

Japan's Soft Power in the Struggle over International Order

KAWASAKI Tsuyoshi

The Context: The Struggle over the Liberal International Order

At present, we are witnessing the struggle over the liberal international order between the two competing camps: the West including Japan as the status-quo camp and the revisionist camp led by China and Russia. In Japanese, I have referred to this type of international power struggle as *kokusai chitsujosen*.¹ Its essence concerns a classical question of politics: Who rules or whose will prevails over the political order? The current version happens to be about the international order that the West, led by the United States and the United Kingdom, created after World War II and survived the Cold War. The struggle over international order involves a wide range of policy instruments from those of military and diplomacy, to various economic measures, and even to cultural and informational tools. In it, the status-quo camp stands on the defensive against its revisionist counterpart that attempts to undermine, erode, or overturn the existing international order.

The overall balance of military power between the two camps is in favor of the West. Thus, the revisionist powers resort to various gray-zone tactics so as to evade the West's mobilization of its armed forces. These tactics include, for example, brinkmanship, salami tactics, soft power and sharp power, and various kinds of economic statecraft, as well as hybrid warfare. Through these means, the revisionist powers have sought to transform the key elements of the existing international order: territorial distribution including the spheres of influence, the ideological legitimacy of liberal democracy, and West-dominant international institutions. Their efforts have manifested themselves in Russia's recent invasion of Ukraine, as well as in China's reclamation projects in the South China Sea and the Belt and Road initiative.

The domestic sphere of the Western countries is also under attack. Here, the revisionist powers employ cyber attacks, foreign interference tactics, soft power tools, etc., all designed to weaken, confuse, or divide these open and liberal societies. The West is more vulnerable than the Russian and Chinese autocracies that can shun external influences at the borders.

These are the features of the ongoing power struggle surrounding Japan as a global player. Where does Japan's soft power diplomacy fit in this picture?

Soft Power Redefined

In answering the question, we need to redefine the concept of soft power as follows: in the battle over the legitimacy of competing political ideas between the two camps, soft power refers to a country's ability to weaken the persuasiveness of the ideas espoused by the enemy camp while strengthening that of its own through the direct and indirect information and other campaigns that are not coercive in nature. From the perspective of the Western camp, this definition zeroes in on the protection and promotion of political ideas such liberal

democracy, human rights, and rule of law against the revisionist camp. Soft power measures would take the forms of information (media) warfare, psychological warfare, and legal warfare (lawfare) to use the language of China's "three warfares," as well as the creation of new political concepts.

It should be noted that anime, game, Japanese cuisine, tourism, and sports are excluded from our definition of soft power. These are often discussed in the context of Cool Japan phenomena. These may be effective in nurturing pro-Japan populations in fellow liberal democracies where the governments need to listen to public opinion. But such long-term political effects should not be expected in the autocratic regimes in which the governments tightly control the population.

Japan's soft power strategy, defined in this manner, has two broad objectives: consolidating the unity of the West and conducting offensive campaigns toward Russia and China.

Japan's Soft Power Strategy: Policy Prescriptions

On the one hand, Japan's soft power exercise has largely been successful to unify the West against the revisionist camp. Here, particularly noteworthy is the idea of "a free and open Indo-Pacific" coined by the previous Abe government. It is fair to say that this political idea, espousing a liberal maritime regional order implicitly criticising China's navalism and maritime expansionism, has become prevalent within the Western camp. On this foundation, Japan should continue to engage trust-enhancing activities including symbolic government events (military exercises, for example) and people-to-people activities within its own camp.

On the other hand, Japan's relations with Russia and China have been less successful from a soft-power perspective and require policy innovations.

Russia: on the key question of the Northern Territories and a peace treaty with Moscow, Tokyo should formulate and pursue a soft-power strategy to undermine and erode the legal claims advanced by Moscow on the Northern Territories. Recently, Prime Minister Kishida remarked in the Diet that the Russian occupation of the Northern Territories lacks legal grounds and is thus illegal. This is a good start. The previous Japanese governments had refrained from this type of narrative. Japan should continue and expand Kishida's line of lawfare.

China: Japan should formulate and propagate a new concept of human rights. This is a concept-innovation strategy as was the case for "an open and free Indo-Pacific." In contrast to its Western partners, Japan is seen as reluctant to promote the human rights agenda toward China and other Asian countries. This needs to be changed—but with Japan's own concept of human rights that speaks to the Asian heart.

Here is our challenge: Such a new concept should be based on Japanese and broader Asian perspectives and experiences while not entirely rejecting or undermining the human-rights concept advanced by the West thus far. It should include (but should not be limited to) elements such as healthy long life and environment, designed to tug on the heartstrings in

Asian minds immediately. Care should be taken furthermore to use a well-chosen set of kanji to express the concept so that Chinese-language users can intuitively understand it—for example, “the freedom from four sufferings: fear 恐 (safety from oppression and physical harm, implying the Western concept of basic human rights), disease 病, poverty 貧, and ignorance 痴 (lack of education).”

Moreover, the new concept must *implicitly* paint Japan as a forerunner and a model to follow—and China as a lagger. It goes without saying that the concept must be understood and supported by the Japanese themselves—and something they can quietly feel proud of.

At the same time, Japan must remain vigilant in protecting the human rights of its citizens including foreign residents. There should be no gap between what it preaches abroad and what it practices at home. Otherwise it will be painted as a hypocrite.

In sum, while the struggle over the liberal international order continues with surprising turns, Japan must astutely exercise its soft power.

Notes:

1. Tsuyoshi Kawasaki, *Daisenryakuron: Kokusai chitsujo o meguru tatakai to Nihon* (On grand strategy: Japan and the Struggle over International Order). Tokyo: Keisō Shobō, 2019.