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Liberalism and Japan's International Relations amidst COVID-19: A Case Study of South Korea, Taiwan, and the USA.

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**Liberalism and Japan's International Relations amidst COVID-19: A Case
Study of South Korea, Taiwan, and the USA.**

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ABSTRACT

This thesis assesses the applicability of liberalism as a theoretical framework to investigate Japan's international relations with South Korea, Taiwan, and the USA during the COVID-19 pandemic. Liberalism foregrounds the significance of democracy and free markets and set that these values promote peace and cooperation in international relations. From my point, I will contribute to the ongoing discussion about Japan's role as Asia's liberal leader. By presenting my own argument, I will engage in the debate on whether Japan truly fulfils this role. The research conducted for this thesis draws on case studies and primary and secondary sources to observe that despite facing various obstacles, Japan was able to maintain a liberal approach to its international relations with these countries. This was achieved through the use of soft power, diplomatic efforts, and cooperation in addressing common challenges posed by the pandemic. The thesis argues that liberalism is indeed a useful framework for understanding Japan's relations with these countries during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic, Liberalism, Japan, Foreign policy, Asia's Liberal Leader.

GLOSSARY

PRC: People's Republic of China

ROC: Republic of China

ROK: Republic of Korea

USA: United States of America

MOFA: Ministry of Foreign Affairs

NGO: Non-Governmental Organization

WHO: World Health Organization

SDF: Self-Defense Forces

BOJ: Bank of Japan

IR: International Relations

APEC: Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation

RCEP: Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership

FTA: Free Trade Agreement

ASEAN: Association of Southeast Asian Nations

GSOMIA: General Security of Military Information Agreement

UN: United Nations

MOU: Memorandum of Understanding

TPP: Trans-Pacific Partnership trade

COVAX: Covid-19 Vaccines Global Access

CEPI: Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations

GAVI: Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunisation

UNICEF: United Nations Children's Fund

ACT: Access to Covid-19 Tools

PAHO: Pan American Health Organization

JWLC: Joint Working Level Committee

LIO: Liberal International Order

LTO: Liberal Trading Order

ARF: ASEAN Regional Forum

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1. INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly impacted the international community, affecting not only public health and economies but also international relations. My thesis will examine Japan's international relations with South Korea, Taiwan, and the United States during the epidemic through the liberal prism of International Relations theory. Liberalism in International Relations holds that via international institutions, mutual understanding, and the promotion of democracy and free commerce, states cooperate and pursue their common interests.¹ In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, liberalism suggests that governments collaborated to confront the pandemic's common challenge while also promoting economic recovery and stability. By determining the degree to which Japan identifies with the role of Asia's liberal leader, I want to actively contribute to the discussion that is currently occurring and answer the following question: To what extent did Japan's foreign policy toward South Korea, Taiwan, and the USA during the COVID-19 pandemic reflect liberal principles?

The conclusions of this study will enable to comprehend the influence of the COVID-19 epidemic on Japan's international relations, as well as understand how liberalism principles can be used by governments in solving common global concerns. The COVID-19 pandemic has presented significant challenges to Japan's relationships with these democracies. For example, the pandemic has led to disruptions in supply chains, causing economic hardship, and has resulted in a decline in international travel and tourism. Despite these challenges, my objective is to investigate the extent to which Japan's policymakers endeavoured to sustain relationships with fellow democratic nations and fostered international collaboration in tackling the COVID-19 outbreak. This research holds potential as a critical instrument for comprehending the dynamics of international relations during a time of crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, and highlights the importance of inter-state cooperation, even amidst past disputes.

The case studies that I will focus on are Japan-South Korea relations, Japan-Taiwan relations, and Japan-United States relations during the Covid-19 pandemic impact. The reason for selecting these three democratic states for my analysis is due to their significant role as key pillars of Japan's foreign policy, both within the East Asian framework and on the International stage. Furthermore, as liberalist states, they uphold the principles of cooperation and collaboration within the Liberal International Order (LIO). These cases will be examined through a combination of methodologies

¹ Francis Fukuyama, *Liberalism and its Discontents*, (Profile Books, 2022).

such as process tracing and positivist approach case analyses to explore Japan's international relations during the COVID-19 pandemic.

By employing process tracing I aim to develop a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the events and how they evolved over time, since the process-tracing methodology adopted in this study offers a means of empirically verifying the validity of the hypothesis that Japan has engaged in cooperative efforts with the selected countries during the COVID-19 pandemic. Meanwhile, adopting a positivist approach to case analysis is intended to ensure that my conclusions are derived from an objective and empirical approach. Through this analysis, I examine whether the tenets of liberalism, which advocates for international cooperation and mutual benefits, were put into action during the COVID-19 pandemic in Japan's relations with the countries taken under consideration. In the absence of a liberal strategy, Japan's politicians might have put self-interest before cooperation, which might have prevented coordination and collaboration in solving the shared problems brought on by the pandemic, by engaging for instance, with: Statist perspective which employs a security-oriented discourse, positing that health matters warrant attention primarily when they intersect with economic, political, or military security considerations²; a Realist approach that emphasizes the self-interested behaviour of states and the competitive, anarchic nature of the international system,³ or a Constructivist approach which argues that the international system is not simply a product of power and self-interest, but is also shaped by the norms and ideas that are prevalent in the international community.⁴ In my thesis, I want to examine how Japan fulfils its role as the liberal leader of Asia in order to actively contribute to the ongoing discussion about this topic and I intend to answer the following question: To what extent did Japan's foreign policy toward South Korea, Taiwan, and the USA during the COVID-19 pandemic reflect liberal principles?

First, I will assess the existing research on the subject, pointing out any gaps that need to be filled in, and secondly, I will outline the methodology employed in order to approach this study question. I assess the case study of ties between Japan and South Korea during the Covid-19 pandemic in Section I, Japan-Taiwan relations during the Covid-19 pandemic in Section II, and Japan-USA relations following the Covid-19 pandemic in Section III. Finally, in the conclusion I will show the results of my findings while engaging in the ongoing debate regarding Japan's role as Asia's liberal leader.

² Sara E. Davies, "What contribution can international relations make to the evolving global health agenda?" *Int Aff.* 86, no. 5 (2010):1167-90.

³ Manuela Spindler, "Neorealist Theory," *International Relations: A Self-Study Guide to Theory*, 1st ed., (2013): 123–40.

⁴ Manuela Spindler, "Social Constructivist Theory," *International Relations: A Self-Study Guide to Theory*, 1st ed., (2013): 195–224.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Framework

Liberalism is a late-nineteenth-century theoretical approach to International Relations that emphasizes collaboration, mutual benefit, and the necessity of institutions in ensuring peace and stability among states.⁵ In conformity with the liberal theory, NGOs and international organizations have crucial roles in the international system, and cooperation among these actors can result in collective benefits.⁶ The multilateralism principle, which encourages international cooperation and the management of international affairs through multilateral institutions, the liberal ideology, which emphasizes democratic values and norms, common objectives and a shared commitment to uphold liberal values, norms, principles, and institutions are the three main pillars of the current Liberal International Order.⁷ The pandemic has impacted countries all over the world, causing economic disruption, health concerns, and social unrest. Liberal theorists argue that states should have cooperated to address these challenges and promote global stability. Cooperation can take the form of sharing information, medical supplies, and financial resources to support those affected by the pandemic. In the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, liberalism would expect democracies to act in specific ways that prioritize these values while also addressing the public health crisis, and to promote international cooperation and solidarity. This would entail, for instance, exchanging scientific knowledge, offering assistance to nations hit by the epidemic, and collaborating to produce and deliver vaccines and treatments. Democracies are expected to see the Covid-19 outbreak as a global disaster requiring a coordinated and collective response.⁸

In my analysis, liberalism will be used as a theoretical framework to which understand Japan's International relations while engaging in the ongoing discourse regarding Japan's role as Asia's liberal leader. In order to do so, in the next chapter, I will review the academic literature concerning the Covid-19 pandemic's effects on the Liberal International Order (LIO) and the contributors engaged within the discourse on Japan as Asia's Liberal Leader.

⁵ Michael W. Doyle, "Liberalism and World Politics," *The American Political Science Review* 80, no. 4 (1986): 1151–69.

⁶ Bruce Buchan, "Explaining War and Peace: Kant and Liberal IR Theory" *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political* 27, no. 4 (2002): 407–28.

⁷ Huang Qingming, "The Pandemic and the Transformation of Liberal International Order," *Journal of Chinese political science* 26, no. 1 (2021): 1-26.

⁸ Mehmood Hussain, "The Changing Dynamics of Liberal International Order: Covid-19 and Its Global Implications," *Journal of Globalization Studies* 12, no. 2 (2021): 143–56.

2.2 Covid-19 pandemic and the LIO

Before dwelling on the research done behind this thesis, it is important to frame it within the existing literature. COVID-19's effects on liberalism are a complicated matter that has generated a lot of discussion. According to some academics, such as Hanan Shai and Huang Qingming, the epidemic has revealed the flaws in neoliberalism, which places a strong emphasis on free markets and minimal government intervention in the economy. For instance, Hanan Shai's research report *The Coronavirus Crisis: Origins and the Way Forward* (2020) does not specifically address how COVID-19 has affected liberalism, however, she discusses the weaknesses in global governance shown by the pandemic, particularly in terms of international coordination and cooperation, as a critique of the Liberal International Order that has prevailed since World War II's end.⁹ Likewise, Huang Qingming claims that the principal foundations of the current order were disrupted by several powerful forces during the pandemic, while on the other hand, the entrenchment of authoritarianism has aided in the demise of liberal philosophy. In addition, he claims that the epidemic's escalation of nationalism further weakened the standing and legitimacy of international organizations that support the liberal order's pro-globalization and multilateralism principles.¹⁰

On the contrary, Thomas A. Firey, contend that the pandemic has highlighted the significance of liberal democratic institutions and government engagement in times of crisis. Concerning the COVID-19 pandemic and with a primary focus on the United States, his report published in 2020 addresses the function of government during the pandemic. According to the author, governments should have prioritized advancing medical research and development and enacted laws that support personal accountability and decision-making. The report promotes a pandemic response strategy that strikes a fair balance between concerns about individual freedom, public health, and economic factors. Thomas A. Firey claims that the US government's actions have not successfully addressed the pandemic crisis, and policymakers should have improved America's overall response to the COVID-19 catastrophe by adhering to classical liberal principles.¹¹

Therefore, one could argue that the Liberal International Order (LIO) that has existed since the end of World War II has been impacted by the COVID-19 epidemic, however, its long-term effects on liberalism is still a complex and multifaceted issue that is being debated among scholars and policymakers. Moreover, as stated by Ikenberry (2018) opportunities for China and other developing

⁹ Hanan Shai, "The Coronavirus Crisis: Origins and the Way Forward," in *The COVID-19 Crisis: Impact and Implications*, ed. by Efraim Karsh (Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies, 2020).

¹⁰ Huang Qingming, "The Pandemic and the Transformation of Liberal International Order."

¹¹ Thomas A. Firey, *Government in a Pandemic* (Cato Institute, 2020).

nations to influence the laws and institutions of the current system are expanding. However, it is doubtful that they will do so during a "power transition" period. The emerging nations are already firmly rooted in the current international system and their "rising" has been made feasible by the post-war system's transparency and loosely regulated nature. In light of this, it is possible that the emerging governments may replace the traditional Western industrial democracies as the new supporters of liberal internationalism.¹² As a matter of facts, in the context of rising states, as I will frame in the next chapter, there is an ongoing debate regarding Japan being seen to take an active leadership role in the Asian geopolitical framework by promoting the Liberal Trading Order (LTO).

2.3 Japan as Asia's Liberal Leader

Yoichi Funabashi and G. John Ikenberry discussed in their paper (2020) Japan's position in promoting the Liberal International Order (LIO). According to the authors, Japan has been an important supporter of the LIO since the end of World War II, even if it has certainly benefited from it by joining the global economy and by developing into one of the richest and most technologically advanced nations in the world, and even if they claim that Japan should be more proactive in promoting the LIO, for instance, by deepening its strategic partnership with the US, forging alliances with other liberal democracies, and by actively contributing to the trade and security of the International Order.¹³

In the next years, regional middle powers such as China, India, and Japan, are expected to gradually increase their influence within their own regions. In the case of Japan, following World War II, the US played a critical role in assisting Japan's economic recovery by giving assistance and opening markets for Japanese exports. Through the security guarantee extended by the United States in East Asia, Japan found a national security imperative to open its markets. This alliance between the United States and Japan was further strengthened through the promotion of free trade, which not only helped address economic disputes but also propelled Japan to assume a leadership role in the Liberal Trading Order (LTO).¹⁴ As a matter of fact, in the context of a shifting global economic and political dynamics, Mireya Solís' study (2020) investigates Japan's growing role as a leader in advancing the Liberal Trade Order (LTO). Since Japan has relied heavily on the US military alliance

¹² G. John. Ikenberry, "Why the Liberal World Order Will Survive." *Ethics & International Affairs* 32, no 1 (2018), 17–29.

¹³ Yoichi Funabashi and G. John Ikenberry. "JAPAN AND THE LIBERAL INTERNATIONAL ORDER." In *The Crisis of Liberal Internationalism: Japan and the World Order*, ed. Funabashi Yoichi and G. John Ikenberry, (Brookings Institution Press, 2020), 1-36.

¹⁴ Takashi Inoguchi and G. John Ikenberry. *The Troubled Triangle*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

and economic partnership to accomplish its own economic prosperity, it has long been thought of as being slow to promote the LTO. However, by supporting the LTO through the World Trade Organization, bilateral free trade agreements, and regional economic alliances, Japan is making use of new opportunities created by the changing economic and political landscape.¹⁵

On the other hand, in this debate, there are scholars such as Paul Midford and Jeff Kingston who are critical of the notion that Japan is indeed Asia's liberal leader. Midford in his book *Overcoming Isolationism: Japan's Leadership in East Asian Security Multilateralism* (2020) argues that Japan is not Asia's liberal leader and has used regional multilateralism since the inauguration of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) in 1994 for several domestic goals. He argues that Japan employed the ARF to assure neighbouring countries that it would not pose a security threat, while simultaneously expanding its role in regional and international security and addressing security challenges through cooperative mechanisms, aiming to foster regional stability. Japan used the ARF as a platform to garner support for new security initiatives that it could not achieve alone or through the US-Japan alliance, and strategically engaged in the ARF to compete with China, forming coalitions to pressure Beijing while defending its own interests and preventing China from doing the same.¹⁶ In addition, in *Japan's Quiet Transformation: Social Change and Civil Society in the 21st Century*, Jeff Kingston also challenges the idea that Japan is Asia's liberal leader. He argues that Japan's slow political reforms and conservative political climate undermine its claim as a liberal leader and that Japan's protectionist economic policies and focus on national interests refuse the notion of liberal leadership. He states that Japan's cautious regional engagement and prioritization of national interests and its cultural exports having limited influence in shaping regional narratives do not position it as a liberal leader in Asia.¹⁷

As a matter of fact, in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, there is a significant body of literature which focuses on analyzing the actions and policies of Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's administration up until 2020. Many criticisms have been directed at Abe, including his delay in postponing the Tokyo 2020 Olympics by prioritizing economic growth and hesitating to declare a state of emergency, insufficient availability of PCR tests and personal protective equipment, flawed mask distribution policy, his "stay at home" Twitter appeal and the "Go To" travel campaign, which

¹⁵Mireya Solís, "Follower No More?: JAPAN'S LEADERSHIP ROLE AS A CHAMPION OF THE LIBERAL TRADING ORDER," In *The Crisis of Liberal Internationalism: Japan and the World Order*, ed. Funabashi Yoichi and G. John Ikenberry, (Brookings Institution Press, 2020), 79–106.

¹⁶ Paul Midford, *Overcoming Isolationism: Japan's Leadership in East Asian Security Multilateralism*, (Stanford University Press, 2020).

¹⁷ Jeff Kingston, *Japan's Quiet Transformation: Social Change and Civil Society in the Twenty-First Century*. (London: Routledge, 2004).

was followed by an unexpected announcement of school closures (see Maruoka & Rose 2022; Mc Donald 2020).¹⁸

On the other hand, in response to these critiques, numerous scholars have examined Japan's approach in handling the pandemic and the subsequent economic crisis. For example, Inoue Hajime argues that despite a significant influx of COVID-19 cases during the initial phase of the pandemic, Japan managed to control the epidemic without interrupting healthcare services systematically.¹⁹ He attributes this to a relatively large-scale restriction of social activity and the adoption of conventional public health measures by local health centers.²⁰ Additionally, the government introduced the term "San-Mitsu," advising people to avoid enclosed spaces, crowded places, and close contact environments while coordinating the optimal use of hospital beds at the community level.²¹

Nevertheless, Jeff Kingston presents a more negative outlook. He suggests that, unlike South Korea and Taiwan, digital tracking was not effective in Japan, with the government-promoted tracking app being adopted by only 18% of the population, and it took four months to identify a glitch that excluded Android phone users from receiving notifications.²² Additionally, despite a relatively low number of cases, public health officials frequently warned that healthcare systems were on the verge of collapse, with frontline workers experiencing burnout and shortages of nurses.²³ Kingston also notes that the Self-Defense Forces (SDF) had to deploy a contingent to Osaka, and there were lengthy waiting lists for hospitalization or quarantine facilities for symptomatic patients, leading many sick individuals to recover at home, risking further transmission.²⁴

The academic publications listed above demonstrate the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on Japan's domestic economy, society, and health governance and that COVID-19's impact had noteworthy consequences on international relations and into the Liberal International Order. However, this literature overlooked the applicability of liberalism in explaining Japan's international relations with South Korea, Taiwan, and the USA in the context of COVID-19. It is worth mentioning that the literature has yet to thoroughly investigate this topic. Therefore, to what extent have liberal principles been displayed by Japan's foreign policy towards South Korea, Taiwan, and the USA

¹⁸ Chiho Maruoka and Caroline Rose. "How the mighty are fallen: Evaluating Abe Shinzō's leadership capital in crisis," *Asian Journal on Comparative Politics*, (2022); Kate Mc Donald, "Olympic Recoveries," *The pandemic: Perspective on Asia*, ed. by Vinayak Chaturvedi, (Columbia University Press, 2021): 63-74.

¹⁹ Inoue Hajime, "Japanese strategy to COVID-19: How does it work?" *Glob Health Med.* (2020): 131-132.

²⁰ Hajime, "Japanese strategy to COVID-19: How does it work?"

²¹ Hajime, "Japanese strategy to COVID-19: How does it work?"

²² Kingston, *Japan in Transformation, 1945–2020*. (3rd ed.). Routledge. 2022.

²³ Kingston, *Japan in Transformation, 1945–2020*. (3rd ed.). Routledge. 2022.

²⁴ Kingston, *Japan in Transformation, 1945–2020*. (3rd ed.). Routledge. 2022.

during the COVID-19 pandemic? By answering this question, I intend to contribute to the debate regarding Japan's willingness to become Asia's Liberal leader since, in this regard, the COVID-19 pandemic has given several opportunities to fulfil this role. To answer this question, I will use a combination of methodologies explained in the next section.

3. METHODOLOGY

In this thesis, I will be using a combination of process tracing and positivist approach case analyses to investigate Japan's international relations with South Korea, Taiwan, and the United States during the COVID-19 pandemic viewed through the lens of liberalism in International Relations theory. Process tracing is a qualitative research method that involves tracing the historical development of a particular phenomenon over time.²⁵ It involves studying and analyzing the causal mechanisms and processes that lead to specific outcomes or events. Process tracing aims to understand how and why certain events occur by focusing on the detailed sequence of actions, decisions, and interactions among relevant actors. It goes beyond simply identifying correlations between variables and delves into the underlying mechanisms and processes that drive those correlations. Process tracing intends to determine causations that are applied to all the various plausible explanations for how a certain change occurred in order to confirm some and/or discard others.²⁶²⁷ In my thesis, process tracing is used to trace the development of case studies methodology, namely, Japan's relationships with South Korea, Taiwan, and the United States during the COVID-19 pandemic. This method enables to define the key events and developments that have shaped these relationships and to evaluate the role of liberalism in shaping these relationships. In addition, the positivist approach to case analyses that I will use includes empirical data to test theories and hypotheses.²⁸ In accordance with positivists, knowledge may and must be developed objectively, without the consideration of the researchers or participants who have an impact on its development.²⁹ Positivists hold that methods can be employed to investigate the causes of social phenomena and that

²⁵ David Collier, "Understanding Process Tracing," *PS: Political Science and Politics* 44, no. 4 (2011): 823–30.

²⁶ George Alexander, "Case Studies and Theory Development: The Method of Structured, Focused Comparison," in P. G. Lauren, ed., *Diplomacy: New Approaches in History, Theory and Policy* (New York: Free Press, 1979).

²⁷ George Alexander and Timothy McKeown, "Case Studies and Theories of Organizational Decision-Making," in Robert Coulam and Richard Smith, eds., *Advances in Information Processing in Organizations*, vol. 2 (Greenwich: JAI Press, 1985).

²⁸ Barbara M. Wildemuth, "Post-Positivist Research: Two Examples of Methodological Pluralism," *The Library Quarterly: Information, Community, Policy* 63, no. 4 (1993): 450–68.

²⁹ Park, Yoon Soo, Konge, Lars MD, Artino, Anthony R. Jr., "The Positivism Paradigm of Research," *Academic Medicine* 95, no.5, (May 2020): 690-694.

these phenomena must be researched objectively.³⁰³¹ In my thesis, the positivist approach will be applied to look at how the COVID-19 pandemic affected Japan's ties to South Korea, Taiwan, and the US as well as to test the idea that these nations worked together to combat the pandemic. Moreover, in this thesis, the case study analysis will be applied as an intensive study of a single unit with a focus on examining the variation within the selected unit over time. In essence, the case study analysis involves delving deeply into a specific case to gain insights and knowledge that can be applied to a broader context or class of similar units.³²

In conclusion, the decision-making process of Japan's policymakers in relation to its foreign policy posture toward South Korea, Taiwan, and the United States during the epidemic will be examined to test whether Japan exhibited liberalist tendencies with the mentioned countries, during the challenging period of the Covid-19 pandemic. I will look at how the Japanese government acted regarding international relations with these nations taking into account liberal concepts such as collaboration, interdependence, and diplomacy. If the decision-making process shows a constant commitment to liberal ideals in the approach towards these countries, that will prove my hypothesis correct. What I will look for is whether Japan consistently advocated for international cooperation, sharing scientific knowledge, and equitable access to vaccines and treatments, and actively supported and funded scientific research, innovation, and technological advancements aimed at combating the virus. Moreover, it should have consistently engaged in multilateral efforts, supporting international organizations such as the World Health Organization (WHO) and participating in global initiatives like the Covid-19 Vaccines Global Access (COVAX), to address the pandemic collectively. This approach seeks to enhance the effectiveness of testing whether Japan exhibited liberalist tendencies during the challenging period of the Covid-19 pandemic. If the liberal viewpoint is regularly reflected, this will add to the body of evidence that supports my claim. I took into account this viewpoint throughout my analysis that follow.

4. Case Study I: Japan-South Korea relations since the COVID-19 pandemic

4.1 Key Historical Perspectives

As a middle state with positive relations with both China and the United States, South Korea has a significant influence on regional stability and cooperation thanks, in large part, to its democratic

³⁰ Jonathan Wilson, "Essentials of Business Research: A Guide to Doing Your Research Project," *SAGE Publications*, (2010).

³¹ Wildemuth, "Post-Positivist Research: Two Examples of Methodological Pluralism."

³² John Gerring, "What Is a Case Study and What Is It Good For?" *The American Political Science Review* 98, no. 2 (2004): 341–54.

system.³³ Nevertheless, tensions have existed between Japan and South Korea since Japan's colonization of Korea in the early 20th century, leading to difficult relations between the two countries.³⁴ A decision by the Korean Supreme Court in the fall of 2018 that ruled two Japanese corporations, Nippon Steel and Sumitomo Metal Corporation, liable for compensation for forced labour during Japan's occupation of the Korean peninsula stoked tensions between South Korea and Japan once again.³⁵ The tensions between the two nations, which had previously been eased by President Park and Prime Minister Abe in 2015, were aggravated by this verdict and conflict aroused as a result of South Korea's demand for Japan's payment for crimes against humanity perpetrated during its rule of the Korean peninsula.³⁶ In recent years, the relationship has been further strained by disagreements over historical issues and trade such as the "comfort women issue," or forced labour issue.³⁷ The COVID-19 pandemic may have further complicated the relationship, with travel restrictions and economic disruptions affecting both countries. Both Japan and South Korea are liberal democracies that share common values, thus, following liberalist thought, the hypothesis of this thesis would be proved correct if Japan and South Korea cooperated to maintain regional stability and fought together the COVID-19 pandemic despite historical disputes. Today, both Japan and South Korea are members of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum, which promotes the flow of goods, services, investments, and people across borders.³⁸ Additionally, both countries are partners of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP)³⁹ and of the Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) with ASEAN and act as coordinators to facilitate effective decision-making among ASEAN bodies.⁴⁰ Furthermore, it is important to mention that both countries are part of the World Trade Organization (WTO).⁴¹ In the next Section, I will provide a chronological analysis, namely process tracing, of the meaningful events that occurred between Japan and South Korea during the COVID-19 pandemic.

³³G. John Ikenberry and Mo Jongryn. *The Rise of Korean Leadership: Emerging Powers and Liberal International Order*, First edition. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

³⁴ Alexis Dudden, "Mission Legislatrice," *Japan's Colonization of Korea: Discourse and Power*, (University of Hawaii Press, 2005).

³⁵ "Mitsubishi Heavy Ordered to Compensate Forced S Korean War Workers," *BBC News*, November 29, 2018.

³⁶ "South Korea and Japan's Feud Explained," *BBC News*, December 2, 2019.

³⁷ Choi Eunmi, "The Inauguration of the Kishida Cabinet and Prospects for Korea-Japan Relations" *Asian Institute for Policy Studies*, (2021).

³⁸ APEC, *About APEC / APEC*. September 1, 2021.

³⁹ RCEP, *About RCEP*. 2019.

⁴⁰ Asean.org, *About-Asean*. 2020.

⁴¹ World Trade Organization, *WTO Members and Observers*.

4.2 Cooperation during the COVID-19 Pandemic

South Korea's prevention of the COVID-19 pandemic was characterized by its previous experience of the Middle East respiratory syndrome (MERS) which hit the country in 2015. Following the discovery of patient zero from Wuhan City in China, in South Korea, on January 20, 2020, the immediate public health response to COVID-19 has been best summarized as the three Ts: test, trace, and treatment.⁴² As of January 2020 and June 2023, in South Korea, there have been 32,018,486 confirmed cases of COVID-19 with 34,960 deaths, and a total of 135,852,851 vaccine doses have been administered.⁴³

Regarding Japan-South Korea relations, early on in July 2019, three important high-tech materials needed by South Korean industries to manufacture semiconductors and smartphone screens were subject to export restrictions by Japan.⁴⁴ As a result of the disagreements over historical matters, the relationship between Seoul and Tokyo progressively worsened, and Japan placed additional trade restrictions on South Korea.⁴⁵ In August 2019, South Korea decided to terminate a military intelligence-sharing pact with Japan known as the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA).⁴⁶ The Japanese government's actions, according to South Korean President Moon Jae-in, were regrettable and had a detrimental effect on the country's economy and the country's Ministry of Economy and Finance likewise withdrew Japan from its whitelist.⁴⁷ However, South Korean President Moon Jae-in attended the 74th UN Assembly in September 2019 outlining his plans for peace and prosperity on the Korean Peninsula, stressing the value of strengthening ties with Japan.⁴⁸ In order to share sensitive military intelligence on North Korea's nuclear and missile programs, Japan and South Korea renewed their General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) in November 2019. The deal signified an important improvement in the bilateral

⁴² June Park, "INSTITUTIONS MATTER IN FIGHTING COVID-19: Public Health, Social Policies, and the Control Tower in South Korea." In *Coronavirus Politics: The Comparative Politics and Policy of COVID-19*, ed. by Scott L. Greer, Elizabeth J. King, Elize Massard da Fonseca, and André Peralta-Santos (University of Michigan Press, 2021) 105–26.

⁴³ World Trade Organization, *WHO Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) Dashboard*. n.d. <https://covid19.who.int/region/wpro/country/kr>.

⁴⁴ Lee Yen Nee, "The Japan-South Korea Dispute Could Push up the Price of Your next Smartphone," *CNBC*, July 22, 2019.

⁴⁵ Ministry of Economy, Trade, and Industry. *Update of METI's Licensing Policies and Procedures on Exports of Controlled Items to the Republic of Korea*. Press Release, July 1, 2019.

⁴⁶ Jesse Johnson, "South Korea Decides to Exit Intelligence-Sharing Pact with Japan," *The Japan Times*, August 23, 2019.

⁴⁷ Joohee Cho, "Japan Removes South Korea from Trade 'Whitelist,'" *ABC News*, August 2, 2019.

⁴⁸ PBS NewsHour, "WATCH: Korea President Moon Jae-in's Full Speech to the UN General Assembly," September 24, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t_IV_I3YiFY.

relationship and came after months of heated discussions.⁴⁹ Following these events, at the outset of 2020, the world was struck by the COVID-19 pandemic. Japan's first case of SARS-CoV-2 was declared on the 16th of January 2020,⁵⁰ and on the 21st of January 2020, the first case of Covid-19 was declared in South Korea.⁵¹ On the 9th of March 2020, the Japanese government requested visitors from South Korea to stay in designated facilities for two weeks and suspended the 90-day visa-free entry program for South Koreans. Subsequently, the South Korean government straightened quarantine procedures for visitors from Japan and delayed its visa-waiver program for Japanese people.⁵² Nevertheless, as reported by *Asahi Shimbun*, both President Moon and Prime Minister Abe put forward proposals for international cooperation in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, suggesting that the neighbouring countries should prioritize sharing information and supplies to jointly overcome the crisis.⁵³ The newspaper also discussed the problems in the Japan-South Korea relationship and looked at potential solutions, highlighting the significance of international information exchange in healthcare and epidemic prevention.⁵⁴ Japan's foreign minister, Mr. Toshimitsu Motegi, held a meeting in Washington, D.C., on the 11th of May 2020, in which also participated foreign ministers from interested nations, including South Korea, gathered to discuss about the COVID-19 pandemic. During the meeting, Minister Motegi addressed the relevance of the international community and the need to share information in a free, transparent, and timely manner. He also highlighted the need to provide assistance to developing countries with vulnerable healthcare systems from a mid to long-term perspective. South Korean and the other countries' Prime Ministers confirmed their commitment to continue coordinating closely in their response to COVID-19.⁵⁵ In practical terms, Mr. Shigeki Takizaki, General Director of the Asian and Oceanian Affairs Bureau of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, and Mr. Kim Jung-han, General Director for Asian and Pacific Affairs of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of South Korea met on the 13th of May to discuss issues of mutual interest, including the COVID-19 situations in both countries. They shared information on the measures taken by their respective governments to stop the spread of COVID-19 and agreed on close communication between the diplomatic authorities of the two countries. During the meeting, Director-General Kim acknowledged the cooperation between South Korea and Japan

⁴⁹ "South Korea to Continue Intelligence-Sharing Pact with Japan," *BBC News*, November 23, 2019.

⁵⁰ Mitsuko Hayashi, "How Japan Can Forge Resiliency and Defense Capacity Building in the Indo-Pacific in the Era of Covid-19" *Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS)*, (2020).

⁵¹ "신종 코로나바이러스 한국인 첫환자 확인 - 매일경제," *매일경제*, January 24, 2020.

⁵² Joohee Cho, "Japan Removes South Korea from Trade 'Whitelist,'" *ABC News*, August 2, 2019.

⁵³ "Pandemic Offers Chance for Japan, South Korea to Reset Relations," *Asahi Shimbun*, May 13, 2020.

⁵⁴ "EDITORIAL: Japan, S. Korea Should Take Quick Action to Defrost Chilly Relations" *The Asahi Shimbun*, July 2, 2020.

⁵⁵ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, *Meeting on the Novel Coronavirus Disease among Foreign Ministers of Interested Countries*, Hosted by the United States," Press release, May 11, 2020.

in repatriating their respective nationals who were stranded in third countries due to the COVID-19 pandemic. He also thanked the Japanese government for their assistance in the urgent repatriation of a South Korean national from India.⁵⁶

What is interesting here, is that the strained relationship between South Korea and Japan, particularly regarding historical issues, has not significantly affected their ability to cooperate on health issues related to COVID-19. One explanation for this is that health issues, including the COVID-19 pandemic, have been viewed as a global crisis that transcends national boundaries and historical disputes engaging with a more globalist approach regarding the pandemic.⁵⁷ This has prompted both countries to prioritize cooperation in tackling the pandemic, despite their ongoing historical tensions.

Additionally, Japan's incoming Prime Minister, Yoshihide Suga, in a speech to the UN General Assembly on the 25th of September 2020, pledged to play a leading role in the international response to the COVID-19 epidemic and he emphasized the important relationship between recovery, health, and economic development and set the objective of "leaving no one's health behind." Japan "proactively lead" international efforts focused on three areas: safeguarding lives, supporting developing nations, and revitalizing developing economies. Specifically, Japan supported the development of therapeutics, vaccines, and diagnostics against COVID-19. The nation vowed to assist poor nations and has given more than \$1.5 billion in foreign aid to hospitals and health facilities throughout the pandemic. This includes collaborating with ASEAN nations of which South Korea is also a member, to build a regional center for public health and emerging disease.⁵⁸ This event exemplifies the Japanese government's dedication to establishing Japan's position as the liberal leader of Asia. In fact, on the 8th of October 2020, the governments of Japan and the Republic of Korea (ROK) agreed to implement the Business Track and Residence Track in order to resume cross-border travel. While the Residence Track compels cross-border travellers to stay at home or in authorized locations for 14 days, the Business Track permits them to engage in limited business activities during that time.⁵⁹ This exhibit that amidst the crisis, there was a notable escalation in cooperation between the South Korean and Japanese governments, aligning with the anticipated outcomes based on liberalist principles.

⁵⁶ Ministry of Foreign Affairs Republic of Korea, *Consultation between ROK and Japanese Directors-General*, Press release, May 14, 2020,

⁵⁷ Sara E. Davies, "What contribution can international relations make to the evolving global health agenda?" 1167-90.

⁵⁸ "Japan to 'Proactively Lead' on COVID-19 Response Efforts," *UN News*, September 26, 2020.

⁵⁹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, *Business Track and Residence Track between Japan and the Republic of Korea*, Press release, October 6, 2020.

It is important to note that in 2021, Japan experienced a leadership change with the election of Fumio Kishida as its new President coinciding with the long-awaited rescheduling of the Olympics Games. Fumio Kishida, as a moderate conservative, does not carry the same perception of being associated with right-wing ideologies as his predecessor, Shinzo Abe. Notably, during his career as Abe's foreign minister, Kishida actively negotiated and signed the 2015 Comfort Women Agreement. His position as an advocate for the reconstruction of Tokyo's relationship with Seoul further underscores his inclination towards improving and strengthening ties between the two countries.⁶⁰

With the onset of 2022, a new presidential election was held also in South Korea providing Japan with an outlook to recalibrate their relationship under the leadership of a new South Korean President. It is important to note, that in terms of foreign policy, South Korean President Yoon has a more hawkish attitude compared to his predecessor President Moon Jae-in. Yoon supports strict sanctions on North Korea, aligning with the foreign policy of the United States. Yoon's victory in the election marked a return of conservatives to power after a five-year period without representation.⁶¹ Therefore, Yoon's victory in the election in 2022 can be viewed as a significant moment in the discourse surrounding the liberalist perspective on a potential collaboration between Japan and South Korea. As a matter of fact, on the 6th of April 2022, Prime Minister Fumio Kishida and a delegation representing South Korean President-elect Yoon Suk-yeol, agreed on the urgent need to implement bilateral relations between their countries, despite the recent deterioration over issues related to border restriction, trade disputes and their wartime history.⁶² In the following chapter, I will provide considerations derived from these findings, in order to investigate whether in this particular case study, Japan's action reflected liberal principles.

4.3 Elaboration of the findings

In terms of the applicability of liberalism, the positive developments, such as the renewal of the GSOMIA agreement, demonstrate that cooperation is possible even in times of tension and the sources suggest that Japan and South Korea share liberal democratic values. The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the importance of international cooperation during global challenges, including public health and economic recovery. Japan and South Korea have made efforts to work together in

⁶⁰ Ji-Young Lee and Mintaro Oba, "Japan-Korea Relations: A New Leader in Japan and Uncertain Future Scenarios," *Comparative Connections* 21, no. 3, (2021): 131-140.

⁶¹ Choe Sang-Hun, "What Happened in South Korea's Presidential Election," *The New York Times*, March 11, 2022.

⁶² "Kishida Says Cooperation with South Korea Now More Necessary than Ever," *The Japan Times*, April 26, 2022.

response to the pandemic, by sharing information and coordinating quarantine measures. In conclusion, the sources indicate that Japan-South Korea relations have been strained amid COVID-19, with issues surrounding travel restrictions and historical disputes being major points of contention, however, there have been efforts to improve bilateral ties, including the signing of several treaties and agreements. It appears that historical conflicts have not significantly affected their ability to work together on health issues related to the COVID-19 pandemic even if different approaches to control the virus were applied at a domestic level. This surely demonstrates Japan's willingness to be—if not a liberalist leader in Asia—at least a liberalist country. Nevertheless, as shown in the next Section, a different outcome will be illustrated in the second case study of Japan-Taiwan relations.

5. Case study II: Japan-Taiwan relations since the COVID-19 pandemic

5.1 Key Historical Perspectives

While the governments of South Korea and Japan successfully collaborated to challenge the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrating Japan's willingness to adhere to liberalist principles, in the case of Taiwan and Japan the partnership showed underlying, different motivations. Taiwan and Japan have a complex historical relationship that dates back to the late 19th century during which Japan colonized Taiwan and ruled the island from 1895 to 1945. The Japanese colonial period had a significant impact on Taiwan's culture, economy, and infrastructure. After World War II, Taiwan was returned to China, but Japan remained an important economic and cultural partner for the island.⁶³ The complexity of their relationship emerged early on from Taiwan's exclusion from the World Health Organization (WHO), which created complications in their joint efforts to effectively respond to the pandemic. About how the COVID-19 epidemic has affected Taiwan's sense of identity and liberal democracy, Taiwan's effectiveness in managing the pandemic has bolstered both of those aspects of its country. Furthermore, the pandemic's effects on liberal democracies around the world and Taiwan's difficulties upholding democracy in the face of China's ongoing diplomatic isolation efforts highlight the significance of collaboration and solidarity among democratic nations in responding to international challenges such as the pandemic.⁶⁴ However, not everyone acknowledges Taiwan as a free democracy, especially China, which sees Taiwan as a rebellious province. Taiwan has maintained its adherence to liberal values and principles despite these obstacles and although Japan does not formally recognize Taiwan as a sovereign state, the two nations have maintained

⁶³ KEN'ICHI GOTŌ, "JAPAN'S SOUTHWARD ADVANCE AND COLONIAL TAIWAN." *European Journal of East Asian Studies* 3, no. 1 (2004): 15–44.

⁶⁴ Casado Ruiz, Alberto Juan. "The Pandemic and its Repercussions on Taiwan, its Identity, and Liberal Democracy" *Open Cultural Studies* 5, no. 1 (2021): 149-160.

unofficial relations and trading links.⁶⁵ In accordance with liberal ideals, these two nations may have provided mutual assistance through a variety of means during the epidemic, notwithstanding Japan's lack of official diplomatic recognition of Taiwan as a sovereign state. Forms of cooperation include sharing information and resources or encouraging global organizations that can facilitate cooperation, such as the WHO even if Taiwan is not a member.

Several agreements and memorandums of understanding (MOUs) have been signed between the two countries in different areas, including trade, investment, tourism, education, and culture.⁶⁶ Trade is one of the main focuses of Taiwan-Japan cooperation and according to the Bureau of Foreign Trade, Japan is Taiwan's fourth-largest commercial partner, with bilateral trade reaching US\$88.2 billion in 2022.⁶⁷ As mentioned above, despite Japan's "One China" policy, which acknowledges the People's Republic of China as the only legitimate government in China, Japan maintains unofficial contacts with Taiwan and has been enhancing its bilateral ties with it, due to the changing East Asia geopolitical order, and the governments of both Japan and the US perceiving China as threats to the national and economic security of their countries. Japan and the US are advocating for a "Free and Open Indo-Pacific," which subtly recognizes democratic Taiwan as an important partner while voicing concerns about a clash between democracy and authoritarianism.⁶⁸ Beyond their bilateral relationship, this deepening of Japan-Taiwan ties has significant effects on China and East Asian international relations. The geopolitical context in issue was important during the pandemic, and COVID-19 was a key factor in advancing Japan's efforts to improve relations with Taiwan in response to Chinese influence. In this Section, I will provide a chronological analysis, namely process tracing, of the meaningful events that occurred between Japan and the Republic of China (ROC) during the COVID-19 pandemic.

5.2 Cooperation during the COVID-19 Pandemic

In terms of Covid-19 pandemic prevention, similarly to South Korea, Taiwan was able to quickly and efficiently respond to the epidemiological threat posed by the COVID-19 virus coming from China thanks to the SARS epidemic experience of 2003. With a total of 1,952,355 cases

⁶⁵ Sun Jing, "Japan-Taiwan Relations: Unofficial in Name Only," *Asian Survey* 47, no. 5 (2007): 790–810.

⁶⁶“外交部條約協定查詢系統,” MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS OF THE REPUBLIC OF CHINA (TAIWAN), accessed April 10, 2023.

⁶⁷ Bureau of Foreign Trade, MOEA, Bureau of Foreign Trade, Ministry of Economic Affairs of the Republic of China. *Bilateral Trade*. February 16, 2023. See also <https://cuswebo.trade.gov.tw/FSCE30F0I/FSCE30F0I?Val=JP> for more details.

⁶⁸Adam P. Liff, "Japan, Taiwan and the 'One China' Framework after 50 Years." *The China Quarterly* 252, (2022).

documented and 2,165 fatalities in 2022, Taiwan was able to stop the spread of the virus despite being near to the People's Republic of China, the pandemic's epicenter. Taiwan has delivered 54,934,541 vaccine doses as of May 31, 2022, and 18,993,785 people had received their entire vaccination, translating to an overall vaccination percentage of 80.5%.⁶⁹ These statistics demonstrate Taiwan's efforts to prevent the pandemic, compared to those of the Japanese government previously mentioned. In recent years, Taiwan and Japan have been working together and exchanging ideas, especially in relation to the COVID-19 epidemic. A Memorandum of Cooperation between the Taiwan-Japan Relations Association and the Japan-Taiwan Exchange Association on the Field of Medical Device Quality Management System Requirements was signed by Japan and Taiwan on November 30, 2018, prior to the Covid-19 epidemic. This agreement aims to facilitate medical companies to share knowledge on medical device quality control.⁷⁰ The agreement played a crucial role in facilitating the sharing of medical information prior to and during the COVID-19 pandemic.

With the start of the pandemic, Taiwan had to implement its measures on the 19th of March 2020, to restrict the entry of foreign nationals into the country to contain the transmission of the virus.⁷¹ One of the earliest exchanges between the two countries during the emergency, occurred in April 2020, when Taiwan donated masks to Japan to help fight the COVID-19 pandemic, and the event was widely reported by Japanese and Taiwanese media as it was viewed as proof of the close mutual support between the two nations. Japan then offered financial aid in May 2020 to businesses that moved their production from China to Japan or Southeast Asia, including Taiwan. This action was considered a strategic effort to diversify Japan's supply routes and limit its reliance on China.⁷² In June 2021, Japan announced that it would provide 1.24 million doses of AstraZeneca's COVID-19 vaccine to Taiwan. This decision was seen as an important step in vaccine diplomacy, as Taiwan had been struggling to secure vaccine supplies due to its limited diplomatic relations. The move was also widely praised by Taiwanese officials, who thanked Japan for its generosity.⁷³ However, the Chinese

⁶⁹ Marlena Blicharz, "Impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic on the International Position of East Asian Countries," *International conference KNOWLEDGE-BASED ORGANIZATION* 28, no.2 (2022): 116-122.

⁷⁰ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of China (Taiwan), "臺灣日本關係協會與日本臺灣交流協會關於醫療器材品質管理系統合作備忘錄 (中譯本) MEMORANDUM OF COOPERATION BETWEEN THE TAIWAN-JAPAN RELATIONS ASSOCIATION AND THE JAPAN-TAIWAN EXCHANGE ASSOCIATION ON THE FIELD OF MEDICAL DEVICE QUALITY MANAGEMENT SYSTEM REQUIREMENTS," November 30, 2018, accessed April 9, 2023.

⁷¹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of China (Taiwan), "Taiwan to Bar Foreign Nationals from Entering the Country Starting March 19 in Response to the Continued Spread of COVID-19," *Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of China (Taiwan)*, March 18, 2020, https://en.mofa.gov.tw/News_Content.aspx?n=1328&s=91690.

⁷² Isabel Reynolds and Emi Urabe, "Japan to Fund Firms to Shift Production Out of China," *Bloomberg.Com*, April 9, 2020, accessed April 9, 2023.

⁷³ Huizhong Wu, "Taiwan, Feuding with China, Gets Vaccines from Japan," *AP NEWS*, June 4, 2021, accessed April 9, 2023.

Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Wang Wenbin responded to the news by firmly opposing the use of the pandemic as a “political show” and by condemning Japan for gifting vaccines to Taiwan.⁷⁴ It is important to mention that Taiwan faced challenges in securing COVID-19 vaccines due to global supply shortages, the political tensions with China, and the fact that most countries including the permanent members of the UN Security Council—China, France, Russia, the UK, and the United States—were unwilling to cooperate during the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic. Between the 30th of January and the 1st of April, neither the UN General Assembly nor the UN Security Council issued any resolutions or statements regarding the crisis. It was the G20 that, in March 2020, called for the creation of a mechanism, eventually leading to the formation of the Access to COVID-19 Tools (ACT) Accelerator on 26 April 2020. Finally, on the 1st of July 2020, the UN Security Council adopted the Resolution (UNSCR) 2532, which assessed significant factors such as ceasefires to enable humanitarian access, international cooperation, and the specific focus on vulnerable populations.⁷⁵ As a matter of fact, since then, Taiwan has received vaccine donations from countries such as the United States and Japan.⁷⁶ These exchanges highlight the importance of international cooperation in the face of global challenges such as the COVID-19 pandemic. They also demonstrate the strength of the relationship between Taiwan and Japan against geopolitical and global health issues.

On the 11th of June 2021, the House of Councillors in Japan approved a resolution in favour of Taiwan's membership in the WHO, highlighting the two nations' strong collaboration and the significance of stability and peace in the Taiwan Strait. During the month of September of the same year, the Republic of China (ROC) expressed its gratitude to Japan for its repeated donations of vaccines to Taiwan by holding a ceremony to launch medical supplies donations to Japan, hoping that through this donation, the mutual care between Taiwan and Japan will become a "cycle of goodness", which will endure and endure. Moreover, the Republic of China (ROC) expressed sincere appreciation for Japan's government support for Taiwan's international participation and WHO membership.⁷⁷ These findings indeed demonstrate that an actual cycle of reciprocal aid between the two countries regarding the pandemic was implemented and that Japan committed to supporting

⁷⁴ Keoni Everington, “China Condemns Japan's Vaccine Donation to Taiwan as 'Political Show',” Taiwan News, June 1, 2021, accessed April 29, 2023. <https://www.taiwannews.com.tw/en/news/4214367>.

⁷⁵ Sara E. Davies, “International and Global Cooperation in Response to COVID-19: The Past, the Present, and the Future,” in Philippe Bourbeau, Jean-Michel Marcoux, and Brooke A. Ackerly (eds), *A Multidisciplinary Approach to Pandemics: COVID-19 and Beyond* (Oxford, 2022; online edn, Oxford Academic, 19 May 2022).

⁷⁶ Shang-Su Wu, “Taiwan Under the Pandemic: A Security Perspective,” *PRISM* 9, no. 4 (2021): 186–99. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48697199>.

⁷⁷ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of China (Taiwan), “外交部舉辦對日本援贈醫療物資啟運儀式,” 中華民國外交部全球資訊網, September 17, 2021, accessed April 10, 2023

Taiwan's membership in the WHO. To further support this thesis, on the 17th of November 2022, Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida met the Chinese President Xi Jinping in Bangkok and during the meeting, Kishida emphasized the importance of peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait and expressed concerns about China's human rights record. Taiwan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) affirmed and appreciated Kishida's statements and thanked the Japanese government, which repeatedly emphasized the shared values between Taiwan and Japan.⁷⁸ Morris Chang, the founder of Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Co., attended the 29th APEC Economic Leaders' Meeting in Bangkok the following day, on behalf of President Tsai Ing-wen. He met privately with Fumio Kishida, to talk about shared concerns, and Morris Chang emphasized how Taiwan and Japan helped one another throughout the pandemic by supplying medical resources, demonstrating the two nations' strong friendship and mutual confidence. They also discussed global developments and the outcomes of Taiwan-Japan economic cooperation. Kishida expressed his desire to deepen bilateral cooperation and exchanges.⁷⁹

However, it is important to highlight that while the support extended to Taiwan during the COVID-19 outbreak and its international participation demonstrates a positive relationship, the underlying motivations may involve a combination of factors, including political considerations, and regional dynamics. Japan may view a stable Taiwan Strait as essential for maintaining peace and security in the region. Supporting Taiwan's participation in international organizations like the WHO can be seen as a step to foster stability, maintain a balance of power in the region and counterbalance China's growing influence. Therefore, Japan's support of Taiwan's international participation can be seen as part of this broader strategy. In the chapter that follows, I will discuss conclusions generated by these findings to determine if Japan's behaviour in this particular case study was consistent with liberal principles.

5.3 Elaboration of the findings

Finally, after analysing the events, it might be claimed that the response to the epidemic was unrelated to the political connection between Taiwan and Japan and Japan's refusal to acknowledge

⁷⁸ "MOFA Response to Japanese Prime Minister Kishida Highlighting Peace and Stability across the Taiwan Strait in Japan-China Leadership Talks," Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of China (Taiwan), November 18, 2022, accessed April 10, 2023.

⁷⁹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of China (Taiwan), "Leader's Representative Morris Chang Attends APEC Economic Leaders' Meeting, Holds Bilateral Talks with Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida (Press Release Issued by the Delegation to 2022 APEC Economic Leaders' Meeting)," Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of China (Taiwan), November 19, 2022, accessed April 10, 2023.

Taiwan as a sovereign nation. While political issues may have influenced how both countries responded to the COVID-19 pandemic, a variety of practical and policy variables ultimately determined the success of the reaction. The relationship between Japan and The Republic of China (ROC) is influenced by various historical and political factors, however, in terms of the applicability of liberalism, the sources suggest that Japan and Taiwan shared liberal democratic values, and in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, both countries have made efforts to work together by sharing information and humanitarian aid. Moreover, the situation brought about by the pandemic resulted in the deepening of the hegemonic conflict between the United States and China, and Japan, despite not recognizing Taiwan as a sovereign state, collaborated with it to combat the Covid-19 pandemic and has strengthened economic, social, and political relations with it notwithstanding the phenomenon of "cold politics, hot economy" in the relationship between Japan and China. Japan has become more assertive on Taiwan, openly supporting its participation in the World Health Organization and maintaining diplomatic contacts, despite warnings and protests from Beijing. Nevertheless, one underlying motivation for Japan's support for Taiwan is likely related to maintaining regional stability and countering Chinese influence. By endorsing Taiwan's participation in international organizations and emphasizing peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait, Japan aims to contribute to a balanced power dynamic in the region while promoting a peaceful environment that safeguards its own national interests and regional security. Hence, it can be contended that in this particular case study, Japan's actions may not have entirely aligned with the liberalist principles, despite its practical collaboration and vaccine donations to Taiwan. Nevertheless, notwithstanding any potential discrepancies in underlying motivations, Japan demonstrated practical assistance and humanitarian aid to Taiwan in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. In the next case study about Japan-US relations, a very different outset will be described.

6. Case study III: Japan-USA relations since the COVID-19 pandemic

6.1 *Key Historical Perspectives*

The relationship between the United States and Japan has gone through various changes over time. Japan's transformation in the past 25 years brought both countries closer on trade and investment rule-making since Japan abandoned many of its industrial policy tools, and Japanese firms' regional production networks encouraged Tokyo to include behind-the-border practices in trade agreements.⁸⁰

⁸⁰ Mireya Solís, "U.S.-Japan Relations in the Era of Trump: Navigating the Turbulence of 'America First.'"

Unlike the previous two cases, which examined situations where both countries' leaders, albeit with their own obstacles, engaged in international exchange and contributed to the Liberal International Order (LIO), the case of Japan and its relations with the USA during the COVID-19 pandemic differ due to the policies introduced by President Trump in America. Joshua Busby and Jonathan Monten (2018) examined the impact of the Trump presidency on the Liberal International Order (LIO). The authors argue that the Trump administration has disrupted key pillars of the LIO, including the commitment to multilateralism, free trade, and human rights. The "America First" foreign policy pursued by the Trump administration has prioritized national interests over global cooperation and has undermined the credibility and effectiveness of international institutions and agreements. Busby and Monten suggest that the Trump presidency has exposed underlying tensions and contradictions within the LIO, particularly in terms of the friction between liberal values and the pursuit of national interests. They continue arguing that the Trump presidency has highlighted the growing challenge posed by illiberal powers, such as China and Russia, to the LIO and has called into question the ability of the United States to lead the liberal international community.⁸¹

Japan and the USA have a longstanding alliance that dates back to the end of World War II. The alliance is characterized by security cooperation and economic ties cemented by the *Treaty of mutual cooperation and security between Japan and the United States of America*.⁸² Based on liberalist ideology, it is conceivable that these two nations could have provided mutual assistance to each other with initiatives that include support for public health systems, economic recovery, and supply chain resilience during the Covid-19 pandemic, even though their relationship entered uncharted territory with President Trump's "America First" policy challenging key pillars of the Liberal International Order and of the two countries relationship.⁸³ While political disagreements and tensions can occur between nations, democratic institutions, and norms are designed to ensure peaceful resolution of disputes and promote cooperation among nations. Therefore, it is possible that despite these circumstances, the US and Japan still have cooperated on issues related to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Over the years, Japan and the United States have signed a number of significant treaties that have influenced their bilateral relationship. Trade, security, taxation, and military cooperation are just

⁸¹ Joshua Busby and Jonathan Monten, "HAS LIBERAL INTERNATIONALISM BEEN TRUMPED?" In *Chaos in the Liberal Order: The Trump Presidency and International Politics in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. ROBERT JERVIS, FRANCIS J. GAVIN, JOSHUA ROVNER, DIANE N. LABROSSE, and GEORGE FUJII, (Columbia University Press, 2018), 49–60.

⁸² Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, *Treaty of mutual cooperation and security between Japan and the United States of America*, Washington, January 19, 1960.

⁸³ Mireya Solís, "U.S.-Japan Relations in the Era of Trump: Navigating the Turbulence of 'America First,'" *México Y La Cuenca Del Pacífico* 8, no. 24 (August 29, 2019): 9–17.

a few of the topics covered by these agreements. Among them, the Japan-U.S. Income Tax Convention, which was signed in 1955, the 1960 Japan-U.S. Security Treaty, and the 2007 General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) which make it possible for the two nations to exchange sensitive military data, which also Japan and South Korea extended in 2019. Moreover, the Japan-U.S. Trade Agreement and the Japan-U.S. Digital Trade Agreement, both signed in 2020, are two more recent agreements. These agreements aim to promote trade liberalization and strengthen bilateral economic connections in the digital age.⁸⁴ In this Section, I will provide a chronological analysis, namely process tracing, of the meaningful events that occurred between Japan and the United States during the COVID-19 pandemic.

6.2 Cooperation during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Regarding the COVID-19 epidemic, the first case of COVID-19 patient in the United States was revealed on the 21st of January 2020.⁸⁵ The United States was slow and inconsistent in its response to the COVID-19 pandemic, initially employing a strategy to suppress the virus with minimal impact on the economy. The government did not use technology effectively to communicate with the public or to implement effective contact tracing efforts. President Trump initially dismissed the threat of the pandemic and delayed federal action, denying the possibility of serious epidemic risk in the US. Lockdown and masking protocols that had been effective were abandoned, and stimulus checks were given without a coherent economic recovery plan.⁸⁶ The pandemic's effects on Japan and the United States have been very different, with Japanese infections being much lower than those in the US, due to the US's slow response to the pandemic mentioned above. In February 2020, when a passenger who boarded a cruise ship in Hong Kong and tested positive for the virus, the US and Japanese governments had to work together to contain the virus' spread among cruise ship passengers in Japan. The Trump administration asked that US nationals on the ship who wanted to return to the US for quarantine to be moved out of Japan as the days dragged on and the number of afflicted

⁸⁴ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, "Japan-United States of America Relations (Basic Data)," *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan*. September 14, 2022.

⁸⁵ "First Confirmed Case of COVID-19 Found in the U.S.," HISTORY, January 19, 2021, accessed April 25, 2023, <https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/first-confirmed-case-of-coronavirus-found-in-us-washington-state>.

⁸⁶ Charles M. Lepkowsky, "U.S. COVID-19 Policy: Politics Trump Science," *Medical Research Archives* 10, no. 7 (January 1, 2022).

increased.⁸⁷⁸⁸ On May 2020, American President Trump decided to terminate its relationship with the World Trade Organization (WTO) with inevitable consequences to the Liberal International Order and by making Japan concerned about their relationship.⁸⁹ Therefore, on the 6th of October 2020, Japan's Foreign Minister Toshimitsu Motegi met with the US Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo. The two ministers discussed various topics, including the Japan-US alliance, the importance of coordination among like-minded countries and confirmed their intention to strengthen cooperation on the development and fair access to COVID-19 vaccines.⁹⁰ During the same month, Toshimitsu Motegi, Japan's foreign minister, delivered a video greeting to the 57th Japan-U.S. Business Conference's online launch on October 27, 2020. In the statement, Minister Motegi declared that the global COVID-19 outbreak has emphasized the need for improved international collaboration and that Japan will collaborate with the United States to take the lead in formulating regulations in a variety of fields in the COVID-19 era.⁹¹

As a matter of fact, it is important to note that both the United States and Japan were partners and active patrons of the Covid-19 Vaccines Global Access (COVAX). COVAX aims to accelerate the development and manufacture of COVID-19 vaccines and to ensure fair and forms an integral component of the Access to Covid-19 Tools (ACT) Accelerator, a worldwide partnership aimed at expediting the progress, manufacture, and fair distribution of COVID-19 tests, therapies, and vaccines. This initiative is enabled by the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations (CEPI), the Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunisation (GAVI), and the World Health Organization (WHO), in close collaboration with the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) Revolving Fund. The United States and Japan have both been actively sharing COVID-19 vaccines and provided financial support to other countries. The United States has shared over 540 million vaccine doses with more than 115 countries and economies, while Japan has donated approximately 44 million doses to 32 countries and regions, as well as providing over \$160 million in "Last One Mile Support" to 77 countries and regions. In addition, the United States co-hosted the launch of the investment opportunity for the COVAX Advance Market

⁸⁷ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, "Disembarkation of U.S. Citizens Aboard 'Diamond Princess' and Their Departure from Japan," Press release, February 15, 2020.

⁸⁸ Sheila A. Smith and Charles T. McClean, "US-Japan Relations: COVID-19 Overtakes Japan and the United States," *Comparative Connections*, 22, No. 1 (2023):15-26.

⁸⁹ Quinn, Melissa, "Trump Moves to Officially Withdraw U.S. From World Health Organization," *Cbsnews*, July 7, 2020, accessed May 25, 2023. <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/trump-who-world-health-organization-us-notice-of-withdrawal/>.

⁹⁰ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, "Japan-U.S. Foreign Ministers' Meeting," Press release, October 6, 2020.

⁹¹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, "Video Message by Foreign Minister Motegi for the 57th Japan-U.S. Business Conference," Press release, October 27, 2020.

Commitment in April 2021, and Japan hosted the COVAX Advance Market Commitment Summit in June 2021, which secured \$9.6 billion in funding commitments.⁹²

The turning point of their relationship came in 2021 with the new democratic American president Joe Biden's election and his decision to rejoin the WHO.⁹³ As a matter of fact, in 2021 and 2022, two important meetings were held between the United States and Japan. Firstly, the 16th Japan-U.S. Joint Working-Level Committee (JWLC) Meeting on Science and Technology Cooperation which took place online on June 17th, 2021. During the Joint Working Level Committee (JWLC) meeting, the participants discussed various topics including health and biomedical research, COVID-19 resiliency, workforce development, research integrity, researcher and student exchanges, and Japan's Moonshot Research and Development Program. They also had "deep dive" discussions on quantum technology, and artificial intelligence, highlighting existing cooperation and ways to enhance it. Additionally, they signed a project arrangement on quantum information science to promote research and development on quantum communication, computing, and devices between Japan and the United States. The conference anticipated discussions on a Joint High-Level Committee Meeting and reiterated both nations' commitment to maintaining a close partnership and coordination on science and technology cooperation.⁹⁴ The second important meeting was the COVID-19 Global Action Meeting on the 14th of February 2022. Mr. Hayashi Yoshimasa, Minister for Foreign Affairs of Japan, attended the COVID-19 Global Action Meeting hosted by the Honorable Antony Blinken, Secretary of State of the United States of America and discussed concrete mutual actions to contain COVID-19 and strengthen readiness for future pandemics⁹⁵ as already demonstrated by the Japanese pharmaceutical company Takeda Pharmaceutical Company Limited business agreement with the Government of Japan, Novavax, and Moderna to help accelerate the availability of COVID-19 vaccines in 2021. Through the collaboration with Novavax, Takeda built on its well-established global manufacturing and supply capabilities and was responsible for developing and commercializing Novavax's vaccine candidate. The company also imported and distributed Moderna's COVID-19 vaccine as part of a three-way partnership with Moderna and the Government

⁹² Sheila A. Smith and Charles T. McClean, "US-Japan Relations: COVID-19 Overtakes Japan and the United States."

⁹³ Weintraub Karen, "Biden Administration Renewed Support for World Health Organization Is 'good News for America and the World,' Scientists say," *USA TODAY NEWS*, January 22, 2021, accessed May 25, 2023.

⁹⁴ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, "Joint Press Release The 16th Japan-U.S. Joint Working-Level Committee Meeting," Press release, June 17, 2021.

⁹⁵ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, "Foreign Minister Hayashi's Attendance at the COVID-19 Global Action Meeting Hosted by the Honorable Antony Blinken, Secretary of State of the United States of America," Press release, February 15, 2022.

of Japan's Ministry of Health Labour and Welfare.⁹⁶ In the final section, I will analyse the implications drawn from these data to establish whether Japan's actions in this particular case study were in line with liberal principles.

6.3 Elaboration of the findings

In conclusion, this passage demonstrates that Japan has been a strong proponent of multilateralism and international cooperation, including its active participation in the WHO despite the "America First" agenda of the Trump administration. Japan expressed its commitment to the WHO's significance and persisted in working with the agency to solve global health issues during the Trump administration. The way Japan responded to Trump's position on the WHO can be considered a reaffirmation of its commitment to the tenets of the Liberal International Order, even though it has successfully navigated the changing dynamics of international relations. This includes efforts to donate vaccines to other countries, and participation in global initiatives such as the COVAX. The willingness of Japan to work together with both the US and the WHO despite Trump's policies demonstrates Japan's extent of international cooperation in addressing global health crises and highlights the value of liberalist principles in promoting collaboration and humanitarian aid. In addition, Japan's recent stance towards the Biden administration reflects an openness to improve collaboration and strengthen communication channels, particularly after the United States renewed membership in the World Health Organization (WHO). Japan has shown a desire to cooperate and engage in a solid communication with the US since then, as demonstrated by the two significant agreements mentioned earlier and the partnerships between Japanese and American pharmaceutical companies. Therefore, Japan's inclination to engage in cooperative endeavours with one of its foremost allies, even during the Trump administration, while concurrently upholding the foundational tenets of liberalist and democratic ideology by sustaining the LIO, LTO and the WHO, reinforces my thesis.

CONCLUSION

Worldwide, the COVID-19 pandemic has had a dramatic impact, necessitating international cooperation to mitigate its effects. The liberal ideas of interdependence and collaboration have shaped

⁹⁶ Takeda. "Takeda to Manufacture and Provide 150 Million Doses of Novavax' COVID-19 Vaccine Candidate to the Government of Japan," n.d. <https://www.takeda.com/newsroom/newsreleases/2021/takeda-to-manufacture-and-provide-150-million-doses-of-novavax-covid-19-vaccine-candidate-to-the-government-of-japan>

Japan's foreign policy during this time toward South Korea, Taiwan, and the USA, and this has been reflected in its reaction to the pandemic. Examining the case studies presented reveals a nuanced perspective on Japan's role as a liberal leader in Asia. While Japan may not fully embody the notion of a liberal leader, it does exhibit adherence to liberalist thought, particularly in the context of addressing global health challenges such as the COVID-19 pandemic. The strained relations between Japan and South Korea during the COVID-19 epidemic highlight the presence of contentious issues, yet efforts to improve bilateral ties and collaboration on health-related matters indicate a commitment to cooperation despite historical disputes. Simultaneously, Japan's collaboration with Taiwan during the pandemic, demonstrates its intention to work together, even without recognizing Taiwan as a sovereign state. Japan has donated vaccines to Taiwan, helping the country to mitigate the effects of the pandemic and by taking this move Japan demonstrated its adherence to liberal principles. However, at the same time, underlying motivations rooted this collaboration in maintaining regional stability and in countering Chinese influence, demonstrating that Japan did not fully align with liberal principles and did not take the role of a Liberal leader in Asia in this particular case study. Finally, Japan's support for multilateralism and international cooperation, including its active involvement in the WHO, even during the Trump administration, reinforces the thesis of its dedication to liberalist principles. Japan's alacrity to collaborate with both the United States and the World Health Organization (WHO) in the face of contrasting policies pursued by the Trump administration serves as a strong point to its commitment to international cooperation when addressing global health crises. This exemplifies Japan's dedication to liberalist principles that prioritize collaboration and humanitarian aid as crucial components of a coordinated response to global challenges with, for instance, the partnerships forged with American pharmaceutical companies, participation in global initiatives like COVAX, and the provision of humanitarian aid through vaccine donations. Therefore, while Japan may not be deemed a liberal leader in a comprehensive sense, it does align with liberalist principles through its pursuit of cooperation, adherence to international norms, and promotion of humanitarian aid. In conclusion, my analysis demonstrates that Japan's response to the COVID-19 pandemic reflects liberal principles such as interdependence and cooperation, and this has been shown in its foreign policy towards South Korea, Taiwan, and the USA. Although the COVID-19 pandemic has significantly impacted and challenged the LIO, and Japan did not fully align with the definition of a Liberal leader in Asia, its continued commitment to international cooperation in addressing global health crises remains evident.

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