

JAPANESE LOOK AT THEMSELVES: CONFIDENCE IN THE TRANSITION

By Gerald L. Curtis

For the past forty years, ever since the end of the six-year-long American occupation, Japan has pursued a foreign policy based on three major elements: alliance with the US; economic diplomacy to promote Japan's own rapid growth; and as low a profile as possible on international political and security matters. That policy has been extraordinarily successful. It has helped turn Japan into a stable democracy, a wealthy economy, and a country at peace with its neighbors. It is little wonder that many Japanese are reluctant to part with a formula that has proved to be so effective.

Yet Japan's postwar foreign policy is rapidly becoming a victim of its own success. Now that it has become an economic superpower, the country finds its key relationship with the US increasingly tense and acrimonious. It faces enormous pressures to further reduce protection of domestic industries and lessen dependence for growth on exports, and to give greater attention to the interests of consumers. It also has become too big and powerful to duck a greater political role in world affairs.

The Argument Over Japan's Place in the World

This produces a profound asymmetry between what role Japan would like and what the world expects Japan to play. Japanese opinion on world affairs is overwhelmingly status quo oriented, while world opinion about Japan is change oriented. Foreigners may not be certain what kind of new role Japan should play, but they virtually take it for granted that policies formulated in the context of Japanese economic weakness, America's overwhelming power, and a world structured by Soviet-American rivalry now must change. Within Japan, however, there is little enthusiasm for moving away from the postwar foreign policy line. Very few Japanese believe they or any other country can play the leadership role the US has assumed since the end of the Second World War.

This asymmetry produces strong tensions in Japan. The strain is heightened by conflicting interests generated by the internationalization of Japan's economy — farmers wanting continued protection, for example, vying with manufacturers worried about continued access to world markets. But mostly it is produced by a widespread ambivalence over how Japan should respond to the world's, and in particular the United States', demands for foreign policy change. Even while they recognize that change is inevitable, many Japanese are reluctant to face it.

These attitudes make Japanese extremely sensitive to foreign opinion about their country, particularly critical opinion. Newspapers are filled with Japan "bashing" stories. Because of excessive attention to what Americans think is wrong with Japan, Japanese believe that US opinion is much more negative about their country than it really is. They are often surprised when informed of survey data that show strong US support for aiding Japan if it were attacked; that a majority of Americans think of Japan as a close ally; and that most believe economic ties with Japan benefit the US. However, unfavorable American opinion has increased in the past several years, and it's not surprising the Japanese focus on this adverse trend. [See the center-section Public Opinion Report for detailed data on US opinion on Japan, and on how the Japanese see themselves.]

Japanese perceptions of American demands for change in Japanese policies play a critical role in structuring the debate over foreign policy. This is evident at the moment in the Persian Gulf crisis. The Japanese government struggles to find a middle ground between what the Bush administration wants it to do and what its own public is willing to support. Indications so far are that the public will support backing up American policy financially, but adamantly oppose any direct military role.

Assessing Their Own Society

Japanese opinion about domestic issues is more difficult to characterize. It's more fluid and contradictory than opinion on foreign policy.

Some survey data, such as those reported in the Public Opinion Report of this issue, suggest that Japanese are less satisfied with their life than Americans are, less happy in their jobs, and more critical of their society's institutions. But much depends on how the questions are posed. Examination of the time series data provided by the surveys undertaken by the Prime Minister's Office, for example, offers a different picture. When asked how much they like Japan, a larger majority indicated "strong" liking in 1990 than in 1985; those measured as "weak" in their affections amounted to fewer than ten percent this year. Most Japanese think of themselves as being in the middle of the middle class, and have strongly positive feelings about the communities in which they live. Quite in contrast to the popular western view of Japanese living in "rabbit hutches" in overcrowded cities, positive attitudes are almost as high in urban Japan as in more rural parts of the country.

Ever since the American Occupation introduced scientific public opinion polling after the Second World War, polls have revealed high levels of opinion critical of Japan when the questions ask respondents to compare the

country to the US. They also invariably produce large "don't know" responses. Though confidence and pride in Japanese ways of doing things have grown, and awareness of American social problems has increased, there still is a tendency to idealize aspects of American life — or at least to assume that the grass must be greener on the other side of the world. Polling data showing that more Japanese believe family values are stronger in the US than in Japan, or that American education is superior to what the Japanese school system offers, tell more about what Japanese want to believe about the US than anything else.

Overall, satisfaction with family, job, and country is high in Japan. The country has grown affluent so quickly that only the youngest have no memory of hard times. Like Americans who grew up during the Depression, older Japanese are conscious of how much things have improved. Americans have trouble understanding how Japanese can pay outrageously high prices for consumer goods. But while the Japanese complain about high prices, they are even more inclined to marvel at being able to pay them, and possess goods they never expected to own.

Areas of Discontent

Survey data indicate several areas of strong public dissatisfaction with domestic life, however. Data replicated in this Public Opinion Report indicate lower levels of job satisfaction in Japan than in the US. They suggest that more Japanese than Americans feel they have not been able to satisfy their ambitions in life, and reveal much higher levels of pessimism among young Japanese that they will be able to have the kind of career they want. Such findings point to growing dissatisfaction with and pressure on social institutions and norms that stifle individualism. Pressures for conformity, discipline, and the sacrifice of individual preferences for the benefit of some larger group remain strong in Japan. But they are weakening, and a desire to have more fun and work less are part of the contemporary Japanese scene.

The data also highlight two important areas of public dissatisfaction with government policies and behavior. One is political corruption. As the 1980s came to a close, Japan's political world was rocked by a stock scandal involving a young, aggressive company called Recruit. The scandal helped bring the administration of Prime Minister Takeshita to a premature end, and it destroyed or damaged the careers of several other powerful politicians. Cynicism about the ethics of people who seek elective office has always been strong in Japan. But there seems to be less of a willingness to accept unethical behavior now than in the past. Many Japanese find it infuriating and humiliating to have a politics seen abroad as backward and corrupt.

The second area involves the public's sense that inequality is growing. This is a new and potentially explosive issue politically; social stability in postwar Japan was built on the public's belief the society was fair. Recently, however, growing inequalities in the social structure have become evident. Most important is the asset inequality that has resulted from inflation in land prices, the ability of some to make a killing in the stock market, and the emergence of a new business class in the provinces, whose wealth derives in part from its access to the public works budget. Slowly but surely social inequality is pushing itself onto the political issue agenda and is likely to continue to grow in importance.

Underlying National Confidence

Thus in both foreign policy and domestic matters, Japan is in the middle of a critical transition. People are reluctant to part with the "tried and true" of the past, but are increasingly aware that policies must be adjusted to new domestic and global realities. Japanese old enough to remember life even two or three decades ago are startled by the rapidity of change and the country's sudden affluence, and they are proud of the accomplishments. But dissatisfaction with political leaders, anger over the emergence of new social inequalities, and resistance to social norms that inhibit enjoying the affluence hard work has produced are on the rise.

Fortunately, public confidence in the country's major institutions is strong. The first transition from one Emperor to another under the postwar Constitution was accomplished without any challenge to the constitutional order. When the long ruling Liberal Democrats lost a majority of seats for the first time in the 1989 election for the upper house, the stock market did not crash nor the yen collapse. People went about their business as usual, no students demonstrated in the streets. All of this indicates a confidence in the country's democratic institutions, if not necessarily in the quality of those elected to them.

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