

A pragmatic public: observations of Japan's 2016 Public Opinion Survey on Diplomacy by Akira Igata and Brad Glosserman

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As controversy swirls around the security policies of the Abe Shinzo government, the Japanese public remains a stabilizing force in foreign policy. Despite rising threats in the regional security environment and heightened sensitivity to such challenges after a bruising national security debate, the annual Cabinet Office survey on diplomacy, published earlier this month, shows surprising continuity in outlook. The Japanese public believes in national defense, but it tightly circumscribes the interests it is prepared to defend. It looks to the US-Japan alliance to defend those interests and sees that alliance playing an ever more important role in Japan's future.

This year's Cabinet survey was published March 14, 2016. For the past 30 years, it was conducted in October or November. This year's survey broke from this pattern; it was conducted between Jan. 7-17 beginning, remarkably enough, the day after North Korea's fourth nuclear test on Jan. 6. The Cabinet Office says the timing was just a coincidence; perhaps, but it has to be kept in mind when interpreting results of this year's survey.

Bilateral relationships

Japanese views of China have improved slightly since the nadir of 2012. To be sure, assessments of the Japan-China relationship are dismal, but those who consider the current bilateral relationship to be positive doubled from 4.8 percent in 2012 to 9.5 percent this year, and the average response improved from 1.41 last year to 1.64 this year, when answers are weighted on a scale of 1 (very negative) to 4 (very positive). This is a notable improvement given the attention devoted to Chinese (mis)behavior in the South China Sea.

One explanation for this rise is that the Japanese people don't see the South China Sea as an issue in their bilateral relationship with China. If correct, then the uptick in public opinion can be attributed to decreased tensions over the Senkakus in recent years.

There is a similar, marginal improvement in Japan-ROK relations. The number of respondents with positive views of the ROK hit its lowest level in 1996, a product of the territorial dispute between the two countries that was rekindled in February of that year. Views continuously improved for 15 years, with positive views of the ROK hitting a peak in 2009-2011; then, over 60 percent felt positive toward the ROK. The numbers plunged dramatically in 2012 (just 39.2 percent had positive views and 59 percent were negative), most likely

triggered by President Lee Myung-bak's visit to the disputed islands of Dokdo/Takeshima in August 2012.

In 2014, views hit a historic low (31.5 percent positive, 66.4 percent negative), but the numbers this year are slightly better (33 percent positive, 64.7 percent negative). When asked to assess the current Japan-ROK relationship, there has been a substantial rise in positive sentiment, however, jumping from 12.2 percent to 22.7 percent. Credit belongs to some normalization of diplomatic ties – the leaders of Japan and South Korea held their first official summit after three years in November 2015 – and the agreement to “finally and irrevocably” settle the comfort women dispute on Dec. 28, 2015. Nevertheless, Japanese respondents on average feel that Japan's bilateral relationship with India (2.75) and Russia (2.05) are better than that with the ROK (1.91) when answers are weighed on a scale of 1 to 4. (Historically, bilateral relations with ROK were better than or on par with India or Russia until 2012.)

Supporters of the US-Japan alliance should take heart: approval of the US remains at stratospheric levels. When asked about affinity toward the country, the state of current relations, and the importance of the future development of the bilateral relationship, assessments best those of every other country. Not only are positive views of the US this year (84.4 percent) comparable to those in October 2011 when the US was feted for its assistance to Japan after the March 11, 2011 triple disaster in Tohoku (84.5 percent), but the percentage of respondents that deem the current state of the Japan-US relationship to be positive is at an all-time high (88 percent). Furthermore, 95.8 percent of respondents believe that future development of relations with the US is either “important” (79.1 percent) or “somewhat important” (16.8 percent) for the two countries and the Asia-Pacific region.

This strong support undermines the criticism of foreign policy experts that US credibility in the region has been eroding as a result of the failure to punish Syria for crossing the red line drawn there, as well as the slow reaction to Chinese assertiveness in the South China Sea. The Japanese public does not seem to be troubled by US policy or behavior.

High levels of support for the US are more than just gratifying; they may be an important cushion if Japan bashing continues in the US presidential campaign. Japanese efforts to pick up more of the burden in the alliance, a result of the new security legislation and the new Defense Guidelines, could help deflect charges of “free riding” – or they could spark criticism of unceasing US demands. The leading candidates' hostility to the Trans-Pacific Partnership and the call for a renegotiation of its terms is likely to irritate many in Japan.

Generational differences

The survey reveals several emerging generational differences in views. When thinking about North Korea, for example, respondents as a whole prioritized the “abductee issue” (83.5 percent) over the “nuclear issue” (76.1 percent) as an area of concern, but Japanese aged 20-29 and 30-39 were more worried about the nuclear issue than the abductees. Among the youngest cohort, the 20-29 age group, 80.5 percent were concerned about the nuclear issue and 78.9 percent were concerned about abductees. Three times previously (2006, 2009, and 2010), this age group ranked the nuclear issue more important than the abductee issue. This is the first time, however, that nuclear concerns (83.4 percent) eclipsed the abductee issue (78.4 percent) among 30-39 year-olds as well.

Views of China elicit a similar split. The 2015 survey asked whether one perceives “the development of future relationship with country X is important for the two countries and the Asia-Pacific” for five key countries: the US, Russia, China, ROK, and India. Compared to older generation (ages 50 and above), younger Japanese (20-49) were more likely to place importance on the future of bilateral relationships with all these countries, but this tendency is most pronounced vis-à-vis China. Japanese aged 20-49 were more likely to judge the development of future relations with China to be “important” (the highest of the four options), than older Japanese: roughly 43 percent of 20-49 year olds reached that conclusion in contrast to 34 percent of those aged 50-59, 28.1 percent of those between 60 and 69, and 21.7 percent 70 or older.

These two proclivities of the younger generation – identifying North Korea’s nuclear development as more worrying than the abductee issue and seeing future relations with China as important – indicate a growing pragmatism among the younger public. Japanese worries about security issues suggest that the public may be more inclined to accept pragmatic foreign policy decisions that take into account a changing international environment. The younger generation’s readiness to prioritize the nuclear issue is potentially the most consequential. Past survey results demonstrate that this shift has more to do with increased fears of the North Korean nuclear program than lowered interest in the abductee issue. However, this finding hints that Japan may be less bound by the abductee issue in dealing with North Korea in the future.

Level-headed public

Given the timing of the survey, respondents concerned about the North Korean “nuclear issue” and “missile issue” increased from the previous year (76.1 percent and 60.5 percent, respectively), but this pattern is consistent with past results. Surveys conducted after nuclear tests experience a sharp spike of concern followed by steady decline until the next nuclear test occurs (2006, 2009, and 2013).

Yet apart from this assessment of the North Korean threat, Japanese thinking has remained static over the last year. The favorability of Russia, India, Southeast Asia, and Europe remain constant. There are no notable changes in thinking about Japan’s role in international society. There is no fluctuation in public support for participating in PKO activities. The public remains skeptical of government

intervention to protect and assist citizens abroad (the weighted average changed from 1.95 to 1.9), which is surprising given the brutal murder of two Japanese citizens by ISIL in 2015. Support for Japan’s bid for a permanent seat on the UN Security Council remains steady, but the percentage of people who opposed that bid because it would oblige Japan to actively participate in military activities jumped 9 points to an all-time high of 39.3 percent. When asked if Japan should set new foreign economic policy priorities, the answer is no.

In short, there has been no significant change in Japanese foreign policy priorities despite a bruising debate over security legislation and belligerent behavior by regional neighbors that would seem to threaten Japanese national interests. It looks as though neither the vocal opposition groups that fought the legislation nor the Abe Cabinet, which seeks to expand Japan’s regional security role, accurately represents the Japanese public.

The best explanation for the survey results is a powerful pragmatism among the Japanese public. If the Japanese were tunnel-visioned pacifists, they would be distancing themselves from the US for fear of entanglement in its conflicts. If they were itching to flex their new collective security muscle, views of neighboring countries would be eroding to justify the use of force. The slight improvement in views of China suggests that the Japanese distinguish between “distant” threats in the South China Sea and “real” threats closer to home, such as the Senkakus, which have been relatively peaceful (in comparison). The overall stability of views despite the contentious national security debate of the last year validates the argument that the Japanese worried not about the actual content of the bills, but instead the process by which they were passed into law and the administration that was pushing them. Significantly, this pragmatism seems to be stronger among the younger generation. Collectively, the outline that emerges is of a practical, pragmatic public that appreciates security concerns, but does not overstate them.

PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed and encouraged.