

The Japan Times

Abe's global contradictions

Kevin Rafferty

January 13, 2016

In his new year resolutions, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe promised that Japan would play a greater role as a mover and shaper of global affairs. This is good; but if Japan is to be a successful player on the world stage, it needs vigorously and rigorously to rethink exactly how and where it should put its energies and money. One basic problem is the glaring contradiction between Japan's global aspirations and Abe's own narrow view of the world.

Successive Japanese governments, including the current one, have fallen asleep in protecting the interests of the Japanese people, in small things and in large.

Where is the Japanese voice at big international gatherings, including the United Nations, the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, and ministerial gatherings of global bodies, especially the Group of Seven? Abe has helped to raise the country's profile by his tireless traveling to meet other world leaders and promote Japan. But he is a one-man band.

At the IMF and World Bank, where Japan remains the second-biggest contributor after the United States, Japan fails to make its voice heard. The main players are U.S. Treasury Secretary Jack Lew, Germany's Wolfgang Schauble, the United Kingdom's George Osborne, publicly, and China behind the scenes. Finance Minister Taro Aso has the additional clout of being deputy prime minister and former prime minister, but he rarely has anything to say except through the tame Japanese press.

At the IMF-World Bank spring meetings last year, Japan hosted an important meeting on health care. Aso was the guest of honor. He turned up late after the main presentations, sat for a couple of minutes, read a short speech in faltering English and swept out with his entourage; for a putative global power, this was a shabby performance.

Years ago, a senior Japanese official in Washington told me: "We sit at meetings; we are silent; sometimes we sleep." The same Japanese behavior happened in Paris at the landmark climate change summit. The U.S., China, the host France, the European Union, even the pope, were influential. Japan was silent on the sidelines, proving that Abe's global promises are bold but empty.

Japan's claims that it extends its global influence by giving aid. But in terms of national income, Japan's aid has slumped almost to the dismal levels of the U.S. On his international trips Abe has frequently performed as a super-salesman, promoting high-speed railways to Narendra Modi's home state, trying to sell submarines to Australia.

He is following other world leaders: Angela Merkel, Francois Hollande and David Cameron vie for deals in China; Xi Jinping visits the U.S. and U.K. talking high-tech and nuclear plants and maybe a Chinese stake in the Manchester City soccer team.

Such salesmanship is very different from Japan graduating to be a global player with contributions that could influence the way that the world works for the better. The recent plea of Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoshihide Suga for Middle East countries to resolve their escalating tensions through dialogue offered a lesson in Japan's naivety. Why should anyone listen? What has Japan to bring to the party in ideas or experience that years of nonstop dialogue by the U.S. and EU have failed to achieve?

Supporters of Abe's determination to change the Constitution urge him on, to make Japan "normal" again, and prove that the country will again be a power in its own right able to influence world events. The ultimate logic of Japan standing proudly on its own feet is that it takes complete responsibility for its defense. If Abe wants to throw off the shackles of a U.S.-imposed Constitution, his next step would be to get rid of the U.S. defense umbrella and shake off any form of U.S. colonialism. It might come to this if a Republican like Donald Trump becomes president: he has said that Japan should pay for U.S. defense assistance.

Doug Bandow of the Cato Institute has suggested that Washington should present Japan with an annual bill of \$184 billion for defense help. Adding the \$46 billion that Japan spends on defense, total defense spending would soar to \$230 billion, billions more than China (\$216 billion in 2014 according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, or \$129 billion, according to the International Institute for Strategic Studies). It would push Japan's defense spending to 5 percent of gross domestic product, more than twice what other industrialized countries spend.

Is this affordable and, more important, is this the way forward for Japan, or is it a way disastrously back?

Japan should urgently examine its culture and traditions and its place in the world, in history, today and tomorrow. It has an immensely rich culture that is the envy of the rest of the world; no need to embellish it with fakes like whaling and slaughter of dolphins that deliberately antagonize the rest of the world and diminish Japan.

A difficult historical part includes the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and Japan's militarism. My fear is that Abe is taking Japan backward, a new Constitution of Abe's making, not a carefully considered supreme document, which is what a Constitution should be, a nationalistic agenda, arms spending, arms making and selling.

Abe and other leaders should remember the words of Dwight Eisenhower, five-star general and supreme commander of the Allied forces in Europe that defeated Hitler, after he became the U.S. president: "Every gun that is made, every warship launched, every rocket fired signifies, in the final sense, a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, those who are cold and are not clothed. This world in arms is not spending money alone. It is spending the sweat of its laborers, the genius of its scientists, the hopes of its children. The cost of one modern heavy bomber is a modern brick school in more than 30 cities. ... We pay for a single fighter plane with a half million bushels of wheat."

Admittedly, the rest of the world is doing it, especially China, offering an object lesson in how to bully its way against a world that huffs and puffs but won't do anything to stop Beijing building islands and airstrips expanding its empire in the South China Sea. China can get away with it because it is a clever rising nationalistic dictatorship facing other nationalistic countries that lack the clout or imagination or guts to challenge it.

The way to fight nationalism is not with nationalism, but with internationalism that understand we are all, whether Japanese, or Chinese, or African, or American, or Arab, or Asian, or European, temporary dwellers on a fragile Earth, whose lives interact and effect each other. Nationalism led to disasters in previous centuries, to widespread misery in the 20th century, and today, with all the military firepower, could bring catastrophe to the Earth and destroy all of us. What are needed now are new rules, new ideas, imagination, inspiration and innovation to achieve a truly global world.

Problems needing urgent solution include care of the environment, curbing greenhouse gases, making sure that there is enough water and food for all, coping with growing inequality and the concentration of wealth and power in a small number of powerful hands.

Japan has many good things to share, including healthy cuisine and lifestyles that lead to long lives, advanced technology making lives easier. Politically, Japan is unique in being both the perpetrator and victim of some of the worst war crimes. The "no war" Constitution won respect because it was an attempt to create a new world.

It is a pity that Abe has no children: his lifetime dream should not be to resurrect the past to vindicate his grandfather, but to strive to ensure that his grandchildren inherit a healthy Earth. True globalism means sharing with the world. What does Abe have to offer?