

Japanese Politics: The Sobering Realities

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Japan, it is said, is advancing rapidly on the road to great power status. On that assumption, people ask how Japan's domestic and foreign policies will be shaped by its new status. In attempting to respond to that question I will begin by challenging the assumption.

The so-called "big power status" really means nothing to the ordinary Japanese, and no domestic issues have ever arisen because some Japanese demanded domestic or foreign policies appropriate to that status. So far, the notion of Japan's being a "big power" has been entirely foreign in origin, and the Japanese, gasping in the world's most polluted air and feeling sick with the world's worst food and water, can scarcely think of Japan as a big power. Under the circumstances it will be very difficult for the Japanese government to conduct its foreign policy in ways historically associated with the behavior of big powers.

The robust economic system of Japan is not a measure of Japan's power vis-à-vis the rest of the world. Rather it is the primary indicator of Japan's domestic problems. Some of these problems may spill over into the arena of foreign policy, but they are on the whole domestic and can be resolved only through domestic policy.

Fortunately there is enough sense among Japanese leaders and opinion-makers not to take the foreign compliments on Japan's big power status at their face value. At the same time, the Japanese political system seems to be constitutionally incapable of according high priority to foreign policy, nor does Japan seem to be willing to generate behavior patterns appropriate to a big power.

Let me therefore address myself to Japan's lack of will or competence with respect to big power foreign

policy by reflecting upon the implications of political developments within the last year. The parliamentary election held on December 10, 1972, offers an apt example. The results of this election are surprising in many respects. The ruling Liberal Democratic Party, while retaining a comfortable majority (271, plus 11 independents won over after the election, out of a total 491 seats in the Lower House), lost 17 seats from its preelection strength. The middle-of-the-road Komeito (popularly translated as "Clean Government Party") and Social Democrats also suffered heavy losses. Socialists and Communists, however, made considerable gains (28 and 24, making 118 and 38 seats respectively).

If everything had gone according to preelection calculations of the Liberal Democrats, this should not have happened. Without confidence in an outcome that would improve the Liberal Democrats' strength in the Lower House, Mr. Tanaka would not have called an election. In fact, it seemed that Liberal Democrats had at least two factors in their favor. One was Mr. Tanaka's personal popularity as the youngest person (at fifty-four years of age) ever to hold the post of prime minister in Japanese history and one who had risen to this height of power from an extremely disadvantaged background. The other factor was the first Tanaka government's success in the normalization of Sino-Japanese relations. How then is one to explain the unexpected weakness of Liberal Democrats in this election?

Americans would summarize the whole thing by saying that Mr. Tanaka's coattail, like Mr. Nixon's, was not long enough for everyone to ride together to victory. Actually, the notion of the prime minister's coattail does not work in Japanese politics because, like any other candidate, he must win the election in his own electoral district. The prime minister must also survive as the president of his party by striking an optimal balance of intraparty factional interests. Thus the party president as prime minister is only

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first among equals. The election of the party president is strictly an intraparty affair conducted among party members who are also incumbent members of the parliament and certain other delegates. It leaves no room for maneuver through appeals to the public at large and their feedbacks into the party.

In forming his government, the prime minister must also strive to defuse the potentially explosive conflicts among the party factions so that a certain measure of administrative efficiency may be attained. The most frequent method of doing this is to allocate the ministerial portfolios to major factions while making efforts on the side to break up some of the formidable factions. Mr. Tanaka's caretaker government between his victory as the president of the Liberal Democratic Party in July, 1972, and the election in December, 1972, followed the traditional practice of factional balance and disappointed the general public, since it supported the view that even he was after all unable to bring new methods of government into Japanese politics. People murmured "*plus ça change. . .*" The post-election Tanaka government looks even worse in this respect; too much attention has been paid to factional balance in the name of party unity.

During the early weeks of his caretaker government Mr. Tanaka kept insisting that he had no thought of asking for a fresh mandate from the Japanese public. There were many more months left in the term of the existing parliament

before its expiration. Actually, however, he was only thinking about the best time to go to the polls. Since his party already had an overwhelming majority, he could stay with it if he wanted to. The only demeaning aspect of this practice was that his parliamentary strength was not of his making but was a gift of his predecessor. The logic of political honor would usually dictate that a new prime minister test his standing with the public by dissolving the parliament he had inherited and calling for an election under his leadership. Mr. Tanaka was careful, however. One reason was that the parliamentary majority enjoyed by his party was too good to give up, and one could worsen the situation by careless timing.

After his negotiations with China resulted in a great success, it was very difficult for him or his partisans to resist thinking that the time had come to renew his predecessor's record in terms of the parliamentary majority by a new election. Indeed, the terms of normalization of Sino-Japanese relations were a great bargain, and a great success from the standpoint of Japan's national interests. The erstwhile toughness of the Chinese stand had mellowed remarkably, and no humiliating kowtow was demanded from Japan. Mr. Tanaka was able to come home with his objectives attained in return for fewer concessions than were originally thought possible. Furthermore, the achievement went farther than Mr. Nixon's because Mr. Tanaka not only talked with Mao Tse-tung and Chou En-lai, but there was reciprocal recognition between China and Japan. One great casualty was the evaporation of diplomatic relations between Japan and the Republic of China in Taiwan. Although Mr. Tanaka evidently did not foresee the extent of dismay and heartbreak among nearly 50,000 Taiwanese Chinese in Japan and their Japanese friends, the timing did seem auspicious for Mr. Tanaka to test his standing with the general electorate. According to the election returns, his brilliant China deal evidently was a liability rather than an asset.

This is so surprising that it would be useful to put the China question in perspective. It all began in July, 1971, when Mr. Nixon announced that he would visit the People's Republic of China. Japan was given notice only three minutes in advance of the actual announcement. At the time, bitter feelings were growing between the United States and Japan with respect to trade and investment. Within the context of animosity, the unilateral announcement of a Presidential visit to China was regarded by many Japanese as a kick in the face of Japan. If Japan's face was not lost in the legendary fashion, at least dirt and smear remained on it. After so many years of aligning its foreign policy with that of the United States, Japan was suddenly made to feel unwanted.

The Japanese, of course, quickly pointed their

accusing finger at Mr. Sato, then prime minister, and demanded that he wipe the disgrace off Japan's face and get on terms with the People's Republic of China even before Mr. Nixon did. Mr. Sato was able to do little about it because he had made too many friends in the Republic of China and it was his government that allowed the rather promising start on Sino-Japanese relations inherited from its predecessor to deteriorate. Besides, it may have looked rash or unethical to Mr. Sato (to judge from opinions expressed by his supporters among Liberal Democrats) to dump a bona fide, friendly country like the Republic of China simply because he had reasons to be angry with another country, the United States. With *samurai*-like determination, Mr. Sato lived up to the trust of the Republic of China and committed his prestige to international maneuvers to keep the People's Republic out of the United Nations in the fall of 1971. When the world welcomed China into the United Nations despite Mr. Sato and the United States, Mr. Sato was the most disliked public figure in the whole of Japan. Dirt on Japan's face took on another layer.

I shall refrain from discussing why the Japanese were so upset about the U.S. initiative to talk to China over the head of Japan. Enough has been said and written about it already. When a nation feels shamed by another, it evidently thinks about how to even the score. Indeed, it seemed that the Japanese were demanding that their government stand up and be counted as the government of an independent sovereign nation in the face of the American diplomatic offensive.

Mr. Tanaka evidently thought so too. With his characteristic decisiveness, he moved quickly to chalk up a better score than the United States in this respect. In October, 1972, the People's Republic of China and Japan were good friends again after nearly forty years of hot and cold war. At the same time, the other China in Taiwan broke her diplomatic relations with Japan, to which Japan did not protest. If this is what the Japanese public wanted, then the same public should have rewarded Mr. Tanaka with an equally heartwarming electoral success when Mr. Tanaka went into an election, very much on the strength of his China achievement.

The reward was not given. Mr. Tanaka took the whole thing philosophically. Despite 57 per cent of parliamentary seats won by his party, he conceded that the Japanese public was making a signal to him that Liberal Democrats were not impeccable in their political record and that much more had to be done for the Japanese people. The decrease in the parliamentary strength of Liberal Democrats by seventeen seats was made to sound like the greatest electoral disaster in Japanese history. (I personally welcome this as behavior befitting the prime minister of a democracy; a majority is not a

carte blanche for naked arrogance. At the same time, Liberal Democrats should be reminded that in terms of popular vote their share was only 46.7 per cent, down slightly from the previous 47.6 per cent. The discrepancy between a plurality of popular votes and a majority of parliamentary seats indicates deficiencies in the system of electoral districts that favor the rural vote. It is indeed a sorry spectacle that a party can govern by depending on the deficiencies of the existing institutions rather than by dint of genuine appeal to the public.)

To make the matter more fascinating, many candidates from the Liberal Democratic Party who ran on a "Don't Forget Taiwan" pledge succeeded in getting elected or reelected, while major figures who made great contributions for the normalization of Sino-Japanese relations failed. Komeito was especially far ahead of the Tanaka government in blazing a new path for Sino-Japanese friendship, but he was rewarded with the loss of eighteen seats. The Japanese logic in this case was that it was unbecoming for an opposition party to carry the ball for the ruling party. On the other hand, Japanese Communists, who had long earned the enmity of the Chinese Communists, made handsome gains in parliamentary seats. The reinvigorated Socialists and Communists will certainly put up an appropriately stiff opposition to the Tanaka government. Their emphasis has always been on domestic problems, and when economic growth is no longer an untarnished glory, Mr. Tanaka would turn a deaf ear to their voices only at his own peril. Communists and Socialists are for unconditional peace—they are the true standard bearers of Japan's postwar Constitution, which denounces military power—and are remarkably free of nationalistic hangups.

Let me now make general remarks about what may be called a Japanese style of foreign policy which may clarify the meaning of the normalization of Sino-Japanese relations. Japan has been successful in preventing domestic problems from spilling over into the arena of foreign policy. Japan has made conscious efforts in this direction by maintaining a measure of self-discipline over domestic problems that may be regarded as very stringent by other countries. Therefore, Japan's foreign policy, isolated from pressures of domestic problems, has had a life of its own as a series of pragmatic responses to what other countries have done to Japan or what they have wanted Japan to do. That is to say, Japan's foreign policy originates in other countries rather than in Japan.

Before the signals from other countries are reflected on Japan's foreign policy, however, there is usually a stage of discussion and interpretations of what they really mean. At this stage, the most active participants are Japan's intellectuals, press and media.

Japan's intellectual community is in a sense a staff department of Japan's foreign office. Japan's response to the U.S. initiative for rapprochement with China is the most pertinent example of the stimulus-response type of Japan's foreign policy via the digestion, discussion and analysis of the many issues by Japan's intellectual community. This is not to say that intellectuals cooperated with the Tanaka government openly. But it is difficult to avoid a conclusion that the most vociferous demand for Sino-Japanese rapprochement together with all possible alternatives of effecting it was first made by intellectuals and that the Tanaka government coopted many of them. The arm's-length cooperation between the government known to be conservative and the intellectual community known to be radical has been impressive in this case. But the pattern is perfectly general as a Japanese style of foreign policy making.

Implicit in this style is the fact that Japan does not take initiative in foreign affairs but merely adapts to developing events. This is one aspect of the Japanese style of foreign policy that has been repeatedly pointed out as something unsuitable for Japan as a "big power." I personally do not think that this observation is particularly fruitful. Japan is not "big power" in the sense of power traditionally associated with moves and countermoves in international politics. An economy, according to sociologists, is an adaptive subsystem which produces for society at large and accommodates to demands from the political subsystem where national goals are formulated and implemented.

If we think of Japan as a portion of the world's adaptive subsystem, i.e., a portion of the world economy, there is nothing wrong in perceiving Japan as a country where an efficient economic machinery is located that can be used for the economic well-being of the whole world. Japan does not have to be a great power. She does not need initiative in political matters. This view of Japan deserves a sympathetic understanding on the part of the United States, because the U.S. is nowadays too prone to a power-political conception of nations and economies. The

U.S. likes initiatives and performs very well with respect to matters for which she has taken initiative. On the other hand, the U.S. is easily annoyed by other countries' initiatives and often tends to sabotage action initiated by other countries. In foreign policy, Japan is entirely the other way around. Japan has given up, since World War II, even a marginal claim as a sovereign nation to occasional initiatives in international affairs. To her credit, Japan stands ready to respond intelligently to moves made by other nations. The intellectuals of Japan are the window of Japan's outlook and psyche in this respect. They constantly wail, sulk and agonize about Japan's incompetence in world diplomacy. They constantly criticize and condemn the foreign service bureaucracy and the entire system of government in Japan. But in the course of doing so, intellectuals generate and accumulate expertise about the range of options open for Japan. When the Japanese government has to act, the technical and analytical problems will have been largely solved, thanks to the constant vigil of intellectuals.

I personally consider it marvelous that intricate checks and balances built into the Japanese political processes have the tendency to tie up the hands of the Japanese government and prevent Japan from reaching out to the world with a so-called "independent" foreign policy. I am sure, too, that an "independent" foreign policy is the last thing the world wants from Japan. Japan should be proud of having made a fine art of passive but responsive diplomacy which has softened and diluted the initial impact of hard-hitting first moves by other countries like the United States, the People's Republic of China and the Soviet Union. I am also satisfied with Japan's sensible restraint in the face of certain harsh demands and even outright abuses by Asian countries. If one pursues one more step the behavioral logic implicit in the Japanese style of diplomacy, one might even point out the unusually constructive role that Japan's passivity and flexibility can play for gently "massaging" away the knotty tensions in contemporary international politics.