

AZEC and the Discursive Construction of Japan's Green Identity:

A Poststructuralist Inquiry

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Abstract: Launched in 2023, the Asia Zero-Emission Community (AZEC) is a Japanese initiative aimed at achieving carbon neutrality in Asia through cooperation with ASEAN and Australia. This is an opportunity for Japan to re-narrate its international identity, thereby increasing its ontological security. However, research has so far paid insufficient attention to this, focusing instead on the tangible benefits for Japan, and the degree of decarbonization and energy security. This study analyzes how Japan discursively (re-)constructs its political identity through the AZEC. The methodology applied is a Poststructuralist discourse analysis. The hypothesis is that Japan positions itself as a regional climate leader, distinguishing itself from China, ASEAN states, and even its past self. This study contributes to the understanding of the AZEC beyond tangible elements, highlighting its pathways to ontological security through the narration of roles and relations. Moreover, it accentuates Japan's desire for greater status.

Keywords: Japan, AZEC, Status, Ontological Security, Poststructuralism

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Introduction

The Asia Zero Emission Community (AZEC) is a cooperative endeavor initiated by Japan in 2023 that involves ASEAN member states and Australia. The AZEC sprouts from the momentum of several preceding foreign policy elements of Japan, such as the ASEAN-Japan Climate Change Action Agenda, the ASEAN-Japan Environmental Cooperation Initiative, and even Tokyo's more dominant Free and Open Indo-Pacific ambitions (Ministry of the Environment (2021). It began to take on its institutionalized shape in 2022 as part of Japan's climate diplomacy, with a particular focus on the Asian region.

The institutional development of AZEC was made possible by the country's considerable economic and technological development. Bearing in mind that striving towards carbon neutrality is not only a rather costly endeavor, but also raises the risk of energy insecurity, depending on the resilience of pre-existing infrastructure, it is particularly strenuous for most ASEAN member states. This power imbalance enabled Japan to establish itself as a leader, supporter, and financier of ASEAN's environmental transition and decarbonization. The material and technological support for the AZEC is a joint effort by the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA), the Environment (MOE), the Economy, Trade, and Industry (METI), and the Japan Bank for International Cooperation (JBIC). Private actors, namely Japanese businesses, also play a considerable role in this endeavor, even if merely with respect to AZEC's economic prospects rather than ontological considerations.

This paper does not focus on the feasibility of energy transitions, or Japan's economic benefits. Instead, it examines the discursive narration of Japan's identity through the construction of this institutional structure with its respective roles and power hierarchies. The matter of agency within the AZEC is particularly curious, especially since Japan has continuously narrated the AZEC as a collaborative initiative. In fact, given Japan's economic and political capabilities, and its use thereof, Japan *de facto* AZEC's agenda-setter, as METI and JBIC largely dictate the policy scaffolding and financing mechanisms underneath it. Thus, the principles and values promoted by the AZEC reflect Japan's strategic energy interests, business opportunity prospects in ASEAN, and the

limited decision-making power granted to its ASEAN counterparts.

However, the framing of the AZEC by Tokyo (referring to Japan's government) as a collaborative endeavor, despite these apparent power inequalities, not only serves the purpose of maintaining friendly diplomatic relations between Japan and its ASEAN counterparts. Moreover, the International Relations (IR) lens of Poststructuralism views the AZEC as a discursive tool for Japan to (re-)construct its own political identity in the region and beyond. Indeed, this study hypothesizes the strategic use of the AZEC by Japan to construct narratives is conducive to its desired self. According to Poststructuralism, such narratives help establish social relations with underlying power (in) equalities.

As will be clearly elucidated in the analysis section of this paper, AZEC's unequal role-constellations take the form of teacher-student, modern-backward, and benign-malign relationships with Japan occupying the superior role in each respective context. Although AZEC is framed as mutually beneficial, ontologically speaking, it consolidates Japan's identity as a leader, trustworthy partner, and authority (economically, technologically, and politically) through underlying bilateral relations and high-level diplomatic undertakings. The ontological counterparts found in these role relationships are the ASEAN member states, China, and even Japan's pre - World War II (WWII) and WWII – era selves.

Therefore, this study aims to deconstruct Japan's climate discourse and ontological self-positioning in Asia. To this end, the academic lens of Poststructuralism will be used to uncover how, in the case of Japan's leadership of the AZEC, language constructs a political reality conducive to Japan's desired self. The discourse analysis used for this purpose focuses on Japan's speeches, policy documents, and AZEC agreements. The primary research question underlying this study is how Japan discursively (re)constructs its political identity through the AZEC. To answer this guiding question, a secondary inquiry into the discourse created by Japan is indispensable, namely an investigation of Japan's narrated binary oppositions (in the form of linguistic devices that highlight contrasts) and the rhetorical devices used alongside them.

The theoretical contributions of this paper range from the integration of rhetorical devices (ethos, pathos, logos) into more prominent Poststructuralist analytical concepts, to the demonstration of the importance of language in power projection, to the provision of a

case of one state/actor attempting to differentiate its desired Self from its own past (in addition to Japan's attempts to differentiate itself from its ASEAN counterparts). Concerning the practical relevance of this research, this paper reveals Japan's non-material strategy for regional influence; provides new insight into ASEAN-Japan power dynamics; and encourages reflexivity with regard to Japan's foreign policy, more generally, by hinting at the potential presence of Japanese historical anxieties concerning its identity and its relations with its regional counterparts.

This paper is structured as follows: A contextualization of this paper follows the introduction section, wherein the novelty of this inquiry in the context of the AZEC shall be demonstrated. Next is the methodology section, followed by the case study on the AZEC, which delves deeper into the matter at hand to unveil the rhetorical mechanisms underlying it, in addition to the apparent realpolitikal factors. Subsequently, the discourse narrated by Japan within the AZEC will be analyzed, and this paper's contributions concerning insights for a better understanding of Japan in the AZEC, as well as the discursive construction of actors' identities, will be stressed.

Japanese Leadership & Ontological Security – A Literary Contextualization

It will become apparent through the subsequent paragraphs that, despite the lack of a novel nature of the AZEC, no critical and/or ontological analysis in relation to Japan exists. Nevertheless, the following places this paper's focus on context through a recapitulation of accounts concerning Japan's stance towards international political leadership in general, and in the field of environmental diplomacy.

The study of political leadership is extensive and multidisciplinary, covering fields such as Foreign Policy Analysis and International Political Psychology. Thus, for the sake of concision, the following recapitulation shall focus particularly on accounts of Japan's past leadership in general, and with regard to the environment. In fact, scholars have attempted to analyze this matter from various perspectives, such as the individual-level mindsets of Japanese Prime Ministers, contemporary and past domestic

politics, and Japan's international relations (Envall, 2014).

Different scholars have attributed varying degrees of importance to the different factors. However, many scholars such as Envall (2014), Inoguchi (2014), and Pugliese (2017) caution against neglecting the agency of Prime Ministers. Nuanced assessments are, for instance, that the mindset of Japan's Prime Ministers is a decisive determinant when allowed by international politics (Envall, 2014) and/or by the notorious inhibition of the Japanese bureaucracy (Pugliese, 2017).

Gaunder notably assigns greater agency to Japanese Prime Ministers with regards to foreign policy making (2007), while others see the agency of Prime Ministers to lie rather inside the so-called 'iron triangle', an agentic grouping consisting of the Prime Minister, political parties and ministries, as well as the industry (Sakaguchi et al., 2021). While Sakaguchi et al. consider this iron triangle to be hindering Japanese foreign policy leadership endeavors, Kameyama occupies a more neutral stance regarding tripartite politics, noting periods of inhibition and support for international environmental leadership (2021). Although Kameyama notes that Japan's standing for the environment in cases such as the Kyoto Protocol in 1997, the Group of Eight in 2008, and the Group of Seven in 2016 were short of strong leadership attributes, and short-lived (2021), the AZEC, at least as of the writing of this paper, appears to be a case in point of a more conscious and resolved regional leadership attempt by Japan that is, indeed, showing a mutually beneficial relationship between Japanese politicians and its industry. While Okano-Heijmans' research supports this claim by indicating a rather positive public-private partnership in Japan conducive to Japan's international environmental leadership ambitions, she sees the primary objective as securing new business opportunities and markets abroad as opposed to intangible status objectives (2012).

This helps explain the strategic foundation of Japan's AZEC leadership, particularly when considering the involvement of Japanese businesses. However, when it comes to politicians, their mindsets, and personal ethics, there is considerable reason to presume the presence of more ideological objectives. While it is not within the scope of this paper to discuss which objectives are primary and which are secondary, but rather to investigate the rhetorical manner of Japan's establishment of itself as an international leader, it suffices to say at this stage that

neither *realpolitik* nor intangible values should be neglected when hoping to explain Japan's foreign policymaking. On this note, Delehanty and Steele highlight that a country's (here: Japan's) identity (be it that of an environmental leader or its opposite) is a discourse that must first be constructed domestically and in public (2009), a discursive realm occupied by politicians, but also by industry and citizens, before it is narrated internationally and used to alter Japan's relations vis-à-vis its international counterparts.

In addition to the individual and domestic variables, other scholars emphasize the role of the international and, particularly in the field of IR, tend to personify the state. However, conceptual borders are rarely clear cut; as such, even Envall regards international systemic fluctuations as partial explanations for Japan's lack of superpower ambitions since WWII, its occasional pursuit of moral superpower status via human security policies, and its favoring of economic growth, such as during the Yoshida Doctrine (2014). In fact, domestic and international factors are often used to explain Japan's fluctuating leadership ambitions, such as domestic anti-militarism (Envall, 2014), strong US-Japan cooperation (Pugliese, 2017), or changing alliances depending on the mindset of the respective Prime Minister (Inoguchi, 2014). The strength of the domestic antimilitarism variable in Japan appears to have been waning in the past decades; however, its legacy might prevail in what one might circumscribe as 'peaceful strength' or 'benign dominance,' manifesting in little notable domestic and international opposition to Japan's promotion of human security, to its framing of itself as a 'smart power,' or to Japan's role in the AZEC.

Interestingly, whether one refers to the geopolitical limitations of the international structure, to liberal orders in the form of regional and international regimes, or to constructivist accounts of norms and value promulgation, Japan's concern with establishing a regional order in Asia and itself as a leader is based on the conceptual scaffolding of a stage for establishing power asymmetries through bilateral and multilateral arrangements. These powers are both tangible and intangible in nature, as they comprise the economic merits that Japan is expected to derive from its leadership and dogmatic role in the AZEC, as well as improvements to its ontological status as a leader.

In fact, many scholars seem to agree that a political and diplomatic

focus on the regional environment is a feasible niche for Japan to establish itself as a leader, despite considerable limitations. Indeed, there are a great many factors in Japan's past that have contributed to Japan's path towards environmental leadership, ranging from the Minamata mercury poisoning in the 1960s, to the Kyoto Protocol of 1997, to the Fukushima nuclear disaster of 2011 (Kolmas, 2017; Kameyama, 2021; Gilson, 2023). At the same time, it is important to highlight cases in which Japan demonstrated considerable neglect of the environment, including Japan's many reservations regarding the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) (Sakaguchi et al., 2021), or Japan's waning commitment to the Conference of the Parties (COP) agreements (Gilson, 2023).

Another reason that a diplomatic focus on the environment is practical for Japan is its current and past involvement in regional politics. Bearing in mind the geopolitical dominance of the US in the Asia-Pacific and the Mutual Security Treaty with Japan (Gilson, 2023); Japan's wartime past (Gilson, 2023); and the territorial disputes as well as historic antagonism between Japan on the one hand, and China and South Korea on the other (Inoguchi, 2014), over the past decades, it has become increasingly feasible for Tokyo to rethink its regional role in non-traditional security terms covering fields such as environmental and human security (Hasui and Komatsu, 2021). Indeed, with regard to the AZEC, climate change is a case in point of the tragedy of the commons, and Japan's non-traditional security leadership role is more likely to be welcomed, given its potential environmental benefits for other states in the region. Nevertheless, while these genealogical insights are indispensable when wishing to make sense of why Japan chose the environmental path it is on in the region, very little scholarship deals with the *manner* of the narration of itself and others in the realm of Japan's environmental leadership, the focus of this research paper.

Interestingly, despite Japan's environmental leadership being a feasible niche, as mentioned above, Japan's leadership aspirations appear not to have manifested beyond its discursive stage prior to the AZEC. Several scholars have noticed that Japan usually has not followed through on its environmental commitments (Kameyama, 2021; Sakaguchi et al., 2021; Gilson, 2023), and cite reasons such as differences in the personal preferences of Prime Ministers (Inoguchi, 2014; Sakaguchi et al., 2021),

or the dependency on the commitments of the USA (Gilson, 2023). In this context, Sakaguchi et al. pose the intriguing question of why “*Japan’s initiatives tend to end up as symbolism?*” (2021, p.147). Kolmas appears to address this point, highlighting that “*Once discursively constructing the image of Kyoto in order to legitimize its foreign policy proactiveness, Tokyo was unwilling to tie itself to unconditioned environmental strategy it entailed.*” (2017, p. 474). This insight eloquently explains the difference between research focusing on the evaluation of Japan’s environmental commitments on the one hand, and research on the manner and rationale of the narration of such commitments and its impact on power hierarchies on the other — this research is centering on the latter.

Only a limited number of scholarly articles have addressed Japan’s strategic utilization of environmental diplomacy for the sake of its international status. AZEC’s discursive dimensions thus remain underexplored. Underlining the absence of a notable environmental leader in the Asia-Pacific region, Sakaguchi et al. (2021) note that Japanese administrations appear to be aware that Japan has a comparative advantage in the field of the environment. This is particularly noteworthy, as Japan is operating within a rather restrictive local and geopolitical environment given, amongst others, the presence of the USA and its ambitions in Asia (Pugliese, 2017). However, it is not only the United States, which is a key political counterpart of Japan, but also (and perhaps even more so) China, surpassing Japan economically and in terms of manufacturing output (Inoguchi, 2014), as well as China’s own pursuit of dominating regional climate politics (Gilson, 2023).

As will be discussed in greater detail at a later stage, given that Poststructuralism presumes the existence of social relations and identities to be determined by binary opposition between oneself and one’s counterparts (see e.g. Campbell, 1992 or Hansen, 2006), China can indeed be referred to as a main social counterpart of Japan, the distancing/contrasting against which may be achieved through environmental discourse and policies — Pugliese would refer to it as ‘China balancing’ (2017). In fact, Japan’s attempts towards such ‘othering’ of China, and more generally towards constructing its regional leadership, can be seen to lie in Prime Minister Abe’s *chikyugi fukan gaiko* (global diplomacy) and its ‘Arc of Freedom and Prosperity’ (Inoguchi, 2014), both based on a re-narration of its security policy in non-traditional (implying: non-

military) terms, whilst maintaining a focus on universal (liberal) values and the freedom of navigation (Pugliese, 2017), and while relying on Japan's as of yet regionally still dominating technological wherewithal (Inoguchi, 2014). Although these scholarly insights date back to the previous decade, they still hold validity regarding the AZEC.

While there are those such as Okano-Heijmans (2012) who assert that Japan has no real status ambitions, but rather focuses on economic growth, others such as Kolmas (2017) counter this point, proposing that the identity creation of Japan occupies a central stage in Japan's foreign policies. Scholars such as Envall (2014) seem to implicitly agree with Kolmas by emphasizing that (Japan's) leadership is a continuous and reciprocal process between members of a group, thereby consolidating the Poststructuralist view that identities, such as those of a leader, need to be narrated on a theatrical stage by one player in contrast to another (Hansen, 2016).

While status may be increased by states in a myriad of ways (Yamamoto, 2019), most scholarships appear to rely on conventional IR theories, and thus center on the creation of dominant relationships in material manners (Realism and Liberalism) or through norm leadership (Constructivism). Increases in Japan's status in the Asia-Pacific in realpolitical ways by, for instance, becoming a dominant economic force (even if through a focus on merely the environment) should indeed be considered, especially as energy security is a notable non-traditional security means towards it. However, this academic avenue leaves the intangible microcosm of Japan's status realization through the creation of a desired self unanswered. This study regards the discursive creation of relations as equally indispensable since identity creates foreign policy, and vice versa (Hansen, 2016). In this manner, the remainder of this paper unravels how Japan is narrating itself as a leader, distinct from China in terms of its official development assistance (ODA) and diplomacy style, as a smart power, and as a benign power through its leading role in the AZEC.

Research Methodology:

This section discusses the research methodology underlying this

thesis, which analyses Japan's discursive creation of international identity through its role in the AZEC. To shed light on this matter, a discourse analysis was conducted. Discourse analysis was used as the research method because it is regarded as a medium through which power runs, manifests, and is made visible (Foucault, 2020). Indeed, Poststructuralism considers language to make up the building blocks of (social) reality, rather than merely describing it. In this manner, Japan's role within the AZEC should not merely be regarded as a component of its foreign policy, but instead as a linguistic construct of its (desired) identity. In other words, language (whether in word, deed, or prose) constitutes political action — action used by Japanese policymakers to narrate the AZEC in such a way that legitimizes Tokyo's identities and its therefrom stemming leadership.

The following are considered key primary documents that will be analyzed in this paper: Prime Ministers Kishida and Ishiba's relevant official statements on AZEC, with a particular focus on how they communicate Japan's role and relations with other states, on the one hand, and documents by the METI and MOFA highlighting Japan's role in AZEC, on the other.

The application of discourse analysis in this study was twofold. First, Hansen's Poststructural understanding of the narration of identity through the construction of binary oppositions (such as 'good' versus 'bad') shall be applied (2016). According to Hansen (2016), a country's foreign policy is regarded as Poststructuralism, a discursive practice, whereby one cannot clearly separate material variables from ideational variables. Moreover, an actor's identity is constructed by a discourse that consists of one's own and another's narratives. Within this discourse, identity is always narrated in relation to something or someone it is not — a binary opposite (Hansen, 2016).

Based on the above understanding, the creation of the Self by means of 'othering' oneself from others along three levels can be observed — namely the narrations of identity temporarily, spatially, and ethically. The spatial frame allows the observer to recognize the linguistic differentiation and/or affiliation by the Self (here, Japan) with one's Other/counterpart (Hansen, 2016). Through a delineation of geographical space, one can narrate what actors and issues lie outside and within a boundary. This eases the legitimization of depicting the out-group as

savages, for instance, while reserving positive attributes and adjectives for the geographical in-group.

A temporal frame depicts the narration of the Self and the Other across a temporal dimension. As such, if narrated temporally, one can construct or bring to light contrasts between the Self and the Other, steering the discourse towards becoming conducive to one's desired identity (Hansen, 2016). A temporal contrast usually denotes progress over time, and can thus be used in narratives to denote attributes of development, modernity, or change more generally, as well as the negative attributes of backwardness, tradition, and stagnation. Interestingly, one may create narratives not only with regard to a backward or uncivilized Other, but also distantiate one's current/future Self from one's less respectable former Self (Waever, 1996).

The ethical frame shifts the focus to how identity is constructed through narratives centered on matters of responsibility (Hansen, 2016). Such narratives generate a binary opposition along two possible lines: either a contrast between a responsible Self and an Other that is narrated as irresponsible, or a contrast between a benign, caring, and responsible Self and an Other that is incapable of managing a problem on its own, and is thus in need of rescue/assistance, or a combination of the two. Examples include the use of ethicality to justify humanitarian intervention, highlighting one's dedication to (inter)national security (note the simultaneous spatial frame present here), or to accord the Self with legitimacy and political power for more efficient decision-making (as is hypothesized to be the case with Japan's role in the AZEC). In the examples above, one may discern how the discourse leaves the geopolitical realm and enters the discursive space of morality; however, the objective of the narrator may remain partially geopolitical.

The second way in which discourse analysis is undertaken in this study, in addition to the aforementioned three frames, is the evaluation of selected documents in terms of their use of ethos, pathos, and logos. These make up the tripartite method of rhetorical persuasion, focusing on the speaker, audience, and topic at hand. While logos appeals to reason and aim to persuade the target audience with logical arguments, ethos aims to highlight the positive attributes of the speaker, and pathos attempt to persuade the discourse recipients emotionally (House, 2020). Using these in discourses can facilitate the narration of identities through the

linguistic construction of the Self and/or the defamation of the Other.

Ethos refers to the speaker's objective of establishing credibility and authority. There are three ways of doing so: through the communication of 'good sense,' which demonstrates the speaker's competency; through 'good character,' which highlights the speaker's honesty and righteousness; and through 'good will,' which refers to the speaker's concern about others (House, 2020). In a document or speech, ethos (in the form of 'good will,' for instance) may be identified in statements such as in the following hypothetical example: "*We are striving to create a region with zero net emissions for the benefit of all individuals all over Southeast Asia.*"

Pathos is an appeal to emotion and embodies the speaker's attempt to raise targeted sentiments (both positive and negative) among the target audience to either motivate them or securitize a matter. One case in point is the targeting of the emotions of pride and excitement in Nkruma's Ghana Independence Speech of 1957: "*We have awakened. We will not sleep anymore. Today, from now on, there is a new African in the world!*" (BBC World Service, 2007).

Lastly, logos refers to the use of logic or logical argumentation to increase the speaker's persuasiveness through evidence in the form of facts and/or premises, some of which can be enthymemes — unstated assumptions (Solomon, 2002). Here too, through logical argumentation, the speaker aims to persuade the audience/counterparts to either do or believe in something. For instance, this might be an attempt to convince us that a problem is indeed a problem, or that the speaker/speaker's country is able to address that particular problem and is thus a justified leader.

Recalling that the main guiding question behind this paper is how Japan discursively (re-)constructs its political identity through the AZEC, and how it strategically uses binary oppositions and rhetorical devices to this end, the above three frames of spatiality, temporality, and ethicality help construct the following hypotheses expressed in the form of discourse themes: First, Japan as a climate leader by framing the AZEC and itself as a regional necessity; second, Japan as a benign power by highlighting Japan's 'trustworthiness'; and third, Japan as an indispensable partner given ASEAN's reliance on Japanese technology

and finance as part of the AZEC. In the subsequent sections, these discursive themes, which are also hypothesized to be Japan's targeted identity attributes, are identified, and their narration is analyzed.

Based on the above, the following clarification regarding the terms 'identity' and 'strategy' is in order: While readers might commonly define identity in intangible, and strategy in realpolitikal (or tangible) terms, this paper considers them to be by no means perfectly distinguishable from one another. In fact, in this research, both are seen to be part of Japan's attempt of consolidating its political powers in Asia. Thus, when speaking of Japan's strategic use of binary oppositions, as is done in the preceding paragraph, it refers to Japan's calculated attempt to alter or consolidate its relative position in the respective social hierarchy. Doing so discursively may thus be circumscribed as a 'strategic discourse'.

Case Study: Japan's AZEC Policy and Discourse

The AZEC is a cooperative endeavor initiated by Japan in 2023 that involves ASEAN member states and Australia. The financial contributions that enable this initiative are covered almost entirely by Japanese institutions, including banks, corporations, and the government (METI, 2024). While the JBIC provides loans and investments to partner countries and institutions, as well as investment guarantees to Japanese banks, Nippon Export and Investment Insurance (NEXI) focuses on insuring Japanese banks' investments and business loans for up to USD 500 million (ERIA & AZEC Secretariat, 2023). In late December 2023, Prime Minister Kishida anticipated that the entire endeavor beyond the AZEC would cost approximately 28 trillion Yen, and informed that the funding would partially consist of so-called climate transition bonds issued by the Japanese government (NIKKEI, 2023).

Concerning the institutional framework of the AZEC, in addition to the Japanese ministries and ASEAN member states already mentioned, another government-related organization is the Japan External Trade Organization (JETRO), which is responsible for the promotion of mutual trade and investment. Specifically, in the context of the AZEC, the JETRO advises Japanese corporations on the business environment in AZEC target countries, particularly concerning matters of technology

transfer and technical assistance (METI, 2024). In addition to other organizations such as the New Energy and Industrial Technology Development Organization (NEDO), the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) is also notably involved in the AZEC through its official development assistance (ODA) in the form of low-interest loans and expert training (METI, 2024).

The scope of the AZEC projects in ASEAN states and Australia generally covers the following focal points: renewable energy such as next-generation solar cells, geothermal technologies, offshore wind energy generation installations, general power grid reinforcement, multinational infrastructure development for cross-border electricity power trading, and decarbonization through, for instance, carbon capture and storage (CSS) technologies (MOFA 2024f, p.3). While the specific pathways and components of the AZEC initiative are customized based on the target country, any AZEC-related undertaking has the following three objectives: the achievement of carbon neutrality, simultaneous consolidation of economic growth, and energy security (Government of Japan, 2024). To exemplify how these, particularly the former two, can be achieved in tandem, one may refer to Mitsui O.S.K. Lines Ltd., which is a major Japanese shipping company that has been made in charge of the construction of a liquefied CO₂-carrying vessel capable of CCS, the hub for which is planned to be built in Malaysia (Government of Japan, 2024). This is one example of more than 350 AZEC projects underway, all set out to be a step closer to the realization of the Paris Agreement of 2016 (RIETI – The Research Institute of Economy, Trade and Industry, 2023).

Recalling the ‘iron triangle’ mentioned in section two which refers to the notably high interrelationship between members of Japanese politics and the industry, and their stark influence over Japan’s foreign policies (Sakaguchi et al., 2021), the aspect of technology transfer is particularly noteworthy here. The AZEC requires a strong synergy between the respective Japanese ministries on the one hand, and Japanese corporations on the other. This goes well beyond matters of finance, as it also includes policy coordination. Elements covered under this synergy include R&D (both in Japan and ASEAN), the training of human resources, the actual transfer of technology and machinery related to, for instance, ammonia and hydrogen, and the latter’s procurement and logistics (METI, 2024).

The official ASEAN stance vis-à-vis the AZEC and Japan's leadership is generally welcoming and positive. ASEAN states and Australia are actively involved in AZEC projects and frequently emphasize the importance of a fair collaboration with Japan. Furthermore, ASEAN member states often insist that each AZEC project is tailored to economic and political circumstances specific to the respective country, as stressed in a joint statement by the ASEAN Business Advisory Council (ASEAN-BAC), Keidanren (Japan Business Federation), and the Economic Research Institute for ASEAN and East Asia (ERIA) (Keidanren, 2023).

ASEAN appears to place primary importance on economic and developmental benefits, and is less concerned with political matters and dependencies. In this light, at the 2nd AZEC Ministerial Meeting in 2024, the Executive Director of the ASEAN Centre for Energy (ACE) emphasized the importance of the development of ASEAN's power, transport, and industry through AZEC projects, and the longevity of impacts through the creation of the Asia Zero Emission Center, an institute for knowledge sharing and capacity building (ACE, 2024).

Analysis: Japan's Identity Construction through AZEC

This section analyzes how significant discourses (in the form of documents, statements, or speeches) have been narrated by Japan to construct the desired international identity as a leader, trustworthy benign power, and smart and indispensable partner. As noted in the methodology section, a discourse analysis in a Poststructuralist manner should be undertaken for this purpose. Any discourse related to political power relies on the narration of binary opposites, which are also presumed to exist in the AZEC-related discourses dominated by Japan, and will be investigated hereafter.

Hypothesis 1: Japan as a climate leader

Although the attributes of a leader cannot be clearly separated from those of the other two hypotheses, especially from the second (Japan as a trustworthy and benign power), Hansen's three frames allow for the

identification of various modes of differentiation (2016). As such, despite the interrelatedness between the hypotheses, hypothesis one narrows in on Japan's *spatial narratives*, the discursive construction of the geopolitics of space, by singling out the area of operation and dictating a primarily bilateral scaffolding.

It will become apparent that two spatial constructs play a central role in the AZEC discourse: Japan and the Asia-Pacific. The placement of the AZEC in Asia is not only as significant as Japan's ontological counterpart (as is demonstrated below), but also because, arguably, Japan is materialistically less capable to raise its status on the world stage as a whole. A focus on Japan's backyard, the Asia-Pacific, appears more feasible for this purpose, particularly when considering the related discourse of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) and its narration in non-traditional security terms (Harukata, 2023).

One way in which Japan spatially constructs its role within the AZEC is by creating a system that is not unlike the US hub-and-spokes system in the Asia-Pacific. Although the AZEC may be regarded as a multilateral project, it consists of several bilateral agreements between Japan and separate ASEAN member states (and Australia) (METI, 2023b; METI, 2023d; METI, 2023e). Such an arrangement is justified by the frequent repetition of arguable necessities, such as customizing development efforts based on each recipient country's unique needs and conditions (METI, 2023a; METI, 2023f; METI, 2023 g). While Japan also frequently hosts several multilateral summits including the AZEC Public-Private Investment Forums, bilateral politics is not only based on a much wider gap in economic and political power compared to the ASEAN-Japan constellation but also enables Tokyo to construct and nurture its superior role in regard to each separate country in a considerably more direct manner: Arrangements through ASEAN would render Japan's relations with its individual member states indirect in nature. However, through Japan's AZEC-based hub-and-spoke system, bilateral meetings frequently take place on the political stage, allowing for repeated narrations and demonstrations of economic and technological superiority.

Another discursive construction of space in Japan is FOIP. Japan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs has clearly narrated that AZEC should be under FOIP's umbrella and has repeatedly stressed the significance

of global commons, such as the seas and environment (2024f). While the AZEC indeed relies on open waters for matters like cross-border electricity power trading or for the transport of hydrogen from Australia to Japan, China's relatively acquisitive conduct in the South China Sea (SCS) becomes directly connected to the AZEC through the latter's positioning under FOIP. Prior to the creation of the AZEC, particularly since China overtook Japan as the second-largest economy in the world, Japan has sought to compete with China's ODA in terms of quality rather than financial quantity (Hirono, 2019). The manner in which the AZEC has been spatially narrated constructs a geographic realm within which Japan can compete with China on its own terms, qualitatively, with liberal values and mutually beneficial and non-exploitative relations. Two 'us-versus-them' relations are thereby constructed; Japan versus China in the Indo-Pacific, as well as Japan and ASEAN (and Australia) versus China. The use of rhetorical devices like innuendos, for instance, the referral to "the situation in the South China Sea" immediately after speaking of the "Russian threat" adds judgment to this binary opposition whereby Japan occupies the role of the just and benign power (MOFA, 2022b; MOFA, 2023c).

Another spatial discourse is discernible with regards to Japan's role in the AZEC — namely that of Japan as the 'in-group' and of ASEAN as the 'out-group' or as 'the Other.' It is considerably less ontologically demeaning vis-a-vis ASEAN than Japan's contrasting of itself with China; yet, Japan's leading economic and technological involvement in the AZEC, and particularly the narration of such, allows for the implied creation of an image of Japan as 'problem-free' and 'advanced,' whereas ASEAN is in need of assistance. In fact, through clauses like "[Japan's efforts to] improving the investment environment in Viet Nam" (METI, 2023d), "[...] the various support that it provided through Japanese government [...]", or "based on policy coordination and support, Japan will expand the market of decarbonization technologies and reduce the cost involved [...]" (METI, 2023c), one may liken Japan's role to that of a mentor giving advice and help to his young and less experienced student — here, too, the social roles and political power embodied are by no means equal.

Hypothesis 2: Japan as benign and trustworthy

Japan's management of the AZEC discourse also leads to the creation of *ethical* narratives that are, as will be demonstrated, conducive to constructing Japan's desired identity of a benign and trustworthy power. The positive self-awarded ethical attributes discussed below and the implicit binary contrast with China and with its own imperial past become more apparent when bearing in mind the aforementioned positioning of the AZEC under FOIP — a rather liberal endeavor built on the principles of the rule of law and peaceful collaboration.

Two ethical themes conducive to Japan's leadership image are particularly discernible here: the values and philosophy of Japan, on the one hand, and the emphasis on Japan's good deeds, on the other. Concerning the former, through Tokyo's choice of words, it constructs an image of itself as not just a materialistically oriented actor desiring economic profit and might, but as a soft power with superior values worth spreading and defending. This is done by discursively depicting the AZEC as the embodiment of a Japanese philosophy towards the environment, by using it to tackle "*challenges faced by Asian countries*" (METI, 2022), and by Japan's standing in for regional/universal liberal values through the FOIP and AZEC (MOFA, 2024a).

The image of Japan as a benign and trustworthy power is further discursively consolidated through the repeated emphasis of press releases by the Japanese government. On many occasions, this is done in a very straightforward manner through reminders of Japan's "*efforts*," "*support*" (METI, 2023a), and "*contributions*" (MOFA, n.d.) towards the AZEC and ASEAN member states — to name just a few. Such statements are accompanied by Japan 'declaring' that ASEAN member states are appreciative of Japan's role and contributions (MOFA, 2024a; MOFA, n.d.; MOFA, 2024e), and welcome Japan's leadership in that they have "[...] *great expectations [...] [towards] new initiatives launched by Japan*" (MOFA, n.d.). Leadership and gratitude are not only declared, but also welcomed by ASEAN, as can be discerned from the Philippines' regard to Japan as being in front of a flying geese formation (Embassy of the Republic of the Philippines in Tokyo, 2023).

Such statements not only help Japan legitimize its leadership of the AZEC, but also place Japan's counterparts in an ontologically inferior position. This is not opposed by ASEAN, as there does not appear to be

any role conflict: As demonstrated in the case-study section, ASEAN member states' primary objective is the financial support and development assistance provided by Japan. On the other hand, Japan expects tangible benefits in the form of domestic energy security and an increase in business contracts in the region; as well as intangible/ontological gains in the form of status gains through the discursive construction of its desired identity.

In fact, Japan and ASEAN member states have stressed on numerous occasions that the AZEC is based on a mutual agreement and equal partnership (see, for instance, METI, 2023d). There are two discernible points. First, given the absence of any opposition to Japan's discursive construction of its superior identity (akin to that of a teacher, mentor, or rescuer), such notions of equality and partnership are likely to refer merely to the economic aspect of the AZEC. Second, such harmonious economic collaboration is linked to FOIP and the need for liberal values such as the rule of law (MOFA, 2024c). Through the use of enthymemes in the same document by the MOFA, Japan's involvement in the Indo-Pacific is contrasted with implicit allusions to China's assertive behavior in the SCS. Thus, with the South China Sea disputes overarching and posing a threat to FOIP as well as to ASEAN, more generally, Japan is able to discursively display and strengthen its leadership in the region in ethical terms (1) through the narration of its goodwill towards ASEAN, and (2) its contrast to China's regional politics.

The ethical narrative that has established Japan's image as a benign and trustworthy power is further strengthened through the use of the rhetorical repertoire of ethos, pathos, and logos. One case in point that communicates Japan's 'good will' along with 'good sense' — its credibility and legitimacy, respectively — is Prime Minister Kishida's speech at the AZEC Leaders Meeting in 2023 where he speaks of "*common goals*," Japan's "*willingness*," and its efforts towards "*green supply chains [...] industrial parks [and] collaborations*" (METI, 2023 g). In fact, Japan's reiteration of its efforts, dedication, and support — and thus its pathos in the form of 'good will' is omnipresent such as in the following remark: "*Going forward, Japan will strive to contribute to decarbonization in Asia through policy harmonization and support [...]*" (METI, 2023d; MOFA, 2023b; MOFA, 2024b; MOFA, 2024d). Another example is the 'good will' found in statements regarding its consideration

of the unique circumstances of ASEAN member states (METI, 2023a), and Tokyo's concern not to damage their economies (MOFA, 2023).

As can be discerned, Japanese authorities have made use of both binary oppositions on the one hand, and rhetorical devices on the other to narrate its image of a benign and trustworthy power — to portray Japan's leadership of the AZEC as justified and necessary, and as the embodiment of certain Japanese ethical responsibilities: to combat climate change, to provide energy security both to its own citizens and to the people of ASEAN, and to facilitate economic growth in Japan as well as in ASEAN. These responsibilities are based on ethical binary oppositions, namely the responsible Japan on the one hand, and the vulnerable or weak ASEAN on the other. A related binary pairing is that of a responsible Japan on the one hand, and an allegedly irresponsible China on the other.

Hypothesis 3: Japan as a peaceful and advanced power

The third way in which Japan discursively constructs its desired identity is through *temporality*. Through the temporal construction of binary opposites, Japan narrates its image as an advanced technological power, functioning as a role model for ASEAN member states to follow, and as a pacifist power disconnected from its imperial past.

Concerning the former, a temporal discourse is built on the notion of progress over time. With regard to AZEC, this refers to the development of ASEAN countries in terms of energy security and environmental protection. In abstract terms, the AZEC is a platform for Japan to share its experiences and technologies with ASEAN. This presumes that ASEAN member states will develop in a way deemed 'proper' by Japan — a phenomenon the discipline of Development Studies would refer to as 'modernization': the socio-political and/or economic development of a country from 'traditional' to 'modern' in a manner prescribed by successful Western liberal democracies. In fact, the self-regard of Japan as a role-model for ASEAN states to do likewise in the context of the AZEC becomes apparent when Japan speaks of "*formulating a roadmap*" for Malaysia (METI, 2023a), or when assuring ASEAN of Japan's lasting support over the next 50 years (METI, 2023 g). Such temporal narratives create a binary opposition in modernizationist terms whereby Japan occupies the role of the modernized advanced state on the one hand, and

the ASEAN member states the role of the less developed traditional Other in need of being “*pushed*” by Japan on the other (METI, 2022).

Rhetorical analysis also reveals Japan's constant allusion to its advanced state and nature. Examples include the use of ethos in the form of ‘good sense’ when noting the delivery of “*Japan's leading technologies, products, systems, services, and infrastructure for decarbonization to such countries*” (METI, 2023f); when announcing the dispatch of “*nine Japanese companies [to explain] their technology*”, implying that Japan's advanced machinery and expertise cannot be easily grasped and requires elaboration (METI, 2023a); or when reiterating how “*Japan expressed its readiness to assist Indonesia*” (MOFA, 2022a; see also MOFA, 2023b).

At the same time, such cases of ‘good sense’ can also be interpreted as ‘good will,’ as Japan chose to dedicate its time, money, and know-how to ASEAN. In fact, such narratives are formed frequently in reminders of Japan's good nature, such as through the statement that “*Japan was the first country in the world to start dialogue with ASEAN*”, and that Japan and ASEAN have been “*true ‘heart-to-heart’ friends*” (MOFA, n.d.). Given that rhetorical means like ethos are used to persuade one's counterpart, such intent can be hypothesized to exist in Japan's use of rhetoric.

A second noteworthy binary contrast temporally narrated by Japan can be discerned where Japan, interestingly, ‘others itself.’ This implies that Japan contrasts its current self with its past self. Recalling Japan's aggressive expansionist conduct during and prior to WWII, and recalling that one major region of its aggression was Southeast Asia, Japan's leadership of the AZEC helped Tokyo construct an image of itself as a peaceful supportive country. Textual evidence for this can be taken from the underlying hypothesis two — the discursive construction of Japan as a benign power—considering that discourse makers often use more than one of the three methods, for instance temporal and ethical ways, at the same time.

In summary, Japan's narration of its desired identity through the creation of binary oppositions in spatial, temporal, and ethical channels, and through the use of rhetorical devices, leads one to identify the following three identity-consolidating roles: first, Japan as a climate leader by framing the AZEC as a regional necessity and itself as capable

and powerful; second, Japan as a benign and trustworthy power; and third, Japan as an indispensable partner and role model for ASEAN member states.

Conclusion

In addition to its considerable economic and environmental potential, AZEC functions as a discursive tool for Japan to construct its international political identity in a way it desires. To this end, Japan makes use of the AZEC in order to (1) position itself as a climate leader in Asia, (2) distinguish itself from China's allegedly less benign international conduct in the fields of the environment, ODA and FP more generally, (3) establish an ontologically unequal relationship vis-a-vis ASEAN member states not unlike that of a relationship between a student and a teacher, and (4) distance itself from its own imperial past during and prior to WWII.

It has been established that Japan has discursively constructed its leadership role with the above positive attributes through the use of binary oppositions in spatial, ethical, and temporal terms. Spatially, Japan has, for instance, narrated itself as the in-group, and ASEAN as the out-group or the Other, whereby "they" require development assistance, while narrating itself as developmentally immaculate. Ethical narratives helped construct the image of a benign and supportive Japan while utilizing ASEAN as an ontological recipient of Japan's goodwill. Moreover, China has occasionally been alluded to, among others, through rhetorical devices such as enthymemes, and has been used as a potentially dangerous Other. Finally, Japan has used temporal narratives to depict itself as technologically and economically advanced, as the role model of ASEAN, and as different and more peaceful than its imperial past. In addition to the three binary frames, Japan has made particular use of the rhetorical tool of ethos, consisting of good sense, good character, and good will, to reinforce its identity as benign, responsible, and advanced.

The implications of Japan's discursive constructions of international relations are considerable. On the surface, the AZEC helps consolidate Japan's economic footing in the region by securing new markets for Japanese corporations in ASEAN, and strengthens Japan's energy

security, for instance, through the establishment of a hydrogen supply line with Australia. In particular, the discursive construction of its image in the region helps enhance Japan's influence by positioning it as an environmental and economic leader, which is a noteworthy remedy for its declining geopolitical dominance. Opposition from ASEAN member states against such framing by Japan has not been observed, as ASEAN states appear to prioritize economic benefits over political powers. Thus, Japan's leadership in the AZEC has been welcomed and actively encouraged.

Considering the long-term feasibility of Japan's environmental leadership in the region, one should recall that its enthusiasm for climate diplomacy remains largely symbolic. As such, whether the still relatively young AZEC initiative matures into tangible regional leadership or remains on the theatrical stage of political performance remains to be seen. In either case, the AZEC discourse has already been undertaken, and can thus be regarded as indicative of Japan's desire for status.

In regard to this paper's theoretical contributions, the integration of the rhetorical devices of ethos, pathos and logos into a Poststructuralist analytical frame allows for a more nuanced approach to understanding discursive state identity constructions. Moreover, the paper exemplifies the importance of language as a means of power creation and projection — even concerning a matter like AZEC which appears, at first glance, entirely realpolitik in nature. Furthermore, one of the many insights in this research is a case in point for a less than common phenomenon in statist identity narration, namely the othering by a state from its own former Self — something notably theorized by Waeber in 1996.

Concerning the practical relevance of this research, this paper exemplifies how Japan consolidates its regional leadership not only in realpolitik terms through finance and technology, but also through narrative imposition and discursive framing. The paper moreover sheds light on the tacit status (and thus power-) asymmetries in AZEC — an insight useful for both analytical scrutiny and practical policy adjustments. One further point of practical relevance is the reflexivity it encourages with regards to Japan's foreign policymaking and the potential presence of historical anxieties within. These might be with regards to China and/or its own colonial past.

On a final note, one avenue for future academic inquiry could center

on the discursive responses to Japan's narratives by ASEAN member states. Such inquiries might uncover latent role conflict that is either ontological in nature, or of another kind. Another feasible path for future research might be to undertake a comparative analysis of Japan's AZEC's discourse, on the one hand, and China's equivalent, in other words, environmental engagements encompassed by its Belt and Road Initiative, on the other.

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AZEC与日本绿色身份的话语构建: 后结构主义探究

摘要: 亚洲零排放共同体(Asia Zero-Emission Community, 简称AZEC)是日本于2023年发起的一项倡议, 旨在通过与东盟(ASEAN)和澳大利亚的合作在亚洲实现碳中和。这为日本重新叙述其国际身份、从而增强其本体安全提供了机会。然而, 迄今为止的研究对这一问题关注不足, 而是更多地关注日本从中获得的实际利益以及脱碳和能源安全的程度。本研究分析了日本如何通过AZEC话语地(重新)构建其政治身份, 采用的方法是后结构主义话语分析。假设是日本将自身定位为区域气候领导者, 将自己与中国、东盟国家甚至过去的自己区分开来。本研究有助于超越实际要素理解AZEC, 强调其通过角色和关系的叙述实现本体安全的路径, 同时凸显了日本对更高地位的渴望。

关键词: 日本、AZEC、地位、本体安全、后结构主义

AZEC와 일본의 녹색 정체성의 담론적 구축: 후구조주의 탐구

초록: 아시아 제로 배출 커뮤니티(Asia Zero-Emission Community, 이하 AZEC)는 2023년 일본이 발의한 이니셔티브로, 아세안(ASEAN)과 호주와의 협력을 통해 아시아에서 탄소 중립을 실현하는 것을 목표로 한다. 이는 일본이 국제 정체성을 재구축함으로써 존재론적 보안을 강화할 수 있는 기회를 제공한다. 그러나 지금까지의 연구는 이 문제에 대한 관심이 부족한 편이며, 오히려 일본이 얻는 실질적인 이익과 탄소 감축 및 에너지 보안의 정도에 더 많이 집중되어 왔다. 본 연구는 일본이 AZEC를 통해 어떻게 담론적으로 (재)정치적 정체성을 구축하는지 분석하며, 후구조주의 담론 분석 방법론을 적용하였다. 가설은 일본이 중국, 아세안 국가들, 심지어 과거의 자신과 구별되는 지역 기후 리더로 자신을 포지셔닝한다는 것이다. 본 연구는 AZEC를 실질적인 요소를 넘어 이해하는데 기여하며, 역할과 관계의 서술을 통해 존재론적 보안을 실현하는 경로를 강조함으로써, 동시에 일본의 더 높은 지위에 대한 열망을 부각시킨다.

핵심어: 일본, AZEC, 지위, 존재론적 보안, 후구조주의

AZECと日本のグリーンアイデンティティのディスコース的構築: ポスト構造主義的探究

要旨: アジアゼロエミッションコミュニティ (Asia Zero-Emission Community、以下AZEC) は、2023年に日本が発案したイニシアチブで、ASEAN諸国とオーストラリアとの協力を通じてアジアでのカーボンニュートラルを実現することを目的としています。これは、日本が国際的なアイデンティティを再構築し、その存在論的セキュリティを高める機会を提供するものです。しかし、これまでの研究ではこの点に十分な注意が払われず、むしろ日本にとっての具体的な利益や、脱炭素化とエネルギー安全保障の程度に焦点が当てられてきました。本研究では、日本がどのようにAZECを通じてディスコース的に（再）政治的アイデンティティを構築するかを分析しています。適用される方法論はポスト構造主義的ディスコース分析です。仮説は、日本が中国、ASEAN諸国、そして過去の自分自身と区別される地域の気候リーダーとして自分自身を位置づけることです。本研究は、具体的な要素を超えたAZECの理解に寄与し、役割と関係の叙述を通じて存在論的セキュリティへの道筋を強調することで、さらに日本のより高い地位を求める欲求を強調しています。

キーワード: 日本、AZEC、地位、存在論的セキュリティ、ポスト構造主義

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