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Honour-Seeking in Russia-Japan Relations

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Honour-Seeking in Russia-Japan Relations

Abstract

This paper seeks to investigate honour-seeking behaviour as a key emotional driver in relations between Russia and Japan. The paper argues that the bilateral interactions between both the States have not been shaped solely by material interests, but by concerns of “face”, recognition, and prestige, through theories on collective emotions and emotional diplomacy. Taking the two-year Russo-Japanese War of 1904–1905 as the turning point of humiliation and vengeance, the paper shall trace the manner in which civilisational self-images and collective memories continue to have an impact on symbolic engagement, diplomatic postures, and even territorial disputes in the post-Cold War period. Further, the paper situates China in the background, as a civilisational reference, to contextualise these dynamics of honour.

Keywords: honour-seeking behaviour, Japan, Russia, Russo-Japanese War, humiliation, civilisational self-image, collective memory

Introduction

Unresolved rivalry and strategic pragmatism have underpinned relations between Russia and Japan, despite their geographical proximity and periodic efforts towards diplomatic rapprochement. This can be traced back to their failure to sign a peace treaty after going to war for the first time in 1904. While typical explanations may simply attribute this coldness to alliance politics, territorial disputes, or material interests, they fail to capture the true extent to which emotions play a role in shaping State behaviour. Among these emotions, honour — typically associated with prestige, “face”, and recognition — emerges as a potent motivator behind State behaviour (Lebow, 2010).

Using an exploratory approach to examine honour-seeking as an emotional factor influencing state behaviour, this paper utilises a qualitative interpretive framework based on emotional and constructivist theories within International Relations. It examines seminal and more recent episodes of Russo-Japanese relations — notably the Russo-Japanese War; the unresolved territorial disputes between both countries (Kuril Islands for the Russians, and Northern Territories for the Japanese); and post-Cold War diplomatic relations between both

nations — as sites where honour, humiliation, and face-saving are given public expression and result in different forms of political consequences. The civilisational narratives and collective emotional responses that produce these forms of State behaviour are investigated using an approach consistent with the emotional diplomacy research framework developed by Hall (2015). China is taken into this process and used as an additional reference point in constructing regional hierarchies of status and recognition through its civilisational legacy, but this aspect does not take precedence over the analysis of the bilateral ties between Russia and Japan. The paper will begin by providing an overview of the civilisational foundation of honour as it relates to Russian and Japanese political imagination before tracing how these civilisational emotional dispositions have shaped hostility, historical memory, and modes of diplomacy between Russia and Japan over time (Hutchison, 2016; Lebow, 2010).

The paper conceptualises honour-seeking behaviour as tied to status, recognition, and hierarchy in international society. Honour is thus understood to be a distinct form of motivation that is not based on material self-interests (Lebow, 2010). This form of honour motivates States to take action towards maintaining or regaining their standing: this would happen by either prestige maintenance (if they are losing out) and/or humiliation avoidance (if they feel that they will lose their prestige) (Lebow, 2010). Friedrichs (2016) similarly distinguishes between honour-oriented and face-oriented political cultures from dignity-oriented political cultures, highlighting the many ways in which the symbolic loss of one's honour and public scrutiny can create a heightened level of sensitivity within these societies.

In Russia and Japan, the honour-seeking behaviour of the two countries arises from their historical understanding of civilisation as well as from their historical emotional repertoire of civilisational experience — both in terms of defining what it means to be Russian or Japanese — as experienced during times of rivalry, defeat, and diplomatic negotiations. Therefore, this paper seeks to highlight and understand the emotional characteristics of these motivations and behaviours in order to go beyond the rationalist explanations of the historical relationship between Russia and Japan. It seeks to show how the historical relationship between the two States has been shaped by “face”, memory, and recognition in their bilateral relations.

Conceptual Framework: Honour in State Behaviour

Traditionally, researchers have viewed emotions as residual or irrational deviations from strategic calculation (e.g., Carr 1939; Vance, 2013; Reus-Smit, 2007), but recent

scholarship in International Relations highlight the role emotions play in shaping national interests, threat perceptions, and diplomatic actions — thereby blurring the importance of reason and emotion (Hall, 2015; Rythoven & Sucharov, 2020). Emotions are not limited to individuals but exist within social identities and institutional practices: therefore, States can act as emotional agents via their representatives (Hutchison, 2016). This is particularly useful when understanding honour-seeking behaviour as a collective emotional orientation tied to a State's perceived standing within international hierarchies.

Understanding international politics as a relational concept based on prestige, status, and recognition by those who matter is the best way to conceptualise “honour”. According to Lebow (2010), “honour” is just one of the three main motives for political action — fear and interest are two other principal drivers of political action. States' pursuit of honour increases when they have a common historical memory or civilisational narrative that gives meaning (moral and symbolic) to honour. Friedrichs (2016) argues that honour and face-oriented political cultures differ fundamentally from dignity-based cultures — in the former, public recognition and avoidance of losing face influence political behaviour, yet the latter do not give importance to or experience this.

The concept of emotional diplomacy is a valuable tool for analysing the relationship between collective emotions and the actual practices of States. Hall (2015) asserts that States utilise signs that convey an emotional message to an audience by using official discourse, ceremonial activities, and diplomatic signalling: such actions help to shape expectations and reinforce roles socially. Honour-seeking behaviour, in this regard, is performed by demonstrating a sense of purpose, scorn, generosity, or restraint to both domestic and foreign audiences. Therefore, by examining how honour is expressed through diplomatic engagement and interactions between countries, this framework can be used to conduct an analysis on the basis of continuity among Russian and Japanese relations through time while remaining sensitive to fluctuations caused by changes in the international environment. Together, these concepts provide a foundation for understanding how honour — as a collective emotion that is embedded within the civilisational identity of a nation or an ethnic group, as well as in its historical memory — continues to shape State behaviour regardless of its physical manifestation.

Civilisation, Identity, and Honour in Russian and Japanese Statecraft

Throughout much of its history as a State, Russia's identity has been shaped by its civilisational self-perception, which is based on an amalgamation of the imperial tradition, entitlement to be one of the world's great powers, and an ongoing anxiety about being validated by others beyond its own borders (Tsygankov, 2012). As such, the Russian orientation towards status has acted as a primary indicator of sovereignty and legitimacy; this was true during the Tsarist period, through the Soviet period, and continues to be true in contemporary Russian foreign relations. Also, as a result of this Russian orientation towards status, the State has developed a heightened sensitivity toward perceived matters of status, particularly from non-Western countries, which have not traditionally been considered as peers by Russia. Japan's rapid modernisation and ascent to military power in East Asia during the early twentieth century disrupted the traditional status hierarchy, and Russia's loss to Japan in 1905 was not only an operational and strategic defeat but was seen symbolically as a challenge to Russia's self-perception as a civilisational power. In addition, events where a State's status has declined in comparison to another State are often remembered as part of a collective memory: in Russia, such memories reinforce narratives of shame and humiliation, along with the need to restore its reputation, which continues to play a role in how Russia approaches its diplomatic relations within its Asian neighbourhood (Hutchison, 2016; Lebow, 2010).

In contrast, Japanese civilisational identity places much greater emphasis on face and recognition within the global order that has historically been dominated by Western powers. This can be traced back to the Meiji era, when the State increasingly emphasised modernisation and military strength to protect itself against regional and global subordination (Buruma, 2003). Honour for Japan, therefore, is often associated with acquiring external affirmation and avoiding public humiliation and shame: specifically, this applies to diplomatic relations with well-established major powers. The victory over Russia ushered in a new age in which Japan proved its capability of commanding respect as a nation with civilisational backing, rather than a mere marginal one. Unfortunately, Japan was unable to sustain this recognition due to diplomatic constraints following World War I and increased pacifism after World War II. As such, honour is now sought through symbolic and procedural forms of diplomacy. These factors help explain why Japan attaches such high emotional value to factors like territorial sovereignty and historical recognition in its relations with Russia, while in reality the material stakes may not be as significant (Friedrichs, 2016; Hall, 2015).

The Battle for Honour and Recognition via the Russo-Japanese War

The Russo-Japanese War (1904–1905) represented a turning point, wherein honour-seeking behaviour took centre stage in relations between Russia and Japan. While material interests were important — including those in Manchuria and Korea — this war cannot be understood without also considering the weightage of symbolic stakes of prestige and status within the global order. Japan confronted its first European imperial power in order to assert parity and challenge systems of racial and civilizational hierarchy that considered Asian States to be inferior. In a similar vein, Russia's military operations in East Asia can be attributed to its perception of itself as a great power entitled to exercise political power outside of Europe — withdrawal or compromise would carry both political and symbolic costs (Westwood, 1986; Lebow, 2010). Accordingly, the decision to go to war was not only a strategic one but also reflected competing claims to prestige and legitimacy.

Japan's behaviour during the war was strongly informed by honour-focused signalling towards domestic and foreign audiences. Military discipline, sacrifice and determination were extensively displayed as signs of national merit and served as a part of a greater national narrative to stress Japan's civilisational strength and moral strength of character (Buruma, 2003). The battles won by Japan, particularly in the Battle of Tsushima, were not merely tactical victories for the Japanese but were also perceived to establish Japan as one of the great powers in the world. This performative feature of war reinforces the argument by Hall (2015) regarding how emotional expression within international affairs seeks to stabilise social expectations and roles. The success of Japan compelled the world order to re-evaluate the historic principles of order and competence.

The defeat of Russia in the Russo-Japanese War was not merely a defeat on the battlefield. This was a great setback to Russian honour and status in the world. This, in turn, compromised the legitimacy of Russia as a world power, and the State became weak due to the war and domestic turmoil. Furthermore, this loss of honour was not something that would be forgotten, but it became a part of Russian memory as a crucial moment in Russia's international history, when Russia was humiliated by one of its non-Western competitors. Perhaps, this loss continues to affect relations between the two neighbours. According to Hutchison (2016), such kinds of losses have long-term political effects as they create a legacy of political resentment founded on emotional wounds. The Russo-Japanese War established an emotional context for

bilateral relations in the years to follow, as questions of recognition, saving face, and historical compensation became major aspects of relations between Russia and Japan.

A Diplomatic Stalemate: A Consequence of Memory and Unresolved Honour?

There is an emotional legacy shared between Russia and Japan, courtesy the war between them in the early twentieth century, leading to several unresolved disputes. One such dispute that has not been settled is the Northern Territories/Kuril Islands issue. It is not only a legal or strategic conflict, but a symbolic one, with Japan having interests in safeguarding its honour, sovereignty and historical identity. To Japan, the absence of a peace treaty since 1945 and the loss of territory during World War II are perceived as salt in its wounds. Moreover, Japan considers this as an insult to its national honour as well as post-war identity. To Russia, possession of the islands is seen as a reminder of its victory in World War II, with additional emphasis on the importance of territorial integrity, which makes compromising politically expensive and emotionally challenging (Akaha and Vassilieva, 2014; Panov, 2016). These dynamics could perhaps be some explanations for why phases of diplomatic interactions have remained in a state of stasis, despite the seemingly material incentives to collaborate.

The diplomatic relations between Japan and Russia since the Cold War are an indication that there are more ways in which honour-seeking constrains bilateral relations. Relations between Shinzo Abe and Vladimir Putin were distinguished by deliberate symbolic exchanges, including Putin being invited to Abe's home prefecture in Yamaguchi and the emphasis on leader-to-leader engagement, which signalled mutual recognition and respect despite unresolved disputes. These gestures served as examples of emotional diplomacy, facilitating dialogue and face-saving mechanisms while also restricting substantive compromise on territorial and sovereignty issues (Hall, 2015; Panov, 2016). Additionally, the ability to be flexible in matters concerning territory can be viewed as a weakness or a sign of surrender in the domestic sphere; hence, a compromise is a more palatable solution. Honour, therefore, may act as an obstacle during the reconciliation process and restrict avenues to negotiations.

Since 2022, Russia has been militarily involved in Ukraine, which has dramatically limited the chances of the two nations to interact with each other in an honour-compatible way. After Japan joined the West's sanctions on Russia and framed the confrontation as a "conflict which infringes on the sovereignty of Ukraine", Russia has been labelled as marginalised and perceived to be a State violating norms: a symbolic rapprochement between the neighbours has

only been further compromised. Japan's decision to strategically align with the United States has also been construed as a withdrawal of respect and recognition by Russia, resulting in a diplomatic chill. As a result, the Russo-Ukraine conflict has exacerbated existing sensitivities regarding honour, hardened moral and status boundaries, created further distance between the two States by solidifying their adversarial identities, and made political and emotional compromise virtually unattainable (Hall, 2015; Tsygankov, 2022).

China's Role as a Reference Point

China's significance in Russia-Japan relations is primarily derived from acting as a civilisational or hierarchically based reference point for understanding status and recognition in the East Asian region, rather than being an explicit or direct interlocutor. The historical Sino-centric structure of the East Asian regional system placed China at the symbolic centre (as the Middle Kingdom), forcing both Russia and Japan to define their identities in relation to this hierarchy. The Japanese drive for recognition in the late 19th century was motivated, in part, by a desire to establish itself as a peer to Western powers and thereby distinguish itself from a declining China, while Russia's expansion into Manchuria was motivated by a desire to assert its imperial ambitions to achieve prestige in a region that was undergoing civilisational re-ordering (Westad, 2012).

From a modern-day perspective, the rise of China has resulted in the *enhancement* of honour sensitivities within Russia-Japan relations. Japan's strategic focus on sovereignty, a rules-based order, and alliances are not only important to its security, but also to distinguish itself from China's model of regional power assertion. Russia, despite having a strategic partnership with China, continues to pay close attention to the power imbalance. Russia uses its engagement in the Asia-Pacific — including its relations with Japan — as a way to pursue its own autonomy and reclaim its status as a great power (Rozman, 2016; Tsygankov, 2012). China, therefore, acts as a quiet structuring actor, establishing issues of hierarchy and recognition while not being a direct intermediary in the bilateral relationship.

Conclusion

The paper argues that honour-seeking is a significant but commonly overlooked aspect of relations between Russia and Japan. It examines how honour may have played a role in

limiting opportunities for compromise over time — beginning with the rupture of bilateral relations due to the Russo-Japanese War, up until the current diplomatic deadlock surrounding the Russo-Ukrainian crisis. These factors demonstrate how collective emotions are embedded into the identities of Nation-States and are replicated by State actors through diplomatic practices, thereby resulting in enduring patterns of rivalry and mistrust between Russia and Japan (Hall 2015; Hutchison 2016).

Honour-seeking behaviour can provide explanations for why a dispute persists, regardless of changes in power distributions and apparent incentives for cooperation between two Nation-States, as well as why symbolic gestures exchanged between them appear to bear disproportionate(ly large) political significance. There is a requirement for diplomacy to be sensitive to any State's interests and capabilities, as well as its history and subsequent importance attached to face management and honour-seeking pursuits. It is worthwhile, therefore, to consider the role of emotions in understanding State behaviour.

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