm was concerned. On the contrary, the United States was a key-partner, as it acted not only as the chief provider of security, but also as an indispensable economic and commercial partner. The end of the Cold war and the rise of China jeopardised the underlying assumptions of this dual alignment. The growing economic relevance of Beijing produced a non-correspondence between the economic domain, heavily influenced by China, and the political and security domain, where the United States continued to play an essential role.

In Japan’s case, the mismatching took a particularly acute form. The data confirming Japan’s shift from an alignment to a “torsion” condition are significant. In 1980, 40% of Japan’s export was bound for the US market. Yet, in the following three decades, United States’ incidence on Japanese trade balance gradually decreased. If we assume as a parameter Japan’s trade dependence rate on the United States (calculated as a percentage of Japan’s GDP), we will see that the dependence was 27,1% in 1999; it scaled down to 18,8% in 2004 and it stood at 13,7% in 2009.¹¹

The reduction of the historic ally’s relevance in the commercial realm was not matched by a

⁸ Buzan, *The United States and the Great Powers*, pp. 83-147.

⁹ For Buzan’s position, see, Buzan, *The United States and the Great Powers*, pp. 107-116; “China in International Society: is ‘Peaceful Rise Possible?’”, *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, vol. 3 (2010), pp. 5-36.

¹⁰ Yamamoto Yoshinobu, “*Nejire (fuseigō) no jidai no Beichū kankei to Nihon. Kyōri to saizu no kokusai seijigaku*” [US-China relationship and Japan in the era of torsion (non-correspondence). Size and distance international politics], *Nihon kokusai mondai kenkyūjo* (ed), *Nichibeichū kankei no chūchōkiteki tenbō* [US-China-Japan relations: short-term and long-term prospects], Tokyo, Nihon Kokusai kenkyūjo, 2012, pp. 31-63.

¹¹ IMF data elaborated by Yamamoto. See, Yamamoto Yoshinobu, “*Nejire (fuseigō) no jidai no Beichū kankei to Nihon. Kyōri to saizu no kokusai seijigaku*”, p. 42.

decline of the US role in the political and strategic domain. The United States continues to be the main guarantor of the archipelago's security and bilateralism is still an essential benchmark of Japanese foreign policy. The end of the Cold war, far from jeopardising Japan's alignment, has strengthened it. In particular, the so-called "war on terror" acted as a catalyst on the process of redefinition of Japanese security which had begun in 1992, giving way to the approval of the so-called PKO bill. In the wake of 9/11, the "Law on special measures against terrorism" (2001) and the "Law concerning special measures on humanitarian assistance and reconstruction in Iraq" (2003) provided an effective institutional framework for the reinforcement of the US-Japan defence cooperation. Besides, the emergence of new threats (North Korea, China), while further contributing to an incremental development of the Self Defense Forces role, confirmed the strategic relevance of the Japan-US alliance.¹² On the other hand, notwithstanding the scaling down of the economic weight, Tokyo continued to be an essential ally to Washington.

The end of Japan's dual alignment with the United States took place simultaneously with the emergence of closer economic ties with China. In 2007, China ranked first as Japan's trading partner, displacing the United States. The increase in the dependence trade rate from China occurred simultaneously with the decrease in the dependence rate from the United States. In 1999, Japan's trade dependence from China represented 9,1% of the country's GDP. Yet, in 2009, it more than doubled, reaching 20,5% (16,5% in 2004).¹³ The growing economic interdependence was not a sufficient condition for peaceful relations between the two neighbours. "History problem" (*rekishi mondai*), the North-Korean nuclear issue, the Senkaku/Diayou dispute, Beijing's strategic anxieties towards Tokyo's international security policy were some of the thornier issues hindering the development of a fruitful bilateral dialogue. Indeed, the Japan-China relation is complex and cannot be easily framed by the optimistic neoliberal equation between interdependence and mutual gains (or, conversely in terms of coercive power resources as the pessimistic realist reading would have it). Several factors should be considered to give an exhaustive account of the post-Cold war relationship between the two neighbours (Japanese and Chinese domestic politics, public opinion, the US-Japan alliance etc.).¹⁴ What I would like to stress is that the opportunities and the constraints provided by the "torsion" exerted a considerable influence on Japan's MENA policy, as it will be shown in the following section.

The evolution of Japan's diplomacy in the MENA region after 2001.

Several analyses have investigated Japan's diplomacy in the Middle East.¹⁵ Most of the studies

¹² R. J. Samules, *Securing Japan. Tokyo's Grand Strategy and the Future of Asia*, Ithaca and London, Cornell University Press, 2007.

¹³ Yamamoto Yoshinobu, "Nejire (fuseigō) no jidai no Beichū kankei to Nihon. Kyōri to saizu no kokusai seijigaku", p. 42.

¹⁴ On post-Cold war Japan-China relation, see for instance, Ming Wan, *Sino-Japanese Relations: Interaction, Logic, and Transformation*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2006; Yinan He, *The Search for Reconciliation: Sino-Japanese and German-Polish Relations since World War II*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2009; Ming Wan, "Japan-China Relations. Structure or Management?", A. Gaunder (ed), *The Routledge Handbook of Japanese Politics*, London and New York, Routledge, 2011, pp. 339-349

¹⁵ See, for instance, Miyagi Yukiko, *Japan's Middle East Security Policy: Theory and Cases*, London and New York, Routledge, 2008; Miyagi Yukiko, "Japan's Middle East Policy: 'still mercantile realism'", Miyata Osamu, *Chūtō kiki no naka no Nihon gaikō. Bōsō suru Amerika to Iran no hazama de*, NHK Shuppan, Tokyo, 2010; Kaoru Sugihara, J.A. Allan (eds.), *Japan in the Contemporary Middle East*, New York, Routledge, 1993; Edward Lincoln (ed.), *Japan and the Middle East*, Washington DC, The Middle East Institute, 1990.

emphasize the mercantile nature of Japanese diplomacy in the region, which is often referred to as “shigen gaikō” (*resource diplomacy*). Indeed, the pursuit of energy resources has been (and still is) the main driver of Tokyo’s MENA policy, given the country’s heavy reliance on oil imported from the Middle East. The alliance with the United States has been one more important factor in shaping Japanese strategic choices in the region. The United States expected from Japan the acceptance of its leadership in the region as well as “burden sharing” in conflicts with the MENA states that challenged the US leadership. The global hegemon, in turn, granted Japan a security umbrella, the defense of the open trade and investment system, and sea-lanes security.¹⁶ This strategic agenda did not necessarily entail Japan’s compliance with the US demands. In fact, Japan’s responsiveness has varied. When the US hegemony appeared to be declining, Japan’s MENA policy took a more independent course. This was particularly evident after 1973, when the effects of the oil crisis overlapped with the implications of the US’s waning global power. The first oil crisis dramatically reminded Japan of its vulnerability vis-à-vis the Middle East, prompting the implementation of a pro-Arab policy, which challenged the compliance required by US diplomacy in the Middle East. At the same time, a remarkable effort to rationalize and diversify energy sources was carried out, and the concept of “comprehensive security” (*sōgō anzen hoshō*) was spelled out to suggest that the implementation of security did not only require Japan’s protection from military threats, but also to make sure the country had free access to raw materials and energy sources.¹⁷ Conversely, in the aftermath of the Cold war, when the US hegemony appeared to be rising, Japan’s alignment with the United States was considerable as demonstrated by the Indian Ocean anti-terror mission (2001-2010) and the afore mentioned Japanese engagement in Iraq.

The “torsion” Japan is currently confronted with has urged the Japanese government to cope with a new variable, when thinking of its regional diplomacy in the MENA area. The rise of China has introduced a new determinant to Tokyo’s MENA policy. Whatever will be the final outcome of the power transition, there is little question that China has considerably strengthened its presence in several regions of the world. In the MENA area, economic interests, energy related needs as well as geostrategic concerns, have induced China to step-up its investments (particularly in the commercial shipping and in the ship-building market) and deepen its diplomatic activities. China’s growing influence prompted Japan to redefine and prioritize its diplomacy in the region. Indeed, since 2001, Japan has intensified its presence in the MENA area in several ways.¹⁸ Japan-led fora intended to strengthen relations with the MENA area countries –such as the Japan-Arab Dialogue Forum (2003), the Japan-Arab Conference (2007) and the Japan-Arab Economic Forum (2009)- have appeared one after another in the 2000s. Japan’s diplomatic activism has also been noticeable within multilateral frameworks, such as the BMENA (Broader Middle East and North Africa) initiative, which was launched in June 2004, at the G-8 summit held on Sea Island (United States).

This quantitative change was accompanied by a qualitative change implying a diversification of diplomatic leverages used to enhance Japan’s national interests in the region. Until 2001, Tokyo had pursued a developmentally focused diplomacy that was mainly based on economic

¹⁶ On this point, see Miyagi, “Japan’s Middle East Policy: ‘still mercantile realism’”, pp. 290-1.

¹⁷ See *Sōgō anzen hoshō Kenkyū grūpu hōkokusho* (Report of the Research Committee on Comprehensive Security), available at <http://www.ioc.u-tokyo.ac.jp/~worldjpn/documents/texts/JPSC/19800702.O1J.html> (Accessed January 10, 2013).

¹⁸ The following section of the paper is based on Noemi Lanna, “Japan and Europe in the MENA (Middle East and North Africa) Area: towards a New Bilateral Agenda?”, pp. 112-114.

means. Japan used aid for development and other “check-book diplomacy” resources to exert its power in the region. In so doing, Tokyo managed to mitigate its vulnerability within the asymmetrical relationship it had with countries in the region. The effectiveness of this economic diplomacy has been so great that Joseph Nye indicates the case of Japan as a good example of how fallacious it can be to equate a rich endowment in natural resources with economic power. Whilst Japan managed to become the second richest country in the world in the twentieth century without considerable natural resources, some of the well-endowed countries –oil producers among them- did not manage to turn their natural resources into national wealth or power.¹⁹ After 2001 Japan continued to rely mainly on an economics based diplomacy; yet, alongside economic diplomacy, Japan has occasionally resorted to non-economic means, as demonstrated by Japan’s involvement in Afghanistan and in Iraq, with the “two wheels of one cart strategy” (*sha no ryōrin*).²⁰ One more case in point is the “Corridor for Peace and Prosperity” (*Heiwa to han’ei no kairo/Jeriko nō sangyō danchi*) which involved a more significant political engagement on Japan’s part.

Overall, in the last ten years, the MENA area has become more important in Japanese diplomacy. This development is also demonstrated by the substantial reform of the “Middle Eastern and African Affairs Bureau” (*Chūtō Afurika kyoku*) of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, implemented in April 2001. Within this bureau a new section was established charged with addressing 48 countries of Sub-Saharan Africa. This choice was inspired by the acknowledgment of Africa’s growing importance, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, by the recognition of the need to address the issues related to the Middle East and North Africa region. Not surprisingly, the first and the second “Middle East division” (*Chūtō daiikka*, *Chūtō dainika*) which were set up as a result of this administrative reshuffle, are in charge of the very countries belonging to the so called MENA region. Even more interestingly, three years later, the denomination “Middle East and North Africa” (*Chūtō to Kita Afurika*) was officially adopted in the Diplomatic Bluebook (*Gaikō seisho*) edited by the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In the 2004 edition, the denomination “MENA” appears for the first time, replacing the separate denominations “Middle East” and “Africa” which had hitherto been used to title the chapter dealing with Middle East and African Affairs.²¹ These organizational changes were accompanied by a factual broadening of Japan’s diplomatic scope. In the last ten years, Tokyo has fully included in its diplomatic agenda areas that so far had not been very relevant, such as North Africa. For instance, the “Kono initiative” was launched in 2001, by Foreign Minister Kono Yōhei on the occasion of his visit to the countries of Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia.²² The start of Free Trade Agreement negotiations with the Gulf Cooperation Countries (GCC), in 2006, can be considered an interesting spill-over of Japan’s greater interest in the region.

In the very same period, the upsurge in piracy activities in the Horn of Africa prompted a

¹⁹ See Joseph S. Nye, *The Future of Power*, New York, Public Affairs, 2011, p. 62.

²⁰ Ministry of Foreign Affairs (ed.), *Gaikō seisho 2005*, <http://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/gaiko/bluebook/2005/index1.html> (Accessed January 10, 2013).

²¹ For the administrative reconfiguration of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs’ Middle Eastern and African Affairs Bureau, see <http://www.mofa.go.jp/annai/honsho/sosiki/chuto.html> (Accessed August 22, 2012); for the introduction of the denomination *Chūtō to Kita Afurika* in the Diplomatic Bluebook, see Ministry of Foreign Affairs (ed.), *Gaikō seisho 2003*, “Dai roku setsu” (*Chūtō*), “Dai nana setsu” (*Afurika*) <http://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/gaiko/bluebook/2003/gaikou/html/honpen/index.html>; Ministry of Foreign Affairs (ed.), *Gaikō seisho 2004*, “Dai roku setsu” (*Chūtō to Kita Afurika*), <http://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/gaiko/bluebook/2004/hakusho/h16/index.html> (Accessed January 10, 2013).

²² See “Policy Address by Minister of Foreign Affairs Kono Yohei (Subtitle: Toward Multi-layered Relations with the Gulf Countries)”, <http://www.mofa.go.jp/region/europe/russia/fmv0101/fmspeech.html> (Accessed January 10, 2013).

parallel intensification of Tokyo's maritime strategy in the region. Assuring the security of the sea routes connecting the Middle East to Japan has been one of the main objectives historically pursued by Japanese diplomacy in the area. Faithful to this objective, Japan has devoted a considerable commitment to counter piracy activity in the Horn of Africa since 2006, when the phenomenon turned into a more relevant issue. Alongside patrolling activities, Japan steadily sought to contribute to the stability and security of Somalia, granting aid for development.²³ The presence of the Japanese navy in the Horn of Africa dates back to March 2009, when Japan dispatched two vessels in the area in order to escort Japanese-registered ships, foreign-registered ships with Japanese on board and foreign-registered ships operated by Japanese ship transportation companies or transporting Japanese cargo. In addition to this operation, two P-3C patrol aircraft were dispatched to the Republic of Djibouti on May 28 for the mission of anti-piracy operations off the coast of Somalia and in the Gulf of Aden. Later, 2009 saw the approval of the "Law to combat piracy", providing Japan with more effective normative means to combat pirate activity.²⁴ Finally, in order to allow the Japanese Self Defence Forces to work autonomously in the region, a facility operated by Maritime Self Defence Forces (MSDF) was inaugurated in Djibouti, on the 7th of July 2011.²⁵

Conclusions.

The analysis carried out in the previous sections of this paper allows for some tentative remarks on the evolution of the EU-Japan relations, to be made with specific reference to the MENA area. The Arab spring can be considered the last stage of a decade-long MENA-crisis that unfolded after September 11. This turning point has confronted the EU and Japan with new challenges. The increasingly volatile political and security environment prompted both actors to review their regional strategies. On the other hand, the post-September 11 changes at the global and regional level paved the way for a deeper cooperation between Japan and Europe on issues related to the MENA area.

In the first place, in response to the strategic environment that emerged after 2001, Japan has enhanced the level of engagement in the region. As it has been argued in section three, the rise of China and the increase in geopolitical risk caused by the "war on terror" have urged Japan to intensify diplomatic efforts in the MENA region. Not only has Japan showed an unprecedented diplomatic activism, but it has also engaged in a comprehensive redefinition of the very target of its activity in the region. Until 2001, Japan tended to consider the Middle East as the core objective of its regional diplomacy, thinking of Africa as a separate entity, mainly consisting of Sub-Saharan Africa. Conversely, in the last ten years the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has started to address the Middle East and North Africa as a single area. The reorganization of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' section and the progressive inclusion of sub-regions, such as North Africa, that had hitherto been

²³ From 2007 to January 2012, Japan's humanitarian assistance to Somalia amounted to approximately US\$ 124.4 million dollars. See, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Somalia oki Aden wan no kaizoku mondai no genjō to torikumi" [The present situation in the Gulf of Aden and off the Somali coast and our involvement], <http://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/gaiko/pirate/africa.html> (Accessed January 4, 2013).

²⁴ The law was approved on June 24 2009. See "Kaizoku kōi no shobatsu oyobi kaizoku kōi e no taisho ni kan suru hōristu" [Law for the tackling and the punishment of piracy activities], <http://law.e-gov.go.jp/htmldata/H21/H21HO055.html> (Accessed December 20, 2012).

²⁵ See Ministry of Defense (ed.), "Establishment of a Facility for Counter-piracy Mission in Djibouti", *Japan Defense Focus*, no. 23, October 2011, <http://www.mod.go.jp/e/jdf/no23/topics01.html> (Accessed December 20, 2012).

marginal, are evidence of this. The result of this redefinition is an unedited convergence of the Japanese picture of the region with the geopolitical vision of the Mediterranean space which the EU has traditionally referred to. Since 2001, the North Africa centred southern bank –an essential factor in European geopolitical perception- has become a vital element of the Japanese understanding of the region. The Arab spring provided an additional rationale for this inclusion. The consequences of the upheavals that swept through the Arab world are yet to be known. Nevertheless, the growing relevance of North of Africa as a driver of geopolitical risk, affecting Japanese interests in the region is already evident. The history of Japan’s diplomacy in the region shows that Tokyo has regularly responded to increased instability in the MENA area with an effective reconfiguration of its strategic choices. This is what happened on the occasion of the two oil crises (1973; 1979), as well as during the Iran-Iraq conflict (1980-1988).²⁶ The MENA crisis culminating in the Arab spring challenged Tokyo’s regional politics once again. With this event, a diplomatic redefinition is again under way. What is really new is that the changes in the surrounding environment allow (and even prompt) a reconfiguration that does not only involve Japan, but could result in a strengthened bilateral cooperation with the European Union.

In the second place, after 2001 new specific issues of mutual concern for Japan and the EU appeared. It has been remarked that a “new pragmatism” is emerging in Japan-EU relations. The complexity of contemporary problems and the diverse level and parties to be addressed have caused a change in the relations between the two actors. Instead of focusing on overarching visions of action, they tend to be based on issue-led agendas. The case of Russia has been presented as a manifest evidence of this. Whereas former Japan-EU positions vis-à-vis Russia were based on shared ideological positions and the desire to see Russia democratize, this approach is now replaced by a pragmatic strategy, driven by imperatives such as energy security.²⁷ The increase in incidence of piracy activities in the Horn of Africa could provide one more case for establishing an issue-led agenda. Safeguarding the sea-lanes of the MENA region is a vital security concern shared by Japan and Europe alike. Certainly, piracy exerts serious detrimental effects on all the states dependant on the sea-lanes encompassing the Gulf of Aden, the Red Sea, the Arabian Sea, and the Indian Ocean. Yet, Japan and Europe’s interests are particularly at risk. Some of the most dreadful hot spots of piracy activities are located around the Bal-el-Mandeb strait, which is considerably relevant for Japanese and European maritime interests. The Strait -located north of Somalia, between Yemen, Djibouti and Eritrea- is a strategic link between the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea as well as a privileged target of piracy activities. It is calculated that 1.8 million barrels of all traded oil (i.e. 3.2 million oil barrels) passing through this strait is destined for the European market.²⁸ Approximately half of the world’s container traffic also passes through the Bab-el-Mandeb. About 80 per cent of this traffic consists of Europe-Asia trade.²⁹ Accordingly, Somali piracy imposes particularly high human security consequences and economic costs on Japan and Europe. These include ransom payments, naval costs, re-routing expenses, insurance premiums, security equipment purchases and prosecutions. Against this background, the Japan-EU Navfor cooperation can be

²⁶ See, Tsuneo Akaha, “Japan’s Response to the Threats of Shipping Disruptions in Southeast Asia and the Middle East”, *Pacific Affairs*, vol. 59, no. 2 (Summer, 1986), pp. 255-277.

²⁷ Hook, Jilson, Hughes, Dobson, *Japan’s International Relations*, p. 275.

²⁸ Nogami Takayuki, “Chūtō Kita Afurika jōsei to sekiyu mondai” [Middle East, North Africa and the Oil Problem], *Kokusai mondai*, no. 606 (November 2011), p. 17.

²⁹ See Martin N. Murphy, “Somali Piracy. Why Should we care?”, *The Rusi Journal*, vol. 156, no. 6 (December 2011), p. 6.

considered a de facto evidence of Japan and EU's common concern and a promising test of issue-led cooperation.³⁰

In the third place, a strengthened bilateral dialogue on MENA region related issues could be favoured by a common vision of action, based on shared values. This is particularly evident if one considers the issue of the Arab spring. Indeed, the final outcome of the turmoil that begun in Tunisia more than two years ago is far from being well-defined. The popular demonstrations that swept through the Arab world since December 2010 produced mixed expectations. Whilst the quick demise of authoritarian regimes in Tunisia, Libya and Egypt inspired optimistic previsions on the democratization process, the subsequent developments (civil war in Syria, fragility of the newly established governments in Egypt and Libya) induced more cautious assessments on the future of the region.³¹ Yet, historical precedents provide interesting insights to identify the potential lines of Japan and EU endeavours in the region.

It has been remarked that the main difference between the transition to democracy triggered by the upheavals in the Arab world and the political transformation in Eastern Europe in 1989 is the lack of a "sponsor".³² One of the key reasons of the success of the post-1989 transformation in Eastern Europe was the support of EU, OECD, and other institutions, as well as Japan's decisive engagement in economic dialogue with the countries involved in the transition, through bilateral frameworks and institutions, such as the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development.³³ A rather different scenario is unfolding in the MENA region. The instability of the political and security environment is exacerbated by the conflicting stances of the outside powers, as the Syrian case sadly confirms. Yet, Europe and Japan are in the position to play a joint and influential role in the future, because of their peculiar political identity. To borrow an argument from Wæver,³⁴ in the second half of the twentieth century both actors came to see their past history of war and rivalry as "the Other" against which to build the new Self. This move led both Japan and the European countries to implement a desecuritization process fraught with long-lasting consequences. Not coincidentally, the normative foundation of the EEC/EU came to coincide with the very base of the Yoshida doctrine –that is, antimilitarism. The shared values underpinning this political identity make easier for Japan and Europe to jointly tackle the specific issues arising from the MENA area. Indeed, the "like-mindedness" –often recalled in Japan-EU joint press statements– is real and could turn into an effective policy instrument.

Finally, Japan and the EU's role vis-à-vis the Arab spring and the MENA area cannot be fully understood without exploring the implications of the severe identity crises that the two actors are experiencing. For the EU, the timing of the Arab spring almost overlapped with the crucial stages of the debt crisis. In January 2010, an EU report condemning "severe irregularities" in Greek accounting procedures was released, officially marking the beginning of the EU debt crisis.³⁵

³⁰ On this point, see also Hook, Jilson, Hughes, Dobson, *Japan's International Relations*, p. 303.

³¹ See, for instance, Seth G. Jones, "The Mirage of the Arab Spring. Deal with Region you have, not the Region you Want", *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 92 no. 1 (January-February 2013), pp. 55-63; Sherie Berman, "The Promise of the Arab Spring. In Political Development, no Gain without Pain", *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 92 no. 1 (January-February 2013), pp. 64-74.

³² C. Freeland, "In Europe, lessons for Arab spring", *International Herald Tribune*, 2011-06-17; quoted in Kokusai mondai kenkyūjo (ed.), *Chūtō seiji hendō no kenkyū* [Research on the Middle East political turmoil], p. 9.

³³ Hook, Jilson, Hughes, Dobson, *Japan's International Relations*, p. 287.

³⁴ Buzan and Wæver, *Region and Powers. The Structure of International Security*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003, p. 354. Quoted in Buzan, p. 18.

³⁵ European Commission, "Report on Greek Government Deficit and Debt Statistics", January 2010,

Eleven months later, in Tunisia, a man burnt himself to death to protest against the police, igniting the pan-Arab revolt that came to be known as “Arab spring”. In the very same period that the Middle East unrest gradually spread from Tunisia to Egypt and then to Yemen, Bahrain and Libya, the debt crisis progressively reached the Republic of Ireland, Portugal, Spain, and Italy. The EU response to this unprecedented crisis led to a harsh confrontation between European leaders. The debate concerned which policy was best to tackle the financial crisis and bail out the weaker economies. In fact, the issues at stake ultimately regarded the identity of the European Union. Europe’s quest to resolve the debt crisis called into question one of the basic assumptions supporting the Union: the idea that a functionalistic cooperation among European countries could be more convenient than a divisive coexistence based on a win-lose approach.

On the other hand, for Japan, the break out and the subsequent expansion of the Arab spring coincided with the “national crisis” (*kokunan*) triggered by the 3/11 triple catastrophe. Some analysts have suggested that this impressive calamity will produce a shift from “post-war” (*sengo*) to “post-catastrophe” (*saigo*), resulting into a rediscovery of the “nation” (*kokka*). Others have voiced expectations for a change leading to “much needed reforms”.³⁶ Indeed, it is reasonable to suppose that 3/11 will not just produce short-term changes, because of the vast size of the cataclysm and because of the massive impact that this unprecedented event is going to exert on collective identity. Most likely, the catastrophe will become the preliminary stage of a long-term transformation. It may be presumed that, this long-standing process will bring to an end the “systemic crisis”³⁷, that unfolded in the aftermath of the Cold war. This system-wide breakdown was the result of the end of bipolarism and of the conciding bursting of the bubble. The combined effect of these two momentous changes probed the viability of the institutions that shaped Japanese domestic and foreign policy as well as economics during the Cold War years. Devoid of the legitimization provided by durable economic prosperity, the political system based on the hegemony of the Liberal Democratic Party (“the 1955 system”), cracked. Without the bipolar structure, the low-profile diplomacy postulating the centrality of the relationship with the United States (the Yoshida doctrine) was divested of its strategic relevance. As for the growth model that had granted post-war Japan’s economic miracle, the global market liberalization challenged its basic mechanisms. Overall, Japan was called to rethink the key normative assumptions of its political identity.

“Today, one often bumps into the word ‘crisis’ whenever he/she opens the newspaper. The term conveys insecurity, sorrow, uncertainty and it alludes at an uncertain future whose assumptions cannot be satisfactorily clarified”. Commenting on this definition included in a French political dictionary (published in 1840), the German historian Reinhart Koselleck bitterly stated: “Today things are not different”.³⁸ Koselleck’s observation was formulated in 1985, but it is relevant more than ever today. In fact, not only this comment, but also the historian’s reflections on the term “crisis” prove extremely useful, when attempting to grasp the changes in European identity and its

http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/cache/ITY_PUBLIC/COM_2010_REPORT_GREEK/EN/COM_2010_REPORT_GR_EEK-EN.PDF (Accessed January 10, 2013).

³⁶ Inose Naoki, Mikuriya Takashi, “Ima koso “sengo” wo kessanshi “kokka” wo katate” [That’s the time to settle accounts with “postwar” and talk about “nation”], *Chūōkōron*, July 2011 Inose, Mikuriya 2011, pp. 86-93; Erick Heginbotham, Ely Ratner, Richard Samuels, “Tokyo’s Transformation. How Japan is Changing and what it Means for the United States”, *Foreign Affairs*, 90:5 (2011), p. 138.

³⁷ Kenneth B. Pyle, *Japan Rising. The Resurgence of Japanese Power and Purpose*, New York, Public Affairs, 2007, pp. 6-8.

³⁸ G. Imbriano, S. Rodeschini, “Introduzione”, R. Koselleck, *Crisi. Per un lessico della modernità*, Ombre corte, Perugia, 2012, p. 18.

implications for the EU's external relations. Ultimately, the profound transformations, that Europe and Japan have been confronted with when the Arab spring broke out, are but "crises" in the sense that has been theorized by Kosellech. Surveying the evolution of the term "crisis" (from ancient Greek to the twentieth century), the historian emphasizes how the gradual spread of the term -that came to be widely used in different disciplines of the social sciences- gave rise to a semantic ambiguity. The overuse of the word crisis produced an inescapable "ambivalence", clashing with the clarity associated with the technical use of the Greek word κρίσις (crisis) in the realm of law, medicine, and theology. As a result of this, the original connotation of separation, fight, final discernment, has been gradually sidelined (and sometimes obscured) by new, overlapping connotations.³⁹

The ultimate meaning of the European and Japanese crises becomes more understandable in the light of the semantic evolution described by Kosellech. More specifically, the Greek etymon of the word provides an interesting clue to grasp the essence of the structural changes Japan and Europe are grappling with. Both crises imply crucial decisions about vital identity issues, that is, a conclusive judgement, as postulated by the original denotation of the term. In Japan's case, the judgement regards the fundamental questions underpinning the "systemic crisis" the country was confronted with in the 1990s. What will be the foundations of Japanese political identity? What kind of international role does Japan envisage for itself? What grand strategy will replace the Yoshida doctrine?

In a similar vein, the eurozone crisis implies a decisive judgement as it questions one of the basic prerequisites of the integration: the convergence between the member-states' national interests and the European project. Fundamental changes in the international structure urged a redefinition of the member-states attitudes towards the future of the Union, similar to what occurred after the end of the Cold war.⁴⁰ With much of the region on the brink of recession and the relatively strong economies opposed to recurrent bailouts of the weaker member-states, the debate on the fiscal union and the future of the single currency depended on a judgement over the fundamental dilemmas of the Union: what's the meaning of the euro currency? Is it the first stage toward a broader economic union or the final frontier of the EU deepening process? What defines the European identity? What kind of international actor does the EU aspire to be? To what extent is European integration a top priority for member-states?

"Structural change –Wendt argues- occurs when actors redefine who they are and what they want". This implies a change in the "relative expected utility of the normative vs. deviant behaviour".⁴¹ It is too early to assess whether Japan and the EU are moving toward a "structural change" in the Wendtian sense of the term. Yet, the common challenges the two countries are grappling with (systemic crises, piracy activities) suggest that the MENA area could become a ground for establishing a new bilateral agenda.

³⁹ Kosellech, *Crisi. Per un lessico della modernità*, pp. 31-93.

⁴⁰ Sakai Kazunari, "Yōroppa tōgō no yukue" [The Future of European Integration], Sakai Kazunari (ed.), *Yōroppa tōgō no kokusai kankei ron* [European integration in International Relations], Tokyo, 2007, Ashi shobō, pp. 335-362.

⁴¹ A. Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2012 (first edition 1999), p. 336