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RESOLVED

Heisei was an Era Marked by Japanese Soft Power



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FROM THE EDITOR

Japan's new imperial era, Reiwa, began on May 1, 2019, after Emperor Akihito abdicated the throne. Emperor Akihito's 30-year reign (1989-2019) was called Heisei, or "achieving peace," a powerful symbol for the Japanese people and the international community given that he succeeded his father, Emperor Hirohito, who occupied the throne from 1926-1989 and was a central figure during World War II. Emperor Akihito emphasized Japan's desire for peace and prosperity, and the Heisei era coincided with scholarly debates about Japan's potential to utilize non-military instruments of power, or "soft power," such as economic growth, diplomacy, and culture, as an attractive tool for Japanese foreign policy to strengthen ties with countries in Asia and around the world.

In this seventh issue of the Debating Japan newsletter series, the CSIS Japan Chair invited Professor Yasushi Watanabe of Keio University and Mr. Brad Glosserman of Tama University to analyze the role of "soft power" in Japanese foreign policy during the Heisei era, and potentially in Reiwa.



Dr. Yasushi Watanabe
Professor of Public Diplomacy,
Graduate School of Media and Governance,
Keio University

Soft power is the power of attraction (rather than coercion and payments), or in other words, the ability to win the “hearts and minds” of others and thus secure an optimal policy environment in which to pursue national strategic objectives. Culture, political values, and foreign policy are the primary resources of soft power.

In this regard, yes, I do support the proposed statement—in both passive and positive terms.

Passive in the sense that Japan’s hard (economic and military) power was in relative decline during the Heisei era, especially vis-à-vis that of emerging states and regions. Japan needed to offset the impacts of that decline by underscoring soft power.

Positive in the sense that the power of shaping realities, setting agendas, and making rules increased its gravity in international relations when economic power became more interdependent and military power more costly to exercise. It was a welcome and worthy change for Japan to exploit actively.

The question then is how well Japanese soft power has worked to the benefit of Japan and the international community.

My answer is “enormously.”

A number of statistical data suggest that Japan and its culture have gained significant attraction over the past decades. According to the comprehensive annual [soft power index](#) by Portland Communications, Japan ranks fifth (2018), following by the United Kingdom, France, Germany, and the United States. Other surveys yield similar results. According to Japan National Tourism Organization (JNTO), the number of international travelers to Japan was 5.2 million in 2003 when the “Visit Japan Campaign” kicked off. It hit an all-time high last year of 31.2 million. The number of international students in higher education was 31,000 in 1989 when the Heisei era began and was 208,000 last year—another record high. Japan’s creative industries, including fashion and architecture, are well received in many parts of the world. The first “[Japan House](#)” opened

Mr. Brad Glosserman
Deputy Director and Visiting Professor,
Center for Rule-making Strategies,
Tama University



Constrained by a [constitution](#) that “forever renounce[s] war as a sovereign right of the nation and the threat or use of force as means of settling international disputes” and pledges to never maintain military forces, Japan’s postwar leaders sought alternative ways to establish a leading role for their nation in the world. Their quest for [soft power](#)—the ability to shape the preferences of others through appeal and attraction, using such tools as culture, values and foreign policies rather than “hard” elements of power like a military or other means of coercion—seeks, in many ways then, to make a virtue of necessity.

As the Heisei era began and the bubble took Japan’s economy to unprecedented heights, there was talk in the early 1990s of a “new type of superpower” in one formulation, a “[global civilian power](#)” whose international role rested on other dimensions of national strength and authority, and in another, a “[lifestyle superpower](#)” that demonstrated leadership through a domestic agenda that prioritized goals other than hard power.

A third avenue emerged in 2002 after the publication of the seminal [article](#) on Japan’s “Gross National Cool,” a paean to Japanese culture and aesthetic that captivated audiences around the world. The Heisei era is ending with another burst of interest in that aesthetic following the publication of Marie Kondo’s books on “the Japanese art” of tidying up.

Japanese ambitions were never realized, however, dissipating as the economy stumbled and national leaders proved disinterested in a more novel approach to power and influence, preferring more traditional thinking about state behavior.

The “lost decades” took much from Japan, but one of the most important consequences was the discrediting of its economic model. Japan’s policies, which turned orthodoxy on its head, propelled it to the heights of the global economy, seemingly threatening to surpass the United States as number one by the end of the 1980s. The extraordinary success of the Showa era

in Sao Paulo in 2017, attracting more than one million visitors in one year whereas internal estimates were closer to 150,000.

Until several years ago, Japan was mocked as the most stable failed democracy in the world. Now, Japan is often complimented as one of the most stable democracies in the world, without being afflicted by rising (negative) populism. Japan has successfully advanced free trade initiatives with Europe and across the Asia-Pacific. Although Japan is a close ally of the United States, Japan remains committed to the Paris Agreement on climate change and the Iran nuclear deal. Prime Minister Shinzo Abe will be the longest-serving prime minister in Japanese history on November 20, 2019 and will soon be the longest-serving head of the state at the G7 summit.

Many countries have their own “history issues,” and Japan is no exception. I am well aware of a strong and persistent inclination among some pundits to pigeonhole Japan into a “nationalist” or “militarist” box. One should remember, though, President Barack Obama’s visit to Hiroshima and Prime Minister Abe’s visit to Pearl Harbor in 2016. Although the case of Franco-German relations is often referred to as a model of post-war reconciliation, the case of Japan and the United States is no less dramatic and historic, particularly when cultural differences and geographic distance are taken into account. In 2015, Japan reached a historic agreement on the “comfort women” issue with South Korea. It is no secret that there was a strong voice against the agreement among some Japanese pundits, but Prime Minister Abe bucked the right to sign it, partly in order to maintain trilateral cooperation with South Korea and the United States.

When the Heisei era started, Japan was under pressure from the United States and Europe to assume more responsibility as a member of the international community, for example, in the form of [peacekeeping operations](#) and [overseas development assistance](#). Japan has certainly made steady progress in this arena so far as its constitution allows. In addition, from the introduction of a “maternal-child health handbook” in more than 30 countries to disaster reduction workshops held in Southeast Asia, Japan has made sober but solid contributions to human security.

Soft power is not a zero-sum game and increases when nations work together. The concept of

provided the backdrop to a distinctly Asian approach to leadership, one built on economic security and which reflected regional virtues and values, rather than a focus on hard power, and which emanated from a foreign culture. It provided deep pockets of developmental aid and largesse, as well as the comfortable lifestyle of a superpower, one in which all citizens participated. The Heisei era, marked by the end of the bubble and the stagnation that followed, erased those associations, emptied those pockets, and did great damage to Japanese soft power as a result.

Just as pernicious was a sense that many in Japan’s leadership were not committed to its unique constitution. The conservatives’ call for constitutional revision—as I write, Prime Minister Abe Shinzo has [repeated](#) his determination to amend the national charter by 2020—undercuts claims that Japan truly believes that constraints imposed by Article 9 are an asset and not a liability. The steady creep of Japan’s military capabilities and responsibilities after the first Persian Gulf War in 1991 and throughout the Heisei era—done to assume greater international responsibility and with considerable prodding from its ally the United States—suggested that this was an obstacle to be overcome rather than a source of power and influence.

The erosion of Japanese soft power is compounded by those conservatives’ complaints—part of the same ideological and policy framework—that Japan must rethink history to shed the “masochism” that constrains its foreign and security policies. As one scholar [noted](#), the “belief that the post-war regime can be brought to an end by constantly revisiting, and in certain instances unilaterally reinterpreting, past history . . . generates regional tensions and leads to the prolongation of Japan’s predicament of being caught in the constraints of the past.” That is the very opposite of soft power.

Then there are the cultural and aesthetic dimensions of Japan’s soft power. There is no mistaking global enthusiasm and interest in Japanese products and ideas, whether it is sushi, cup ramen, Pokémon, manga, anime, karaoke, the fashion of Issey Miyake, or Marie Kondo’s household management techniques. By 2005, there was even a [reference](#) to “a third wave of Japonism.” But it is hard to see how that translates into genuine international influence. Lots of folks enjoy sashimi but couldn’t care less about Japan’s policy

“Free and Open Indo-Pacific” was originally proposed by Japan during Prime Minister Abe’s first term of office in 2006-07. It is an important initiative in ensuring the liberal international order in the region, jointly with the United States, India, Australia, France, and other like-minded states. Such a collaborative, multilateral approach is, I believe, what Japanese soft power should pursue further in the Reiwa era—the era of beautiful harmony.

preferences. And the Japanese bureaucracy’s attempts to commoditize, monetize, and strategically utilize those interests leaches the wonder—the actual source of their power—from them and transforms them into a ploy that furthers political and economic ambitions.

These objections don’t undercut the belief that Japan has soft power or the regular surveys that put Japan in the top ranks of countries with soft power. However, that status reflects a cruel irony: Japan is perceived as having soft power and influence because it is never seen as pushing its views on other countries. Exploiting soft power would cause it to dissipate, leaving little after the predations of the Heisei era.

Japan could be a soft power superpower. It has remarkable assets and an inspirational postwar history. It is facing many challenges that postindustrial societies will encounter, and its ability to fashion workable solutions would position it to help other states as they grapple with those same issues. But soft power success demands a commitment to soft power itself—and the forgoing of traditional means of international leadership. Japan’s leaders haven’t been ready to make that commitment. There is little indication of a readiness to change course.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

YASUSHI WATANABE is a professor of public diplomacy at the Graduate School of Media and Governance, Keio University. Before joining Keio University, he was awarded a PhD in social anthropology from Harvard University and undertook postdoctoral research at the Universities of Cambridge and Oxford. He was previously a fellow at Downing College, University of Cambridge in 2007, a visiting professor at Sciences-Po in 2013, a Japan scholar at the Wilson Center, and a visiting scholar at Peking University and College of Europe in 2018. Yasushi is part of the advisory panel at the Japan Foundation, a programme director of the International House of Japan, and a co-chair of the Japan Advisory Council of the Salzburg Global Seminar. His books include the co-edited volume *Soft Power Superpowers: Cultural and National Assets of Japan and the United States (2008)* and the

BRAD GLOSSERMAN is a deputy director of and visiting professor at the Center for Rule-making Strategies, Tama University. He is also a senior adviser at Pacific Forum, where he served for 13 years (2004-2017) as executive director.

Brad is the author of *Peak Japan: The End of Grand Ambitions* (Georgetown University Press, 2019) and co-author (with Scott Snyder) of *The Japan-South Korea Identity Clash* (Columbia University Press 2015). He is the editor, with Tae-hyo Kim, of *The Future of U.S.-Korea-Japan Relations: Balancing Values and Interests* (CSIS, 2004). He is also the English-language editor of the journal of the New Asia Research Institute (NARI) in Seoul. A frequent participant in U.S. State Department visiting lecture programs and the U.S. Navy’s Regional Security Education Program, he speaks at conferences, research institutes, and universities around the

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edited volume *Handbook of Cultural Security* (2018). In 2005, he was awarded the prestigious Japan Academy Medal, which is the highest national prize awarded to mid-career academics.

world. His commentary regularly appears in media around the globe. He has written dozens of monographs and articles on U.S. foreign policy and Asian security relations, and he has contributed numerous chapters to books on regional security.

He was for 10 years a member of the editorial board of *The Japan Times* and continues to serve as a contributing editor

He is an adjunct lecturer at the Management Center of Innsbruck (MCI) and a guest lecturer at the Osaka University School of International Public Policy (OSIPP). He has a JD from the George Washington University National Law Center, an MA from the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS), and a BA from Reed College.

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ABOUT THE EDITOR

YUKA KOSHINO is a research associate with the Japan Chair at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, where she focuses on projects involving U.S.-Japan relations and security in the Indo-Pacific region.

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