Reflections on 2019 Sasakawa USA Emerging Experts Delegation Program

I had the privilege of working in the US Department of State from 2014 to 2017. One of the lessons I took away from that experience was how essential it is that the push to advance democracy around the world is multilateral, with as many countries as possible contributing their voices, diplomacy and resources to the effort. This observation stuck with me when I traveled to Japan at the invitation of the [Sasakawa Peace Foundation USA](https://www.sasakawa-usa.org/) in December 2019 to discuss global democracy and governance issues with government officials, academics and thought leaders, alongside colleagues from other democracy promotion organizations, including the National Democratic Institute, International Republican Institute, and National Endowment for Democracy.

Can Japan, I wanted to learn, play a greater role in global promotion and defense of democracy, especially at a time of widespread democratic backsliding?

The answers we heard to versions of this question were mixed, some in contradiction to each other. Broadly speaking, several themes stood out:

- **Several experts noted that democracy in Japan may be taken for granted relative to other countries.** They made versions of the point that democracy in Japan was not acquired by the people and not fought for, but a product of the post-war settlement. They noted that Japan’s democracy sometimes appears to be a passive democracy, with inconsistent public understanding of the pillars of democracy (surely part of a global phenomenon). One interlocuter said democracy is not part of Japan’s core identity, citing Japan’s low voter turnout rate.

- **Japanese leaders have historically been hesitant to forcefully advocate for democracy abroad.** We heard concerns about how countries cannot be coerced and how quickly democracy promotion can morph into regime change (accompanied by critiques of past US regime change efforts). One expert noted that Japan’s overall confidence has been shaken by the rise of China over the last decade, and another said that initiatives around the Free and Open Indo-Pacific strategy, and rhetoric around “rules-based principles,” have overtaken a focus on human rights and democracy. We also heard concerns about Japan not wanting to be seen as an agent of western values (though democracy should be seen more as a universal value). Another
said Japanese are not confident in democracy coming from the heart, and thus are not confident in promoting it elsewhere, with the concept of “values diplomacy” not widely understood.

- **NGO and think tank culture and infrastructure are not as developed in Japan as elsewhere**, resulting in less pressure on the government to promote and defend democracy abroad. One expert noted that Japan has approximately 2,000 foundations, many of them affiliated with corporations and working in corporate interests, while the US has roughly 86,000 foundations. This expert added that many of the Japanese corporations are well intentioned but inefficient, and that citizens have some mistrust of non-profits and are unsure where to make donations when they want to.

While these observations reflect some disappointment in Japan’s involvement in international democracy promotion, that is largely due to the gulf between that involvement and the potential. Considering the stability and durability of Japan’s democracy, the country’s technological advances and dynamic economy and the widespread respect for Japan on the international stage, expectations are that Japan can do more to defend abroad the system of government that has served it well at home. Steps that Japanese policymakers and non-governmental leaders could take include:

1. **Cultivate a more forceful voice on the value and universality of democracy.** Make an argument that democracy is the system of government that is most effective and equitable in delivering services and tangible dividends to citizens – in contrast to authoritarian models, including in China. The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic provides additional fodder for this argument as, overall, stable democracies such as Japan have responded more effectively to the pandemic that authoritarian countries – and better than backsliding democracies such as the United States, Brazil and India. Japan should seek to elevate its voice on these issues in international fora, countering China’s increasing efforts to influence international bodies such as the UN (filling a gap left by the United States).

2. **Match this voice with additional resources.** While the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) makes some investments in governance, it is not seen as a leading player in this field. While the results can seem intangible compared to some development and humanitarian initiatives, targeted assistance to civil society groups focused on democracy promotion and to journalists can be hugely influential over time and make those development investments more effective and sustainable. As suggested by some of my colleagues on the trip, Japan could consider establishing an equivalent to the **National Endowment for Democracy** to sustain and grow democracy-focused civil society globally (this could have a partial focus on the Indo-Pacific region, to match the Free and Open Indo-Pacific strategy).
3. **Encourage a more robust democracy-focused think tank and foundation environment.**

Universities, major corporations, government and existing think tanks and foundations could collaborate to substantially enlarge the ecosystem of private groups thinking about and supporting global democracy and governance issues, working toward developing a critical mass of these groups in order to elevate public awareness and debate on these issues and to allow for more experts from around the world to spend time in Japan working on democracy and governance. The government could also consider creation of a quasi-public “think- and do-tank” focused on democracy and governance issues, somewhat akin to the United States Institute of Peace.

Pursuing each of these recommendations will take time and investment, but the payoff could be substantial and directly support Japanese interests concerning security and rule of law. There has arguably never been greater need than there is now for Japan to step into an elevated global role in defending and promoting democratic norms.