Japan’s Realism and Liberalism

Myanmar, the United States, and Regional Peace in Southeast Asia

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Abstract

In 2011, with the Thein Sein administration, the global community welcomed a “new-born” Myanmar. Now, the future course of the country is receiving attention from various actors in the global arena. Especially in terms of its economic potential, views of Myanmar have been transformed from “isolated state” to “last frontier.” At the same time, Myanmar faces challenges of democratization, national reconciliation, and sustainable development. In the age of globalization, to pursue greater peace in Southeast Asia, it is critical for all to help Myanmar’s reforms become successful. As a global player, cooperating with its allied partner the United States, Japan is ready to assist Myanmar’s efforts at all levels. In tackling challenges in Myanmar through the mechanism of the U.S.-Japan alliance, Japan’s well-balanced realism and liberalism are required.

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Global Politics in the Twenty-first Century

Many practitioners, pundits, and scholars point out that international politics may change due to four major influences: (1) the rise of emerging powers followed by a global power shift; (2) the increasing importance in global affairs of non-state actors, such as international organizations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), multi-national corporations (MNCs), ethnic minorities, and terrorist groups; (3) power itself, both hard and soft, taking new forms; and (4) the rising importance non-traditional security issues including humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HA/DR), maritime law enforcement, and energy security. To address these influences many actors in the global arena adopted the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as new norms at the United Nations General Assembly. This “human security” approach describes the close linkage of national and regional stability with non-traditional security issues such as poverty, natural disaster, and economic development, and it elucidates the importance of maintaining sustainability, strengthening resilience, and cooperating jointly and globally to tackle common challenges.

Japan’s Realism and Liberalism

Japan is one of the most important actors in global politics. Japan has enjoyed peace and prosperity and has gained global influence by providing its soft power through tools such as high-end products, culture, and liberal values. Recently, both in response to global demands and for its national interest, Japan has contributed to the peaceful order of other nations and regions by enhancing liberal norms and regimes. Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, Japan has made efforts to spread the concept of human security through creation of United Nations Trust Fund for Human Security and to accelerate the process of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), followed by establishing a set of SDGs. At the beginning of 2016, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe (2012–present), who famously announced “Japan is back” shortly after taking office, clarified Japan’s stance on global common challenges, saying “we will face whatever challenges occur. We will make this year a year to face the future boldly.”

It is obvious that Prime Minister Abe wants Japan to be a global player. To this end, he employs “values diplomacy,” placing emphasis on liberal universal values such as freedom, democracy, fundamental human rights, the rule of law, and market economics; at the same time, he views the world as a realist. His “values diplomacy” is based on the idea of the “arc of freedom and prosperity,” a term coined by his former foreign minister Taro Aso (2005–2006). This arc would start from Northern Europe and the Baltic States,

2. Currently, Aso serves as the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance of the Abe Cabinet.
Central and Southeastern Europe, Central Asia and the Caucasus, the Middle East, and the Indian subcontinent, then cross Southeast Asia, and to reach Northeast Asia. Mackinderian heartland theory once considered this stretch an “arc of crisis” because it has been prone to struggles and insecurity. Attempting to stabilize this extensive zone through international cooperation by sharing liberal values could lead to regional and global peace and prosperity. This is why Japan has been acting in partnership with other nations across the Eurasian continent, for example with, “Visegrad Group plus Japan (V4 plus Japan),” “GUAM plus Japan,” “Central Asia plus Japan,” “South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation plus Japan (SAARC plus Japan),” and “CLV plus Japan.” In short, the liberal order of the region has become essential to Japan’s national interest. Japan views Southeast Asia based on its geopolitical interests regarding China’s aggressive policy in the region. Japan welcomes China’s peaceful rise, but Japan is concerned about a scenario in which China’s rise would lead, through its hard power as diplomatic leverage, to the expansion of its sphere of influence in the region. It is crucial for Japan, relying on imported energy and maritime security in the region, that China’s rise not adversely affect regional order. Hence, Japan places a high priority on working with its neighbors to create regional peace and stability underpinned by rules that comply with liberal universal values. Supporting liberalism, based on realism, Japan has enhanced its ties with neighboring countries in Southeast Asia not only through economic assistance and international trade, but by participating in an expanding number of multilateral military exercises such as Rim of the Pacific (RIMPAC), Cobra Gold, Pacific Partnership, Khaan Quest, and the Global Peace Operations Initiative capstone “Garuda Canti Dharma.” In accordance with its strategic vision, Japan recognizes the importance of Southeast Asia and, in particular, a “new-born” Myanmar.

Myanmar in Global Politics

With the end of World War II, newly-independent Myanmar took a course of non-alignment. After the military coup of 1962, General Ne Win promulgated a constitution in 1974 based on isolationism coupled with a socialist economy that nationalized Myanmar’s major enterprises. In 1988, a political crisis shook Myanmar. Crackdowns on nationwide anti-government demonstrations were strengthened, and pro-democracy

3. “Speech by Mr. Taro Aso, Minister for Foreign Affairs on the Occasion of the Japan Institute of International Affairs Seminar,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA), November 30, 2006.
4. V4 stands for Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Hungary; GUAM for Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, and Moldova; CLV for Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam. Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan are members of “Central Asia + Japan”; India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan, Maldives, and Afghanistan of “SAARC + Japan.”
protests suppressed. Since then, Myanmar remained isolated not only because of historical preferences internally, but also external structural factors as the economic sanctions imposed by the United States, the European Union (EU), Australia, and, to a lesser degree, Japan in response to undemocratic developments in the country. But Myanmar has not been truly “isolated.” Many NGOs have collaborated in Myanmar with civil society, other governmental bodies, and international organizations in order to help the country move toward democracy. After 1988 and until 2011, the Japanese government also maintained contact with Myanmar in the form of grants for humanitarian assistance and debt relief. Tokyo provided two loans for important projects, which included improvements to Yangon airport in 1998 and the renovation of the Baluchaung hydroelectric dam in 2002. Because of the need for safety at the airport and electricity for the country’s citizens, Japan considered these continuous efforts human security.6

It is necessary to understand the democratic reforms initiated by Thein Sein since 2011 from various perspectives, but it is undeniable that besides a long-time pro-democracy movement led by Aung San Suu Kyi, one underlying cause has been the effect of globalization.7 A powerful wave of globalization, along with a growing global civil society and the Myanmar people’s demand for democracy, presented a challenge to the junta. The Thein Sein administration responded with reforms and a return to global engagement. As a result, great powers dropped some of their economic sanctions, and MNCs began showing interest in investing in the country. The World Bank subsequently earmarked a huge amount of money in credit and grant funding for Myanmar.8 It is globalization that has transformed views of Myanmar from an “isolated state” to a “last frontier.”

At the same time, globalization enables us to look at deep antagonism among people that is rooted in ethnic and religious differences in Myanmar’s society. In the country, there are 135 distinct ethnic groups. The Burmese are dominant, but minorities live in border areas, for instance the Kachin in the north and the Rakhine in the west. Minority ethnic groups created their own liberation armies to achieve independence from the Burmese-centered government. In 2011, Myanmar’s army launched a major offensive against the Kachin Independent Army and violated Kachin human rights through widespread displacement, forced labor, rape, torture, and the use of child soldiers.

7. This article mainly uses the term “globalization” referring to the following definition as “the process of international integration arising from the interchange of worldviews, products, ideas, and other aspects of culture.” See Martin Albrow and Elizabeth King, (eds.), Globalization, Knowledge, and Society, London: Sage, 1990.
Moreover, Myanmar faces the Rohingya issue. After the Citizenship Law was passed in 1982, all Rohingya, who are predominantly Muslims, were stigmatized as the “illegal people.” Since then, they have been targeted for violence in the community. Recently, as a result of communal violence in 2012, an estimated 120,000 Rohingya people remain segregated as internally displaced persons in camps in Rakhine state. On August 2016, State Counselor and Leader of the National League for Democracy (NLD) Aung San Suu Kyi announced the establishment of a high-level advisory commission to find solutions to the issue. A few months later, nine Myanmar police officers were killed and weapons were stolen by armed men in Rakhine state. No one has claimed responsibility for the attacks, but a senior official within Rakhine’s state government blamed the “insurgent” group known as Rohingya Solidarity Organization (RSO), a small Rohingya armed group formed in the 1980s. To search the attackers and homes for stolen weapons, the government carried out a military operation, followed by further violence against the Rohingya, and as many as thirty thousand Rohingya abandoned their homes. UN officials called the incident “ethnic cleansing.” This kind of ethnic strife has exacerbated tensions between Buddhist and Muslim communities and created internal insecurity in Myanmar. Despite some positive signs including a nationwide ceasefire agreement signed by eight armed ethnic groups in 2015, from viewpoint of the responsibility to protect, many believe that the government is still failing to uphold human security with regard to the Rohingya.

Myanmar also faces economic challenges. While many in the global arena are interested in investment in the “last frontier,” Myanmar is forced to accommodate a wave of globalization. Its past experience with isolationism and a state- and military-led economy prevented the country from developing a market economy. Even now, Myanmar does not have resilient hard and soft infrastructure for economic development. The road pavement rate and power generation capacity in Myanmar remain at low levels, close to those of Laos and Cambodia. The Human Development Index in Myanmar, however, shows slight improvement. While poor infrastructure is an obstacle for investors all over the world, Myanmar has great potential because of its rich endowment of labor and natural resources. Successful reform in Myanmar is expected to boost not only its economy, but regional and global prosperity. Japanese specialists on Myanmar’s economy said, “there are vast opportunities for Myanmar to enjoy latecomer’s advantages[;] […] this is the most

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appropriate time to pursue people-centered development that keeps citizens at the center of economic and political reforms.”

Japan has actively engaged in Myanmar’s reform. In April 2012, in order to assist democratization, national reconciliation, and sustainable development, Japan extended economic cooperation focused on (1) people’s livelihoods, (2) capacity building, and (3) infrastructure necessary for sustainable development. Since then, under the umbrella of its Official Development Assistance (ODA) policy, Japan’s presence has been prominent in areas of infrastructure development in Thilawa, upgrading ferry boats in Yangon, helping displaced persons in ethnic minority areas, and capacity development of legal, judicial, and other important sectors. Collaborating with NGOs and grassroots human security projects, massive programs such as construction of health centers; community-based integrated maternal, newborn, and child survival programs; and delivery of humanitarian aid for conflict-affected peoples have been vigorously carried out. Moreover, Yohei Sasakawa, the chairman of the Nippon Foundation, has proactively worked for a long time to eliminate leprosy and the stigma endured by those affected by the disease, along with building schools in the Rakhine state. After being appointed as Special Envoy of the Government of Japan in 2013, he has done an outstanding job in promoting national reconciliation in Myanmar. Now, utilizing its technical advantages and “human security” approach, Japan has launched the Partnership for Quality Infrastructure in collaboration with other countries and existing international organizations. Through this initiative, Japan is attempting to promote “quality infrastructure investment” as an international standard at international forums such as the UN, the World Bank, and the Asian Development Bank (ADB). Japan’s assistance policy is an important part of its soft power policy.

**Implications for U.S.-Japan Relations**

The United States has been elevating the importance of economic statecraft as a core part of its foreign policy, partly to fuel its economy. The United States also prioritizes support and advocacy for liberal universal values. Throughout the region, as a Pacific power, the United States emphasizes respect for fundamental human rights as a source of peaceful relations among nations and as an enabler of national achievement and prosperity. A “new born” democratic Myanmar and its increasing strategic importance for the U.S. “pivot to

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Asia” policy allow the United States to establish channels with Myanmar at political, economic, and diplomatic levels. In 2011, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton visited Myanmar on a goodwill mission; during her meeting with President Thein Sein and Aung San Suu Kyi, she agreed to boost humanitarian aid. Over the following years, President Obama and President Thein Sein visited one another’s respective capitals, and eventually the United States formally announced the lifting of U.S. sanctions on Myanmar. Now, the United States expands its assistance to Myanmar under (1) national reconciliation and peace building, (2) supporting democratic systems and institutions, (3) expanding economic reforms, (4) building resilient and productive communities, and (5) humanitarian assistance funding. 19 Indeed, U.S. and Japanese policy goals overlap significantly, and the historic transition that is underway in Myanmar is a strategic opportunity for both countries. In the longer term, success in Myanmar could strengthen the economy and governance of Southeast Asia, whereas failure could undermine regional progress.

In an age of global politics, Japan and the United States remain the “cornerstone of peace, security, and stability in the Asia-Pacific region”. 20 They cooperate through a stable bilateral alliance based on realist geopolitical notions as well as shared liberal universal values. Now, democratization in Myanmar offers the United States and Japan a chance to deepen alliance cooperation. In early 2014, the allies established a new mechanism for coordinating ODA, followed by the U.S.-Japan Development Dialogue convened in February. The goal is to maximize the effectiveness of the two countries’ ODA for promoting peace, stability, and economic growth, and they identified disaster risk reduction, women’s economic empowerment, and regional cooperation as key priorities, 21 all of which correspond to the globally-acknowledged norm. In April 2015, the United States and Japan adopted the new Guidelines for Japan-U.S. Defense Cooperation, pledging, “in an increasingly interconnected world, Japan and the United States will take a leading role in cooperation with partners to provide a foundation for peace, security, stability, and economic prosperity in the Asia-Pacific region and beyond.” 22 In sum, both countries are ready to support Myanmar’s development toward democracy.

### Conclusion

When we view Myanmar’s reform as an alliance matter, and people in the country want U.S.-Japan engagement, it is necessary to consider how the two countries can help make

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Myanmar’s development successful. Here, we have to frame common challenges in a broader perspective. As SDGs expected, internal-external security and traditional-nontraditional security are mutually-reinforcing. Considering this framework, we have to identify what the two parties in the alliance can each do for Myanmar’s development. It is plausible to employ the previous Carnegie Endowment for International Peace’s analysis on the “division of labor” approach: while Japan prioritizes national reconciliation and sustainable development, the United States takes a democracy-first approach to Myanmar. In doing so, both countries have to account for perceptions of neighbors in the region. China is climbing the ladder as a strong emerging power through creation of its own organizations such as the Asian Infrastructure and Investment Bank (AIIB), the New Development Bank (NDB), and the “one belt, one road” initiative. China appears focused on expanding its sphere of influence to consolidate its hard power. In this context, some evaluate Japan’s “values diplomacy” and the U.S. “pivot to Asia” policy as a counterbalance to China’s rise. This kind of great power politics in the region or the “tug of war” around nonaligned Myanmar may fuel hostility between China and the two allies, followed by regional instability. Of course, we must be aware of the strategic importance of Myanmar. Yet, it is unwise to show the “hard” aspect of the alliance too much.

 Luckily, the U.S.-Japan alliance is well capable of meeting Southeast Asians’ high demand for maritime capacity building, which includes non-traditional security areas such as HA/DR, maritime law enforcement, and shipping and dock security. Addressing these issues can have positive effects. Realistically, operating our military commands to stabilize the region, we can contribute to solving non-traditional security issues as well as deterring any attempts to change the status quo. In liberal terms, showing “soft” aspects of our power based on a “human security” approach may succeed in encouraging Myanmar to embrace liberal universal values, and eventually preserving national and regional order, assuming recipients are attracted by soft power. In tackling common challenges in Southeast Asia, particularly in Myanmar, through the mechanism of the bilateral U.S.-Japan alliance, well-balanced Japanese and American realism and liberalism are required. If successful, the two countries will be welcomed by many in the region as, using Prime Minister Abe’s terminology, an “alliance of hope.”

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