

RESEARCH ARTICLE

The agent, the structure, and space in Japan's foreign relations: rethinking international political dynamics as *Aidagara*

Taku Tamaki 

IRPH, School of Social Sciences and Humanities, Loughborough University, Loughborough, UK
Email: T.Tamaki@lboro.ac.uk

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Abstract

This article leverages Watsuji Tetsurō's idea of *aidagara* – “inter-relationships” – to better appreciate the interpenetration of space and relationships in Japanese foreign policy narratives. I set Watsuji's philosophical framework against Japanese foreign policy narratives referring to various spaces as a case study to emphasizing the interplay of space and relationships in Japanese diplomatic efforts. On the one hand, we see the Japanese government invoking East Asia, the Asia-Pacific, and the Indo-Pacific as spatial descriptors to conceptualize the political dynamics surrounding them. On the other hand, Japan's relations with its interlocutors reify fluid geographical boundaries as spaces relevant for Japan's foreign relations. Thus, Watsuji helps us to rethink international politics as an *aidagara* in which the space produces political relationships, while political relationships themselves reproduce, or even redefine, space.

Keywords: *Aidagara*; foreign policy; international relations; Japan; Watsuji Tetsurō

There are two dimensions to Japan's foreign relations. On the one hand, Japan's diplomatic efforts aim to balance power against China, as well as fostering Japan's alliance with the United States (US) and enlisting like-minded governments into a broader alliance to counter China's rise. On the other hand, the language of Japanese foreign policy remains a function of space, be it East Asia, the Asia-Pacific, or the Indo-Pacific. Yet, existing International Relations (IR) theories are primarily about the *practice* of international politics, and tend to overlook how space and relationships are predicated on one another. For instance, Neorealism, informed by Classical Geopolitics, enables us to make sense of Japanese strategic considerations prioritizing the pursuit of national interests and the balance of power (BoP), subordinating space into an intervening variable. Likewise, Contemporary IR theorizing, particularly that which focuses on speech act interaction, focuses primarily on the discursive constructions of meanings, thereby remaining muted on how space informs relationships, and *vice versa*. Yet, the attention given by Classical Geopolitics' to the physical, as well as the subjective, nature of space that is lost from its Neorealist descendants, is there a theoretical one-stop shop to bridge the gap between Classical Geopolitics' awareness of space, on the one hand, and contemporary IR theories' focus on agent-structure (A-S) dynamics on the other?

The significance of this article lies in introducing the Japanese philosopher, Watsuji Tetsurō, and his idea of *aidagara* – “inter-relationship” – to bridge that gap. This paper contributes to the theoretical discussion of Japanese foreign policy language by reframing Japan's foreign relations into an *aidagara* relationship, to better appreciate the interplay between space and relationships.

Watsuji considered human existence to constitute a social structure, ostensibly similar to the agent-structure (A-S) dynamic in contemporary IR theorizing. Yet, Watsuji helps us to realize a further layer

of interaction involving the agents and the social structure, on the one hand; and with the space, on the other. Watsuji stressed that the social actors and their relationships can only be comprehended by considering the spaces within which they exist. In short, Watsuji implores us to take seriously how the *physical* translates into the *subjective*, and *vice versa*, a theoretical insight into the duality of space that is lacking in contemporary IR theories.

I treat the Japanese government as the agent engaging in the A-S dynamics with other states actors. For instance, the increasingly influential construction of China as a threatening, undemocratic Other simultaneously constructs a democratic Japanese Self in contra-distinction. Also, the Japanese efforts to forge partnerships with other like-minded governments through the values diplomacy of the Arc of Freedom and Prosperity (AOFPP), the East Asia Community (EAC), and the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) vision can be construed as a Japanese attempt at collective identity formation and institution-building. As such, I posit that such agent-agent/structure relationships constitute familiar A-S dynamics. Furthermore, I consider East Asia, the Asia-Pacific, and the Indo-Pacific as denoting the duality of space within which Tokyo operates – both as a *physical* set of geometric boundaries, as well as a *subjective* set of international A-S dynamics. I look for Japanese government narratives that identify Tokyo's interlocutors, as well as references to the spaces within which Tokyo understands such interlocutors are located. The Japanese narratives reveal that references to interlocutors are predicated on space, while the references to space are predicated on relationships with the interlocutors. Such interpenetration of space and relationships exhibits an *aidagara* quality in Tokyo's diplomatic language and efforts. I show that Japanese initiatives such as the AOFPP, the EAC, and the FOIP denote instances of a Watsuji-esque *aidagara* in Japan's foreign relations in which space produces political relationships, while political relationships reproduce space.

In the first section, I highlight the paucity of discussion into the duality of space in IR theorizing. I then introduce Watsuji's idea of *aidagara* as a theoretical, one-stop shop that fills this gap by deliberately couching space within the discussions of A-S dynamics. In section three, I explore the spatial narratives of Japanese foreign policy thinking, revealing that Japanese national identity is predicated on space, while the Japanese government's interactions with interlocutors have helped to reify East Asia, the Asia-Pacific, and the Indo-Pacific, into oscillating spatial concepts reinforcing the Japanese Self and defining the logics of appropriateness for diplomatic engagement. In the fourth section, I emphasize the value added by reframing Japan's foreign relations as a Watsuji-esque *aidagara*, before concluding by emphasizing the benefits of re-integrating space back into A-S dynamics in discussions of international political dynamics.

A space for space in IR thinking?

Japanese foreign policy narratives entail two facets. First, there are references to the relationships to which the Japanese government is involved. The Japanese Self is narrated in opposition to China as the Other. The Japanese government seeks to forge a collective, democratic- and free-trading, "we" in response to the purportedly undemocratic Chinese Other flexing its geostrategic- and geoeconomic muscles, via its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Second, there is the spatial dimension in which the Japanese Self is defined through Japan being located in Asia. The variety of spatial terms – East Asia, the Asia-Pacific, and the Indo-Pacific – that appear in foreign policy narratives reaffirm Japanese self-awareness of its geographical position and the associated ideational affinity towards "Asia" as opposed to the "West." Hence, the language of Japanese foreign policy is constructed through the interpenetration of space and relationships, whereby spatial dimension helps to identify Japan's diplomatic interlocutors while Tokyo's relationships are defined within Asia as a space.

The discussions of A-S dynamics in Constructivist IR explain how states and intersubjective structures are co-produced, *via* speech act interactions involving the agents exchanging speech acts amongst themselves reproducing meanings and the intersubjective structures, on the one hand; while the social structures define the relative social- and political positions of agents (Wendt 1987, pp. 356, 336, 338). Furthermore, Constructivism posits that the agents realize their identities through speech act

interactions specific to the particular time and space (Dessler 1989, p. 443), and that material, and by implication, geometric, dimensions matter in the subjective reproductions of actor identities and international political structures (Onuf 1989, pp. 64, 183).

Empirically-oriented Constructivist IR literature makes inferences to space as a factor in Japan's foreign relations. For instance, Japan's socialization into the Western international society in the late-nineteenth century provoked Japanese imperialism as Meiji leaders witnessing the *Realpolitik* engulfing Asia felt they had no choice but to adopt imperialism in order to be accepted into the Western international society (Suzuki 2005). Similarly, contemporary Sino-Japanese relations are informed through Japan cohabitating with China in Northeast Asia. This shared space spurred Japanese identity reproduction in opposition to the Chinese Other on issues ranging from the Japanese government's geostrategic concerns over China's flexing of military muscles to territorial conflicts over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands, as well as the mutual exchange of invectives over the politics of wartime memory (Gustafsson 2015, 2016; Hagström 2012; Hagström and Hanssen 2015; Hagström and Jerdén 2010).

Ultimately, though, the Constructivists' focus rests on the exchange of speech acts and how the meanings are reproduced (Wendt 1987, p. 356). Even the ideas about space, such as spheres of interests, are ultimately subsumed into a discursive construct (Dessler 1989, p. 458). Such tendency to subsume space as just another social construct is particularly pronounced in the Post-structuralist critique of A-S dynamics, where actor identities and social interactions, in general, are discursive constructs that do not exist beyond speech act interactions between and among the actors (Campbell 1998; Doty 1997).

A similar tendency can be observed in other contemporary IR theorizing. Relational IR suggests that political structures are informed by the spaces within which they are situated (Qin 2009, p. 9), and to appreciate Chinese behaviour requires an understanding of China's particular spatial and temporal understanding of power-relationships and governance structures (Qin 2016, p. 17). Relationality reframes IR into a "universe of relatedness" contingent on how agents are spatially related to one another, with China comprehending relationships in a "geographically determined" way (Nordin and Smith 2018, p. 384). Yet, Relational IR retains its primary focus on how *Chinese* foreign policy thinking differs from Western IR thinking, with space predominantly referring to *Chinese conception* of space.

Furthermore, Practice Theory (PT) in IR also makes reference to space as a socially constructed realm (Haugaard 2008). Here, space constitutes a *locus* upon which the "field," as "areas of social life in which individuals recognize that there are certain 'stakes at stakes'" (Standfield 2020, p. 143), and define "habitus" wherein "individuals ... act according to structural notions of common sense" as defined by the field (Standfield 2020, p. 144). In essence, space in PT forms "the site of the dialectic" where the "historical practice" of "structures of habitus" are reproduced (Standfield 2020, p. 144). The constant reproduction of habitus is only possible if the agents share the space within which the speech-act interactions are reproduced (Haugaard 2008, p. 202) in an "automatic and unreflective" series of interactions (Hopf 2010, p. 548). Hence, in PT, practice is seen as a "flow" (Martin-Mazé 2017, p. 208) that is socio-historically constructed through agents discursively co-creating the social dynamic to which they belong (Martin-Mazé 2017, p. 208). In other words, practical knowledge emerges out of speech-act interactions necessary in navigating the "social milieu successfully" (Kustermans 2016, p. 185). However, despite practice being "situated in space" (Kustermans 2016, p. 190), space itself is subsumed into yet another social dimension. Put differently, space as a concept is relegated into one of many artefacts of speech act exchange, such that PT focuses on the *subjective* dimensions of space, while remaining silent on its *geometric* aspects.

Similar to PT, Political Geography considers space primarily as a social construct and as a *locus* of cultural practices, since "the boundary creates and excludes the other while simultaneously enclosing itself" (Fu 2022, p. 592), informing varieties of practices as speech act interactions are located in space (Rösch and Watanabe 2017, p. 621). Furthermore, space is considered a source of identity construction (Lewis and Wigen 1997, p. 68), including how the "West" used to signify rationality in counter-

distinction to the “East/non-West” denoting irrationality (Lewis and Wigen 1997, pp. 73–75). Similarly, the Indian Ocean is considered a space where international political dynamics are constructed (Rumley, Doyle, and Chaturvedi 2012, p. 2), with the labels, “the Indian Ocean Region” and “the Indo-Pacific Region,” representing ideologies of “different constellations of domestic institutions within states” (Rumley, Doyle, and Chaturvedi 2012, p. 7). A shift in designation from “the Indian Ocean” to “the Indo-Pacific” was prompted by the United States and Japan “maximi[zing] the prospects for regional and global security” under the rubric of “the Indo-Pacific” (Rumley, Doyle, and Chaturvedi 2012, p. 14), largely in response to China’s growing international influence through its BRI (Rumley, Doyle, and Chaturvedi 2012, pp. 16–17). The oceans can also be reconsidered as a socially constructed space enabling social interaction to take place (Steinberg 2001, p. 18), constituting a “space of resources” (Steinberg 2001, p. 11), while being “a repository of culture as well as a place of economic processes” (Steinberg 2001, p. 158).

It is here that a critical re-reading of Classical Geopolitics reveals a nuanced approach to space. While Alfred Mahan is better associated with maritime BoP, he recognized that geographical space entailed human agency to take on particular meanings. For Mahan, geography was a platform for governments to play out their “character” (Sumida 1999, pp. 49, 51, 57–58), with the importance of sea-power – both for trade and strategic- and power-political considerations – resting on how governments made use of their geographical opportunities (Russell 2006, pp. 125–26). In other words, space is what agents make of it.

Similarly, Halford Mackinder considered geography less as a determinant of political action, as it was more about a *locus* of interaction between geography and the communities established by the people (Knutsen 2014, p. 836). Mackinder’s fascination with the “revolutionary change” in the BoP dynamics brought about by technology indicated humans’ ability to alter the meaning of geography (Mackinder 2004, p. 313). As such, Mackinder recognized the tension that existed between the “permanent geographical realities,” on the one hand, with the “unstoppable, securely predictable, technical trends” (Gray 2004, p. 19).

Nicholas Spykman, too, recognized that geographical opportunity was what policy makers made of them. He understood geography as a conditioning, rather than a determining, factor (Spykman 1938, p. 36), recognizing an inherent tension in geopolitical BoP between the “legal fiction of universality,” on the one hand, with “the political fact of regionalism,” on the other (Spykman 1942, p. 442). He claimed that the international system comprised of sovereign states was predicated on territoriality as a spatial-temporal *expression* of the prevailing BoP, rather than being determined geographically (Spykman and Rollins 1939, pp. 391, 398). Hence, space was to be considered a “political-geographic expression of temporary power-relationships in a dynamic world” (Spykman and Rollins 1939, p. 410).

Despite such nuanced views on space, Classical Geopolitics’ Neorealist descendants tend to prioritize relationships over space, primarily concerned with the “study and practice of international power relations” (Vihma 2018, p. 4). Neorealism considers geography as a determinant of national interests, particularly within the context of the US foreign policy interests. John Mearsheimer (2006, p. 161) claims that the US has historically been a hegemon in the Western Hemisphere but also prevented “other great powers from controlling either Asia or Europe.” Implicitly restating Mahan, Mackinder, and Spykman that BoP requires space, Mearsheimer (2014b, p. 82) argued that the Russian invasion of Crimea in 2014 needs to be condoned as “Ukraine seems as a buffer state of enormous importance to Russia [G]reat powers are always sensitive to potential threats near their home territory.... This is Geopolitics 101.” Yet, Mearsheimer (2014a, p. 12) considered that the US needed to get involved in Northeast Asia, Europe, and the Persian Gulf because they are in American interests. The idea, then, was that the US should remain “offshore for as long as possible,” and not come onshore until absolutely necessary (Mearsheimer and Walt 2016, p. 74). Other Neorealists have realized that alliances can transcend geographical distance, by altering the “meanings to political boundaries” (Starr and Siverson 1990, p. 236), and that “alliances can ‘leapfrog’ distance and geography ... [and by] doing so, alliances also change the meaning of distance, space, and the physical arrangements

of the earth's features" (Starr and Siverson 1990, p. 237). Yet, the Neorealist embrace of space goes only insofar as *some* spaces matter for US interests – not too dissimilar to Relational IR's concept of Chinese space.

Thus, the Classical Geopolitics' recognition of the intricate interpenetration of space and relationships has shifted in favour of prioritizing relationships. What we need now is a bridge that spans both the space-relationship insight provided by Classical Geopolitics, on the one hand, with the attention to the socially-constructed nature of political realities as provided by contemporary IR theories, on the other. This is particularly the case, as the language of Japan's foreign policy remains a combination of space, such as East Asia, the Asia-Pacific, and the Indo-Pacific, on the one hand; with relationships, involving BoP, as well as in forging regionalism and interdependence, on the other. In short, we need, a theoretical tool that is attentive to the duality of space. It is here that the philosophy of Watsuji Tetsurō allows us to do this in one go.

Aidagara and the duality of space

Watsuji Tetsurō was closely associated with the Kyoto School of philosophy, having been influenced by Nishida Kitarō to ponder the practical question of human existence. In his quest, Watsuji realized that the duality of space in the evolution of human societies, echoing contemporary Social Theory whereby agents interact with one another through speech acts reproducing social structures, which in turn, boomerang back onto the agents as an obdurate reality to inform social behaviour. For Watsuji (2007e, pp. 17, 21), human existence comprises complex layers of inter-relationships involving interactions between and among the agents, as well as the agents themselves interacting with the society, and the agents acknowledging their individual identities through an incessant process of Self/Other distinctions mediated by speech acts which then reproduce society in the form of "social artefacts" (Watsuji 2007e, p. 27). Watsuji (2007e, pp. 15–18) introduced the idea of *aidagara* – "inter-relationships" – as a set of intersubjective links connecting the agents with other agents; as well as how the agent-agent relationships themselves interact with the emergent social structure. Yet, *aidagara* is not a mere precursor to the familiar A-S dynamic, having identified space – both its physical- and subjective dimensions – as an indispensable factor in the emergence and elaboration of social reality. This derives from Watsuji's (1979, p. 16) conviction that A-S dynamics are predicated on the particular space: an agent's relationship with other agents and the society assumes a particular form as agents devise technical skills to cope with the particular physical constraints of the particular space. In short, social practice requires space.

Watsuji's *aidagara* is comprised of a complex web of inter-relationships involving the agents and the society manifesting as an A-S dynamic as a function of space. *Aidagara* consists of several layers: (1) the agent-agent relationship in which the agent realizes a sense of the Self in distinction to the Other; (2) the agent-society dynamic through which the agents interact with one another, *via* speech-acts, to reproduce social structures; and (3) the space-agent/society relationship in which space informs social relationships.

Watsuji (2007a, p. 20) considered "the problem of ethics" to centre on the "inter-relationships between and among the individual human beings" in an incessant process of counter-distinctions or *hitei* ("rejection"). Watsuji (2007a, p. 28) argued that human beings are neither merely "individuals" nor "constituents of a society," instead possessing dual characteristics through which an agent realizes its Self in "absolute rejection" (*zettai-teki hiteisei*) of its own existence by rejecting the Self to realize that it is part of the society (Watsuji 2007a, p. 179), while simultaneously rejecting society, thereby highlighting the Self's own discrete existence in counter-distinction to it being part of a social structure (Watsuji 2007a, p. 37). Such incessant counter-distinctions comprise the inter-relationships governing the agent-agent, as well as the agent-society relationships (Watsuji 2007a, pp. 40–41).

Watsuji's notion of human existence is defined through a social relationship comprising an A-S dynamic. The agents discursively reproduce social structures, which then boomerang back onto the

agents as an obdurate social reality. Watsuji (2007a, p. 82) maintained that an agent inhabits a “social space,” and through social relationships, “the notion of the Self held by the agent” is “objectified” into a reified image (Watsuji 2007a, p. 37). Watsuji (2007a, pp. 140–47) asserted that focusing on inter-relationships is crucial in the understanding of human existence, as the emergence and elaboration of social structures derive from an incessant series of distinctions in which the Self is rejected to reveal the existence of an Other, and how the Self rejects itself to realize that it is part of the society. Watsuji (2007a, p. 103) considered it pointless to think of agents in abstraction from other agents and objects, since unless there is social interaction, the incessant dialectics of the Self/Other dichotomy cannot be realized and actors lose their agency. For Watsuji (2007a, p. 97), agents comprehend their social position by reading each other’s expressions and behaviours in a “practical interaction between and among the humans,” which then lead to a “direct proof” of their existence (Watsuji 2007a, p. 105). He suggested that the Self’s consciousness of the Other is intimately linked to the Other’s consciousness of the Self, such that the conversation of gestures became the conversation of consciousness (Watsuji 2007a, p. 196). Hence, rather than focusing on how the agents produce social relationships, the agents and the society not only co-exist but they also co-produce one another in an ongoing process of mutual rejections.

Watsuji (2007a, p. 169) urged us to recognize inter-relationships sustained by a series of rejections as a fundamental principle of human condition, since “the society is not a universal idea inside an individual. It is outside. Of course, society presents itself through the individuals, but it also leaves the individuals.” *Aidagara* as an A-S dynamic involves an incessant dialectic between and among the agents and the society in what he termed the “dialectical structure of *aidagara* existence” comprising the “fundamental structure of human existence” (Watsuji 2007a, pp. 178–79).

The duality of space

So far, this discussion of *aidagara* resembles the familiar A-S dynamics and the discursive constructions of social reality familiar in contemporary Social Theories. Yet, what distinguishes Watsuji is his focus and attention on space – as a *physical*, geometrical, dimension as well as a *subjective* set of meanings. Watsuji (2007a, p. 82) stressed that the Self/Other dichotomy is context-bound spatially, which stems from his belief that the particularities of human existence are predicated on particular space. Watsuji (1979, p. 14) considered *aidagara* to be contextualized by the particularities of the spatial constraints within which the agents find themselves, since “we realize our selves, our existence as *aidagara* through our milieu [*fūdo*].” Here, milieu refers to the amalgamation of “climate, weather patterns, geology, productivity of the land, topography, and the landscape” (Watsuji 1979, p. 9).

The spatiality of *aidagara* derives from the fact that humans are located within space because “spatio-temporality emerges from human existence” (Watsuji 2007a, p. 42). Watsuji (2007a, pp. 337–38) suggested that the space is the *locus* within which the Self is realized in counter-distinction to the Other. Furthermore, it is only within space that the Self can apprehend the existence of the Others, as the relationship also requires a particular social context underpinned by the practical, material, tools devised to adapt to the space. In short, the A-S dynamic requires a space to function. Watsuji (2007a, p. 338) believed that an agent realizing the Self in counter-distinction to the Other is not just in a social relationship, as it is also situated within a *spatial* relationship: it is only through recognizing the existence of the Others sharing the space with itself that the Self gains a meaningful sense of its position relative to the Others and the society as a whole. The incessant rejection of the Self in contra-distinction to the Others requires a space for its sustenance.

The reality of human existence can only be comprehended by realizing the particular spaces and circumstances through which incessant dialectics of the Self/Other and the Individual/Social have emerged and were elaborated (Watsuji 2007b, p. 26). Watsuji felt that a failure to take space into consideration denuded social relationships of context, turning the discussion into a barren set of abstract

principles. Watsuji (2007c, p. 227) posited that the particularities of cultural practices emerge when agents interacting with one another and the society adapt to the particular space within which they inhabit. In short, human existence is a product of the A-S dynamic predicated on space (Watsuji 2007c, p. 229). For Watsuji (2007c, pp. 229–30), the “space as an expanse of objective things emerge out of subjective human existence, not because the physical space determines human existence,” but rather, because the human acclimatization to the space around them remains a subjective endeavour on the part of the agents seeking to adapt to the space. The space informs cultural practices; but agents also manipulate the space using skills developed through cultural practices themselves (Watsuji 2007c, pp. 230–32).

Perhaps the idea that aligns Watsuji to Classical Geopolitics is the notion that the particular characteristics of any culture represent the particular trajectory of social emergence and elaboration influenced by the particular space. A culture acquires its particular characteristics when the agents develop particular “cultural artefacts” designed to cope with the particular spatial constraints within which they thrive. The particularities of the culture represent the particularities of *aidagara* particular to that space (Watsuji 2007c, p. 245). The resultant interaction between and among the agents, the society, and space manifest itself as a particular landscape as an amalgamation of material dimension of space with the social, emergentist, elements of space – such as the way the rice paddies have been arranged and how the roads and other artificial structures provide visual manifestation of cultural practices as practical solutions that have evolved through the ages to cope with the space (Watsuji 2007c, p. 315).

Hence, a landscape represents an “appearance of a particular human society” (Watsuji 2007c, p. 317). For Watsuji (2007c, p. 319), if “the geographical landscape represents the scene of human existence,” then the “uniqueness of the land represents the uniqueness of human existence.” As an example, Watsuji provides us with an account of “coldness.” While the concept of being “cold” resembles a description of a physical reality, he suggested that subjectivity is involved in establishing the understanding of coldness. Watsuji (1979, p. 10) suggested that coldness is not just an idea about the climate or a perception of the temperature, but instead, it is borne of agents’ interaction with one another, as well as with the natural surroundings. The *concept* of coldness requires speech acts: only when the agents exchange speech acts agreeing on the label being attached to the climactic condition as cold can the concept of coldness be associated with the physical, environmental, condition. Without agential intervention, the cold climate lacks meaning. Hence, the coldness is a product of the physical environment interlaced with the practice of coping with coldness: only when the agents reproduce the discursive reality of their cold climate in response to the particular space can the agents gain consciousness about existing within a cold climate (Watsuji 1979, p. 10). As such, Watsuji provides an explicit link between the physical, thus geographical, space of low temperature, on the one hand, with the habitus and practice of inhabiting in cold geographical locations, on the other. This is a process of emergence and elaboration of social behaviour that can only be apprehended through explicitly recognizing the duality of space (see Watsuji 1979, p. 13).

Such complex inter-relationships between and among the agents, the society, and the space form the basis of *aidagara*. The agents engage in an exchange of speech acts informed by the particularities of the space within which they inhabit, subsequently formulating a sense of Self defined partly by the space within which they are located. The space does not determine the agency of the agents; but rather, agents are actively involved in subjectively internalizing the implications of adapting to that space. In other words, the Self comprehends its relationships to the Others only when the Self understands that itself, the Others, and the relationships to which they belong occupy a particular space.

Thus, Watsuji provides us with a conceptual framework that enables us to consider the duality of space where relationships are nurtured and meanings emerge. Watsuji helps us to rethink Japan’s foreign relations as *aidagara* given that space often provides a cue in the construction of Japanese national identity, which in turn provides the worldviews through which the Japanese government determines its friends and foes, as well as where Japan’s spheres of interests lie. As we will see from the Japanese narratives, space also remains indispensable for Tokyo to apprehend its self-identity and the evolving

political relationships unfolding around it. In short, the language of Japanese foreign policy is predicated on the duality of space.

The oscillating spaces of Japan's foreign relationships

Asia as a geometric boundary delimits Japan's interlocutors, contextualizes the political relationships, and, in turn, reinforces or redefines what Asia as a space means for Japanese foreign policy. Japan's geographical proximity to China, for instance, means that Japan is "stuck" with China as an interlocutor, compelling Tokyo to respond to Chinese behaviour. Through the exchange of speech acts with Beijing, Japan constructs a variety of Chinese Otherness, which then contextualizes Asia as a potentially hostile environment. Thus, space produces Japan's relationships, which in turn, helps to redefine the space for Tokyo – an *aidagara* quality where Asia as a *physical* space delineate Tokyo's interlocutors, constructing the A-S dynamics, which in turn reify what Asia as a *subjective* space means for Tokyo's international existence.

Historically, Japan's physical reality as an island off the Asian continent has been a source of national identity construction. The delineation of "sovereignty line" (*shuken-sen*) and the "interest line" (*rieki-sen*) by Field Marshal Yamagata Aritomo in 1890 can be reframed as Japan's worldviews of the late-nineteenth century, reinforcing the reified reality of Asia as Japan's dangerous neighbourhood (Iriye 1966, p. 30–31). Asia as space remained a physical constraint, which then translated into Yamagata's own threat perception upon witnessing China being devoured alive by Western powers and realizing *Realpolitik* as the *modus operandi* within Asia as a space. Yamagata's "lines" were a subjective interpretation of political dynamics predicated on physical space.

Similarly, prewar Pan-Asianism and Asian liberationism culminating in the Greater East Asian Co-prosperity Sphere can be reframed as Japan's egocentric identity construction through a vulgarized form of *aidagara*. Asia as a space signified Japan as a non-Western, yet an un-Asian, entity due to its particular historical trajectory (Okamoto 1998, pp. 1–2). As Takeuchi Yoshimi (1993, p. 194) observed, such identity construct suffered from an "inherent contradiction" as prewar Japanese policy towards Asia – as a physical space and as a locus for egotistically realizing Japanese liberationism – forfeited Asian principles, while Tokyo's narratives against the West increasingly relied on identifying Japan as Asian. In short, Japan became increasingly un-Asian towards Asia while emphasizing its purported Asian-ness against the West. Watsuji (2007d, pp. 296–97) realized this contradiction too, criticizing the lack of Japanese respect towards other societies in other spaces, pointing out that *aidagara* needs to be about mutual respect between and among the societies spanning space, not about coercion.

Even after 1945, Asia defined Japan's *aidagara*. Asia as a geographical space remained a significant factor in Japanese foreign policy thinking because Japanese diplomatic activities required oscillating spaces reflecting a variety of potential interlocutors in Southeast Asia and Oceania. Prime Minister Kishi Nobusuke's Asia diplomacy in the 1950s revolved around the creation of Asian "solidarity" (Edström 1999, pp. 42–43), while the Ikeda Hayato administration considered Japan's fate as linked to Asian economic development (Edström 1999, p. 55). The construction of Asia as both a space and as a source of Japanese national interests continued into the 1970s and the 1980s. "The New Pacific Agenda" under the Satō Eisaku government (Edström 1999, p. 68), as well as Prime Minister Miki Takeo's interest in the Asia-Pacific as a sphere for enhancing regional co-operation (Edström 1999, p. 88), were foreign policy thinking involving multiple labels and interlocutors to redefine the space relevant for Japanese diplomacy as East Asia or the Asia-Pacific. The Fukuda Doctrine of the 1970s focusing on the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) was a Japanese attempt at consolidating political relationships relevant for Japan not just in Southeast Asia, but also within the larger geometric boundaries of Asia. Fukuda Takeo himself considered the Doctrine to be "valid for Asia as a whole" (Edström 1999, p. 98), fluidly oscillating between East Asia and the Asia-Pacific as overlapping spaces of relationships. Such oscillating spaces were further evident in Prime Minister Ōhira Masayoshi's "The Pacific Basin co-operation concept" embracing

both Australia and New Zealand for the “stability and development of the entire Pacific region” (Edström 1999, p. 109) were now seen as crucial for pursuing Japanese interests.

Hence, the physical space relevant for Japanese diplomacy oscillated among East Asia, the Asia-Pacific, and the Far East in response to the variety of interlocutors. Negotiations over the return of Okinawa under the Satō administration defined the Far East as a defence periphery for Japan which included Taiwan and the Korean peninsula (Wakamiya 2006, p. 147). While Taiwan and the Korean peninsula remained the main focus of the Far East as a spatial designation, the notion was redefined to include a space north of the Philippines in the 1997 New Guidelines. The concept of Surrounding Areas under the New Guidelines as a “situational,” rather than a geographical, definition further revealed the fluidity of space for Japanese foreign policy. The Secretary General of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), Katō Kōichi, explicitly stated that Taiwan was “not included,” while the Chief Cabinet Secretary, Kajiyama Seiroku, worried that, without a geographical specification, the New Guidelines “lack[ed] the deterrence effect” (Miyagi 2016, p. 78). To complicate matters, Prime Minister Obuchi Keizō felt compelled to suggest that he did not consider the Indian Ocean “and the other side of the world” as Surrounding Areas (Miyagi 2016, p. 134). Yet, as MOFA’s Tanaka Hitoshi suggested, the Japanese government “did not want to be beholden to the Far East” since Japan intended to deploy “Self Defence Forces [SDF] beyond the Far East” (Miyagi 2016, p. 98). Thus, while the domestic disagreements produced multiple, contested, spaces considered relevant for “surrounding areas” depending on the identity of relevant interlocutors, an explicitly “situational” concept nevertheless had to be couched within a spatial language.

A similar oscillation is evident in the spatial language of East Asia and the Asia-Pacific, reflecting the existence of two schools of thought within the Japanese government – one focusing on the US-Japan alliance, while the other sought to enhance Japanese influence in Southeast Asia (Inoguchi 2011, p. 236). Anxious not to alienate the US, Tokyo remained cautious in its relationship with the ASEAN, preferring to invoke the spatial language of the Asia-Pacific through the wider Asia-Pacific Economic Co-operation (APEC) forum rather than a more restricted ASEAN+3 (Miyagi 2016, pp. 39–40). APEC capitalized on the Asia-Pacific as a space that encompassed the US, the Pacific states – including Latin America – East- and Southeast Asia, as well as Australia and New Zealand (Inoguchi 2011, pp. 239, 241). This contrasts with the spatial descriptor, East Asia, denoting Japan’s courting of the ASEAN, *via* the idea of East Asian Community (EAC). In January 2002, Prime Minister Koizumi Junichirō urged enhanced co-operation between Japan and the ASEAN as benefiting East Asia as a whole in (MOFA 2002) in “creating a ‘community’ in which Japan ‘acts together and advances together with other East Asian countries’ referring to ASEAN member states” (Hosoya 2011, p. 15). Thus, the meaning of the spaces reflected the dynamics of overlapping diplomatic imperatives, as demonstrated in the domestic Japanese debates over prioritizing “Tokyo’s relationship with the US or ASEAN” (Inoguchi 2011, p. 236).

China’s growing international influence in the twenty-first century prompted Japanese foreign policy thinking to elaborate on programmes such as the AOFPP, the EAC, and the FOIP comprised of spatial descriptors providing a spatial context to the A-S dynamics within which Japan remains involved. Abe Shinzō (2013, p. 157) stated that “it is evident that Japan’s location next to a large country with a different political system causes numerous problems,” highlighting Japan’s sensitive relationship with China as geometrically informed yet subjectively contingent. Space was also considered a destiny, “given that, because neighbours share borders, it is natural that problems emerge” (Abe 2013, p. 160). The Abe administration’s efforts at assembling a democratic and law-abiding “we” – the US, India, Australia, and increasingly, European partners – in counter-distinction to a purportedly autocratic Chinese Other, reinforced Asia as a space for Japan’s foreign relations, while simultaneously revealing the Indo-Pacific expanding to the east coast of Africa as a newly emergent space for Japan’s diplomatic efforts.

The nebulosity of the AOFPP reflected Japan’s relationships in search of a viable space. The original intention behind the AOFPP was to co-ordinate with the US in the so-called “War on Terror” to enhance Tokyo’s alliance commitments (Hosoya 2011, p. 15; Inoguchi 2011, p. 241). Koizumi stated

that both Japan and the US “stand together” not just against “mutual threats,” but also on “mutual values” such as the rule of law in what Kanehara Nobukatsu of MOFA suggested was a “historic mission of the Japan-US alliance” (Hosoya 2011, p. 16). Indeed, the AOFP as a “concept was engineered by Kanehara” (Pugliese 2017a, p. 160), who “claimed that the ARC would have constituted Japan’s Grand Strategy for the twenty-first Century” (Pugliese 2017a, p. 161). Kanehara, having benefited from the influence enjoyed within MOFA by the former vice minister for foreign affairs, Yachi Shotarō, enabled AOFP’s values diplomacy to enter the policy lexicon as “a synthesis of idealistic preferences for universal values and geopolitics” (Pugliese 2017a, p. 161).

As a “values-based diplomacy” emphasizing purportedly universal values such as human rights and the rule of law, the AOFP remained vague (Hosoya 2011, p. 19), requiring oscillating spaces encompassing wide geometric boundaries. Foreign Minister Asō Tarō suggested in 2007 that the AOFP spanned the “Middle East” purportedly ranging from Afghanistan into North Africa, then along the “outer rim” of the Eurasian continent including Georgia (MOFA 2007a). Asō likened the Middle East as the “Ginza 4-chome crossing” for Japanese diplomacy – a busy intersection where the purportedly universal values intersected, forming an important node in the “corridor for peace and prosperity” (MOFA 2007a). In a similar vein, Asō identified the Arc as covering a wider space starting from the Nordic states through the Baltics, Central- and Eastern Europe into Central Asia, then further into Southeast- and East Asia, following the contours of the “outer edge of the Eurasian continent” (MOFA 2007b).

MOFA was uneasy about the AOFP’s exclusion of China, particularly as Asō considered the rise of China as a prompt for promoting the values-based diplomacy (Hosoya 2011, p. 15). Yet, Yachi suggested that the governments in the Baltics, Eastern Europe, the Middle East and Central Asia were “happy” given that Tokyo’s spatial focus now included them (Miyagi 2016, p. 188). Indeed, Asō pointed out that such shared values helped to “expand Japan’s diplomatic horizon [*Nippon gaikō no chihei wo hirogeru*]” by enabling Japan to “expand [its] activities and the horizon of diplomacy” (MOFA 2007b).

The Arc represented Japanese ambition to expand relationships constructing a collective, a purportedly democratic- and a law-abiding, “we” spanning a nebulous spatial expanse. The “War on Terror” remained a crucial impetus, with Abe identifying Australia and India as important partners sharing similar values with Japan (Hosoya 2011, p. 19). Vice Foreign Minister Asano Katsuhito added that India as a largest democracy in the world meant South Asia was firmly within the AOFP; and the coming-together of like-minded states was akin to a “*de facto* integration” in Asia (MOFA 2007c). Here, we see *aidagara* in the language of AOFP. On the one hand, the Arc was a *physical* space – primarily subjective, though elaborated through geometric boundaries – within which the Japanese government realized the Self in counter-distinction to an under-determined, purportedly undemocratic, Other. On the other hand, it depicted a *subjective* space within which Tokyo pursued relationships with fellow democrats and free-traders in an effort at sustaining a normative structure purportedly underpinned by “inalienable” principles. This identification of Self/“we” in counter-distinction to an Other required the duality of space represented by the Arc – that relationships required space for realization, while space required relationships for identification.

The idea of AOFP lost momentum after Abe resigned as prime minister (Nagy 2021, p. 13), especially as Abe’s successor, Fukuda Yasuo, was more sympathetic towards the EAC. MOFA’s scepticism towards the AOFP as excluding China meant the Arc was increasingly viewed as Asō’s pet project and was eventually side-lined (Hosoya 2011, p. 19–20). Fukuda instead spoke of the Pacific Ocean becoming an “inland sea,” even laying out a rhetorical foundation for the subsequent Indo-Pacific narrative by claiming that “if Asia was able to [accomplish economic development], then there should be no reason why Africa should not” (Kantei 2008). Fukuda’s aspiration was for the Pacific Ocean to turn into an “inland sea” by notionally “shrinking it to the size of the Mediterranean” (Kantei 2008). Thus, despite the side-lining of the AOFP, the sea as a spatial descriptor was again invoked as a physical space espousing an ideational source of Japan’s expanding political relationships, underlining Japanese government’s realization of its diplomatic efforts predicated on space.

The language of EAC gained prominence after the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) assumed power in 2009. Initially, the EAC was Koizumi administration's response to China's rising influence, but there was an economic rationale as well. As the Japanese policy makers debated the economic significance of China, the Ministry of Economy, Trade, and Industry (METI) suggested that Japanese economic recovery hinged on leveraging the vitality of both the Chinese- and Southeast Asia economies (Sohn 2010, pp. 506–07). This resulted in Japan reaching out to ASEAN, but also hoping to bring China into the EAC framework (Sohn 2010, p. 511) by articulating the “principles of ‘openness, transparency, and inclusiveness’” (Sohn 2010, p. 512) – themes that are pertinent to the current FOIP vision.

However, it was Prime Minister Hatoyama Yukio's scepticism towards the US that prompted a countervailing spotlight on Asia as a locus of Japan's diplomatic efforts (Miyagi 2016, pp. 194–95). Hatoyama focused on his idea of “fraternity” (*yūai*) between “Japan and other Asian countries, and more broadly among the Asia-Pacific countries” (Kantei 2009). *Yūai* was a relational concept contingent upon being practiced at the intersection of East Asia and the Asia-Pacific. Put differently, *yūai* was a relational bridge that sought to link interlocutors in Southeast Asia and the Asia-Pacific. For Hatoyama, the pursuit of fraternity in East Asia and the Asia-Pacific meant learning from the postwar European experience of “reconciliation and co-operation” (Kantei 2009), pledging to build a “sea of fraternity,” since “Japan, as a maritime country, has know-how and assets to maintain peace at sea” (Kantei 2009).

Despite its vagueness, the EAC possessed an *aidagara* quality in which space contextualized relationships, which in turn contextualized space. Hatoyama emphasized that the membership of the EAC should consist of “people who share the ideas and dreams” (Kantei 2009), and that it was an “open regional co-operation” based on a mutual sense of “vulnerability to natural disasters,” and in order to overcome the challenges of nature, the EAC needed to be forged on people-to-people relationships and trust in an effort at constructing a “community of life [*inochi no kyōdōtai*]” (MEXT 2010). Hatoyama hoped that the “sea of East Asia” would also become “a sea of knowledge and tradition, and of people-to-people communication,” becoming “a cultural collective [*bunka yūgōtai*]” (MEXT 2010). The focus of the EAC remained on sustaining spatially-dependent relationships, perhaps at the risk of alienating the US. The “sea” remained a key spatial- and a relational concept, with Japan's sea-faring identity lending credence to ocean space remaining a source of Japanese identity construction. However, Japanese ambitions for the EAC did not last long. Hatoyama declared that “while the alliance with the US remains important, we need to focus on Asia as an Asian state” (Miyagi 2016, pp. 194–95), going so far as to insinuate his ambition to forge an Asian version of the European Union (Miyagi 2016, p. 195). Yet, while Hatoyama “claimed that he had no intention of excluding the US,” Foreign Minister, Okada Katsuya, contradicted him, stating that “by including the US, we will lose track as [the EAC] would then cover half the world” (Miyagi 2016, pp. 195–96) – exposing a lack of consistency within the DPJ government (Miyagi 2016, p. 196). Prime Minister Noda Yoshihiko, the last DPJ prime minister before the party lost to the LDP – felt that Hatoyama had dangerously alienated the US, preferring, instead, for a NATO-like charter (Miyagi 2016, p. 222). Even such dithering by the successive DPJ governments still highlighted how relationships and space inform one another within domestic debates on foreign policy. And such a fluid relationship between space and relationships continued even after the defeat of DPJ government in 2012, being superseded by the government of LDP and its associated FOIP vision.

The Indo-Pacific as a spatial concept is not new. Prime Minister Hashimoto Ryūtarō had his sights on “Silkroad Diplomacy” in 1997, encompassing Russia, Central Asia, and the Caucasus as a way to tap into natural resources around the Caspian (Miyagi 2016, p. 85). Yet, the rising influence of China's BRI propelled the FOIP to become Japan's primary instrument for flexibly building regional order (Koga 2020, pp. 50–51), with the twin aim of enhancing Japan's alliance with the US, as well as to establish the Quad involving India and Australia to balance against China (Koga 2020, pp. 57–60). Japan's overtures to Australia and India reflected Abe's December 2012 assertion to create a “security diamond of the Asian democracies” (Takenaka 2022, p. 105). Japan's enhanced partnership with

Australia was depicted as establishing a free space “spanning the Pacific and the Indian Oceans,” while Abe’s approach to India was framed as enhancing stability in the “Indian Ocean Region” (Takenaka 2022, p. 106). Hence, the “Indo-Pacific” in FOIP provided not only the fluid spatial context within which Japan sought to become an architect of a new partnership, but also for Japan to manage its own “entrepreneurial power” in which the Indo-Pacific became the “regional frame of reference” (Envall and Wilkins 2023, p. 692). In short, the Indo-Pacific confirms the duality of space – as a new geometric boundary within which Japan now operates; as well as denoting a multiple set of challenges and opportunities for Japanese foreign policy.

The idea of the Indo-Pacific, too, was a product of influential personalities – Abe and Yachi – and the grand strategy and geopolitical vision realized by the strong leadership of the prime minister’s office (*Kantei*). Abe turned *Kantei* into a “control tower,” enabling him to mould his foreign policy vision effectively (Pugliese and Patalano 2020, p. 612). The FOIP was an amalgamation of the AOFIP with the “Diplomacy that takes a Panoramic Perspective of the World Map,” representing “a specific worldview” espoused by Abe and his advisors (Pugliese and Patalano 2020, p. 623). The FOIP also encapsulated Yachi’s Classical Geopolitics mindset, framing China as Japan’s “new Russia,” compelling him to call for a “forced balancing” of China, prompting Abe to crystallize the concept of the Indo-Pacific as a new form of regionalism (Pugliese 2017b, pp. 241–42). As such, the Indo-Pacific comes with a significant dose of scepticism towards China underpinned by Classical Geopolitical insight into space, fusing the Realist policy thinking with Watsuji-*esque* attention to space.

The Indo-Pacific as a spatial descriptor gained leverage in response to the increasing international attention on China’s BRI. Foreign Minister Kishida Fumio stated in 2015 that the Pacific- and Indian Oceans constitute a “sea of freedom and a sea of prosperity” where the “dynamic inter-linkages” between and among states are forged (MOFA 2015), symbolizing an enhanced partnership amongst a collective “we” of the Quad. Foreign Minister Kōno Tarō stated in 2018 that the Indo-Pacific is an “international public good” as it represented a set of shared values of freedom and openness underpinned by the rule of law (MOFA 2018a). Kōno suggested that Japan and China as neighbours cannot move away (Bungei shunjū 2017, p. 140), reiterating how Japan’s relationship with China is governed by the shared spatial existence. But in an effort at balancing against China, the Indo-Pacific assumed a short-hand for the A-S dynamics in which the Japanese government sought to “practice leadership in enhancing liberal international order in Asia” with like-minded governments (Gaikō 2020, p. 12). In other words, Japan’s encounters with the reality of China’s increased global influence required a duality of space for Japan to nurture new relationships, and the Indo-Pacific represented such a duality.

The Indo-Pacific as a space unveiled Japan’s new interlocutors, particularly with African governments now emerging as candidates for partnership. Japanese overtures to Africa accelerated after 1993 with the establishment of the Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD), particularly after Prime Minister Mori Yoshirō invited leaders of South Africa, Nigeria, and Algeria to Tokyo as part of the Okinawa Summit in 2000 (Miyagi 2016, p. 116). The Indo-Pacific as a concept that included Africa was made more explicit by Abe in the August 2016 TICAD VI when he talked of turning “the Pacific- and the Indian Oceans, and the confluence of Asia and Africa into a place respectful of freedom, rule of law, market economics, divorced from power and coercion” (Takenaka 2022, p. 97). Abe addressed the United Nations in 2018, pledging to “spearhead” the movement (MOFA 2018b).

The “Africa-Asia Growth Corridor” proclaimed by Japan and India in 2017 was another instance of a relationship predicated on space. The “Corridor” initiative follows a series of discussions since 2016 in which Japan and India agreed to co-operate in developing Africa in what amounted to an “amalgamation by both [states] growing geostrategic convergence in the Indo-Pacific region” (Panda 2017, pp. 2, 8). Furthermore, the “Corridor” also involved a geoeconomic dimension, as Africa was a significant market for Japanese automobiles produced in India (Pajon and Saint-Mézard 2018). Thus, once the African states were identified as relevant interlocutors, the contours of, and the relationships enclosed by, the Indo-Pacific expanded. To Vice Foreign Minister Sonoura Kentarō’s identification

of Southeast Asia as a corridor to Africa (Gaikō 2017, p. 26), India also became an important node – both physical and subjective – in the evolving geopolitical relationships predicated on the duality of the Indo-Pacific as a space increasingly relevant for Japan’s foreign relations.

Thus, the Indo-Pacific as a space suggests that the A-S dynamics now requires a newly expanded space within which Japan responds to Chinese ascendance thereby expanding the relevant space for Japanese diplomacy; which in turn helped the Japanese government to identify new partnerships beyond the traditional confines of East Asia and the Asia-Pacific. Such an interplay of space and A-S dynamics reinforce Japan’s contemporary foreign relations as comprising an *aidagara*, reaffirming Japanese maritime identity. Abe mentioned in 2019 that,

For us living in the Indo-Pacific, our prosperity is predicated on being nurtured by the nature and the seas. We have benefited from the free-trading regime that blossomed in these seas. So, we need to co-operate to protect the ecosystem and restore the environment. We need to strengthen our free-trading system (Nihon keizai shimbun 2019, p. 23).

Here again, the Indo-Pacific as a space consisted of dual characteristics: (1) defining the geometric boundaries prescribing Japan’s foreign relations; but also (2) signifying Japan’s expanding sphere of relationships with other states in an effort at reproducing the normative structure involving purportedly rule-abiding states sustaining a free-trading regime.

The Japanese government had been forging new relationships in response to China’s growing international influence inside the space now reified as the Indo-Pacific for some time, indicating that Japan’s foreign relations remain a function of the A-S dynamics predicated on space, bearing in mind that, as the A-S dynamic evolved, so did the conception of the relevant space.

Reframing Japan’s foreign relations as *Aidagara*

Watsuji’s philosophy reveals a possibility for reframing Japan’s foreign relations into *aidagara*. What we see is that the physical, geometric, boundaries oscillating among East Asia, the Asia-Pacific, and now the Indo-Pacific define equally fluctuating relationships to which Japan is involved and the interlocutors with which Tokyo interacts. Such relationships, in turn, reify East Asia, the Asia-Pacific, and the Indo-Pacific into multiple spaces representing the multitude of overlapping relationships and the meanings they pose for the Japanese government. Furthermore, such subjective dimensions of space reify physical, geometric, boundaries as relevant locations for the conduct of Japanese diplomacy. In other words, the *subjective* space where A-S dynamics play out redefines the *physical* space within which A-S dynamics emerge and are elaborated, completing the incessant cycle of *aidagara*. Moreover, the oscillating spaces – physical and subjective – show that spaces in Japanese foreign relations remain in a perpetual flux.

Put differently, *aidagara* in Japan’s foreign relations reveals three, inter-linked, dimensions of inter-relationships. The first dimension is the familiar agent-agent relationships. Just as Watsuji (2007e, p. 170) suggested that the Self is realized in counter-distinction to the Others, the Japanese Self is realized in opposition to the Others, particularly the perception of an increasingly threatening Chinese Other. Responding to such a Chinese Other prompts the second dimension of *aidagara*, the equally familiar agent-structure relationship. The construction of China into an *undemocratic* Other reinforces the imperative of forging a collective identity of “we,” whether be it with the US, Australia, India, or the African states, into a normative collectivity purportedly underpinned by a set of shared inalienable principles. This process is akin to Watsuji’s (2007e, p. 194) argument that agents interact with one another such that individual identities (*ware*) transform into collective identities (*ware-ware*).

Yet, these international political relationships can only be realized within the duality of space – both physical and subjective. We see that the Japanese Self as an island- or a sea-faring state is constructed in opposition to the Others located within the oscillating geometric boundaries of Asia and beyond. And it is within such geometric boundaries that the Japanese government pursues values-based

diplomacy – a democratic- and free-trading “we” in counter-distinction to the Chinese Other – adjusting to the emerging power-political dynamics within which Tokyo finds itself. Hence, the *physicality* of space helps to define the *subjectivity* of space within which Tokyo identifies its interlocutors and attach meanings to political relationships that emerge and are elaborated.

This leads to the third dimension of *aidagara* consisting of space-agent/structure relationships taking on the quality of “subjective spatiality” constituting a mutual feed-back loop through which a space produces relationships, while the relationships reinforce – or helping to redefine – the space. As the Japanese example attests, Asia as a physical space is where Japan’s interlocutors are located and the Japanese Self is realized in contra-distinction to Others sharing that space. As Japan’s webs of inter-relationships push outwards as Tokyo responds to the action of Others, such as China’s BRI, the subjective space of political significance also expands. The more Japan engaged in values diplomacy and sought to match China’s international influence and its geometric outreach, the more the Japanese government felt the need to enlist potential interlocutors beyond East Asia or the Asia-Pacific. And this expanding sphere of political relationships redefined Japan’s subjective space for political relationships from East Asia and the Asia-Pacific to the Indo-Pacific. Finally, such subjective spaces are physically situated, reifying the oscillating geometric boundaries of East Asia, the Asia-Pacific, and the Indo-Pacific as relevant spaces for Japanese diplomacy.

The above dynamic is in line with Watsuji’s (2007c, pp. 229–30) assertion that a space is not only a physical constraint, but it also possesses subjectivity in the form of “spatial subjectivity,” since “a space as an expanse of objective things emerge out of subjective human existence, not because the physical space determines human existence.” As such, physical space requires the subjectivity of the agents for it to become meaningful. This is not to deny the physicality of the space; but in the context of political relationships, and the A-S problem in particular, given that the space acts as a source of identity and relationships, we need to reframe the A-S dynamics as requiring a particular space for their contextualization, bearing in mind that, as political relations evolve, so does the space.

That space matters in IR seems obvious. However, Watsuji’s *aidagara* emphasizes the need to devote more attention to the duality of space in Japan’s foreign relations, and the discussions on international political dynamics more generally, but in a different way. If states are spatially contingent, then it should be the case that the discussions on interstate relationships should also scrutinize space as a factor, since international politics comprises agents encountering one another in space. Hence, space produces relationships. Simultaneously, as the political relationships evolve, the space for encounter also changes. As new agents join the existing circle of actors, the spatial boundaries of the existing relationships are pushed outwards to encompass new participants, and the political relationships transmogrify as agents, both old and new, elaborate on the already-existing political relationships. As Watsuji (2007c, pp. 313–15) reminded us, a discussion on human existence becomes an abstraction if space is forgotten. Watsuji’s *aidagara* provides us with a bridge to fill the theoretical gap between Classical Geopolitics, on the one hand, and contemporary IR theorizing, on the other. As Japan’s foreign relations show, the international political dynamics in general, need to be reframed as *aidagara*, because the duality of space produces A-S dynamics, and the A-S dynamics reproduce and redefine space.

Conclusion

Re-reading Japan’s foreign relations as *aidagara* allows us to take space more seriously in IR theorizing. *Aidagara* allows us to rethink space not just as a physical setting, but also as a subjective factor at the core of the feedback-loop in which space produces political relationships, which in turn reproduce – or helps to redefine – space. This enhanced spatial awareness is a necessary corrective to IR thinking, as without space, A-S relationships are denuded of context.

The A-S problem familiar in IR thinking requires an enhanced engagement with space for contextualization. The failure to take into account the space within which A-S interactions take place turns discussions into abstractions, as inter-state relationships do not happen in spatial vacuums. That

the state actors are rooted in their space is an obvious point; but somehow, it is a point that seems to be forgotten in the existing discussions on international political dynamics. By leveraging Watsuji's theoretical tool space can be (re)integrated into A-S dynamics, we can start paying closer attention to the space as an integral part of identity formation. In short, Watsuji acts as a valuable "bridge" that enables a meaningful conversation that was long needed between Classical Geopolitics, on the one hand, and contemporary IR theories, on the other.

Space needs to be integrated back into the wider A-S problem. Without paying adequate attention to space, we remain oblivious to the particular manner in which political relationships evolve. Watsuji highlights the importance of bringing the notion of space firmly back into thinking about international politics, not just as an externality, a social construct, or an enabler of knowledge production; but as an endogenous facet of the A-S problem involving the agents, the structure, and space.

Competing interest. None.

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