

Public Diplomacy and the Evolution of U.S.-Japan Relations



March 2018

Yasushi Watanabe



THE TRAJECTORY OF JAPAN'S PUBLIC DIPLOMACY IN THREE PHASES

Phase I: 1945-1950s

Right after the World War II, Japan faced the challenge of transforming its image as a militaristic aggressor into that of a democratic, peace-loving nation. Japan's public diplomacy avoided material likely to arouse associations with the way of the samurai and with other elements of Japan's feudal past. Instead, it highlighted benign facets of Japanese culture, such as the tea ceremony and ikebana flower arranging. Ikebana has remained to this day an emphasis in Japan's diplomatic PR, as seen in photographic calendars published and distributed annually.

The government provided comparatively little support for overseas Japanese-language education until recent years. That was in deference to bad memories of imperial Japan's imposition of its language on its colonies. Also, Japan in the early postwar years lacked much latitude for the exercise of public diplomacy. Two obvious constraints in the era, which coincided with the Allied occupation, were Japan's shaky political foundation and a general shortage of resources.

Phase II: 1960s-80s

The U.S.-Japan trade imbalance had become a contentious issue by the early 1960s, and the U.S. government had clamped limits on imports of Japanese textiles. U.S.-Japanese relations would suffer another blow in 1971 in the form of a series of “Nixon shocks.” Then-president Richard Nixon, without consulting his foreign counterparts, ended the convertibility between the dollar and gold and, also without prior consultation with the United States’ allies, announced plans to visit China. In 1972, Japan’s parliament passed the bill that provided for establishing the Japan Foundation in the name of promoting mutual understanding. It was also during this period that Japan’s economic inroads in Southeast Asia had exacerbated latent ill will. People had come to regard Japanese as “economic animals.” A popular epithet was “banana:” yellow (Asian) on the outside but white (Western) on the inside. The animosity had boiled over into a vitriolic boycott of Japanese goods in Thailand in 1972. Southeast Asia also became a focus of Japanese public diplomacy in the late 1970s on par with the United States.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs even published a condensed version in English of Chie Nakane’s “Tateshakai no Ningenkankei” (human relations in vertical society) and distributed it in the United States, Southeast Asia and elsewhere. Japan’s public diplomacy became more assertive but thus remained reactive in its nature.

Phase III: 1990s-present

Calls arose in the United States and Europe in the 1980s for Japan to shoulder more responsibility as a member of the global community. Pressure mounted for Japan to provide support for multilateral peacekeeping operations and similar undertakings and to expand its government development assistance

and other economic assistance for developing nations. Japan’s burgeoning trade surplus with the United States had become an especially vexing problem. The nations’ mutual-security arrangements, meanwhile, had long been a nagging source of mutual discontent. And that discontent had worsened amid U.S. dissatisfaction with Japan’s contribution to the United Nations–authorized military action in the Gulf War.

In 1991, the Japanese government invested 50 billion in establishing the Center for Global Partnership (CGP) inside the Japan Foundation. Its founding mandate was to promote U.S.-Japanese cooperation in policy initiatives aimed at addressing global issues of mutual concern; for example, supporting democratization in developing nations, addressing threats to the environment, and combating contagious diseases. Unsurprisingly, some in the United States viewed the Center warily as a vehicle for Japanese lobbying. The Japanese defused that cynicism, however, by placing the Center under the supervision of a council that comprised American and Japanese members and by investing the Center with a full and convincing measure of autonomy inside the Japan Foundation.

The establishment of CGP was a turning point in the history of Japanese public diplomacy. Establishing the Center was, to be sure, a reactive, rather than proactive, measure. Japan was, as always, scrambling to quell foreign criticism and to dampen bilateral frictions. But the Center attained an importance that transcended its initial purpose of dealing with issues that had arisen in the U.S.-Japan relationship. Its approach was a refreshing departure from Japan’s all-too-familiar reliance on hackneyed pleas for understanding of the nation’s “special circumstances.” The Center marked a new departure in tackling global issues of multinational concern through a genuinely bilateral and sometimes multilateral approach.

With the Center, Japan embraced a paradigm shift. It began to emphasize its common ground with other nations, rather than its uniqueness.¹

RECENT FOCUSES

Cool Japan

Japan's Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry embarked on a national branding campaign in 2011 to promote Japanese "content industries" internationally under the moniker "Cool Japan." That presumably reflects a sense of crisis about the long-term decline in Japanese manufacturing and a determination to offset the economic impact of that decline by promoting creative, post-manufacturing industries. But it also reflects informed perceptions of a genuine basis—a cultural commonality among East Asia, North America, and other regions—for chic national branding. What's cool about "Cool Japan," in other words, rests on a foundation of regionally and even globally shared culture. From a public diplomacy perspective, "Cool Japan" is valuable as a "gateway" to Japan, especially for the young generations of foreign countries. Some of them might choose to study Japanese language and culture, visit Japan, or even pursue Japan-related careers. They tend to have a more nuanced and contextual understanding of Japan, instead of being susceptible to soundbites, even at the time when the bilateral relations get sour.

Human Security and Life Infrastructure

In recent years, Japan's public diplomacy has addressed the international public interest in the spirit of "human security." And Japan's increasingly proactive stance in public diplomacy will benefit from the nation's history of creative and effective responses to adverse circumstances and events. That history and its legacy are just as valuable as pop culture and content industries in asserting an identity as

"Cool Japan:" innovation in energy conservation and material recycling as a nation blessed with little in the way of energy resources and other natural resources; an extensive, systematic commitment to preserving environmental quality and maintaining healthful public sanitation as a nation that has experienced serious pollution; miraculous reconstruction efforts and a deep-rooted commitment to peace as a nation that has suffered calamitous natural disasters and devastating war. All of these and other challenges present a confluence of national interests and international interests. Japan's growing emphasis in public diplomacy on shared experience is part of a broader shift to proactive approaches in that realm.

Liberal International Order

Japan's diplomacy priority, including public diplomacy, is to preserve, protect and defend the "liberal international order" based on democracy, the rule of law, human rights, free trade, et al. This is especially so when anti-liberal phenomena such as the spread of terrorism, the rise of authoritarian states, the unilateral change of status quo by force, and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, et al. have become conspicuous.

Bilateral Public Diplomacy

One of the highlights of the bilateral public diplomacy events in recent years was President Barack Obama's visit to Hiroshima and Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's visit to Pearl Harbor. Although the case of France-Germany relations is often referred to as a role model of post-war reconciliation, the case of the United States and Japan is no less dramatic and historic, particularly when cultural differences and geographic distance are taken into account.

To date, the bilateral relation remains stable and strong, at least far better than many in Japan

had feared at the inauguration of President Donald Trump. I would say, facing the common threat of nuclear North Korea, the alliance has never been more resilient. Bear in mind here that Japan retains high priority in U.S. public diplomacy. Interesting evidence of that priority is the number of American Centers in Japan. American Centers are public affairs outlets run by the U.S. State Department in nations worldwide. Japan is home to fully five Centers, in Sapporo, Tokyo, Nagoya, Osaka, and Fukuoka. That is an unusually large number for an industrialized nation, because the United States, like other Western nations, is shifting its public affairs resources to developing nations in the Middle East, Africa, and other parts of Asia.

Japan and the United States nonetheless have different concerns:

From the U.S. side

Apprehension about Japan's relationship with South Korea, especially over the "comfort women" issue, continues. So many emotions are embedded in this issue at grass-root levels, but we need at least a "political" solution, at the inter-governmental level, to keep the bilateral relations viable before the threat of North Korea. The 2015 Accord was significant in this respect. While the real intention of President Moon Jae-in's recent statement on the Accord (January 10, 2018) remains to be clarified, Japan holds that Accord should be duly fulfilled by both sides. Otherwise, any accord gets meaningless in the future, and the Japanese public will lose confidence in South Korea, which makes it more difficult for good-minded Japanese politicians and diplomats to take positive move towards South Korea. According to a most recent Yomiuri poll (January 10-12, 2018), 86 percent of Japanese respondents refused to take any new measurements to the Accord.²

There is also a persistent notion of Prime Minister Abe as being a nationalist. If the term "nationalist" implies "racist" (as in Europe), he is clearly not. I would consider him to be more a realist than an ideologue, and more a globalist than an isolationist. He has decided to cut a deal with South Korea over the comfort women issue in 2015 and to attend the Opening Ceremony of the Pyeongchang Winter Olympics in 2018 despite vehement oppositions from one of his key constituencies who are very conservative and (proudly) nationalistic.

Another concern is the perception of Japan as still engaging in an unfair, "non-reciprocal" trade with the United States. This rhetoric was repeated by President Trump during his presidential campaign in 2016, but he still clings to it if not frequently. In fact, he could continue to embrace it towards the mid-term elections in autumn 2018 to shore up supports from his core constituencies. To the Japan side, Trump's claim is outdated and mostly baseless, yet there is every reason to suspect that Japan's past record on direct investment in the United States has been underestimated or misunderstood for the past few years.

From the Japanese side

The Trump administration's policy towards North Korea is the biggest concern while acknowledging the merits of "strategic ambiguity." If the United States ever cuts a surprise deal with North Korea without prior consultation with Japan, it would make a major blow to the alliance management. The U.S.-DPRK summit meeting, alleged to take place by May 2018, needs close scrutiny in this regard and could be a game changer in the U.S.-Japan relations.

The Armitage-Nye Report in 2012 posed, "Does Japan desire to continue to be a tier-one nation, or is she content to drift into tier-two

status?”³ While Prime Minister Abe set to become Japan’s longest serving leader in 2018, many experts in Japan’s diplomatic circle are apprehensive if President Trump’s “America First” doctrine is synonymous with “America Alone,” and ultimately, if the United States is building a wall between the liberal international order. Certainly, American retrenchment is not welcome, as it creates a serious vacuum of power in world politics including East Asia.

In addition to this anxiety is a perception that the U.S. domestic politics is too divided to lead the world effectively, even if there is a bipartisan support for the U.S.-Japan relations in particular.

Collaborative Public Diplomacy

Notwithstanding these concerns to each other, the United States and Japan can and should strengthen collaboration in public diplomacy. The two countries should upgrade its efforts to “win the hearts and minds” of the international community for tougher sanctions and diplomatic pressures on North Korea, including its violation of human rights. There is no point in demonizing China, but we need to keep China accountable to its neighboring countries, especially over its military and economic activities.

President Trump’s tour of Asia in autumn 2017 was historic in the sense that the President of the United States adopted, probably for the first time in the bilateral history, the strategic concept (“Free and Open Indo-Pacific”) originally conceived by the Japan side (during Prime Minister Abe’s first term of the office 2006-2007). It is an important initiative in ensuring the liberal international order in the region, and the United States and Japan should strive to seek cooperation of countries concerned, including Australia and India, and more broadly such European countries as the U.K. and France. Such a collaborative approach might make the Phase IV for Japan’s public diplomacy.

Common Challenges

Sharp Power

Finally, the United States and Japan share the same challenges in public diplomacy. We face the rise of “sharp power” as delineated by Christopher Walker and Jessica Ludwig of the National Endowment for Democracy (written for ForeignAffairs.com on November 16, 2017).⁴ The authors bring out the cultural and informational “propaganda” as embraced by such authoritarian states as China and Russia abroad, especially toward weak democracies. If that is the case, how can we keep their activities in check?

Fake news itself is not new. Benjamin Franklin was constantly bewildered by (what he perceived as) the Britain’s disinformation. In the age of the internet and with the rise of authoritarian states, we cannot take the truth for granted. It is not self-evident any longer, and we occasionally have to battle for it.

In April 2016, the State Department established, within the Office of the Under Secretary of Public Diplomacy, the Global Engagement Center (GEC) which “charged with leading the U.S. government’s efforts to counter propaganda and disinformation from international terrorist organizations and foreign countries.”⁶ Japan should deepen the cooperation with GEC, especially as it prepares for the Tokyo Olympic in 2020.

Populist Backlash

Domestically, both the United States and Japan face the challenge of growing economic disparity. Often, the shrinking of middle-class entails a decline of tolerance for “others” and global engagements. Understanding and accommodating “others” or making a

commitment to global causes tend to be deemed as waste of resources and taxpayers' money, rather than as a long-term, strategic investment. Also, any self-reflective exercises in public diplomacy (e.g. critical remarks on its own government or administration) are considered to be self-defeating or even un-patriotic. Such a social ambience could make sound public diplomacy, in the form of open dialogue and mutual understanding, less tenable.

“Public Diplomacy”

Among experts, the concept of “public diplomacy” is getting more ambiguous and problematic. It has been long time since such a new concept as “New Public Diplomacy”⁷ has come into vogue, with the multiplication of non-state actors and the emergence of new digital technologies. However, at the time when diplomacy has become more multidimensional and public engagement has become the “whole of government diplomacy”⁸, what are the quintessential properties of “public diplomacy” per se? If “diplomacy” is an art of shaping realities and setting agendas, or negotiating over norms and institutions (or boundaries and categories at large), how is it different from “public diplomacy?”

These questions get more salient when the distinction between “diplomacy” (foreign affairs) and “politics” (domestic affairs) gets more blurred in the age of globalization.

ENDNOTES

- 1 See Yasushi Watanabe, “The pivot shift of Japan’s public diplomacy” in *The Routledge Handbook of Public Diplomacy* (eds. Naren Chitty, Li Ji, Gary D. Rawnsley, Craig Hayden, Routledge, 2016, for a more comprehensive overview.
- 2 <http://www.yomiuri.co.jp/feature/TO000302/20180114-OYT1T50121.html>
- 3 Richard L. Armitage and Joseph S. Nye, “The U.S.-Japan Alliance: Anchoring Stability in Asia,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, August 2012, p. 1.
- 4 Christopher Walker and Jessica Ludwig, “The Meaning of Sharp Power: How Authoritarian States Project Influence,” *ForeignAffairs.com*, November 16, 2017. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2017-11-16/meaning-sharp-power>
- 5 Sara Cook, “How to Respond to Beijing’s Growing Influence Abroad,” *The Diplomat*, February 27, 2018 <https://thediplomat.com/2018/02/how-to-respond-to-beijings-growing-influence-abroad/>
- 6 <https://www.state.gov/r/gec/index.htm>
- 7 Jan Melissen, *The New Public Diplomacy: Soft Power in International Relations*, ed., Palgrave MacMillan, 2005.
- 8 Bruce Gregory, “The Paradox of US Public Diplomacy: Its Rise and “Demise,”” Special Report #1, Institute for Public Diplomacy & Global Communication, The George Washington University, 2014.

Yasushi Watanabe was the 2018 Japan Scholar at the Wilson Center and is a professor in public diplomacy in the Graduate School of Media and Governance, Keio University. The author would like to thank the Asia Program of the Wilson Center for providing suggestions and feedback for the conference. The author can be reached at: ywatanab@sfc.keio.ac.jp
