

# JAPAN – A BALANCE POINT IN A NEW BIPOLAR WORLD

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## Abstract

This essay starts from the hypothesis that we are entering a new bipolar world, dominated by the US and China. Time will prove its sustainability in front of other scenarios, like the unipolar world, the multipolar world or the emergence of new superpowers. Based on this hypothesis we discuss Japan's possible role as a credible facilitator between the US and China. According to its history, traditions, culture and geography, Japan belongs to the Far East and according its system of government, economy and civil liberties, it belongs to the Euro-Atlantic value system. Through this equidistance, in a world where China seeks to assert its hegemon role on various global levels, Japanese diplomacy and good practices can represent a point of balance. In the US-China-Japan triangle, relations are like a traffic light (three "co"): green-cooperation, yellow-competition, and red-confrontation. Currently, yellow dominates China's relations with the other two actors, while green prevails between the US and Japan. Japan's diplomatic skills could reduce the risk of red colour (confrontation) on either side of the triangle.

**Keywords:** *bipolar world, Japan, US, China.*

## 1. THE OLD JAPANESE MIRACLE

To foreshadow Japan's role as a potential mediator, we outline the essence of the old "Japanese miracle."

Japan rose from its own ashes after 1945, recalling a Japanese version of the phoenix bird, which symbolizes peace.

The classic Japanese miracle defines the period of accelerated economic growth after World War II until the end of the Cold War. By the end of the period, Japan had become the world's second largest economic power. The political, economic and civic changes imposed by the Americans after 1945 were intended to keep the Japanese away from the influence of

communism, to avoid Soviet control of the Pacific.

In addition to the fundamental role of the state, a contribution brought the big business groups, formed by industrialists, banks and merchants, as co-owners of huge financial assets. Companies were copying everything they could in the field of technologies, supporting each other and acting strategically. The emphasis on quality and the orientation towards mass production, namely the automotive and electronics industries, have confirmed their value in the world.

Human resources policy, with well-paid managerial elites and lifetime employees motivated to work hard, represented a mystery to outsiders. Taken from school based on their abilities, students were already prepared for corporate life.

For its part, the government offered tax breaks, credit facilities, customs protection and favourable exchange rates. Another actor, the consumer, accepted a modest standard of living.

Analysing Japan's post-war miracle, economist Milton Friedman acrimoniously stated: "The best way to rapid growth is to have the country bombed." In the Second World War, the country lost almost three million lives and \$56 billion, only to afterwards grow at an unimaginable rate, between 1945 and 1991".

The miracle ended when the speculative bubble of the 1980s created hundreds of billions of dollars in corporate debt, leading to a persistent recession.

## 2. JAPAN'S PERFORMANCE ON THE GLOBAL STAGE

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Japan's performance on the global stage argues for its potential as an intermediary in a new bipolar world.

Last year's G7 presidency with the Hiroshima summit demonstrated its skills as an arbitrator in global affairs, bringing moderation in tone towards China in anticipation of a "thaw" in the China-US bilateral relationship.

It has "engaged" China on issues such as the debt of vulnerable countries, climate change, public health and resource conservation, to the point that G7 leaders expressed the willingness to have "constructive and stable" relations with China.

Moreover, it said the group does not intend to affect China's role in the world and appreciated Beijing's refusal of the Russian rhetoric on "Western aggression in Ukraine." However, the G7 called for pressure on Moscow to withdraw its troops from Ukraine.

Japan's relationship with ASEAN provides another example of good diplomacy. In December 2023, ASEAN and Japan agreed to closer cooperation in cyber security and combating transnational crime and fraud. China's activities in the area, some stemming from territorial claims, catalyse ASEAN-Japan cooperation based on international law.

At the G20 summit in Osaka in 2019, Japan managed to convey a message of support for the global economy, despite the heterogeneity of the group.

As a member of the so-called G4 (along with Germany, India and Brazil), it supports the expansion of the UN Security Council, thereby associating itself with the states that rely on reforming the organization.

By metonymy, the so-called "West" also includes Japan, from which perspective Tokyo belongs to the QUAD grouping, a diplomatic network including Australia, India and the United States. This affiliation contradicts the "diplomacy of modesty" inherited by Tokyo from the "Ryukyu" Kingdom. To explain it in a few words, this diplomacy allowed the Ryukyu Kingdom to survive between two

powers, China and Japan. A parallel with Japan's post-war diplomacy towards the United States and China cannot overlook the remark that the "diplomacy of modesty" is feasible, but not in the face of the "diplomacy of the warrior wolf." Hence the need for cooperation in the quadrilateral QUAD, seen as a response to China's military growth.

## 3. THE JAPAN - CHINA - USA TRIANGLE

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The Japan - China - USA triangle is gaining in relevance, both as a whole and through each of its sides.

Separately, bilateral relations show specificities, as following:

**a. The Japan-China relationship,** notwithstanding the cultural-historical affinities, could be defined as the "Ryukyu diplomacy" versus the "warrior wolf diplomacy."

Commercially, China has become Japan's main partner, overtaking the US. Chinese tourists increasingly prefer Japan. The geographical proximity brings them closer culturally and economically, pushing the US further apart in the triangle. The Chinese cyber-attacks and intellectual theft are not hampering much the profit of Japanese companies in the Chinese market.

The relationship is more complex when we consider the third countries in China's neighbourhood, such as North Korea and Mongolia. Prime Minister Kishida's potential visit to Pyongyang or the role of "Mongolia's third neighbour" offers Japan a unique status in the regional geopolitical architecture.

The historical asperities and territorial disputes, especially over the Senkaku Islands, manifest themselves more on the political level and less often on the level of citizens, under the impact of the communist propaganda. Although the pacifist constitution imposes obligations, Tokyo is relaxing its self-defence norms outside its borders, under pressure from Chinese assertiveness in the area.

**b. The Japan-US relationship,** based on the strategic alliance treaty, benefits from the

only green colour in the “traffic light” of the triangle with China. Sharing core values and strategic interests, cooperation strengthened after Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, calling for common defence in front of adversity. If China takes over Taiwan by force, the Senkaku Islands and even the entire Okinawa archipelago will need a defence.

The Japanese-American trade disputes continue, fuelled by the market freedoms, to the advantage of third parties, but respecting the principles of fair competition. The asperities of dialogue are overcome through diplomacy and pragmatic spirit.

In the triangle mentioned above, an intervention in favour of China in Washington could be accepted easier from Japan, than from another country.

**c. The China-US relationship**, the third side of the triangle, starts from the historical agreement to fight against imperialist Japan in the Second World War.

Economically interdependent, the two countries are competing for global hegemony, together accounting for 44.2% of the world’s GDP in 2023. Their dispute is more visible in the Indo-Pacific region, especially regarding the status of Taiwan, human rights in China and islands in the South China Sea. Interdependence is beneficial when it is mutually balanced, but if the US depends too much on supply from China, then it exposes itself like the EU to Russian gas.

Since its founding, the Chinese Communist Party has exhibited an anti-American and anti-Japanese nationalism. More refined, the sentiment is still evident today, despite US efforts to integrate China into a global liberal economy.

A global leader before the industrial revolution, China dreams of that status. What are its chances? The economic slowdown, after decades of unprecedented paces, seems to signal the end of the “miracle,” but China continues to assert itself.

Russia’s annexation of Crimea in 2014 and its invasion of Ukraine in 2022 have emboldened China in its offensive stance towards Taiwan. Here lies perhaps the litmus paper of the global future.

#### 4. “RYUKYU” DIPLOMACY VERSUS “WOLF WARRIOR” DIPLOMACY

##### a. Ryukyu Diplomacy

Returning to the suggestion of Japan’s intermediary role in a bipolar world, we briefly describe some of its diplomacy inspired by the Ryukyu Kingdom.

The history of Ryukyu provides an example of survival of small smart states through diplomatic manoeuvring in the proximity of great regional powers. Disputed between China and Japan, the Ryukyu Kingdom managed to survive independently for 270 years, even if at times vassal. The essence of its diplomacy lies in the ability to offer certain advantages to the great neighbouring empires, through negotiations and courtesies, so as to preserve their independence.

Experts argue that Ryukyu, giving the impression of defeat in the negotiations with China and Japan, managed over the centuries to avoid its incorporation into one of the two empires. Courtesy to the envoys sent by Beijing or Tokyo (formerly called Edo) as well as their ability to satisfy them gave them an advantage in negotiations. The great neighbouring power, be it China or Japan, gave up on a forced annexation, under the impression that the partner is weak and humble. This would represent a “loser’s diplomacy.” Basically, it was like in the 15th century Romanian Countries, when the rulers recognized the sultan’s suzerainty.

The specialized literature suggests a possible comparison with today’s Ukraine in the face of Russian aggression, but from different positions. Supposedly, a negotiation with the Russians would put Kiev at a disadvantage from the beginning, in the position of a “loser diplomat.” We believe that studying the “soft power diplomacy” of the Ryukyu Kingdom in the nineteenth century could have universal meanings today.

Through diplomacy, be it that of the “loser,” Ryukyu was able to temper the territorial claims of neighbouring powers.

Opposed to the “total war,” in which the whole nation mobilizes itself for a military confrontation, Ryukyu mobilized in the “total

diplomacy," employing all available resources of the nation.

In the texture of Ryukyu's history, we can find threads of the China - USA - Japan trilateral. In 1854, the United States concluded a treaty with Ryukyu, signed in Chinese and English, after having signed the Treaty of Peace and Friendship with Japan a few months earlier. During the discussions, Ryukyu achieved a small victory, through the skill of a negotiator. The American delegation had arrogantly demanded permission to build a warehouse in Ryukyu, but the local negotiator, Chochu Makishi, intervened, saying in English that President Washington would not be so "rude" to them. His elevated language and vast knowledge of the US impressed so much that the American delegation dropped the claim. The Ryukyuan strove to hide their achievements in order to manage their partners' pride. Although the behaviour may be cowardice or timidity, at the same time it represents a form of courage. It can be the example of the anecdotal expulsion of the Soviet troops from the territory of Romania, in 1958, also through a "loser's diplomacy."

Japan, which emerged as a loser from the Second World War, gradually managed to achieve the "economic miracle," also due to a form of "loser diplomacy" vis-à-vis the United States.

### **b. Wolf Warrior Diplomacy**

Towards the end of the last decade, China adopted the "wolf warrior diplomacy," a term taken from the 2015 patriotic film "Wolf Warrior." Characterized by an attitude of countering external criticism of the Chinese regime, it vehemently rejects any reference to the abuses and violations of human rights in China.

In an attempt to gain prestige in international politics, the "wolf warrior diplomacy" reflects Xi Jinping's foreign strategy generically referred to as the "major country diplomacy." This seeks to legitimize China's more significant role in the global arena, including through the desire to create a "new world order" and engage in an open ideological dispute with "the West."

Despite Beijing's intentions, the "wolf warrior diplomacy" has only further isolated China in foreign relations and distanced it from the

world's democratic powers. The most conclusive effect, for us European Romanians, is the blocking, by the European Union, of the ratification of the Investment Agreement with China in 2020. Moreover, the European Commission recently opened an investigation into unfair trade practices in Chinese exports to the EU of electric cars.

Although the phrase "wolf warrior diplomacy" emerged during COVID-19, similar diplomatic rhetoric has existed since Xi Jinping came to power. Noting the hostility of the West towards his country, he called for more stern diplomacy, to abandon the controversy-avoidance orientation of Deng Xiaoping. This meant, on the part of Chinese diplomats, the use of a rhetoric of confrontation and dismissing criticism. Previously, Chinese diplomacy had considered that it "needs to hide its power" externally.

In the digital age, Beijing's diplomats are breaking the mould and turning massively to mass media platforms with a large audience in the West in order to achieve their stated goals. The expression "wolf-warrior diplomacy," at bottom a subtle irony, paradoxically associates war with diplomacy, in the sense of a true oxymoron.

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After the brief presentation of the two types of diplomacy, it is necessary to note that the "Ryukyu diplomacy" can work, but not in the face of the "warrior wolf diplomacy." A certain diplomatic legacy from the Ryukyu Saga can be found in the Japanese imperial families' contribution to the country's "gentle diplomacy" through attitudes and practices based on culture and rituals (courtesy). This diplomacy can be effective in dealing with partners who share the same fundamental values.

## **5. CONCLUSIONS**

The world is facing the crisis triggered by the war in Ukraine, a war of civilizations in which two forms of government known since antiquity collide: totalitarianism (Sparta) and democracy (Athens). In this world, Japan can represent a point of balance, by its equidistance and diplomacy, helping to avoid the "red light," or the confrontation.

Obviously, the picture is much more complex than this sketch. Through its specificity, Japan manifests itself in the world today in many other poses, for example in relation to the European Union, India, Russia, North Korea or the Middle East. This paper has only summarized its place as potential balance point in the China-US see-saw.

*For bibliographical references please address the author.*

### **Endnotes**

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