

**JAPAN AND INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS IN THE  
LIBERAL INTERNATIONAL ORDER**

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In recent years, Japan has adopted a more proactive and assertive approach toward international organizations. This likely reflects the passage of time since World War II, domestic political shifts within Japan, and evolving international conditions. This is a welcome development in some ways: Japan can compensate for the retrenchment of traditional leaders like the United States and United Kingdom. On the other hand, allowing nationalist impulses to take over could harm Japan's image and undermine broader international co-operation. To remedy instability of the liberal international order and respond effectively to the COVID-19 crisis, it will be necessary for like-minded democracies like Japan and Canada to strengthen co-operation and contribute to the provision of global public goods rather than seek to advance narrow, self-serving goals.

## **Japan and International Organizations: A Brief Overview**

Since the end of World War II, Japan has largely acted as a reformist power in international organizations. Japan entered the U.S.-led liberal international order with nontrivial sources of dissatisfaction. Having been absent during the initial negotiations that created major postwar institutions like the United Nations (UN), Bretton Woods institutions, and the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), Japan found its interests underrepresented. Nonetheless, rather than seeking to overturn the order, Japan sought rules-based reforms, working to secure equitable treatment in the trade regime, commensurate formal representation in the Bretton Woods institutions, and UN Security Council reform.

Japan has also acted as a force for positive change in international organizations in areas where its own interests were not directly at stake. During the turbulent 1980s, when the Reagan administration criticized international organizations as corrupt bureaucracies and threatened to reduce U.S. contributions, Japan played a constructive role. In 1985, Foreign Minister Abe Shintaro (the current prime minister's father) proposed the Group of High-Level Intergovernmental Experts, which led to significant UN reforms that cut waste and improved administrative efficiency. After the withdrawal of major countries—the United States, the UK, and Singapore—from the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) over ideological and administrative concerns, Japan remained a member and facilitated reforms from within. Japanese officials orchestrated support around the 1991 constitutional amendment that shifted representation on the UNESCO executive board from individuals to national representatives in an effort to reduce ideological extremism. Matsuura Koichiro, who became Director-General in 1999, led major administrative and budgetary reforms that eventually facilitated the resumption of U.S. membership. Japan has also played a central role in the creation of regional institutions like the Asian Development Bank (ADB), Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), and the Chiang Mai Initiative Multilateralization (CMIM).

## A More Assertive Policy Toward International Organizations?

An interesting question is whether Japan is now adopting a more assertive policy toward international organizations. In 2015, the Japanese government sharply criticized UNESCO for including documents related to the Nanking Massacre in the organization's Memory of the World Register. To prevent similar documents being included in the register, Japanese officials withheld funding from UNESCO and leaked to the press that withdrawal from the institution could be in the cards if documents related to comfort women were included. In 2018, the Japanese government announced its intention to formally withdraw from the International Whaling Commission (IWC) over the organization's refusal to allow Japan to resume commercial whaling activities. Although Japan had been critical of the IWC moratorium on commercial whaling since its adoption in 1982, the country had until recent years focused on efforts at internal reform through persuasion, diplomacy, and the gathering of scientific evidence. More broadly, Japan has largely refrained from criticizing the Trump administration's aggressive tactics toward international organizations, such as the gutting of the World Trade Organization (WTO) Appellate Body.

There are several plausible explanations for Japan's greater willingness to adopt an aggressive approach to international organizations:

1. **The passage of time.** In the early postwar period, memories of Japan's 1933 exit from the League of Nations were still fresh, and it was important to commit to new international organizations to demonstrate that Japan would be a constructive member of the postwar international order. As memories have faded, Japan is behaving more like other powerful countries, such as the United States.
2. **Domestic political reforms** in Japan since the 1990s—particularly electoral reform and administrative reform—have increased the role of politicians, and particularly the prime minister, in foreign policy decision-making. In turn, politicians may be more willing to accept damage to Japan's international reputation in matters that invoke nationalist sentiments.
3. **International conditions** may be creating a permissive environment for Japan to adopt a more assertive stance toward international organizations. Leaving the IWC in the 1990s would have likely produced front-page news and attracted major international criticism. In an era when Trump is constantly leaving or threatening to leave major international organizations, Japan's actions receive less attention and appear less alarming.

The explanations suggest different degrees of permanence in Japan's policy shift. If the passage of time or political reforms are important, the change is likely durable, though a different prime minister may place less emphasis on issues related to historical memory. If Japan is responding

to permissive international conditions, we may expect at least some reversion after the end of the Trump administration.

## **Policy Implications**

What are the policy implications of Japan's assertive diplomacy toward international organizations? On the one hand, the expansion of Japan's diplomatic tool kit vis-à-vis international organizations may create greater leverage and opportunities for constructive reforms. The liberal international order was already under considerable stress before the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic, with challenges from rising powers and retrenchment by the United States and the United Kingdom. Rather than being a quiet partner, Japan may now be better able to play a leadership role in moving constructive reforms forward.

On the other hand, if Japan uses financial leverage and exit threats to satisfy nationalist impulses, it may weaken international co-operation and the liberal order. There is also a danger that Japan's actions vis-à-vis UNESCO and the IWC will harm the country's international reputation and cut against other foreign policy priorities. Using financial pressure, rather than appeals to evidence and academic experts, to arbitrate historical memory issues in international organizations may deepen international skepticism toward Japan's underlying claims and motivations. It may become more difficult for Japanese officials to criticize China for violations of the "rule-based order" in maritime issues now that Japan has chosen to exit from the primary international organization governing whaling in favour of a unilateral alteration of the status quo.

## **COVID-19 and Japanese Policy Toward International Organizations**

The COVID-19 pandemic has claimed hundreds of thousands of victims worldwide and triggered the most serious economic crisis since the Great Depression. The pandemic has also refocused attention on the shortcomings of U.S. foreign policy-making under the Trump administration, particularly its neglect of international organizations like the World Health Organization (WHO). The WHO has long suffered from underfunding, which hampered its response during the 2014 outbreak of Ebola in West Africa. However, the Trump administration has pursued a policy of disengagement from international organizations and slashed U.S. spending on global health initiatives, undermining both the U.S. and international response to COVID-19.

U.S. disengagement created an opportunity for China to exert influence in major international organizations. Even before the pandemic, UN officials were increasingly expressing alarm in private about China filling the void left in the organization. As COVID-19 spread worldwide, WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus praised China's response despite the country's lack of transparency and refusal to allow independent investigations of the virus's origin. This raised serious questions about the independence and efficacy of the WHO, which came under criticism from both U.S. and Japanese officials. However, this criticism is somewhat

misplaced: the WHO does not have strong enforcement authority and depends on member states for financial support and information about disease outbreaks.

Both Canadian and Japanese policy-makers have suggested the WHO's COVID-19 response needs to be reviewed and reforms implemented if necessary. It is critical to bring the United States and China on board to make such an initiative effective. The Trump administration has unhelpfully sought to scapegoat the WHO to divert attention from its own catastrophic domestic response to COVID-19, threatening funding cuts and withdrawal in the middle of a global pandemic. Meanwhile, the Chinese response has become deeply politicized: rather than seeking expert evaluation of the origins and nature of the virus, Chinese officials have resisted independent investigations and promoted conspiracy theories that the virus was invented outside of China. WHO reform will be impossible without support from both of these countries. Canada and Japan should seek to leverage their ties with the United States and China to promote constructive solutions and compromises. Learning the correct lessons from COVID-19 based on unbiased, scientific examination will be critical for preventing the next major pandemic. This is in the interests of all parties, including China and the United States.