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The Empire of Japan's Foreign Policy

Otto F. von Feigenblatt¹

The present research applies the Theory of Harmony through Holistic Engagement to the foreign policy of Japan. As the third largest economy in the world and one of the most highly developed countries in the world, Japan is a major international power. Most analysts interpret Japan's foreign policy through the lenses of realist, exceptionalist, or liberal institutionalist approaches. All the previously mentioned approaches tend to be based on etic studies conducted from the point of view of outsiders. The present interpretation of Japanese foreign policy applies an emic model based on primary sources from the Greater East Asian region and concludes that the Model of Harmony through Holistic Engagement shows considerable explanatory traction in interpreting the direction and development of Japanese foreign policy, in particular in the last two to three decades.

Introduction

Japan was the second largest economy in the world for several decades and is currently the third largest economy in the world (Sakamoto, 2008). In addition to that it is one of the most highly developed countries in the world and its population enjoys one of the highest life expectancies (Morton & Olenik, 2005). Japan is a success story of Asian development and a nation with a long history that has successfully adapted to the international system of sovereign nation states as well as taken advantage of the perilous process of global economic globalization (Smith, 1997; Togo, 2005). Japanese Multinationals are leaders in many industries such as in automobiles, computing, and consumer electronics. Nevertheless, Japan is an island nation with a high degree of dependence on the international environment. Japan is resource poor and thus it needs to import a considerable proportion of its energy needs as well as raw materials for its industries. Moreover, Japan's high dependence on exports means that it has an interest in the protection of international sea lanes of communication and in the avoidance of violent conflict (Hook, Gilson, Hughes, & Dobson, 2005). Therefore, Japan considers its foreign policy to be vital to the country's success and stability. This

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differs with other Asian countries that focus more on internal problems. Nevertheless Japan's success is based on its interaction with the rest of the world rather than on isolation.

This research provides a brief overview of Japan's foreign policy since the end of World War II to the present and then applies the Model of Harmony through Holistic Engagement to its foreign policy. The goal is to test the fit of the theory on a country that is considered to be by many outside observer and by many domestic intellectuals, an exception to the rule (Smith, 1997). Japanese exceptionalism enjoys considerable support not only among Japanese scholars but also from many respected Western scholars (Feigenblatt, 2007a, 2010b). This chapter shows that Japanese Foreign Policy is neither exceptional nor mechanistic in the realist tradition, but rather inherently Asian in nature.

Finally, in the conclusions section, important findings are presented and recommendations are put forth. Japan's foreign policy needs to be understood in its own terms while at the same time relating it to the behavior of other highly interdependent regional actors. This means that Japan can be both Japanese and Asian at the same time.

Brief Historical Overview of Japan's Foreign Policy

Japan's early history is a mix between fact and legend. The proud Yamato people claim direct descent from the Goddess Amaterasu and the Imperial Family are supposed to be the descendants of the Goddess (Morton & Olenik, 2005; Smith, 1997). Thus, the mythological history of Japan emphasizes the uniqueness of the people and the land. Nevertheless archeologists and anthropologists recognize that the early inhabitants of Japan came from the Asian mainland and from the surrounding islands (Feigenblatt, 2012). Thus, the Yamato people are actually a mix of immigrants who assimilated over time and then underwent a long period of isolation from the world, resulting in a very cohesive and homogeneous culture. There are important minorities in Japan such as the ancient Ainu as well as the Okinawans. Thus, Japan is a nation built on the very successful assimilation of diverse groups. Assimilation is a key factor in the national history of Japan and partly explains the emphasis on Japan's exceptionalism.

Medieval Japan was greatly influenced by Chinese culture from which it borrowed its writing system, Confucianism, as well as important philosophical concepts such as Buddhism (Buddhism travelled from India to China and then to Japan) (Ashizawa, 2008). This is particularly true in the Heian period when Chinese culture was actively emulated and elaborate gardens and court dress resembled their Chinese counterparts. This period of fruitful cultural exchange was asymmetrical in that Japan was the lesser power and China was the regional superpower as well as its cultural core (Lin, 2009). Several invasion attempts by China as well as internal socio-political changes in Japan led to a long period of isolation during subsequent Shogunates (Morton & Olenik, 2005). Japan pursued a policy of active and conscious isolation during which it achieved a remarkable degree of homogeneity and developed a powerful national ethos.

With the rise of the West and the subsequent increase of European activity and interest in the Far East, Japan came into contact with European powers such as Portugal and the Netherlands. The Shogunate pursued a highly limited trade with the Portuguese and with the Dutch but effectively closed the country to European influence (Morton & Olenik, 2005). An initial increase in the number of converts to Christianity was perceived as a serious threat by the Shogunate and

as a result Christians were persecuted. Therefore, Japan continued its policy of isolation and the only meaningful interaction was with the Ryukyu Kingdom (present day Okinawa) which was brought into the Japanese sphere of influence (Morton & Olenik, 2005).

The Meiji Restoration in the 1868 changed Japan forever and ended its policy of isolation (Smith, 1997). A plethora of reforms were introduced aiming to transform the country into a modern nation-state in the European mold. The army was modeled after the Prussian Army, as well as the Diet (Parliament). Other institutions such as the Navy were modeled after the British Navy and the University system was also remodeled to resemble European ones. Japanese students travelled to Europe to learn about Western technology and Science. The formerly feudal aristocracy of Japan was transformed into a peerage modeled after the one in the United Kingdom. Service to the State became the main function of the aristocracy and rising to the ranks of the peerage was possible based on both landholdings as well as meritorious service (Morton & Olenik, 2005).

The most important reform of the Meiji period was in terms of ideas rather than in terms of physical technology. Scientific methods were adopted and most importantly policy makers espoused the Western notion of the system of Independent Nation States. In other words, the old tributary system based on diffuse borders and hierarchical relations between nations was replaced by the idea of sovereign national states operating in an international context. The Russo-Japanese War of 1904 further reinforced the transition to the new paradigm and marked a pivotal point in the development of foreign relations policy formation in Japan (Morton & Olenik, 2005). Japan's victory showed how the adoption of Western ideas and methods could turn Japan into a great power able to stand on equal ground with the European powers.

It should be noted that international norms at this time did not include non-interference in the affairs of weaker countries and was actually inspired by the spirit of colonialism and imperialism. Japan jumped on the imperialist bandwagon and started to increase its military and diplomatic clout in the Asia Pacific Region. The initial establishment of a protectorate in Korea was followed with direct rule from Japan as well as resulting in the end of the Yi dynasty in Korea (Kaplan & Denmark, 2011; Ryang, 2010). Japan's new position of prominence in Asia was demonstrated in several diplomatic and armed conflicts with China, the former preeminent regional power. Japan dropped its traditional deferential relationship with Imperial China and forced several unequal treaties providing extraterritoriality and even the occupation of Taiwan (Fenby, 2008).

This period saw increased Japanese assertiveness at the international level and a concerted effort to secure natural resources for the country. Another important concern at this time was keeping the Western Powers at bay which was perceived as only possible with a strong and assertive foreign policy in the Asia Pacific Region. Japan was undergoing an important identity crisis at this point. Due to the period's connection of development with the West, many Japanese policy makers started to identify their country with the West and attempted to separate themselves from the East. On the other hand, other Japanese scholars and policy makers favored greater cooperation and integration with the East (Bix, 2000). This ambivalence between cooperation and domination marked the pre-war period and in a way continued to define the post-war period as well.

Japan's increasing influence in its vicinity morphed into European-style imperialism with the important difference that it lacked the discourse of the "white man's burden". On the contrary, the Japanese made efforts to communicate an empowering message vis a vis the Western Powers, asserting the power and strength of the Asian nations. Nevertheless, the period directly preceding World War II was marked by the contradictions of a policy of cooperation and integration with the rest of Asia as well as a concurrent policy of domination of the region (Feigenblatt, 2007a). Thus, the Japanese government was ambivalent about its position in Asia. This ambivalence is partly due to the changes instituted during the Meiji era and the country's identification with the developed powers of the West (Smith, 1997).

Thus the initial integrating spirit of the Greater East Asia Co-prosperity Sphere proposed by Japan became simply a way to promote Japanese colonialism and domination in the region. Cooperation with the other Asian nations turned into Japanese disdain for other Asians, in particular for the Chinese (Lind, 2009; Morton & Olenik, 2005). This partly explains the atrocities committed by the Japanese during World War II. The Japanese despised the weakness and perceived backwardness of the other Asian nations and thus wanted to distance itself from it. It also used this as an argument of why Japan not only had the power to but also the duty to colonize the other Asian countries. Thus, Japan created its own version of the "White man's burden".

The end of World War II was a traumatic event for Japan but the decision to surrender to the United States rather than to other allies, such as the Soviet Union, resulted in a relatively peaceful occupation (Togo, 2005). General Douglas MacArthur headed one of the largest experiments in social engineering in human history. The allies broke up the large landholdings of the former daimyo class and distributed the land to peasant farmers. Wartime industries were converted into industries producing consumption products. Most importantly a democracy was established with a strong bureaucracy and a commitment to development with equity (Morton & Olenik, 2005).

The United States wanted Japan to develop for several reasons. One of them is because by this time mainland China was becoming a threat to the United States and Japan was the natural way to balance the growth of communism (Fenby, 2008; Togo, 2005). The United States could use Japanese soil as an important forward deployment base for the Asia Pacific Region. Okinawa served this purpose as well as other bases spread out throughout the islands (Morton & Olenik, 2005). The American army also needed supplies and having a strong industrial base would help satisfy some of those needs. Finally, a stronger Japanese economy could help the United States cover some of the costs involved in maintaining American bases in the Asia Pacific (Feigenblatt, 2010b).

The previously mentioned American need for a strong Japan complemented Japan's need for a strong relationship with the United States in order to have market access as well as in order to balance mainland China and the Soviet Union (Ellis, 2009). North Korea's kidnapping of Japanese citizens and virulently anti-Japanese rhetoric further strengthened the need for a strong relationship with the United States (Ryang, 2010). Thus, the Liberal Democratic Party of Japan formed a strong alliance with the United States involving trade, military bases, and a close alignment in diplomacy.

This means that Japan's foreign policy during most of the Cold War was closely aligned to that of the United States. There are a few differences however that should be noted. The first is the

emphasis of Japan on international development cooperation as an integral part of foreign policy (Drysdale, 2010; Feigenblatt, 2007a). Japan made concerted efforts to change its image as a former aggressive military power into a peaceful economic power. Therefore diplomacy started to include cooperation projects in both industry and basic development aid. The close relationship between the bureaucracy, the government, and business made this kind of concerted effort possible. Trade missions were closely aligned to foreign policy goals and attempted to promote both a good image for Japan as well as the growth of Japanese industry. This resulted in the famous “flying geese” model in which Japanese industries expanded into Southeast and East Asia and transferred technology and knowhow to those countries (Sakamoto, 2008). As a result of this policy, Japanese foreign direct investment poured into the economies of regional developing countries and lower value industries moved from Japan to those countries in favor of lower costs (Dhillon, 2009; Keong, 2006).

Therefore, Japan was a strong supporter of regional development. Japanese official development assistance, foreign direct investment, as well as technological transfer had a very positive effect on the economies of regional neighbors. This was a way of strengthening Japan’s regional influence through the use of soft power rather than through the use of more traditional hard power sources such as a strong military (Togo, 2005).

Japan developed close relationships with regional governments such as those of Malaysia under Prime Minister Mahathir as well as with Thailand and Singapore. At the core of the relationships was economic integration and mutual development. Japan became a regional economic leader and other countries depended on Japanese capital and knowhow to develop their own industries. Thus, Japan’s regional influence grew due to economic reasons as well as due to its soft power.

Japan’s relationship with China was not as smooth as with other regional powers during the post-war period. Taiwan enjoyed a much closer relationships to Japan due to its colonial history and capitalist system while China’s leadership emphasized Japan’s World War II aggression and took a more aggressive stand against Japan on territorial issues such as the Senkaku Islands (Wang, 2008; Weitz, 2011). Due to this the United States’ announcement of improved relations with China, known as one of the Nixon shocks, came as a surprise to Tokyo. Japan had to adapt its foreign policy by acknowledging the presence and importance of mainland China (Fenby, 2008).

Japan adapted to the changed situation by increasing official development aid to China and by eventually encouraging Japanese companies to invest in China (Feigenblatt, 2007a). This approach was relatively successful and resulted in increased interaction between the mainland and Japan. Japanese companies started to move labor intensive parts of their operations to the mainland as a way to cut costs. Mainland China started to encourage this type of investment in particular after Deng Xiao Ping’s ascent to power (Fenby, 2008).

Therefore Japan’s post-war foreign policy was mainly focused on economic cooperation and centered on the security alliance with the United States. Interaction with other regions of the world such as Latin America and the Middle East mainly followed America’s lead and focused on economic issues (Togo, 2005).

Applying the Model of Harmony through Holistic Engagement to Japan’s Foreign Policy

Japan's pre-war foreign policy tended to emulate that of the great powers and thus can be considered to be anomalous in terms of Japan's overall history. The country's foreign policy was isolationist for much of its history before the Meiji revolution with brief periods of participation in the ancient tributary system of the mainland (Lin, 2009). The present section explores how Japan's recent foreign policy can be explained through the Model of Harmony through Holistic Engagement.

Japan's post-war foreign policy was mostly guided by the United States and thus cannot be considered to be truly independent however with Japan's rise to economic power in the 1970s and 1980s we can see a more independent foreign policy based on Japanese values and needs (Dore, 1997; Kingston, 2011). America's rapprochement with China and the winding down of the Cold War gave Japan more flexibility to develop its own foreign policy and the Nixon shocks further encouraged the Japanese to find their own way and to deploy a more finely tuned foreign policy in order to achieve their goals.

Japan's rapprochement with China was partly due to the steps taken by the United States as well as due to more pragmatic reasons. The Plaza Accords caused the yen to appreciate considerably thus making Japanese products more expensive for foreign buyers and therefore less competitive (Morton & Olenik, 2005). Japanese companies were then forced to look outside of Japan for cheap labor in order to lower costs and thus regain international competitiveness. Due to China's geographical proximity to Japan, it was a perfect location for Japanese industry to relocate to. Friendly government policies, on the part of China, a relatively stable political system, cultural similarities, as well as low transportation costs due to the short distance between Japan and China, resulted in high levels of foreign direct investment flowing into the Asian giant (Feigenblatt, 2007b; Fenby, 2008).

Japan's relationship with the mainland is marred by historical animosities and some important cultural differences. Due to this, Japan tried very hard to establish trust and to increase goodwill through development assistance. For decades, China was the main beneficiary of Japanese Official Development Aid. Japanese ODA presented several advantages to the Chinese leadership such as the sidelining of human rights issues in favor of economic development (Feigenblatt, 2007a). This approach to development assistance was well received by the Chinese leadership and was relatively successful in creating goodwill, in particular at the elite level, in China.

Japan did not focus solely on the mainland but also developed strong ties with other countries in the region, such as Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia, and South Korea (Dhillon, 2009; Keling, Saludin, Feigenblatt, Ajis, & Shuib, 2010; Than & Thein, 2007; Vu-Tung, 2007; Wyatt, 2003). Japan followed a similar approach to the one used with the Chinese mainland by offering considerable amounts of Official Development Assistance to regional states, some in the form of capacity building projects, and others as soft loans (Feigenblatt, 2007a). Japan also used the goodwill gained through development assistance to seek stable sources of raw materials such as lumber from Malaysia and sand from Indonesia (Laksmanna, 2011).

In addition to seeking resources, Japan also attempted to integrate the supply chain of its industry with that of regional countries. This was achieved due to Japan's close relationship between the bureaucracy, big business, and the government. Coordination and cooperation between the three sectors resulted in a concerted effort to work together with foreign governments

to support Japanese industries and to establish the environment needed for them to succeed. This practice was particularly successful in promoting Japanese industry and businesses in countries such as Thailand and Malaysia (Sakamoto, 2008).

The result of this practice was that while Japanese companies competed at the state level they also cooperated with local industries and fostered a certain degree of technological transfer, in particular of older technologies. This practice of close integration and cooperation between Japanese industry and regional industries has been called the “Flying Geese Model” and resembles a group of birds flying in a coordinated fashion in order to attain maximum efficiency through alternation at the head of the pack. Nevertheless in the case of Japan alternation takes place only for industries considered to be outdated by the Japanese, as the country moves up the value change to higher level technologies.

While there is considerable cooperation on the industrial realm this does not preclude competition. Japan competes against other regional countries on a vast array of products and industries, such as automobiles, electronic components, and tourism (Kingston, 2011). Therefore Japan’s economic relationship with the region is characterized by cooperation as well as competition. It is important to note that Japan undertakes competition and cooperation through constant dialogue with regional leaders in both the private and public sectors. Examples of this include close and cordial relationships with regional leaders such as Mahathir Mohammad of Malaysia as well as the constant flow of trade missions between the country and the region (Dhillon, 2009; Togo, 2005).

Japan is always keen to use its foreign development assistance to support the spread of Japanese industries as well as to create feelings of goodwill with regional countries. This is done through JICA, the official development agency as well as close cooperation with MOFA, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan. Thus Japan focuses its foreign policy on what are traditionally considered to be soft policy issues. Economic diplomacy is at the core of Japan’s foreign policy (Hook et al., 2005; Iwabuchi, 2008).

It should be noted that Japan’s foreign policy also includes considerable competition over markets and even in terms of traditional security interests such as territorial disputes and security in the East Asian Region. Examples of disputes include the issue with the Senkaku Islands as well as Japan’s continued alliance with the United States (Feigenblatt, 2010a). The United States considers Japan to be its unsinkable aircraft carrier and China views Japan as a competing power. Moreover, Japan has expanded its security apparatus to include a strong defensive capability with a high degree of interoperability with US forces, making it a formidable force in the region. This is further emphasized by the assertive stance taken by prominent LDP politicians such as Shinzo Abe that Japan should take on a more traditional security role in the region (Sakamoto, 2008). Therefore, while Japan cooperates with regional states in the economic and development fields, it is also a competitor in those fields as well as in traditional security.

Japan favors dialogue and holistic engagement as evidenced by Japan’s approach towards pariah governments such as Myanmar (Than & Thein, 2007). While most Western countries supported sanctions for Myanmar’s military regime, and avoided any kind of interaction with the government, Japan followed a different approach which stressed the importance of continued dialogue and engagement in mutually beneficial projects as a way to integrate Myanmar into the

international community and thus enable a peaceful transition to democracy. Based on recent development in Myanmar, it seems that Japan's approach has paid off in terms of a peaceful yet slow transition to democracy which includes the release of a large number of political prisoners, including the famous Nobel Prize winner, Aung San Suuki (Keling et al., 2010). While the reasons behind the peaceful transition to democracy in Myanmar are complex, there is a strong argument in favor of Japan's long term investment in human development in the impoverished nation not only due to the benefits in terms of regime change but also at the level of human security.

Another important example of Japan's foreign policy in action includes the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) headed by Yasushi Akashi (Togo, 2005). This was one of the most ambitious missions in the history of the United Nations and it involved running the entire country and rebuilding its institutions. Japan was at the core of the countries leading the mission and provided considerable funds in order to guarantee its success. Japan's considerable expertise in terms of development assistance became an important source of influence and showed how soft power can be as useful as or even more effective than traditional power. This mission included providing aid in all policy areas ranging from training for policy officers to the drafting of a new constitution. Thus, this particular foreign policy action exemplifies holistic engagement through a varied array of diplomatic actions including dialogue, negotiation, and competition.

Conclusions

Japan's foreign policy is complex yet it is focused on soft policy issues such as foreign development assistance and human security. Due to Japan's history of militarism during World War II and the period preceding the conflagration, Japan found alternative sources of power which closely resemble the Model of Harmony through Holistic Engagement. Japan's foreign displays myriad examples of cooperation on such policy areas as capacity building, economic development, and international security. In addition to that Japan emphasizes negotiation through dialogue. Building trust and reaching consensus through continued interaction is at the core of Japan's foreign policy style.

Holism is clearly present in Japan's foreign policy. For instance, Japan's constructive engagement with countries such as Myanmar shows that it is possible to interact in a vast array of policy realms that go beyond traditional security. Thus Japan's foreign policy balances traditional security with alternative security in the hope of establishing trust with the target countries. In addition to that Japan's foreign policy does not only operate at the state level but rather encompasses everything between the state and the individual. This is exemplified by the project conducted by JICA as well as by MOFA official statements. Therefore Japan's foreign policy is multidimensional, nuanced, and most importantly focuses on continued constructive interaction with regional powers.

While Japan's foreign policy is centered on its strong alliance with the United States, its foreign policy has shown increasing flexibility after the end of the Cold War. Its constructive relationship with China and with other socialist countries such as Vietnam and Laos attests to this trend. Furthermore, Japan's deployment of nontraditional sources of power to pursue its foreign policy goals is compatible with the model in question.

In conclusion, Japan's post-war foreign policy, and in particular its foreign policy after the end of the Cold War, fits the model of Harmony through Holistic Engagement. Japan pursues regional stability and prosperity through a combination of dialogue, negotiation, and competition,

with the aim of creating a regional community based on norms of trust and non-violence. Even Japan's troubled relationship with mainland China displays strong signs of cooperation in addition to competition. Most importantly, Japan consistently attempts to pursue negotiation and dialogue even in instances of clear competition with other states. This shows that the Model of Harmony through Holistic Engagement rather than claiming Japan's unique nature as in the exceptionalism school of foreign relations, this model provides a more nuanced explanation of Japan's foreign policy behavior.

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