

March 17, 2014

Response to PacNet #20 “Understand Abe, but Focus on Japan” by Ken Yates

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Pacific Forum’s *PacNets* continue to stimulate constructive thoughts, and Grant Newsham’s latest (*PacNet* #20) continues that tradition. Newsham’s suggestion that Americans should be paying more attention to broader Japanese thinking than only in the narrow thrust of what appears to be strengthening nationalist sentiments of a ruling class is right on target. As a former diplomat concerned with “Public Diplomacy” aspects of Japan’s relations with the US, I share his sentiment that we have lost contact with the wider culture.

Viewed over the longer term, it is clear that Japanese public opinion is remarkably stable and broadly pro-American. For the most part, US policy toward Japan, particularly following the end of the Pacific War, demonstrated respect for Japanese institutions and traditions. Despite some discomfort with “victor’s justice” over the unilateral reformulation of Japan’s constitution and political system, it is fair to say that most Japanese see the results favorably while maintaining a Japanese-style foundation within their social system and successful economy. US actions, particularly those such as “Operation Tomodachi,” serve to sustain this generally positive image held by the Japanese public. The result is a level of mutual respect and trust between the two peoples that is rarely matched internationally.

Of course, the same feelings do not apply to relations within the neighborhood. Chinese, Koreans, and other Asian publics that have been stressed during more than a century of sometimes painful interaction with Japan, hold views that are based on difficult contacts stretching from at least the beginning of the Tokugawa period that brought together the parts that we recognize as modern Japan. There should be little surprise that Abe’s “*tokonoma*” government, in which there is a seeming pattern of singular focus on one aspect of Japanese culture at the expense of the surrounding environment, would offend the neighbors among whom memories of Japanese cruelty are deeply felt.

US policy should be mindful of the Japanese political developments as existing within a context of persistent regional sentiments. The only sure way to build an awareness of the nature and depth of such political attitudes is to maintain broad diplomatic contacts throughout those respective societies and not rely solely on the political currents of the capitals. Newsham is right; we have got to get out of our embassies and mix.

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