Japan’s Challenges in Public Diplomacy
An American Vision

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Executive Summary

Japan’s public diplomacy (PD) profile rests almost exclusively on the promotion of its cultural soft power. Today, in the complex geopolitical setting of Asia, in which national rivalries are reviving competing wartime history narratives and territorial disputes, this approach is no longer sufficient to advance Japan’s own national interests and gain favorable opinion abroad. Under the Prime Minister Abe, Japan has begun to transform and upgrade its public diplomacy. However, the country is still facing a number of challenges.

First, Northeast Asia is a complicated region to navigate: despite strong economic interdependence, countries are jockeying for influence, and the competition among national narratives is fierce. Second, Japan has a mixed image: the Cool Japan brand full of cute idols, anime and pop music has to coexist with the darker figure of a more nationalist Japan that aims to normalize its military status and reinterpret in a rosy way its war history. Third, Japan has yet to develop efficient tools to communicate with the world. If Shinzo Abe were successful in giving a new impetus to develop a truly global public diplomacy, developing new tools and narratives, his legacy is still mixed.

The paper suggests five paths Japan could follow to raise its international image and better communicate its story to the world. First, Japan should go beyond political personality in promoting its public diplomacy. Second, it should expand communication skills and public diplomacy study in its education system. Third, its PD should target not only foreign governments, but also people. Fourth, Japan should be careful to increase information sharing about itself. Fifth, national narrative and PD tools should be strengthened in a systemic manner.
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**Introduction**

It was once predicted that the Japan’s economy would overtake that of the United States. Three decades ago it would have been almost laughable to imagine the Japanese government’s need to invest in public diplomacy because everyone, it seemed, was buying Sony electronics and driving Toyotas and Hondas.

That confidence, at first blush, would seem to be in marked decline. A Japanese embassy official was quoted in *The New York Times* in 2014 in response to Japan’s recent efforts to peddle influence through American think tanks and universities: “Japan is not necessarily the most interesting subject around the world.” This choice of words illustrates a recognized lack of confidence that the Japanese nation has regarding its ability to persuade both generally and globally. This is reflected in an “in-house” rather than outside agency approach to public relations, coupled with a tradition of on-the-job training in persuasive communications. An academic study of public relations, critical or not, is missing at Japanese universities, driven in part by Japan’s long tradition of lifetime employment that has led to in-and-out rotation in PR. Even more troubling, there is a lack of understanding among Japanese people about how public relations relates to the public interest, promoted facts, and social truths that are separate from paid media advertising.

Actually, Japan’s public diplomacy profile rests almost exclusively on the promotion of its cultural soft power that takes the form of a “Cool Japan” brand focused on mass consumer and creative industries. It is led by the global popularity of manga (comic books), anime (animation), cosplay (costume play based on animation), J-Pop (such as the Akihabara-inspired girl group AKB48), modern J-Fashion (such as Harajuku and Lolita), as well as the traditional crafts and cuisine of Japan. But as with every nation that emphasizes soft power, there are limits. In the view of some people, Japan may have appealing comic books, cartoons, pop groups and

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animation films, but there is no direct causal correlation between enjoyment of such products as a consumer and a change in one’s attitudes toward a nation as a whole. Some global citizens would prefer a Japanese public diplomacy approach that emphasizes denouncing its imperial past, for instance, correcting rhetorical setbacks (e.g. “comfort women”) or forging ahead with better diplomatic relations in the region.

In the complex Asian geopolitical setting, in which national rivalries are reviving competing wartime history narratives and territorial disputes, public diplomacy is becoming recognized in Japan as an important tool to advance one’s own national interests while gaining more favorable opinion abroad. The return of Shinzo Abe to power in December 2012 opened a period of governmental stability and strong (even if controversial) leadership that, in a way, facilitated Japan’s public communication to the outside world. In 2015, amid sensitive commemoration ceremonies, Japan succeeded to secure a tighter bond with the United States, took part in the reunited trilateral summit with China and ROK and inked an unexpected agreement with South Korean President Park Geun-hye on the resolution of the so-called “comfort women issue”. To Japan’s champion soft power idol, Joseph Nye, Abe’s Japan is looking more like its old self again. But it could do much more.

This paper aims to provide recommendations to improve Japanese branding and public diplomacy. After presenting the challenges of the regional environment that Japan is facing and the characteristics of Japan’s public diplomacy under the leadership of Shinzo Abe, the paper will suggest five paths Japan could follow to raise its international image and better communicate with the world.

1. Joseph S. Nye has become a visible proponent of Japan’s updating of its security bills, as laid out in a report co-authored with CSIS Japan Chair, Richard Armitage, “The U.S-Japan Alliance: Anchoring Stability in Asia”, August 2012, in which they note, “Japan’s soft power is also considerable. She rates among the top three countries in international respect and first in the world in terms of national brand.”
Japanese Public Diplomacy in its regional context

What is Public Diplomacy?

The most accessible understanding of public diplomacy is the catch-all popular concept known as soft power, which has come to mean any nonviolent, persuasive activity designed to attractively influence attitudes, opinions, and behaviors of global publics, many of whom increasingly see themselves as directly involved in diplomacy activities. The originator of soft power, Joseph S. Nye, Jr.\(^2\), is careful to point out that “soft” can become overemphasized to “power”. Ultimately, soft power attraction activities have an association with national security and hard power objectives. States seek to use carrots and big sticks,\(^3\) coercion, payment (military, social), and everything short of outright force and intervention that are both costly and unpopular with domestic and foreign publics. Public diplomacy is in service to and is an instrument of soft power. It cannot be viewed in a vacuum. Indeed, much public diplomacy funding today is being shifted to more immediate, short-term, crisis-oriented strategic communication initiatives in hard power agendas.\(^4\)

Power is the guise of public diplomacy everywhere.\(^5\) Nation-states understand that they no longer have the luxury to meet behind closed doors to discuss policy issues of the day. They must seek out positive public opinion through influence and engagement with global publics. This is a simple working definition of public diplomacy. The mechanics of public diplomacy span the gamut from exchanges to

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3. “Speak softly and carry a big stick,” is a proverbial foreign policy directive of Theodore Roosevelt, which emphasizes the tactics of caution and non-aggression, backed up by the ability to do violence, if needed.
4. See Matthew Wallin, “Military Public Diplomacy: How the Military Influences Foreign Audiences,” White Paper, American Security Project, February 2015, 46 pages. Wallin concludes that the Department of Defense brings significant resources to bear to conduct public diplomacy activities. DOD claims it does not conduct “public diplomacy,” but Wallin notes in this report “the reality of actions on the ground and in cyberspace indicates that it does.”
media diplomacy, to speeches and rhetoric, and today to social media platforms like YouTube, Facebook and Twitter, to amplify both accessibility and outreach.

The term “public diplomacy” has American origins from a lifelong member of the Foreign Service. The Edward R. Murrow Center of Public Diplomacy, founded by the diplomat Edmund Gullion in 1965, defined public diplomacy as “the influence of public attitudes on the formation and execution of foreign policies. It encompasses dimensions of international relations beyond traditional diplomacy…[including] the cultivation by governments of public opinion in other countries; the interaction of private groups and interests in one country with those of another… (and) the transnational flow of information and ideas.”

Forty years later, acting director of the Murrow Center Crocker Snow, Jr. updated the definition and described the New Public Diplomacy: as “expanded - by accident and design - beyond the realm of governments to include the media, multinational corporations, NGO’s and faith-based organizations as active participants in the field.”

My own definition of public diplomacy is a soft power tool closely aligned with national security and thick (“intense”) globalism: in the rise of global interdependence and democratization of international relations coupled with reduced credibility of state actors, non-state actors today are playing a more significant role in public diplomacy, but their intensity and influence will vary state to state.

8. Ibid.
9. Joseph S. Nye, Jr., “Globalism Versus Globalization: What are the different spheres of globalism – and how are they affected by globalization?” The Globalist, April 15, 2002. Intensity or thickness of globalism refers to the density of networks of interdependence. Thick globalism does not imply universality, so there remain enormous gaps in knowledge diffusion through lack of access to digital media and education. Nye describes four dimensions of globalism: economic, military, environmental – and social or cultural, which “involves movements of ideas, information, images and of people, who of course carry ideas and information with them” including “the movement of religions – or the diffusion of scientific knowledge.” The Digital Era and the D-Generation (born into the Internet era of the early 1990s) are the primary exemplars of the fourth dimension.
Northeast Asia Public Diplomacy: Elite Actor Preference

In the last several years (2012-present), much of public diplomacy interactions in Northeast Asia consist of rhetorical battles over which country can be the most trusted political partner in international relations. This constant battle for regional rhetorical advantage diminishes a more collaborative approach to public diplomacy since public diplomacy is viewed in either the context of power politics (China) or as a lower rank version of diplomatic relations that has limited effect (Japan).

In the three main countries of Northeast Asia (China, Japan, South Korea) domestic politics is controlled by political elites; citizens do not have much say in how governments are run, even in the two democracies under examination here. This lack of representational democracy means that public diplomacy is an elite- and top-down driven process, much more so than in North America generally and the U.S. specifically, where public diplomacy study and training has infiltrated the academy as international public relations and international relations subfields, and where elite programs are on offer at a host of universities.

There is no comparable, comprehensive study of public diplomacy strategies yet underway in Northeast Asia, and to the extent that such study or training occurs, it is still dominated by outside academics and trainers from the United States and Europe, which is more of an observation than a criticism.

Public diplomacy has not taken hold as a concept as much as Joseph Nye’s “soft power,” itself a term that is often used without definition beyond “international appeal” or “cultural persuasion.” The lack of public diplomacy to take hold in common currency has a lot to do with the lack of understanding about the concept of “the public” as opposed to “diplomacy,” which is readily understood as what heads of states or their representatives do in international relations.

Moreover, the region is a mixture of strong economic integration and dependency in trade and services, but also fierce competition for hearts and minds of the buyer. Given the stalemates and enemy images that persist in an almost New Cold War fashion, there exists no cooperative or collaborative outlook in public diplomacy that could lift the region out of its tendency to look back as much as, if not more, than it looks forward. “We hate you but send us your rice cookers” is not an exaggerated sentiment if attitudes and opinions over the last several years can be believed. Further, the

10. The Genron NPO and China Daily released “The 10th Japan-China Public Opinion Poll” on September 9, 2014, which concluded that Japanese impressions of China had worsened to over 90% unfavorable and Chinese
regional media are not as transnational and internationally sophisticated as one would expect or hope for such a vibrant economic region that is cast these days as the leader of the Asian Century. Media here tend toward sensationalism and animosity coverage reflecting the longtime bitterness between regional competitors China and Japan. In a media context, “nationalism is a market commodity that sells more than cooperation.”

To some extent the public diplomacy methods and strategies involved in China, Japan and South Korea are not unlike the West: they are expected to improve the image and reputation of the nation-state overall, and in turn, inform, engage and influence global publics in support of national security and policy objectives. The difference is the enormous economic prowess that East Asia holds and the competitive spirit among the three in branding their respective nations to the world. No such jockeying for influence exists in North America among Canada, Mexico and the United States.

In contrast, the public diplomacy narrative in Northeast Asia is dynamic, rising occasionally in a spirit and tone of hopefulness and cooperation, but mostly falling or remaining steadily suspicious in tone and manner like a hovering cold war storm.

**Japan’s Public Diplomacy: to promote or not to promote?**

**What to promote? Cool Japan vs “Dark Japan”**

It is a difficult task to design a relevant public diplomacy strategy for Japan in such a regional context. The country has a multifaceted impressions of Japan were over 80% unfavorable. (See more at: <www.genron-npo.net>). See also Bruce Stokes, “How Asia-Pacific Publics See Each Other and Their National Leaders,” September 2, 2015, Pew Research Center, Washington, D.C., that concluded Japan enjoys a “relatively favorable image except in China and South Korea.” The Japanese, in turn, hold negative views of South Korea, with one-third registering very unfavorable views of their neighbor to the West. Older Chinese are the most unfavorable toward Japan.

11. The University of Cambridge hosted a conference (January 30-February 1, 2015), “The Media and How It Shapes History in East Asia,” at which it was noted by one participant that domestic journalism in the region is more insular compared to the transnational nature of the academy: “the history issue is not manufactured by the government in its entirety, since the very emotions of passionate and proud East Asian nationals inform reporting on this matter: a view shared by most of the journalists present.” Another participant, unidentified due to Chatham House conference rules, said that “the three G-Spots of journalism in China [are]: Japan, Taiwan and the U.S.” because of their emotional importance. Giulio Pugliese, “The Media and How it Shapes History in East Asia,” ASIEN, n.135, pp.104-106.
image, including darker sides difficult to reconcile with an overall excellent reputation. Besides, a Japanese culture of self-restraint and lack of globalised public diplomacy assets are a challenge for a proper worldwide communication.

When it comes to Japan’s public diplomacy, one must begin with *mono no aware*, a sense that nothing lasts forever. Japan Inc. is gone and so the Japanese adjust. Today the shrinking Japan and the demographic nightmare statistics strike a foreboding tone, but as with the sensitive cherry blossom “season” that lasts all of a few days, trying to package Japan in the world is itself ephemeral. Is Japan J-Pop star Kyary Pamyu Pamyu or one of 1,600 temples in Kyoto? It is both. It is a world-class master sushi chef refusing to be in the Michelin Guide to the world’s best restaurants. “Let things happen as they will” is how some at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs have explained it to me. Do Japan’s public diplomats feel the need to compete with China? It’s not necessary. Japan has another way. It’s seen from my perch in Tokyo as less “in your face” vis-à-vis a Confucius Institute and more slow-simmer. If China is the hare in the East Asian public diplomacy image and information race, then we know who the tortoise is.

This does not mean that Japan’s public diplomacy doesn’t confound critics. The Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI) opened up a Cool Japan Fund in November 2013, but Cool Japan as a leading indicator of Japan’s public diplomacy is, unlike K-Pop and the Korean Wave, regularly met with eyes rolling. A derivative of the UK’s Cool Britannia of twenty years ago, Cool Japan is known more for its blasé promotion of things globally for which the Japanese have in plentiful supply around the world.

The Japanese government started to formally adopt a pop-culture approach in its diplomacy to global publics when it first used the term “public diplomacy” in its Diplomatic Bluebook 2004. To be sure, Japan’s culture power status began decades earlier. Post-World War II Japan could not exercise hard power options, so it relied on soft power agendas (e.g., foreign aid, cultural diplomacy, person-to-person exchanges), primarily to the United States and ASEAN member countries. The Japan Overseas Cooperation Volunteer (JOCV) program began in 1965 and was modeled on the U.S. Peace

12. The Cool Japan Fund (2013-), part of Japan’s cultural diplomacy profile because of its prominence in Japan’s overall nation brand, focuses primarily on Japan’s cultural cuisine, fashion, manga and anime global reputation. A recent government-sponsored Cool Japan Fund project is an investment of $2.18 million in upscale green tea cafes across the United States. In December 2014, the Cool Japan Fund announced investment in a ramen noodle restaurant chain in the U.S. and Europe. Cool Japan has many critics, including this author, who sees no strategic purpose to the Fund other than to promote products that are better left marketed in the private sector.
Corps. To date, well over 25,000 volunteers between the ages of 20 and 39 have worked in developing countries. Another cornerstone of Japan’s cultural diplomacy is the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) program. The Japan Foundation was founded in 1972 to coordinate the country’s cultural diplomacy and exchange activities. By the mid-2000s, Japan relied on cultural products (Cool Japan) and cultural diplomacy (Japan Foundation) for the bulk of its public diplomacy. Despite a slowing of the domestic economy that began in the 1990s (known as “Lost Japan” or the “Lost Decades”), Japan’s popular culture still held a superpower status that was marked by an increase in demand for modern cultural products.

Beyond the “cool Japan” also lies a darker image of the archipelago, which is difficult to manage for the practitioners of public diplomacy.

Under Shinzo Abe, who adopted a new interpretation of the Article 9 of the Constitution to allow the country to use (in a limited way) its right of collective self-defense, Japan has shed its pacifist nation brand that served it well for seventy years, ostensibly to earn its rightful place among those countries that can fully back their words with the threat or use of force. Moreover, several Japanese politicians do not fully acknowledge the worst atrocities committed by Japan in World War II because they perceive that such acknowledgement would taint the image of Japan at home and abroad. This approach is in marked contrast to the “warts and all” strategy of journalist Edward R. Murrow for whom, “truth is the best propaganda”.¹³

What Japanese leaders wish to present in their public diplomacy is a level of perfection in cultural superiority (Washoku, Omotenashi). Japan’s Big Power status in cultural presentation and refinement is admired around the world but concomitantly creates vocal enemies or detractors who wish that Japan would just acknowledge its imperfections and past mistakes. A full airing of Japan’s past might have the best possibility to smooth over relations with China and Korea and would put an end to China and Korea’s using Japan’s historical amnesia to political advantage. The December 2015 agreement between Tokyo and Seoul on the recognition of the so-called “Comfort women” (women sexually enslaved by the Japanese Imperial Army) is an encouraging step forward in this regards.

**How to promote? The question of communication tools, globalization and cultural characteristics**

Beyond the question of which self-image and message to convey to the world, Japan also has trouble finding proper communication tools.

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¹³ Nancy Snow, *Truth is the Best Propaganda: Edward R. Murrow’s Speeches in the Kennedy Years*, Miniver Press, 2013
It should be noted that the international broadcasting network NHK (Nippon Hoso Kyokai) does not project itself in the context of public diplomacy like its elder statesman brother network, the British Broadcasting Corporation. To add to the broadcasting content deficit, there is little discussion or debate-style format on any of the commercial or public television networks; rather, game shows, Japanese drama for the Japanese market, and cooking shows dominate.

Japan is also struggling to improve the “globalization” of its own society. Ultimately, cultural characteristics explain the difficulty Japan is facing to properly conduct its own self-promotion on the international scene.

Japan has been on a widely publicized effort to globalize its universities and to make more English-language classes available to attract a global marketplace of students, not just the small percentage of foreign students adept enough in Japanese language for a university environment. Today, approximately 130,000 foreign students are in Japan, nearly 100,000 are from neighbor countries China and South Korea. To give Japan a sense of urgency, China now outranks Japan in higher education. Part of the problem remains the lag in English-language instruction.

Moreover, Japanese studies scholars point out that public speaking and speaking well or skillfully hold more negative than positive connotations in Japan. There are proverbs (smart in words, weak in deeds; an empty drum thunders loudly; a mewing cat will not catch a mouse) that demonstrate that. In contrast, a European or American tends to place a higher value on good public speaking and making a powerful argument in public. As I stated in an opinion piece for The Japan Times: “If globalization were a person, it would be an extrovert skilled in the art of conversation and persuasion, and English (whether second or native language) would be its tool of interpersonal communication. This globalization ‘person’ skilled in public presentation is not the cultural norm for Japan, a country that historically has been a bit put off by skilled speakers”.

The problem for Japan is that it doesn’t tap enough its non-native enthusiasts for guidance, relying instead on rotating government bureaucrats to figure out how to better tell Japan’s story. Further complicating the picture, the Japanese aren’t sure if they like overdoing promotion in national objectives. It’s fine to have the Dentsu juggernaut advertise in the enormous domestic media market, but selling Japan to the world seems unseemly. Japan asks you to discover its special qualities in due time.
Shinzo Abe’s mark on Japan’s public diplomacy

Since returning to power in December 2012, Shinzo Abe has adopted a very proactive stance regarding public diplomacy, first targeting the global audience rather than the regional one. This trend should be analyzed in the context of renewed tensions with China, especially since September 2012 and the frictions over the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu islands. These tensions gave rise to a competition of narratives between Tokyo and Beijing with the aim to win the understanding and support of the international community.

Initiatives by Shinzo Abe include:

- Raising the profile of the Prime Minister as the global persuasion agent for Japan—the brand face of Japan in image and reputation. Abe’s personal brand trumps any other image of Japan in Japan’s official public diplomacy. Not since Koizumi has such a Japanese prime minister so sought out the attention of the media (identified here as media diplomacy). Abe has participated in a record-breaking number of trips overseas and has become personally involved in public diplomacy-related agendas like the G7 meeting in 2016, the Tokyo Summer Olympics in 2020, the World Assembly for Women (WAW) first held in 2014, and the Cyber3 Conference Okinawa 2015, co-sponsored by the World Economic Forum and the Cabinet Office of Japan.

- Seeking to influence think thanks and raise its lobbying profile in Washington and elsewhere. Japan is among a handful of countries increasing its global lobbying efforts. On October 7, 2015, the author attended the Embassy of Japan in Washington-sponsored Foreign Policy Forum US-Japan dinner for approximately one hundred influential academics, journalists and Japan watchers, an unprecedented move for normally Public Relations-shy Japan.

- Funding endowed chairs in Japan Studies. Abe announced during his April 2015 trip to the United States that the Government of Japan would fund three endowed chairs in contemporary Japanese studies at Colombia University in New York, Georgetown University in Washington and MIT in Cambridge, each valued at $5 million.

- Establishing an Office of Global Communications (OCG) in 2011 located inside the Prime Minister’s Office, which was originally conceived before March 11, 2011 struck and before Shinzo Abe’s second term installment in December 2012. It was put into crisis communications action to handle the global press deluge to the triple disaster (earthquake, tsunami, Fukushima-Daiichi nuclear power breach). The OGC is still in its infancy vis-à-vis social
media outreach from Japan to the world, for instance, managing the official Facebook page of the Government of Japan along with the Public Relations Office, the Cabinet Office, and the Cabinet Secretariat.

- Paying more attention to media and public relations in general, but with mixed results, notably Japan’s blunder with sanitizing textbooks, and Abe’s awkward pushback to a popular high school McGraw-Hill textbook in the United States that covers the comfort women issue, which, in turn led to an “Open Letter in Support of Historians in Japan.”

- Increasing Japan’s global “bricks and mortar” outreach through the creation of Japan House, not on the scale or purpose of a Confucius Institute, but in response to Korea’s and China’s global cultural presence.

However, the legacy of Shinzo Abe in terms of public diplomacy and image of Japan is so far ambivalent.

On the one hand, Abe is promoting (since his first mandate as Prime Minister in 2006-2007) a positive, values-led approach to Japan’s diplomacy, one that would advocate for “freedom, democracy and fundamental human rights,” adding that Japan “will deepen ties with nations that share and uphold these values.” These words set a tone that is an obvious challenge to the People’s Republic of China. Abe’s media and public relations prowess also marked a turn in the Japanese government’s management of message and personal image. Abe promoted catchphrases for Japan’s economic recovery such as Womenomics (first coined by Japanese-American financial analyst, Kathy Matsui) and Abenomics, which caught the attention of the world’s media. Japan was back and a renewed commitment to global public diplomacy efforts would follow. But so far piecemeal approaches at METI or MOFA have not coalesced around any grand Abe-led public diplomacy strategy comparable to the resources and personality of an Uncle Xi in China.

On the other hand, Shinzo Abe’s Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) process of updating Japan’s Constitution through a post-midnight passage of unpopular security bills in September 2015 was
a domestic public relations disaster since a clear two-thirds majority of Japan’s citizens did not want to end Japan’s pacifist nation brand, but so far the undemocratic process does not seem to have a spillover effect as a public diplomacy setback. It is too early to say how Abe’s proposed “proactive contributions to peace” will shape or be shaped by Japan’s public diplomacy strategy to reengage with the world.†  

Abe’s statement on the eve of the anniversary of the end of World War II (August 15, 2015) did not get much negative pushback outside of China and Korea, even though he was criticized by former Prime Minister Tomiichi Murayama for not stating his apology clearly to those who suffered under Japan’s imperial war machine.‡  

More recently, Japan was criticized for not acting more like Germany in taking in refugees, instead resorting to traditional checkbook diplomacy.§  

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† See Jeffrey Hornung, “Gauging Japan’s ‘Proactive Contributions to Peace’”, *The Diplomat*, October 27, 2015. “The rhetoric has been strong, but has it been matched by action. Unless Japan makes more substantial contributions in dealing with problems in which it does not have such a direct stake, Tokyo risks disappointing the international community for not playing an international role commensurate with its international standing and capabilities.” The same could be said about Japan’s public diplomacy measures.

‡ Ex-PM Murayama lashes out at Abe’s war statement as lacking clarity, Kyodo News Service, August 14, 2015.


Abe’s check-writing gesture toward Middle Eastern refugees in 2015 resurrected images of Japan’s checkbook diplomacy efforts during Desert Shield/Desert Storm in 1991.
Japan’s Public Diplomacy: Playing to Strengths, Improving Weaknesses

As the old caveat goes, play to your strengths and mask your weaknesses. Too often Japanese public diplomacy makes its weaknesses highly visible (e.g., poor public presentation) and masks or underplays its strengths. Japan should be a natural public diplomacy powerhouse. Japan’s strength is cultural power and it should promote more cultural diplomacy and exchange diplomacy, not just cultural activity or person-to-person exchanges that stand apart from public policy.

In order for Japan to better tell its story to the world, as we once did at the U.S. Information Agency (“telling America’s story to the world”), here is a list of 5 ways that Japan can put the PUBLIC back into DIPLOMACY:

1. It’s time to graduate beyond personality and one-party LDP partisanship in Japan’s public diplomacy

Branding Japan requires a nation branding process that exceeds the current occupants of the Diet, Prime Minister’s Office, Ministry of Foreign Affairs or Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology. Whenever countries place too much attention on their political leaders, the nation falls when the personal brand of that politician falls. The best example is U.S. President Barack Obama, whose favorability numbers in June 2015, according to a CNN poll, fell below that of his predecessor, George W. Bush (45% to 52%) -- though at the time Bush left office in January 2009, just one third of voters approved of him. It happens to all politicians and it will happen in Japan too. Abe and Abenomics will not be around forever. Political dynasties are inefficient carriers of a nation’s global projection.

A related challenge in Japan is finding its own bilingual and charismatic spokespeople at the top. One who was mentioned by Tamzin Booth, bureau chief for The Economist in Tokyo, as a model commentator and source to foreign media, is Tomohiko Taniguchi. A former journalist turned speechwriter and professor at Keio University, Taniguchi is very prompt at responding to media requests and is very knowledgeable about Japan’s role and function in the world. I would add to this shortlist Noriyuki Shikata, who began tweeting furiously in English and Japanese during his stint as media
spokesman for the Japanese government right after 3/11. Japan needs to develop more public relations speaking, but this is practically non-existent now in a country that has no formal programs in global public relations and public diplomacy.

2. Expand the Cultural and Public Diplomacy Presence in Japan’s Education System

Every college and university acknowledges a global education mission, but overall commitment in real dollars to international education is woefully supported. Japan is one of the worst-case scenarios in terms of foreign faculty, study abroad, or global curriculum. Sponsored educational and cultural exchanges remain largely elite and exclusive undertakings that represent about 5% of all exchanges. And the percentage of students who enroll in a study abroad program hovers in the low single digits (200,000 out of 16 million). In Japan, globalization numbers are bleak: In 2009 Japan had the lowest score of any of the International Monetary Fund's advanced economies on the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), administered to foreign students who want to study in the United States. It had the second-lowest score among Asian nations, outperforming only Laos. Still, companies like Rakuten (2010), Uniqlo (2012) and Honda (2015) make English their corporate language, and Nissan and Takeda conduct many meetings in English. Should prestigious schools such as Tokyo University or a few of the leading Japanese companies make high English scores a prerequisite for acceptance, we would imagine a rapid increase in overall English ability. TOEFL and speaking English are not now prerequisites for entering a Japanese university, despite the government's move to globalize elite campuses.

Besides an effort on the globalization of its universities, Japan should also take advantage of the international programs that bring foreign students to Japan. For example, many alumni of the Fulbright program in Japan have become leaders in academic and industry sectors.²² There are many offspring to the Fulbright program, and students going abroad have more grant options, but the eloquence of Fulbright’s words about his namesake program has no match. It is a

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²² The president of Kyoto University of Foreign Studies, Takeshi Matsuda, is a Fulbright alumnus who received his doctorate in American Studies from the University of Wisconsin-Madison. He is the author of Soft Power and Its Perils: U.S. Cultural Policy in Early Postwar Japan and Permanent Dependency (Stanford University Press, 2007). He is one among several senior Fulbright scholars I’ve met who is part of a pioneer generation of young Japanese men who traveled overseas just after the postwar Occupation period.
legacy program that deserves more public diplomacy focus in Japan than it is currently receiving.  

3. Japan’s public diplomacy must be targeted for people, if not more so than for governments

There are exceptions, notably a very positive development in Japan’s public diplomacy—Japan House. Modeled in part on the Scandinavian House in New York City, this public-private partnership will create Japan House ventures in three major cities of power and influence in the world: Los Angeles, London, and Sao Paulo. These houses are still at the concept level but they are meant to be centers of dialogue, exhibit, conversation, and yes, some commercial engagement, but mostly places where people of all persuasions, ethnicities and nationalities can develop their minds. The Japan House ventures will be led by a local secretariat in each respective city. The locals are the eyes and ears of what works, what appeals, and those participating are community leaders but not necessarily Japan experts.

Also, in Japan, public diplomacy operates without much of a public constituency. The Japan Foundation headquarters in Yotsuya is understated in architecture and overshadowed by the Korea Center, a beautiful bricks and mortar example of how Korea has followed China in expanding its cultural presence overseas. Cultural diplomacy is not readily understood among the Japanese public. What dominates news about Japan is the weird and wacky (e.g., sexless Japan) or the back-and-forth rhetoric among the Big Three leaders in Northeast Asia.

4. Japan needs to increase its information sharing about itself

Right now there isn’t enough factual information about Japan in the world. There is a mystery and secrecy surrounding some of what Japan is and does. Information abhors a vacuum. When there is a void, people fill in that space with their own preconceived notions and stereotypes. It’s important that Japan redefine itself to the world on its own terms and not play catch up or constantly play defense attempting to explain things after the fact. Japan needs to build more

23. When I worked at the U.S. Information Agency in the early to mid-1990s, I had the privilege of serving as the desk officer for the Fulbright program in Germany, Spain and the former Yugoslavia. I was asked by my supervisors to elevate the importance of person-to-person exchanges in the national conversation, including being asked to coin some verbiage for President Clinton’s Inaugural Address of 1993. My words didn’t make the final cut. Nevertheless, I’ve dedicated my life to the “relationship race,” to use Judith McHale’s words.
accessible databases of statistical and other information on its society and do this in a multilanguage platform.

In addition, Japan needs to educate, train, and elevate its own CDC, Cultural Diplomacy Corps, whose main focus is overcoming perception and perspective myopias related to Japan. We all operate with something called belief perseverance, a strong tendency to hold onto our beliefs despite overwhelming data to the contrary. Stereotypes are particularly vulnerable to belief perseverance, and Japan is a country like no other that has more stereotypes attached to what it is and who its people are.

Finally, Japan should be using its ICT technology to increase global connectivity and to promote global transparency: new media, including mobile and social media, can help to demystify Japanese society and encourage more global interest and participation. Japanese public diplomacy staff leadership is on a shoestring budget but for a relatively low cost could seek out better interactions with civil society and the media.

5. Strengthen the narrative and tools

It’s time to get beyond Cool Japan: culture promotion alone won’t win more adherents to Japan’s place in the world. If I eat sushi, do I support Japan’s policies? No, I just eat sushi, and sushi has transcended Japan. Sushi is Japan’s origin but is so widely franchised today in all sorts of ventures that it has diluted its meaning as the official food emblem of Japan. Japanese cuisine is now listed as a UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage, but Japan needs to be more strategic about relating culture to reputation gains.

It’s not clear what Japan’s story is to the world. What are Japanese values that need more promotion? Cool Japan says that its mission is to build sympathy for Japan in the world. But just winning hearts and minds is too unclear. Japan needs a strategic plan. It needs to do more research ahead of public information campaigns. It needs to tap into the critics as well as Japan champion networks. It needs to hire more international faculty to carry the message of Japan to the world.

It’s beyond time for Japan to develop its own scholars/practitioners on Public Diplomacy. Japan’s Public Diplomacy (PD) is more than what Joseph Nye says or what you think he said. Japanese PD needs ties to academy with curriculum development in PD, Public Relations, Global Media Studies, Public Opinion and Media Relations Management. It’s not soft power versus hard power. It’s all about power and influence. Public Diplomacy is more than nation branding—it’s regional collaboration, place branding.
Conclusion

Japan, five years separated from a devastating triple disaster known as 3/11 and without a firm foundation in strategic public diplomacy, has not played its global public diplomacy cards enough. Unlike China and Korea, which have formidable institutional programs in place, Japan is stuck in perpetual "catching-up" mode, as exemplified by the highly-louted Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry-sponsored Cool Japan campaign. Where Japan is at a decisive disadvantage to China in public diplomacy outreach is not only in funding but also in information and communication continuum strategies. Japan is a professed liberal democracy that is not comfortable with viewing its advocacy communications in terms of propaganda or information warfare. High-level diplomats have shared that there is a constant debate about how hard line Japan’s global communications continuum should be played, especially against the legacy propaganda power China. So far, while there may be some Japanese government officials who would like to utilize more proactive propaganda tools in regional relations, these efforts are downplayed in favor of popular approaches like person-to-person exchanges (Fulbright, JET) and cultural diplomacy programs (Cool Japan Fund, Washoku, Omotenashi).

Japan remains a most important strategic partner to the United States, a regional leader in Asia, and a world economic powerhouse, China’s second largest economy place notwithstanding. Japan won over many hearts and minds in 2011 when the world watched a nation deal with a massive 9.0 magnitude earthquake followed by a deadly tsunami and a nuclear power plant meltdown. In a post-Fukushima era, and with Tokyo 2020 Olympics four years away, Japan could revive the Future City of Tomorrow, a city that has the world’s best in public transportation, the world’s safest and fastest intercontinental transportation (shinkansen); the best technology and science available for a sustainable environment; a model of how to respond to an aging and low fertility society; and a model for how to serve as an exemplary “bridge nation to Asia.” Japan’s problems are the canary in the coalmine for the world: Japan’s story is enhanced through sustainability and green economy high-tech, high-touch ventures. The Japanese government must now use the momentum from its Olympics bid win to ask the world to step in and help it overcome a disaster that was both natural and man-made. In 1964, Tokyo unveiled itself as a global economic miracle a mere two decades after the end of World War II. In 2020, Tokyo should unveil its nation brand as a global environmental leader. Now that would be really cool, Japan.