

Aikido and world politics: a practice theory for transcending the security dilemma

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Abstract

In the final analysis, is the security dilemma inescapable? Or can the protagonists in world politics learn to live with never-ending insecurities and the risk of attack without producing precisely the outcomes that they wish to avoid? This article explores this fundamental problem for International Relations theory by performing a thought experiment, in which it applies lessons from *aikido* to world politics. A form of Japanese *budo*, or martial art, aikido provides practitioners with a method for harbouring insecurities, and for dealing with attacks that may or may not occur, by empathically caring for actual and potential attackers. The article builds on practice theory in assuming that any social order is constructed and internalised through practices, but also capable of change through the introduction and dissemination of new practices. Although an unlikely scenario, aikido practice could serve as such a method of fundamental transformation if widely applied in world politics. Empirical examples ranging from international apologies and security cooperation to foreign aid and peacekeeping operations are discussed, suggesting that contemporary world politics is at times already performed in accordance with aikido principles, albeit only imperfectly and partially.

Keywords

Aikido, care, empathy, identity, practice, security dilemma

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Introduction

With geopolitical tensions on the rise around the world, not least between the United States and China (e.g. Breuer and Johnston, 2019; Liff and Ikenberry, 2014), there is renewed interest in the security dilemma. In International Relations (IR) theory, scholarly thinking about this dilemma is heavily influenced by realists, such as John H. Herz (1950), who suggest that states and societies ‘must be, and usually are, concerned about their security from being attacked, subjected, dominated, or annihilated by other groups and individuals’ (p. 157):

Striving to attain security from such attack, they [states] are driven to acquire more and more power in order to escape the impact of the power of others. This, in turn, renders the others more insecure and compels them to prepare for the worst. Since none can ever feel entirely secure in such a world of competing units, power competition ensues, and the vicious circle of security and power accumulation is on. (p. 157)

Liberals, by contrast, often assume that self-interested actors can manage the security dilemma if they understand the benefits of cooperation and find ways to reassure each other (e.g. Keohane, 1984). In turn, globalists believe that security dilemmas can be avoided if the naturally collaborative instincts of humans are not hampered (e.g. Falk, 1987).

Furthermore, scholars who draw on constructivism, poststructuralism, feminism, Marxism and other critical perspectives highlight how the social dynamics captured by the security dilemma concept are historical and contingent rather than determined by the structure of the international system (e.g. Cox, 1981; Huysmans, 1998; Mitzen, 2006; Tickner, 1992; Wendt, 1999). There is also an emerging strand of IR research on how perceptions and emotions might influence security dilemma dynamics among states and across wider populations (Baker, 2019; Booth and Wheeler, 2007; see also Jervis, 1978). While attempts to contextualise the security dilemma have generated important insights, existing debates tend to rely on Eurocentric or ‘Westphalian’ experiences and epistemes – that is, those premised mainly on European and North American examples of state- and war-making. Moreover, they seldom provide practical guidance on how to deal with the risk of being attacked without (re)producing at least to some extent the outcomes that one wishes to avoid. This article seeks to rectify both problems by engaging with the Japanese martial art of *aikido*.¹ Although it evolved from the fighting techniques that Japanese samurai warriors honed for centuries, as a modern form of *budo*, or martial art, aikido practice aims to redefine and transcend most understandings of fighting and even self-defence. As such, aikido is more accurately described as an art of movement, or as meditation in movement.

Translated as ‘the way of harmony/peace’, aikido might seem to share the pacifist goal that ‘humans should aspire to harmonious living and reject war’ (Cady, 2010 [1989]: 1). However, such a pacifist aspiration has been portrayed as ‘naïve and even dangerous’ (Cady, 2010 [1989]: 58), for putting aggressors at an advantage. It is, moreover, true that a *rhetoric* of harmony or peace has often just barely masked hierarchical, hegemonic and sometimes belligerent and totalitarian ambitions (Callahan, 2008), and that powerful actors have invoked such concepts to quell dissent and pre-empt conflict (Carr, 2001 [1946]: 75, 151). In the 1930s, for example, harmony was the prescribed ideal for unifying the Japanese people under the ‘divine’ emperor’s ‘benign’ rule and Asian states under Japan’s

'benevolent' leadership (Hagström and Nordin, 2020). Various justifications of European colonial expansion and rule contained similar notions (Hobson, 2012), and Chinese authorities currently dispatch 'harmony makers' to discipline people in regions labelled 'disharmonious' – for example, Xinjiang and Tibet (Hagström and Nordin, 2020). Hence, like several other benign-sounding concepts, a rhetoric of harmony has legitimised and enabled violence against 'disharmonious' others in many locales across time. How then can aikido's understanding of harmony inspire a rethink of the security dilemma in world politics without falling into similar traps?

This article performs a thought experiment (Cooper, 2005: 328), by asking 'what if' we treated aikido as a source of legitimate knowledge on how to think and do world politics? What would happen in the hypothetical scenario that the protagonists in world politics began to model their dispositions and actions on aikido? The purpose of a thought experiment is to construct models of 'possible worlds that are different from the actual world' (Ling and Nakamura, 2019: 544; see also Cooper, 2005: 336). As in similar thought experiments, however, our aim is not just exploratory, but hopefully also transformative, because only '[o]nce a scenario is imagined' can it 'assume a life of its own' (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2019 [1996]). We find Glenn D. Paige's (2007 [2002]) suggestion particularly useful in that '[t]o assert possibility . . . is not to guarantee certainty but to make problematic the previously unthinkable' (p. 69).

We build particularly on existing scholarship that has sought to bring 'non-Western' insights to IR theorising (e.g. Acharya and Buzan, 2017; Shilliam, 2010). While scholars have drawn on Confucianism to construct a distinctly *Chinese* IR theory (e.g. Qin, 2007), and at times to 'legitimise' the People's Republic of China's foreign policy (Acharya and Buzan, 2017: 363), our aim is neither to contribute to *Japanese* IR theory (e.g. Ong, 2004), nor to draw any parallels with Japan's International Relations. Ironically, some have called Japan an 'aikido state' for allegedly having altered 'the orthodox understanding of how a great power behaves' (Hook et al., 2001: 380), but aikido practice shares few similarities with the foreign policy of its country of origin (Hagström, 2008). Instead, we find more appealing Meera Sabaratnam's (2011) suggestion that it may be possible to recover '*alternative* political subjecthoods' (p. 791, emphasis added) by engaging with knowledge traditions, experiences and histories that have not previously gained much epistemic recognition in IR theory.

While this article has a similar focus as some existing 'non-Western' accounts – particularly a critique of the self/other binary – aikido practice is devoted to the *process* of transcending the binary and less interested in transcendence as a supposedly peaceful or harmonious end-state. Some scholars have drawn inspiration from Daoism and Buddhism in their search for clues in this regard (e.g. Ling, 2013; Shimizu and Noro, 2020, 2021). While aikido's philosophical underpinnings resonate with Daoism and Buddhism (Hagström and Nordin, 2020: 520; Pettman, 2005: 76), since aikido is a martial art, we argue that it is particularly well-suited to drawing *practical* and even *embodied* lessons on how to blur self/other relations – including in situations that are characterised by violent conflict.

Ralph Pettman (2004) has noted that aikido provides fundamental lessons for IR theory in that it rejects 'the modernist strategic spectrum that puts competition at one end and cooperation at the other' (p. 89). We agree, and perhaps more importantly argue that

aikido provides a method for *how* to ‘live dangerously’, as Arnold Wolfers (1952) remarked that ‘nations must’ (p. 494), and for *harbouring* insecurities and dealing with attacks that may or may not occur, without applying force or even constructing antagonism. The goal of aikido practice is to foster empathetic dispositions towards actual and potential attackers, and to care selflessly for them. Assuming that any social order is constructed and upheld through practices (Schatzki, 2002), moreover, we contend that the spread of aikido practice in world politics could go some way towards transcending this realm as we currently know it, although complete transcendence is unlikely.

The next section briefly introduces our understanding of aikido and outlines the practice approach on which our thought experiment is based. The following two sections apply an aikido practice perspective to rethink central concepts in the study of the security dilemma in world politics – conflict, cooperation and collaboration as well as the self/other binary. The penultimate section discusses how it might be possible to practice harmony or peace without adhering to a strong version of pacifism or anti-militarism, and what concept of power it might entail. Using empirical examples, we then illustrate that our ‘non-Western’, ‘post-Western’ – or perhaps rather ‘post-imperial’ (Murray, 2020) – IR theory is not *just* a thought experiment, and that contemporary world politics is, at times, already performed in accordance with aikido practice, albeit only imperfectly and partially.

Aikido at the ‘practice turn’

IR scholarship is currently experiencing a ‘turn’ to practice theory (e.g. Adler and Pouliot, 2011; Bicchi and Bremberg, 2016; Bueger and Gadinger, 2018). We define practices as patterns of meaningful action that are contingent on situated understandings and reproduced through human interaction. One of the key insights gained from practice theory is that everyday ways-of-doing are consequential for the production and reproduction of the social world (Schatzki, 2002). Conceptually, practice overlaps with behaviour and habit, but a distinctive feature of a practice is that it is intersubjectively meaningful also to the performing actors (Lechner and Frost, 2018). Moreover, while actions constitute practices, practices are classes of action and not limited to their actual enactment (Adler and Pouliot, 2011).

Given the focus on patterned action, some versions of practice theory can be said to have ‘a conservative bias’ (Kustermans, 2016: 19). Yet, certain practices are only enacted intermittently, while others can authorise rupture and change (Bueger, 2014). Whereas no practice is carried out just once, patterns of action can obviously shift. In this article, we see the potential for cross-fertilisation between aikido practice and a pragmatist understanding of human action (Frankel Pratt, 2016; Kratochwil, 2018). The latter takes as its point of departure that any given social order is constructed and reproduced through practices, but also that social change can occur through the introduction of new practices or new ways of thinking about established practices. Pragmatism suggests that it is possible to foster new dispositions for acting with others through social learning based on embodied experience, with profound implications for individuals and societies (Dewey, 1997[1938]). This theoretical starting point is important, as our aim is to explore the possibility of change in world politics by drawing lessons from aikido.

Aikido practice resonates with such a pragmatist understanding of learning and social change. According to the orthodoxy, founder Ueshiba Morihei (1883–1969) began to develop aikido in the 1920s and 1930s, combining fighting techniques mainly from the martial art of *Daitō-ryū Aiki-jūjutsu* and spiritual revelations derived from his involvement with the new religion *Ōmoto-kyō*, which originated from Shinto. His concept of harmony or peace may originally have echoed that of Imperial Japan, as explained in the Introduction above (e.g. Stevens, 1984: 23), and Ueshiba initially supported Japan's imperialistic ambitions. However, he allegedly became more sceptical about them after experiencing a third profound spiritual revelation in 1942 (Stevens, 1992: 7). Clearly addressing Japan's war of aggression, he was quoted as saying, 'The Way of the Warrior [*budo*] has been misunderstood as a means to kill and destroy others. . . . The real Way of the Warrior is to prevent slaughter – it is the Art of Peace, the power of love' (Stevens, 1992: 8). This was also when he coined the name aikido to better account for the vision of 'a path that could lead to the elimination of all strife and the reconciliation of human-kind' (Stevens, 1992: 7–8).

Aikido has since evolved in several directions, and there are schools and organisations that emphasise and further develop different aspects of Ueshiba's teaching, often based on the years during which central figures practised with him. While we do not wish to deny the richness and diversity of these teachings, in this article, we interpret aikido based on our own decades-long experience of practice. In that sense, we trace a lineage from Ueshiba to Tohei Koichi (1920–2011) – one of Ueshiba's foremost students, the first person to receive the rank of 10th dan, chief instructor of the Aikikai Headquarters and later founder of Ki No Kenkyukai – and then to Yoshigasaki Kenjiro (1951–2021), who was in turn one of Tohei's foremost students, chief instructor of Ki No Kenkyukai Europe and later founder of Ki No Kenkyukai Association Internationale.

All aikido practice is premised on regular training in a *dojo* – a training hall or 'place of the way' – in order to master a broad set of techniques. In our understanding, however, the deeper goal of aikido practice is to nurture new dispositions towards conflicts, tensions and insecurities. Such dispositions are integral to the successful execution of techniques but are also meant to affect practitioners' daily lives outside of the *dojo* (Tohei, 1978). Key here is the disposition for *reciprocal* relations. Practitioners sometimes act (*nage*) – moving their own and their partner's (or partners') bodies – and are sometimes acted on (*uke*). The basic pattern is that *uke* initiates an attack against *nage* (sometimes referred to as *tori* or *shite*), which *nage* then neutralises using an aikido technique. Both *uke* and *nage* are essential to aikido practice, and practitioners constantly change places. A first important lesson is thus that we should be able to be on the 'receiving end' of all actions performed to defend ourselves.

Another lesson is that it is often hard even for advanced practitioners to tell whether it is *uke* or *nage* who initiates the movement, which turns into an aikido technique. The relationship between *uke* and *nage* can be captured by the concepts of 'one point' (*seika no itten*, *saika no itten*, *seika tanden* or *hara*) and *hanmi*. 'One point' refers to the place in the body, just below the navel, where all movement in aikido practice begins and which is the *common* centre in aikido techniques. *Hanmi* is derived from traditional Japanese sword practice and denotes the bodily position that aikido practitioners assume at the start of a technique. It is an embodied understanding of how to move the body in

relation to other bodies in one's immediate surroundings, regardless of what role (*uke* or *nage*) is being assumed during training. Thus, one point and *hanmi* provide aikido practitioners with practical experiences of a certain form of *hybridity* – both how *uke* and *nage* can move as one and how attacks and defensive actions often blend into each other.

Even though aikido practice aims to prevent attacks creatively, it does not necessarily strive for their total abolition. That would again risk inviting preventive and non-proportional attacks to 'pacify' potential aggression or insurrection, as in the case of European and Japanese imperialism and colonialism, Chinese policy on Tibet, Xinjiang and Hong Kong, the US wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, Russian aggression against Ukraine, as well as courses of action adopted by actors in many other places around the world and across time. Moreover, if attacks still occur, it is also possible to use aikido more reactively. In fact, most aikido practice seeks to reconstruct, as realistically as possible, situations in which one or several people wage attacks with strikes, kicks and grapples, and sometimes using knives, swords and sticks. Advanced practitioners are expected to cope with increasing complexity and increasingly complex attacks, again without using force or resorting to antagonism. In this way, we argue that aikido practice carries important lessons on how to think about and do world politics. The following two sections continue to apply the aikido practice perspective to rethink the security dilemma and the way it infuses central IR thinking on conflict, cooperation and collaboration, as well as the self/other binary.

Conflict, cooperation, collaboration and the quest for harmony

As discussed earlier, the notion of an ever-present risk of conflict is at the heart of realist thinking on the security dilemma. The Eurocentric understanding of the security dilemma is heavily influenced by Thomas Hobbes (2006[1651]), who stipulated that the 'nature of war, consists not in actual fighting; but in the *known disposition* thereto' (p. 70, emphasis added). Realists assume that states rely on self-help to survive (e.g. Carr, 2001[1946]; Morgenthau, 1992[1948]), adopting strategies premised on internal and/or external balancing. Balance of power implies that the risk of conflict, and concomitant feelings of insecurity, can be mitigated when the balance between opposing forces is relatively even. Moreover, a distinct version of neorealism – hegemonic stability theory – stipulates that institutionalised forms of inter-state cooperation can emerge if the hegemon has an interest in them (Gilpin, 1981). Even the most institutionalised alliances are understood as inherently unstable, however, and prone to wither away as soon as underlying power relations change (Mearsheimer, 2001). Since no state can depend on another to guarantee its survival, 'rational mistrust' is in the final analysis inescapable.

Liberalism in IR, especially the neoliberal institutionalist strand, makes quite different assumptions about the propensities for conflict and cooperation in a state of anarchy. It relaxes the realist assumption that states aspire to relative gains from cooperation and assumes that they care more about absolute gains (Keohane and Martin, 1995). In contrast to the Hobbesian logic of rationalised mistrust, neoliberal institutionalism owes more to the Kantian notion of rationality. In Immanuel Kant's (1927 [1795]: 40) words, collective action to achieve a common good (e.g. a constitution, a state or perhaps even peace among

states) is possible even for ‘a nation of devils’ as long as they are intelligent and self-interested. Hence, the configuration of preferences through the involvement of new ideas, domestic policymaking or international regimes and institutions matters just as much, if not more, than relative military strength (e.g. Ikenberry, 1998; Keohane, 1984; Moravcsik, 1997). However, even if interdependence between states is possible, it is potentially just as conflict prone a situation as the more unregulated state of anarchy, albeit defined more by the use of non-military instruments (Keohane and Nye, 1977: 11–19).

Realist and liberal scholars thus ultimately agree that rational actors seek to secure their survival but disagree on *how* they can achieve this goal and what courses of action are available to them. Other scholars drawing on globalist understandings suggest that human nature is basically benign. Apart from conflict between enemies and cooperation among rivals, they also see collaboration among friends as possible (Turner, 1998), and as something that could give rise to ‘a positive global identity’ (Falk, 1987: 15). However, these distinctions are less useful from the perspective of aikido practice, which signifies an aspiration to transcend them in a quest for harmony. As we have seen, however, harmony is neither exclusive to aikido, nor absent from existing IR theory. Realist Hans J. Morgenthau (1992[1948]: 35–36), for example, associates the quest for ‘harmony among nations’ with a liberal understanding of international politics. According to him, liberals believe that the international spread of democracy, constitutionalism and a market economy can achieve harmony. As a liberal, however, Robert O. Keohane (1984) suggests that ‘Where harmony reigns, cooperation is unnecessary’ (p. 51). Since cooperation depends on a negotiation between actors who attempt to wield power over each other in order to secure narrow self-interests, and since power relations become entrenched in various cooperative arrangements, we agree more with Keohane’s remark. Furthermore, cooperation and even friendly collaboration among states is never open-ended and all-embracing; much like Robert W. Cox’s (1981) critical understanding of theory, they are ‘always *for* someone and *for* some purpose’ (p. 128, emphases in original), which means that others are excluded. They thus reproduce security dilemmas and are inevitably reactive to actual, potential and latent conflicts.

While recognising the constant risk of conflicts, tensions and insecurities, aikido teachings are agnostic about whether humans can transcend this predicament once and for all. Harmony in aikido does not emerge through stipulation or following the violent annihilation of conflicts and tensions. Nor is it the product of cooperative or collaborative arrangements. Instead, aikido practice is based on the embodied experience that some transcendence is possible in the limited settings in which attacks can and sometimes do occur. Here, harmonious relations are characterised by continuous efforts to live with and unify imminent insecurities. As Yoshigasaki (2002) explains, ‘Real harmony exists only within your perception, so all you can do is to create harmony and keep it in every circumstance of your daily life’ (p. 58). According to Tohei (1966), the fundamental question in aikido is whether it is ‘possible for one not to fight while all . . . others are fighting’ (p. 36). Rather than just reacting to conflicts after they have occurred, the goal of aikido practice is thus to ‘create a new situation in which the attack does not harm you’ (Yoshigasaki, 2015: 68), or indeed in which attacks do not happen. This sounds similar to realist Wolfers’ (1952) suggestion that ‘Efforts have to be made toward the goal of removing incentives to attack’ (p. 497).

If attacks still happen, moreover, aikido techniques aim to neutralise them without applying force or harming the attacker unnecessarily. Aikido is often described as a peaceful martial art that focuses on self-defence, but this is only correct if the self to be defended is defined so broadly and inclusively that it includes all living things, including actual and potential attackers. This means that aikido teachings provide not only a new perspective on conflict, cooperation and collaboration in IR, but also a way to rethink the relationship between self and other.

The self/other binary and the quest for oneness

Constructivist, poststructuralist and other critical IR theories provide excellent tools for analysing how conflict can become intersubjectively regarded as inevitable, and cooperation constructed as the best self-interested actors can hope to achieve. An important concept in such analysis is identity construction, where the identity of the self is seen as co-constituted with the other's difference. To facilitate the construction of the self as the 'good' but insecure 'home' that needs protection, the other tends to be constructed as 'foreign', a 'threat', 'the enemy' or simply 'bad' (e.g. Campbell, 1998 [1992]; Hansen, 2006). The self's ontological dependence on the other is at the heart of the security dilemma understood as a social or discursive construct.

The goal of aikido practice, in contrast, is not to analyse self/other distinctions, but to learn how to live with never-ending tensions and insecurities – and sometimes to deal with the unpredictable reality of an attack – in ways that go some way towards transcending the self/other binary. Aikido practice shares this ambition with some constructivist work. Arash Abizadeh (2005), for example, notes that while

collective identities often do constitute themselves in contrast to an external other . . . this is a contingent empirical fact . . . [and] to reify it is to bar the possibility of overcoming the current anticosmopolitan order on the mistaken grounds that it is conceptually or metaphysically impossible to do so. (p. 46)

While the kind of transcendence that constructivists have in mind clearly goes beyond a liberal notion of cooperation, the former might still emerge as an effect of the latter (Berenskoetter, 2010). Perhaps more in line with the globalist notion of collaboration, constructivists have referred to collective identity in terms of 'community' (Wendt, 1994: 384), or 'we-ness' (Adler and Barnett, 1998: 7–8), and some express hope that it could generate peaceful relations between states (Berenskoetter, 2010).

Critical constructivists and poststructuralists, however, have criticised the notion that collective identity 'can bring the relationship between self and other to its logical conclusion' (Rumelili, 2004: 32) and help transcend self/other relations. To them, uncertainties, contradictions and threats in the form of otherness – a 'constitutive lack' – are not only ever-present, but what makes it possible to aspire to an identity in the first place (e.g. Connolly, 1991; Huysmans, 1998). Nonetheless, some scholars are also interested in how to overcome the most adverse effects of identity construction. William Connolly (1991: 4–9, 64–81, 124), for instance, wonders if one day it might be possible to construct identity without demonising others. To be 'true to difference', explains Peter

Digeser (1992), is ‘to be reluctant to construe what is different as a failure or as an evil or as something to be reformed’ (p. 998). Jef Huysmans (1998) agrees that we have ‘to mediate our relations to uncertainties, paradoxes and ambivalence in a peaceful way’ (p. 248). In fact, several poststructuralist and postcolonial scholars emphasise the challenge of harbouring ambivalence (e.g. Rossdale, 2015; Untalan, 2020; Vieira, 2018). John Cash (2013) states that such an ambition can generate ‘constructions of self and other that are multifaceted and reparative’ (p. 119), and promote ‘reconciliation with both the stranger within and the imagined-as-other’ as well as an ‘ethic of care and concern’ (p. 120).

Aikido practice is premised on a similar ethos of tolerance of and curiosity about uncertainty and ambivalence. As such, it offers ways to mitigate ontological insecurities and securitisation practices (see also Browning and Joenniemi, 2017: 32). Aikido masters advise against the designation of threats, enemies and allies, but also, as Yoshigasaki (2002) notes, against thinking in terms of friends: ‘If you accept the concept of friendship, you will also accept the concept of the enemy’ (p. 69; see also Tohei, 2001: 41). The distinction between friend and foe, or self and other, is not only unhelpful, but – in the words of Ueshiba – a chimera to be transcended in aspiration for oneness with ‘the universe’ (Stevens, 2013[1993]: 29). As Tohei (1978) explains, ‘the universal is absolute in its oneness, but its manifestation is a world of dualism’ (p. 22). The logic of ‘oneness’ diverges from that of ‘we-ness’; whereas the latter implies the familiar idea that one plus one is two, the former is based on the notion that one plus one is ceaselessly striving to become one.

According to Tohei (2001), the literal meaning of aikido is the ‘way to union with the Ki of the universe’ (p. 41). ‘Ai’ (合) stands for ‘union’ or ‘unification’ and ‘Do’ (道) is ‘way’ or ‘path’, but what exactly is ‘Ki’ (氣)? Tohei explains, ‘Ki is something impossible to find, mysterious and incomprehensible’. Ki can be translated as ‘particle’ and the character is used to conceptualise such intangible phenomena as ‘feeling’ (*kimochi*), ‘popularity’ (*ninki*), ‘weather’ (*tenki*), ‘bravery’ (*yūki*), ‘electricity’ (*denki*) and ‘air’ (*kūki*), just to mention a few examples. Tohei (2001) asks, ‘How can you become one with something that you cannot grasp?’ Aikido teachings advocate a spirit of continuous investigation, self-reflection or meditation – both *shūchūhō* (集中法), which is premised on concentration and centring one’s mind; and *kakudaihō* (拡大法), which is the other side of the same coin and means expanding one’s mind. The former is based on mathematics of division. Tohei (2001) explains,

If you begin with the number 1, it can be reduced by 1/2. Yet this half is still a unit, which can be further subdivided by 1/2 without end, never reaching zero. . . . Anything that exists can be reduced to infinitesimal particles and still exist, never really ceasing to exist. I define the universe as an infinite gathering of infinitely small particles. (p. 42)

From the viewpoint of the large and sophisticated literature on meditation, this may sound simplistic, but, as we understand it, *shūchūhō* implies the continuous examination and division of increasingly miniscule questions, tensions and contradictions within ourselves. As a practice, it is characterised by the humble realisation that there is always something unclear – hence, *ki* – beyond that which we may think we already know. As a

result of such a centring of one's mind, it may also become possible to pinpoint one's 'own faults ahead of time and apologise to . . . [an] opponent before a quarrel can get started' (Tohei, 1978: 107). As Yoshigasaki explains, 'Realising that others are wrong has no bearing on one's own life . . . it is more important to realise that "I am wrong." Then my life can change' (Yoshigasaki, 2002: 55). Similarly, Ueshiba (1992) wrote that the goal is 'to defeat the mind of contention that we harbour within' (p. 63). If we strive to do that, 'others lose their attacking minds', and the attack stops before it has even begun (Yoshigasaki, 2015: 74).

Kakudaidō, in contrast, is based on mathematics of multiplication and means doubling 1, so that it becomes 2 and then 4, and 8 and onwards – again without ever becoming fully complete. Turning the mind-set of investigation outwards like this means continuously examining and embracing increasingly remote questions, tensions and contradictions. The mind is again directed at the constantly changing limits of one's own perception and imagination. One thing that is again unclear – and therefore part of *ki* – are the minds of actual and potential attackers, and the challenge is to try to put oneself in their place (Tohei, 2001: 90). This may share some similarities with the kind of 'self-reflexive interrogative processes' or 'perpetual self-reflection' that some critical IR scholarship advances as a method for overcoming self/other binaries (Eberle, 2019: 253; Mälksoo, 2015: 231). However, it is important to beware of pseudo-understanding and pseudo-self-insight, which is obviously easy to conflate with self-reflexivity (Hagström, 2021: 334–335; Inayatullah, 2011: 7–8). Yoshigasaki (2002) notes, 'Respect means to understand that you *do not* understand others' (p. 55, emphasis added). More concretely, he encourages the practice of listening: 'When you listen to somebody, you unconsciously put your mind where the talker's mind is. . . . When your minds are together you will naturally lead the talker. So listening is leading' (Yoshigasaki, 2002: 86). In this way, *kakudaihō* entails nurturing a spirit of empathy and a practice of selfless care – 'of loving and protecting all things' (Tohei, 1978: 21) – including potential and actual attackers. Ueshiba called on aikido practitioners to 'Envelop adversaries with love . . . and efface the boundary between self and other' (Stevens, 2013[1993]: 29) – a statement that we interpret as similarly premised on expanding one's mind and care.

Based on these discussions, we argue that *empathy* and *selfless care* are intrinsic to aikido practice. Recent work on emotions in IR, especially in relation to the security dilemma, stresses that empathy can be understood as both cognitive (i.e. understanding others' feelings) and affective (i.e. feeling for others; Baker, 2019). Here, we understand empathy in a similar way to Liz Yeomans (2016), namely as 'a human concern for the other in order to understand experiences, feelings and situations that may be different from our own' (p. 71). Thus, empathy is 'a process that involves a temporary letting go of the self in order to inhabit or share the feeling world of the other' (Yeomans, 2016: 75). Existing research has argued that when promoted and institutionalised, empathy can help bring about reconciliation and provide an antidote to the fear, anger, resentment and hatred that are seen as driving violence and conflict (Bleiker and Hutchison, 2021; Crawford, 2014; Halpern and Weinstein, 2004). However, Neta C. Crawford cautions that 'it will be difficult to develop empathy between the leaders and peoples of states' (Crawford, 2014: 550). While this is arguably correct, aikido practice at least provides a method for fostering empathetic dispositions through the repeated enactment of selfless, caring acts, with

the hope that they will in turn help transform social practices. In aikido practice, such acts permeate a broad repertoire of techniques geared to neutralising potential and actual attackers in order to allow them to preserve their lives and sense of dignity.

To practice aikido in world politics

What if aikido practice became prevalent in world politics and large populations began to pursue it in earnest? In this thought experiment, *shūchūhō* and *kakudaihō* would become ubiquitous, and contribute to a fundamental shift in people's disposition towards difference, thereby affecting our collective consciousness. The implications are radical, as this would go some way to transforming world politics and IR theory as we have come to know them. While this scenario might be criticised for being too far removed from reality, it actually projects individual-level traits and behaviours on to collectivities in much the same way as many other IR theories (Mitzen, 2006: 351–353). Realism, for instance, understands, 'The behavior of the state as a self-seeking egoist . . . to be merely a reflection of the characteristics of the people that comprise the state' (Baylis and Smith, 2001: 147). If we take a pragmatist understanding of social change as our point of departure, moreover, it is hardly far-fetched to assume that the rapid spread of aikido practice among individuals could help to change behaviours and attitudes at the collective level. However, this scenario remains unlikely.

In his anti-pacifist treatise, John Lewis (1979[1940]) argued that the most certain way 'to get nowhere' is to demand 'nothing less than perfection' (p. 48). Hence, we suggest another, significantly less radical, scenario that is based on the assumption that everyone will *not* start practicing aikido in earnest. Moreover, even the aikido practice that occurs does not have to be perfect. In the spirit of *shūchūhō* and *kakudaihō*, mentioned earlier, and some pacifist thought, our proposal is simply 'heading in that direction' (Cady, 2010 [1989]: 145). Aikido is arguably also better equipped to escape another objection to pacifism – that hampering one's own ability to wage war puts potential aggressors in an advantageous position (Lewis, 1979[1940]; Orwell, 1942). While defined as the 'way of harmony/peace', aikido practice differs from strict versions of pacifism in the sense that it does not propose a method premised on the laying down of weapons.

However, since aikido practice aims to *affect change* in the relationship between self and other, and to create a situation in which attacks do not occur, it cannot escape power relations. Naomi Head (2016) has made the similar observation that empathy also 'contains within it the potential seeds of a hierarchical, asymmetrical relationship between the empathiser and the recipient' (p. 101). In aikido practice, however, power is exercised without the application of force, because force inevitably invites resistance. Even versions of power that are imagined to be relatively 'soft' rely on force. As Janice Bially Mattern (2005) has argued, 'soft power', for instance, is premised on 'representational force' and is defined by the self's capacity to get others to empathise and identify with it. In contrast, aikido practice strives to change the relationship between self and other by fostering the capacity of the *self* to live and unify – identify and empathise – with the other, and to selflessly care for it (see Hagström and Nordin, 2020: 518–520). This might not satisfy Head (2016), however, and she notes that the language of empathy 'may serve to "disempower people" by making interpretive claims regarding the experiences of

other', thereby constituting 'particular subject-positions whereby the weaker, more vulnerable, needy party receives a benevolent empathy from the stronger party' (p. 101). These are important reservations but, as mentioned earlier, with aikido practice premised on reciprocity and hybridity, power relations are not expected to become entrenched like this. Moreover, although it may be possible to understand real attackers as psychologically deficient (e.g. Bushman and Baumeister, 1998), they are hardly *just* weak and vulnerable when performing an attack. Notwithstanding, we must respect actual and potential attackers, and try to understand their direction and mind by putting ourselves in their place. Self and other never completely unite, however, but unification remains a continuing aspiration – one that is defined by humility and an investigative spirit directed towards understanding and absolving increasingly greater and lesser tensions and insecurities in oneself and in one's relationship with difference.

While lessons from aikido practice on how to escape the security dilemma in world politics could be operationalised in several different ways, we have chosen here to focus on strategies that conform to David A. Baldwin's four sets of policy instruments. Normally, policy instruments can be used both to increase or decrease tensions and to escalate or de-escalate conflicts. In this article, however, they are reconceptualised as means for transcending the security dilemma, at least to some extent. As such, they have been slightly reconfigured both to mirror the description of aikido practice and to account for our new understanding of power:

- *Symbolic instruments* refer to influence attempts that rely on discourse, narrative and framing (Baldwin, 2012: 275; Hagström, 2005: 401). We discuss the use of apologies as an example of a symbolic instrument.
- *Diplomatic instruments* refer to influence attempts that rely on negotiation and (diplomatic) representation (Baldwin, 2012, 275; Hagström, 2005: 402). Security cooperation is discussed as an example of a diplomatic instrument.
- *Economic instruments* refer to influence attempts that rely on 'resources which have a reasonable semblance of a market price in terms of money' (Baldwin, 1985: 13–14). Aid is used here to exemplify economic instruments.
- *Military instruments* refer to influence attempts that rely on weapons, but for the purpose of this article *not* on the use of threats, force or violence (Baldwin, 1985: 14, 2012: 175). We discuss international peacekeeping operations as an example of a military instrument.

We do not wish to argue that certain states and international actors are somehow unconsciously practicing aikido, nor that these four reconfigured policy instruments are in frequent use – or even that they are always effective when employed. Rather, we wish to show that such instruments are to some extent already employed in contemporary world politics. We thus hope to advance the debate on the security dilemma by suggesting that a lesson from aikido practice is that social change does not necessarily require a fundamental break with current conditions, which both pacifists and IR theorists often seem to assume. Instead, social change can build incrementally on the embodied experiences that our examples entail. For the same reason, we think that relevant examples do not necessarily have to be found outside of the imagined West. The essence of our thought

experiment is thus not to argue the need to learn from some marginalised or culturally bound source of knowledge, but to suggest that aikido has more universal value (Shahi, 2019; Shih and Hwang, 2018). In this way, we use aikido to apply a new perspective to what is in some ways already known, and draw inspiration from Yoshigasaki's (2015) suggestion that aikido practice strives to perfect certain elements that some of us 'are already doing in [our] daily life' (p. 63).

In the following, we present a few examples in relation to the four instruments that are more reminiscent of aikido practice and discuss how they differ from other examples that may appear similar but arguably resemble aikido practice to a lesser extent. This enables us to discuss historical instances where states and international actors managed to preempt, reduce or even overcome security dilemmas, in contrast to other instances where seemingly similar actions instead served to exacerbate or prolong such dynamics. This kind of boundary-drawing helps tease out even further how aikido practice in world politics might look.

A symbolic instrument: the use of apologies

Apologies might look like a perfect example of how aikido practice could help transcend the security dilemma by reconciling self and other. Yet, the existing literature lists apologies that not only failed to promote mutual understanding, reconciliation and peace, but actually added insult to injury (Kampf and Löwenheim, 2012: 44–45). Apologies arguably lack utility and may even prove counterproductive if they are selfish or interpreted as insincere, forced, long overdue, calculated or opportunistic, as ignoring the needs of the other, or as not clearly recognising accountability or transforming this into concrete action. Japanese Prime Minister Murayama Tomiichi's 1995 apology is often considered the 'gold standard' for a Japanese apology (Stockwin, 2016), or the best among the more than 50 apologies that Japanese leaders have issued in the post-war period for Japan's war of aggression and colonial rule in Asia in the 1930s and 1940s. Even so, it can be interpreted as selfish, not only for obscuring Japan's responsibility as an aggressor – stating that the war 'caused many people, both in Japan and abroad, great suffering and sorrow' (Murayama, 1995) – but also for boasting about Japan's attempts to heal relationships with neighbouring countries. It *accentuated* existing self/other dynamics by blaming *their* 'scars' for curbing *our* efforts directed at peace and reconciliation (Murayama, 1995). Furthermore, Murayama declared that Japan would establish an 'Asian Women's Fund' as an 'expression of atonement' and to support women forced into sexual slavery by the Japanese Imperial Army (Murayama, 1995). The fact that this private fund was set up to evade legal responsibility, however, was soon criticised and only seven South Korean women accepted an offer of compensation (Soh, 2001).

If an apology sincerely reflects the ambition to understand and reconcile with the other, however, it can go some way towards transcending the kind of self/other dynamics that are understood as driving security dilemmas. All things being equal, apologies that are spontaneous and specific, that recognise responsibility and culpability, and that express guilt and regret in a sincere and unreserved way, without requiring any quid pro quo measures, are more selfless and in line with aikido practice. German apologies for Nazi atrocities during and before the Second World War are arguably a case in point.

While West German apologies in the immediate aftermath of the war were also rather selfish in their focus on German suffering, the Mayor of West Berlin, Ernst Reuter, offered a remarkable apology at the Warsaw Ghetto memorial in 1952:

[W]e want to say that there are things which we are not permitted to forget, and which we do not want to forget. As Germans – I speak to you here as well as to my Jewish fellow countrymen as a German – we must not and we cannot forget the disgrace and shame that took place in our German name. (quoted in Lind, 2008: 109)

Reuter's statement was selfless in that it took responsibility for Nazi atrocities 'in our German name'. In the 1960s and 1970s, several important political speeches also admitted and atoned for past crimes, demonstrating a broader change in focus from the self to the other. This era peaked with the famous *Warschauer Kniefall* in 1970, in which Chancellor Willy Brandt visited the Warsaw Ghetto memorial and spontaneously fell to his knees, symbolically placing himself and Germany 'in a position of vulnerability and inferiority' (Wilson and Bleiker, 2014: 53) vis-à-vis the Jewish community. He later claimed that 'under the burden of millions of victims of murder, I did what human beings do when speech fails them' (Lind, 2008: 128). Brandt's apology stands out for its unre-served nature, acknowledgement of wrongfulness and expression of sincere regret. Over time, German apologies and soul-searching are perceived to have produced effects in that they 'facilitated reconciliation with its former enemies' (Lind, 2008: 102), thereby curbing security dilemma dynamics in Western Europe.

A diplomatic instrument: the use of security cooperation

It is not uncommon to think of diplomacy as an essentially peaceful exercise that is premised on the use of non-military means. Thus, it might also seem inherently aligned with aikido practice. However, such an interpretation would be mistaken since 'threatening, often by invoking military capabilities, is . . . inherent to all known diplomatic systems' (Neumann, 2012: 314). A common feature of diplomatic relations among states is security cooperation involving military forces (Gibler, 2008). Moreover, as military exchanges and exercises are carried out, they tend to reify notions of friendship and enmity, self and other, and thus serve to exacerbate security dilemmas around the world (Jervis, 1978). At the same time, security cooperation has also been conducted with the aim of easing tensions and building reciprocal relations among former adversaries, in a way more characterised by empathy and care. We highlight two examples – the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) and the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) – that can be said to represent two distinct approaches to security cooperation in Europe, arguing that one is more in line with aikido practice than the other.

After the end of the Cold War, NATO embarked on a process of enlargement to incorporate Central and Eastern European countries, and to engage non-members through initiatives such as the Partnership for Peace, albeit without addressing the underlying self/other dynamics particularly vis-à-vis Russia (Mälksoo, 2006). NATO members and partners conducted a number of joint military exercises, several of which Russia participated in. Given the history of rivalry and mistrust between NATO and Russia, this was

astonishing. However, in 2014, NATO decided to suspend all security cooperation with Russia in response to the latter's aggression against Ukraine and illegal annexation of Crimea. There were also indications that NATO–Russia cooperation had been hampered not only because of Russia's insistence on being treated as a great power, but also due to NATO's tendency to present itself as *the* model for security cooperation in Europe (Pouliot, 2010: 140). NATO's approach to security cooperation ultimately sought to make its partners and potential members 'achieve Western standards of liberal-democratic subjectivity' (Gheciu, 2008: 82). NATO's approach to building security by seeking to shape new and potential members in its own image points to a disposition of superiority that is hardly premised on continuous self-reflexivity, and the self's ability to empathise and identify with the other, and is thus alien to aikido practice.

The OSCE approach to security cooperation is different. With members in Europe, North America and Central Asia, including the United States and Russia, the OSCE stages activities ranging from arms control to border management, counterterrorism and security sector reform. Its approach to security cooperation focuses on confidence building among members and partners. OSCE exercises often involve non-military personnel, such as police and border guards, and aim to foster shared understandings around security challenges. From the perspective of aikido practice, it is particularly interesting to note that the OSCE aspires to build security in a region 'from Vancouver to Vladivostok' by including former adversaries without necessarily assuming that this requires a strong collective identity (Adler, 2011). The OSCE's 'comprehensive security approach' has given it 'a nuanced relationship with Europe's security challenges, allowing it to focus on a broader range of underlying sources of conflict and violence' (Galbreath, 2019: 80). Its focus on practical security cooperation and involvement of local actors and communities are more reminiscent of aikido practice. Most importantly, the practice that the OSCE seeks to uphold – through regular notification of military activities, exchanges of military information on defence planning and budgets, and observations and visits to military facilities – resembles aikido practice in that it seeks to foster reciprocal dispositions through recurrent interactions.

An economic instrument: the use of aid

The explicit aim of much aid provision is to enhance security by helping to free developing countries from poverty. However, existing research contends that aid often does more harm than good (Williamson, 2009). One underlying problem is that a lot of aid is driven by selfish motives rather than selfless ones, acting as a 'bribe' or a bargaining chip (Heinrich, 2013). First, aid is not always distributed to tackle poverty, but to serve the donor's more limited strategic, political or economic interests. US aid patterns in the Middle East, for example, have been analysed as a function of the country's interests in the region (Alesina and Dollar, 2000). Riddell (2008: 5) describes the large increases in US aid in recent years to countries such as Pakistan, Afghanistan and Iraq in this way. Anderson (1999), moreover, claims that aid provision during conflict, such as US aid to the Middle East, can produce adverse effects and 'reinforce, exacerbate, and prolong the conflict' (p. 1). Second, aid provision often fails to consider recipient-specific circumstances and conditions (Easterly, 2006), and such lack of care can prove

counterproductive. Few aid projects are flawless, and many have been criticised. Recent research on public support for the provision of foreign aid moreover suggests that while individuals often 'feel the pain of others', such feelings are easily influenced by various cognitive and emotional cues (Bayram and Holmes, 2020).

Nonetheless, some aid provision is reminiscent of aikido practice in that it is more other-oriented and characterised by a greater sense of care. To show care means to be keenly attentive to the other and its specific circumstances, the process and the wider context. In the context of aid, care can be operationalised through the implementation of mechanisms for feedback and accountability, so that self-investigative donors continuously analyse the consequences of their actions to ensure that no harm is done (Easterly, 2006: 13–14). One example is arguably the United Nations Children's Fund's (UNICEF) humanitarian relief activities in Lebanon during the civil war of 1975–1990. Because of its long-standing presence in the country, UNICEF managed to draw on a broad network and unparalleled logistics capacity, demonstrating the importance of knowledge of the local context. Several activities gained UNICEF domestic recognition and public credibility. It mobilised tanker trucks in the summer heat of June 1982 to provide the population and hospitals with water. In 1987, when UNICEF undertook a nationwide vaccination programme, it considered the local circumstances by cooperating with non-governmental organisations (NGOs), churches and mosques aligned with different factions. This made it possible for UNICEF to transport immunisation teams safely through dangerous areas. In 1989, it set out to ensure the regular supply of 44 essential drugs through cooperation with local NGOs, which helped re-establish previously existing networks of clinics and dispensaries (Anderson, 1999: 95–96). Also in 1989, UNICEF began to distribute the *SAWA* newsletter (meaning 'together' in Arabic), providing children living in shelters with stories and facts, expressing a shared identity and heritage, and promoting a message of peace and reconciliation (Anderson, 1999: 96–99). Children were allegedly enthusiastic and, as a continuation, UNICEF established Summer Peace Camps to which children from all sides of the conflict were invited. Summer camps had been supported by different NGOs and civic associations before the war, an idea UNICEF took and renewed. The children could be safely transported throughout the country because of UNICEF's widespread cooperation with all factions. The programme grew and by September 1991 had reached 100,000 participants (Anderson, 1999: 99–101). The camps encouraged mutual understanding and tolerance not only among the children, but also among the camp leaders who came from different factions. They therefore helped to sever previously entrenched self/other distinctions and to de-escalate tensions in Lebanon, quite in line with aikido practice.

A military instrument: the use of peacekeeping operations

Military force can be deployed in line with aikido practice if it is used to protect not only oneself narrowly defined, but also attackers and potential attackers in a spirit of empathy and selfless care, and to create situations in which conflicts do not occur. Examples can be found in the field of international peacekeeping operations (PKOs), although far from all PKOs meet these criteria. The work of Séverine Autesserre (2017) shows that many PKOs rely on 'unsupported and flawed assumptions' (p. 126) that make them ineffective and even counterproductive, not least the notion that 'insiders lack the capacity and

knowledge to resolve their own predicaments' (Autesserre, 2017). For instance, some PKOs and peacebuilding efforts have been criticised for reproducing cultural and racial stereotypes and for promoting a 'Western', liberal model of politics (Chandler, 2010; Richmond, 2004). However, PKOs that combine the use of military force with careful consideration of the needs, perceptions and shared experiences of local communities better resemble aikido practice. Below, we discuss two examples that demonstrate the limits and possibilities of applying military force in PKOs from the perspective of aikido.

The UN missions in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) are among the UN's largest and most expensive to date (Coleman, 2017). The conflict in the DRC dates back at least to the time of independence from Belgium in 1960. It has become highly complex, shaped over decades by military coups, interventions, civil wars and secessionist dynamics. A peace accord was signed in 2003 and elections have been held – most recently in 2018 – but the DRC remains plagued by instability. Building on extensive fieldwork, Autesserre (2010) shows how UN operations in the country were designed according to the notion that violence and conflict require top-down solutions. UN personnel had a little knowledge of local or historical circumstances and were influenced by assumptions that tensions at the national and the regional levels determined local dynamics rather than the other way around (Autesserre, 2010: 45). This lack of understanding and attention seems to have contributed greatly to the failure of the UN operations: 'because the causes of violence varied so greatly between and within each province, peacebuilders should have tailored their strategies to each specific context, instead of using a blanket approach for all areas' (Autesserre, 2010: 178).

In contrast, the United Nations Transition Assistance Group (UNTAG) in Namibia was set up to monitor the peace process in the country and the elections that were intended to end South Africa's rule in the country. The UN mission was launched in 1989 and ended in March 1990, shortly before Namibia became an independent state. Around 50 (not necessarily like-minded) countries contributed military and civilian personnel to UNTAG, including Canada, France, Germany, the United Kingdom and Yugoslavia. Finland, Kenya and Malaysia provided infantry battalions and both the Soviet Union and the United States provided air support. UNTAG's success was allegedly due to its personnel's close contact with the local population, which allowed them to 'accurately [assess] problems, and [deal] with them through political means by setting up mechanisms to decrease tension' (Howard, 2002: 128). The UNTAG mission in Namibia can be said to resemble aikido practice in the sense that recurrent meetings and discussions between different actors created an atmosphere in which threats could be neutralised before they escalated. In this way, it helped to bring about a peaceful resolution to the conflict between Namibia and South Africa.

Conclusion

Inspired by research that has sought to bring insights to IR theory from knowledge traditions, experiences and histories around the world in a more 'post-imperial' way (Murray, 2020), this article has performed a thought experiment based on a pragmatist reading of how aikido practice might be applied to world politics, and with what implications. While a scenario in which people around the world would start to practice something akin to aikido in their interactions with each other is not wholly inconceivable, our

thought experiment is based on the far less radical assumption that aikido practice will be rarer and performed less perfectly. This has allowed a discussion of actual examples of symbolic, diplomatic, economic and military policy instruments that can be said to *resemble* aikido practice, and that could help move the relationship between self and other in a more peaceful and harmonious direction.

By engaging with aikido teachings, juxtaposing them with various IR theories and reflecting on how aikido practice might instil social change, the article has thus sought to advance the debate on how the security dilemma can be addressed and dealt with in a way that does not simply reproduce it. As such, our findings emphasise the importance of IR theory continuing to engage with traditions of thought that are based on the embodied experience of human collectivities, past and present, and that do not just reproduce the stylised ways of thinking about conflict, cooperation and collaboration, or the self/other binary, which most theoretical perspectives in the field tend to do.

The most important lesson is that states, inter-state organisations and people are *already* acting in ways reminiscent of aikido practice, but seldom consistently or sufficiently self-consciously. As we move forward, the challenge will thus be to encourage the protagonists in world politics to *nurture* empathetic disposition and extend selfless care, including towards actual and potential aggressors. If this is done in the self-reflexive spirit of *shūchūhō* and *kakudaihō*, then actors might be able to take further concrete steps on the path to peace and harmony in world politics.

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Note

1. As Japanese loan words, we write aikido, budo, dojo, and so on as they usually appear in English, and do not mark long vowel sounds with a macron (i.e. aikidō, budō, dōjō, etc.). We also write the names of well-known Japanese aikido masters and organisations as they

are conventionally written in English without marking long vowel sounds. Other Japanese terms and names are transcribed in accordance with the Hepburn system, marking long vowel sounds with a macron.

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