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## Japan Tangle of Ideology and Diplomacy

**Abe's diplomatic successes are being constrained by his ideological leanings.**

By Yo-Jung Chen  
December 10, 2015

As the world casts a wary eye on China's rapid and aggressive expansion in the seas to its east and south, Japan's Shinzo Abe, who does little to hide his ambition of rallying the world to a ring of containment around the Middle Kingdom, is pursuing an active program of diplomacy that has been unusually wide-ranging.

Although Abe's outreach has had its successes, there is scope for debate as to whether Abe's diplomacy has been as successful as the Japanese media tend to portray it. Overall, it is not clear whether those countries Abe has courted are entirely won over to his grandiose design of a "ring of democracies" encircling Communist China. (Never mind that not all of these partners are exemplary "democracies" themselves.) In fact, many of them appear to be only too happy to benefit from the rivalry between the world's second and third largest economies.

Besides, as long as Japan sticks to its traditional allegiance to its U.S. ally, Abe's diplomatic overtures, however active, will inevitably be seen as a proxy of American interests.

In a sense, Japanese diplomacy's loyalty to America may be seen as the diplomatic manifestation of what Robert Dujarric recently described in *The Diplomat* as Japan's parochialism. Here is a great advanced nation, rich in culture, widely esteemed as the world's third economy, and with a

fine record as a peaceful nation during the seven decades of its democratic rebirth after the war. And yet this economic giant has so far shied away from becoming a political power, preferring to remain in the shadow of America, as if it were still under postwar U.S. occupation. As Dujarric aptly pointed out, Japan sees the world uniquely through the prism of the United States while consistently constraining its diplomatic options to those acceptable to Washington.

This overreliance on America has at times caused Japanese diplomacy to act in a way seemingly at odds with its own interests. One recent such case was when Japan, which never misses an opportunity to proclaim its status as the only nation to be the victim of an atomic bombing, inexplicably abstained in early November from voting on a United Nations resolution calling for a treaty banning the use of nuclear weapons. Although Japan ended up supporting a revised version of the resolution, critics suspect that the untold reason for its initial abstention was simply U.S. opposition to the resolution in question.

By focusing exclusively on the United States, Japan has excluded many diplomatic possibilities, among them that of building normal friendly ties with its neighbors. In doing so, it has isolated itself from the rest of the world and finds itself without reliable all-weather friends.

Striking evidence of this isolation was seen in March 2015 when China set up its Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank. Standing faithfully with Washington in opposing what both saw as a challenge to the U.S.-led international financial order, Tokyo found itself “let down” by almost all of its “friends” in the world, as they rushed to join the Chinese scheme without even bothering to consult with Japan.

In October, Japan suffered another setback in Southeast Asia, an area thought to be its longtime economic sphere, when, much to Tokyo’s dismay, Indonesia rejected the Japanese bid in favor of the Chinese plan to build the region’s first rapid railway system. This did not necessarily mean that Jakarta had fallen into China’s embrace – after all, Indonesia, at odds with China in the South China Sea, also became the first ASEAN nation to start a “2×2” (foreign and defense) dialogue with Japan. But it is a typical example of how Japan’s partners, instead of taking sides, are rather practicing a balance act between Japan and China.

What is going on in the rest of the world?

For a long time, Japan has relied on America (or, according to critics, on a handful of American “Japan Handlers” who are alleged to “coach” Tokyo on how to meet Washington’s requirements) to make important judgments and decisions. This has resulted in apparent inability of Japanese diplomats to think outside of the American box, becoming at times oblivious to the general thinking prevailing in the rest of the world.

In one recent such example, the Japanese government announced in November its decision to award Japan’s highest medal to Donald Rumsfeld. Tokyo apparently has not received the memo about the Iraq War and Rumsfeld, its principal architect. The announcement also helped remind the world that Japan remains one of the rare countries that still believes in the righteousness of their support for a war that virtually everyone else now sees as a catastrophic error.

## **A Touch of Ideology?**

Nationalists in Japan seem to have discovered only recently that the “outside world” does not share many of their views, especially those related to Japan’s wartime deeds, such as Imperial Japan’s invasion of Asia, the practice of “comfort women” by its military, or the “Rape of Nanjing.”

On these topics, the hawkish ideologues of the ultra-conservative wing of the ruling LDP party have started pushing their diplomats to actively challenge what they see as erroneous perceptions of Japan, and to advocate instead a jingoistic version of history aimed at whitewashing wartime misdeeds. Never mind if their jingoism struggles to convince anyone outside of Japan.

Recent events have shown how Japan has stunned the world by attempting to sell this ideological version (which is not generally shared in the nation) of history to various partners abroad.

This ideological drive to advocate the ruling conservatives’ revisionist version of history took a surprising new turn when Tokyo took the fight out of the usual bilateral context (with China and South Korea) to the very international stage of the United Nations.

For some 20 years, Japan has unsuccessfully sought to have the UN Human Rights Commission retract a 1996 report condemning it for the wartime practice of “comfort women” (women in Japan-occupied territories who were coerced into Japanese military brothels). Japan argued that the report contains unreliable information, but the UN decided nevertheless that these details were not sufficient to retract the Coomaraswamy Report because the actual fact of “comfort women” it depicts remains unshakable.

On the same “comfort women” issue, as I have written previously, Japan is also fighting an uphill battle for its image in the U.S., where a growing number of municipalities are erecting embarrassing statues in commemoration of what are known locally as Japan’s “sex slaves.” Lacking convincing arguments to dismiss the issue, Japan was unable to stop these municipalities, including San Francisco, from building statues, nor could it prevent Congress from maintaining its 2007 resolution condemning Japan for the shameful wartime practice. So much for its American friends.

Another case of challenging the UN on its interpretation of history occurred in October. Japan celebrated UNESCO’s decision to include three Japanese documents in its Memory of the World Register. So far so good. Japan has always loved being recognized by UNESCO, either in the World Heritage Sites program or in the Memory of the World program.

But this time, Tokyo objected angrily when the UN body also registered in the same program China’s documents about the Nanking Massacre. Up in arms, furious conservative politicians, who refuse to admit that any massacre was committed by Japanese forces, started pushing their government to protest to UNESCO, threatening to cut off its funding in retaliation.

Regardless of who is right about Nanking, the de facto intimidation of the UN body was far from an elegant response and hardly likely to burnish Japan’s reputation.

And while Japan claims China is politicizing the UNESCO process with the Nanking Massacre documents, it has found itself accused of the same sin by Russia regarding one of Japan's own successful entries in the Memory of the World Register, involving the decades-long detention in Siberia of hundreds of thousands of Japanese prisoners after the end of World War II.

In another case involving the UN – this time not involving the history issue – the UN rapporteur on freedom of expression, who was scheduled to visit Tokyo in early December to investigate accusations of violations of press freedom, was asked by the Japanese government to cancel his trip. In the view of critics, this is a tacit admission that Japan had something to hide regarding violations of freedom of expression and political pressures on the media.

If the allegations were true, this is certainly not the best way to halt Japan's embarrassing fall down the rankings of the World Press Freedom Index (from 11th in 2010, to 53rd in 2013, 59th in 2014, and 61st out of 180 countries in 2015).

This heavy-handed approach to the United Nations is difficult to reconcile with Japan's years of hard campaigning to win permanent membership of the UN Security Council.

### **Press Dealings**

Japan's ruling Liberal Democratic Party is regularly accused of applying pressure on the liberal media. Foreign journalists in Japan are also occasionally targeted, mostly because, unlike their "polite" Japanese colleagues, they tend to ignore the tacit local rule of not asking embarrassing questions or reporting embarrassing topics.

In April 2015, the German correspondent in Japan for *Frankfurter Allgemeine* revealed that, because of his articles criticizing Abe's revisionism, he has made himself a "Japan basher" in the eyes of Japanese officials. According to his account, in a surprisingly undiplomatic move, an angry Japanese diplomat even went to the daily's head office in Frankfurt to denounce the journalist directly to his editor, going as far as insinuating, without proof, that he was secretly working for China. Following this diplomat's visit, it is easy to imagine what reputation the Japanese government now enjoys with the German daily.

One thing is clear: Don't bet on Japan improving its ranking in next year's World Press Freedom Index.