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BUILDING STRATEGIC TRUST IN ASIA

How to Trust Japan

by

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What is Value Diplomacy ?

After the end of the World War II in 1945, Japan has virtually stepped down from the stage of power politics, accepting the two basic pillars of its foreign policy; the postwar constitution (particularly its article nine) and the U.S.-Japan security treaty. Both of these schemes have fundamentally constrained Japan's freedom of action in the domain of international security, rendering the substance of Japan's foreign policy a de-facto middle-power diplomacy. This diplomatic style in fact allowed Japan to focus on the postwar economic recovery, which eventually proved to be the key to Japan's rise as an economic power. Moreover, even upon achieving its economic status, Japan maintained a low key posture in dealing with political and security issues, and concentrated on cultivating economic and cultural relations with Asia and the world.

Japan's economic input in the modernization programs of the Park Chung-hee regime since the mid-1960s was significant in the eventual economic success of South Korea. Japan's official development assistance and foreign direct investment in Southeast Asia helped accelerate the economic integration of the region. Japan's full-scale support for the ambitious open-door and reform policies of Deng Xiaoping since the end of the 1970s was not insignificant in the eventual rise of China. In a nutshell, Japan played a critical role in constructing the foundation of the Asian century.

These good old-days for Japan are now clearly over. South Korea has virtually caught up with or even surpassed Japan in some of the economic and cultural dimensions, while Southeast Asia has been advancing toward forming its own political, economic and cultural communities. The impact of the rise of China now goes beyond the region and extends into various corners of the globe. As a result, Japan is the

process of soul-searching for new mission and role of Asian diplomacy.

Some may say that value diplomacy is it. Value diplomacy of the Japanese government in recent years, however, is a unique combination of two different considerations where a coherent theme of Asian diplomacy is lacking. The first aspect dates back to the end of the Cold War, when the Japanese government started a serious search of a new rationale of the U.S.-Japan alliance in the absence of the Soviet Union as a major threat. The protection and promotion of universal values were the answer. As such, the main focus of this new foreign policy orientation is global rather than regional, sustained by the self-recognition of the central policy makers and bureaucrats that Japan is and should be a global actor.

The second thread of value diplomacy originates from the mid-1990s when Taiwan embarked upon the democratization/Taiwanization process with the strong leadership of Lee Deng-hui, which China attempted to intimidate with a series of military exercises. From this time on, typical anti-China conservative politicians and opinion-makers in Japan have started to emphasize democracy in their foreign policy advocacies. It is obvious that in the backgrounds are their somewhat naïve pro-Taipei and anti-Beijing sentiments.

Universal values including democracy and human rights are of course very important, perhaps even central in the promotion of peace and stability in the new Asian century. Previously, Japan was perhaps correct in asserting that economic development should precede political democratization in Asia. Then, the critical question now and ahead in the Asia century is how universal values would fit the new Asian context.

Here, the concept of middle-power cooperation should provide a clue. Of particular importance for Japan is to recognize its regional profile as truly an equal partner with other Asian countries in the Asian century. The equal partnership with ASEAN, for instance, was the key element of Japanese Southeast Asian diplomacy already in the 1970s. Today, the equality should have become even more conspicuous between Japan, on the one hand, and many other Asian countries, on the other.

Of equal or more importance for middle-power cooperation with value orientation is to maintain and cultivate various channels of communication with the Chinese civil society. As implied above, the current Shinzo Abe administration of Japan inclines toward the "geopolitical use of values." Preoccupation with China is also an important breeding ground of regressive attitudes toward the history problem among some of the key members of the administration, while anti-Japan sentiments in China

are also quite deep. Here, an emotionally-charged vicious cycle gets only exacerbated between the two societies.

As an ultimate security guarantor, Asia will continue to need the United States. The merit of middle-power cooperation, however, lies elsewhere: one of its main objectives is to co-exist with China in the Asian century.

What is "Normal" Japan?

After the end of the Cold War, many had thought that the time of traditional balance of power game was over. Japan, too, attempted to reestablish its international presence responding to the new trend of multilateral cooperation in building a new international order in Asia and the world. For this purpose, Tokyo tried hard to settle the history problems with its neighbors in the 1990s, through the prime ministers' statements, summit meetings and joint communiqué, participation in the ASEAN process, parliamentary resolutions, and the establishment of the Asian Women's Fund.

Eventually, however, the memory of these serious attempts has faded away, after being rejected as "cosmetic" by Japan's immediate neighbors. What remained among those who worked so conscientiously in the 1990s was indeed a "trauma," more than a mere sense of "fatigue." Quite ironically and unexpectedly, this has led to the emergence of a social and political atmosphere in Japan where conservative and inward-looking views on the history question and diplomatic agenda have gradually expanded grounds in domestic debates and politics.

In retrospect, the harsh clash between the right-leaning conservatism and the left-leaning liberalism was not any news in the postwar Japanese society and politics. During much of the postwar years, it essentially remained a domestic contest where the liberal left enjoyed the upper hand. During the last two decades, however, this domestic cleavage has become entangled in a vicious cycle particularly with China and Korea, where the emotional clash over the history and territorial problems has continued to provide fuel for Japanese conservative arguments. This in turn clearly aggravated the psychology of the Asian victims of the Japanese military aggression in the past, further fueling the vicious cycle.

This emotional vicious cycle in turn convinced many observers, quite wrongly I should stress, that the rise of conservatism encouraged Japan's shift toward a "normal" country since the end of the Cold War. This has created a deep gap between the external understanding and the internal reality concerning some of the important changes in

Japanese foreign policy. For instance, the historic dispatch of Self Defense Forces as part of the international peace-keeping operations in Cambodia in the mid-1990s was nothing but an embodiment of liberal-internationalism explicit in Japanese thinking and intention after the end of the Cold War. Many external observers, however, perceived this as a critical sign of "normalizing" Japan that had begun to revert to the conservative inclination for power politics.

Also, many Chinese analysts appear to be convinced that the U.S.-Japan alliance ceased to be a "cork" in the bottle and has now become an "incubator" encouraging and satisfying Tokyo's thirst for defense buildup and enhanced military capabilities. In the Japanese calculation, however, the logic is exactly the opposite: Tokyo does need the alliance with the United States, precisely because its own self efforts would not mean much unless tightly institutionalized in the alliance set up. Resource shortage and self-restraint are still the fundamental premises of Japan's traditional security policy.

An apparently aggravating vicious cycle over the territorial disputes in recent years reveals a similar problem with the prevailing understanding of a "normal" Japan. Quite contrary to the widely-held belief, the hard fact is that, among the contesting countries, Japan has followed the most benign territorial policies over the contested islands with its neighbors for a long time. This should be obvious if one reflects upon and compares actual policies and behaviors of the countries concerned over the last half century. For the Japanese, this is not surprising, because traditional security issues including national sovereignty and territoriality have long ceased to be central in diplomatic agenda of Japan.

This sharp twist between Japanese realities and suspicions of its neighbors regarding the liberal and internationalist nature of Japanese diplomacy has complicated actual security developments in East Asia. Stimulated in this vicious cycle is the somewhat anachronistic emphasis on traditional security issues, most notably territorial disputes, by policy-makers of the countries concerned. In this vicious cycle, Chinese preoccupation with these traditional values stand out, where the national leaders and the majority of the population appear unanimous in believing that territorial issues should constitute "core" national interests. In the Japanese debate as well, equally anachronistic arguments on national defense and territorial disputes are on the rise.

One of the most difficult aspects of the new Asian Century, therefore, is this mix of still lingering traditional security issues and the long-term evolution of an

international order premised on post-modern, liberal and internationalist values.

To repeat, a “normal” Japan in the coming Asian Century will remain liberal-internationalist. This natural and inevitable course of evolution of Japan reflects two fundamental factors; the core national interests and the dominant values deep-rooted in its civil society. Japanese core national interests toward the new century, where the creation of a culturally-rich aging society is a natural goal of the nation, will not be achieved without enmeshing its national strategy with the emergence of stable, prosperous and civilized Asia. Although Japan’s identity is complex, diplomacy of a “normal” middle power, which Japan unconsciously but in fact has aspired to achieve, is essentially internationalist, whose mission is to contribute to the creation of a liberal international order.

What is Middle-Power Diplomacy?

After the end of the Cold War, there emerged many analyses arguing that Japan would finally cast off the postwar constraints on its security policy deriving from the peace constitution and the U.S.-Japan alliance. There was a neo-realist prediction that the structural pressure created by the demise of the Cold War would inevitably force Japan to go nuclear. Many observers interpreted Japan's wish to become a “normal country” as an aspiration to play a “normal military role” in the game of power politics. Not a small number of people have come to believe that Japanese security policies have been changing in the direction of reverting to those of a traditional great power. This view on a “normal” Japan has thus become a conventional wisdom in many parts of the world.

During the last two decades, however, none of these predictions has come to pass. The U.S.-Japan alliance was strengthened rather than weakened, rendering the point about Japan's military independence virtually meaningless in the evolving structure of strategic interdependence in the alliance arrangements. The fundamental motive behind the participation of Japanese Self Defense Forces (SDF) in the United Nations peace keeping operations (PKO) and other international peace activities has been internationalism rather than nationalism, and their activities are still being guided and constrained by the norm and the legal framework embedded in the peace constitution. Japan's efforts in the domain of national defense have in fact been upgraded, but the constitutional constraints remain intact and many of these military efforts are closely institutionalized in the U.S.-Japan alliance setup. If judged according

to actual behaviors, therefore, Japanese security policies including changes in recent years are still much closer to those of a middle power, and virtually have no element of diplomacy conducted by a strategically independent great power such the United States and China.

The gap between the conventional wisdom about a “normal” Japan and the reality of Japanese security policies gives rise to a couple of puzzles. First, why and how has the conventional wisdom on a “normal” Japan been so tenacious despite its obvious failure in explicating changes in Japanese security policies after the end of the Cold War? Second, how have aspects of change and elements of continuity in Japanese security policies been balancing out amid significant transformation of external security environments and domestic politics?

Regarding the first puzzle, backgrounds are naturally complex including the psychological setup of Asian and other victims by Japanese military aggression in the past. But, most importantly, the rise of regressive nationalism among conservative politicians and opinion-makers in Japan has blurred the eyes of many observers, misguiding them to believe that this nationalist trend is guiding the changes in Japanese security policies. As a result, these views have tended to dismiss the internationalist elements in Japanese policies, and jump at a typical conspiracy theory, interpreting elements of internationalism as cosmetic and as containing “hidden” nationalist intentions.

If this is the case, then unraveling the second puzzle becomes all the more important in understanding the substance and nature of the newly evolving security policies of Japan in recent years. Here, it is important to astutely interpret the meaning and the function of regressive nationalism in transforming domestic politics and the policy making process in Japan. In brief, its influence is real in confusing domestic politics as well as external perceptions, but not in the way implied by the above-mentioned conventional wisdom. Particularly since the second half of the 1990s, a new set of factors have begun to complicate Japanese debates and domestic politics over security policies, i.e., threat perceptions of China and North Korea. As a result, Japanese debates and politics have begun to assume a nationalistic tone, and have become increasingly detached from a truly strategic debate on security and defense policies.

The recent argument of revisiting the question of the right of collective self-defense is a case in point. The government has been saying that as a sovereign nation Japan has the right but constitutionally cannot exercise it. In essence, the right

is an important tool to strengthen the alliance with the United States, thus consolidating the foundation of postwar security policy. The external observers are totally confused, because Japanese regressive nationalists also support Japan exercising the right. An important fact, however, is that by exercising the right Japan would become a much closer ally of the United States in the direction of becoming a full-fledged middle power. Recognition of this deep reality is missing in both external perceptions and Japanese debates.

The intensifying territorial dispute with China is also an issue of exactly the same nature. The value system of Japanese civil society is virtually post-modern, where territorial integrity is of secondary importance. This is why the Japanese government has exercised much restraint toward the territorial disputes throughout much of the postwar years. Now, regressive nationalists have begun to attack these traditional policies of self-restraint openly, confusing both external perceptions and Japanese decision-making process.

In both cases, a trend created by regressive nationalism is a source of confusion, but no indication of Japan's new strategic thinking or choice. The critical task for Japan now and ahead is to match its strategy explicitly with "middle power internationalism" amply demonstrated by its actual behaviors and rooted in its societal values. This is not the task that Japan alone can tackle. The virtue of a middle power is internationalism, where cooperation with like-minded countries toward strengthening a liberal and open international order is the key in any aspect of strategy.

*I have expressed these views in my previous contributions to East Asia Forum (<http://www.eastasiaforum.org>).