EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Support for democracy and human rights is a small component of Japan’s foreign policy. This stems from the country’s history of putting economic development before democratization, as well as its emphasis on noninterference due to its role in World War II. As a result, while Japan is showing increased interest in this area, it lacks experience in promoting democracy abroad.

Japan’s official statements increasingly incorporate universalist language that includes promotion of democracy and human rights, but some ambivalence is still reflected in official statements regarding promotion of human rights and democracy. Japan does not demand observation of these values in foreign assistance or trade, though it has contributed financially to some election-related activities in Asia. Overall, Japan has shown some promise for increased attention in this area, but has not yet demonstrated that it is prepared to take action to support democracy and human rights.

Introduction

The role of democracy assistance in Japan’s foreign policy remains small, a product of the country’s history and its traditional emphasis on economic development. Although Japan’s industrialization and economic growth prior to World War II led to the emergence of democratic politics in the 1920s, the trend reversed as the global depression led to overheated Asian security conditions and intervention by the military in Japan’s national politics. Democratization was imposed by the occupying U.S. forces after Japan’s defeat in World War II. Subsequently, Japan’s economic bureaucracy gained a measure of dominance over national political affairs, and pressed forward the goal of rebuilding the nation’s economy. Political life also became more democratic within a national context that supported the emphasis on building prosperity while at the same time reducing the influence of the economic bureaucracy. Postwar experience has thus driven home a message that economic growth comes first, and then contributes to a strengthened democracy, not the other way around.

During the Cold War period, Japan’s foreign assistance was heavily concentrated in East Asia, focused on economic development with a few exceptions of strategic aid to allies of the United States, such as Egypt and Pakistan.1 By the early 1990s, democratic transitions in Southeast Asian states (such as Thailand and the Philippines) further enhanced Japan’s belief in its "economy first” doctrine, as well as the principle of noninterference in domestic political affairs. Japan thus lacks experience in promoting democracy abroad.

About this project

This project analyzes support by 11 democratic powers for democracy and human rights during the period June 2012–May 2014.

About the author

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However, in the 2000s, support for democracy became—at least rhetorically—one of the themes of Japan’s foreign policy. This was manifested mainly in two ways. First, Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi’s (April 2001–September 2006) active pursuit of permanent membership in the UN Security Council was an incentive for closer diplomatic ties with African states. Seeking visibility in various UN-led agendas focusing on that continent, including economic development and peacekeeping missions, Japan gradually adopted the language of democracy promotion in its foreign policy.

Second, Japan’s worsening relations with China over conflicting territorial claims and the maritime demarcation dispute in the East China Sea led Japan to seek closer security partnerships with like-minded democratic states. Prime Ministers Shinzo Abe (September 2006–September 2007 and December 2012–present) and Taro Aso (September 2008–September 2009) attempted to enhance security cooperation with the United States, Australia, and India to check China’s maritime expansion in the Western Pacific and the Indian Ocean, where Japan’s economic vitality depends on the safety of the sea-lanes. Democratic solidarity became an explicit rationale of the partnership, although deterrence of China remained the principal goal.

The defeat of the UN Security Council reform plan in 2005 temporarily took the steam out of Japan’s drive for a seat, while Japan’s worsening budget deficit has resulted in a reduction in official development aid. As most of Japan’s earlier contributions to UN-led multilateral initiatives have expired, the country’s support for democracy today is found primarily in bilateral assistance to specific countries, with increased emphasis on the implications for Japan’s own security. The more bilateral approach might partially reverse as Japan relaunches its drive for a permanent seat on the UN Security Council leading up to 2015, but a full return to the generous multilateral assistance levels of the pre-2005 period is unlikely. While the Japanese government will publicly stress the goal of the “consolidation” of new democratic states, it will in practice base its actions on whether a country supports its bid for a Security Council seat.

While the end of internal strife in several East and South Asian countries has opened up new opportunities for Japan to expand cooperation among democratic states in opposition to China’s expansionism, economic and security interests still drive Japan’s foreign policy in Asia. However, Japan’s cautious embrace of universalist norms of human rights and democracy as well as active contributions to multilateral efforts promoting these values has yielded more pragmatism and flexibility as the country pursues national security in a deteriorating regional environment. This represents a shift that appears to be part of a long-term trend of increased interest in supporting human rights and democracy.

**Foreign Policy Objectives**

Despite some formal reservations, Japan has largely incorporated the norms from key international treaties and conventions on human rights into its domestic laws. While the country has not fully incorporated these treaties in national law, Japan’s reluctance to apply the same norms to its foreign policy is nevertheless notable.

Japan’s official statements increasingly integrate universalist language that includes promotion of democracy and human rights. For example, according to the December 2013 strategic document of Japan’s newly created National Security Council, the maintenance and protection of [the] international order based on rules and universal values, such as freedom, democracy, respect for fundamental human rights, and the rule of law, are likewise in Japan’s national interests . . . [and Japan will] improve the global security environment and build a peaceful, stable, and prosperous international community by strengthening the international order based on universal values and rules, and by playing a leading role in the settlement of disputes, through consistent diplomatic efforts and further personnel contributions.

Likewise, the country’s common core document of 2012, which reports on its adherence to UN human rights treaties, stated, While it is important that human rights and fundamental freedoms, as universal values, are guaranteed not only in Japan but in all countries and regions around the world, each country has its unique history, traditions, etc. Therefore, the Government of Japan has considered the unique situations specific to each case and has provided proper international support for improvement of human rights through dialogue and cooperation.
Prime Minister Abe in particular has embraced the rhetoric of democratic norms in order to emphasize the unity of democratic countries in opposition to the nondemocratic neighbors (especially China) that threaten Japan’s security.

However, there is still some ambivalence regarding promotion of human rights and democracy in official statements. The government’s basic stance on human rights diplomacy on the Ministry of Foreign Affairs website, dated March 14, 2014, shifts the emphasis from “unique situations” to “universality,” stating,

All human rights and basic liberties are universal values. [The] human rights situation in each country is a legitimate concern of the international society, and such interests should not be considered as interference in domestic politics. …The means and the speed of achieving human rights protection may vary, but human rights must be respected regardless of culture, tradition, political-economic system, and the stage of socioeconomic development. Protection of human rights is the fundamental responsibility of all states.5

The fact that the government has not developed a unified stance on democracy and human rights has meant that Japan has remained generally passive and minimalist in terms of promoting these values.

Development Assistance and Trade

In spring 2014, Japan started revising its guidelines for official development assistance, which had last been revised in 2003. Given the reversal or deadlock in many democratic transitions at that time, several members of the committee that were tasked with the revisions felt that continuous assistance for democratic consolidation should be emphasized in lieu of democracy “promotion,” which often focused on initial transitions.6 In April 2013, Parliamentary Senior Vice-Minister for Foreign Affairs Shunichi Suzuki attended the Seventh Ministerial Conference of the Community of Democracies, held in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia. Suzuki emphasized continuous support for young democracies through training of young bureaucrats to improve administrative capabilities in order to foster “a form of equal society” following the initial establishment of democratic institutions.7

In East Asia, consolidation of democratic transition is implemented through administrative training for bureaucrats to improve governance capabilities. As Table 1 shows, however, the recipients include two nondemocratic (socialist) states.

Japan’s assistance to Africa is increasing as a priority. Yet Japan’s Africa aid policies do not stress democracy promotion. Reasons for this include Japan’s traditional focus on economic development, its political culture of noninterference, a lack of cultural and social science expertise, and reluctance to tie aid to democracy in the face of China’s aggressive aid drive in nondemocratic African states.

Japan also has a request-based system of assessing aid needs: the aid decision begins with an official request from the government of a would-be recipient, and local needs are articulated through collaboration between the local elite and Japanese

Table 1: Japan’s Development Assistance for Governance-related Administrative Training in Asia

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>2013</th>
<th>2014</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cambodia</td>
<td>¥258 million* ($2.65 million)</td>
<td>¥295 million* ($3.03 million)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philippines</td>
<td>¥263 million* ($2.70 million)</td>
<td>¥239 million* ($2.45 million)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vietnam</td>
<td>¥324 million ($3.33 million)</td>
<td>¥468 million ($4.80 million)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Myanmar</td>
<td>¥456 million ($4.68 million)</td>
<td>¥242 million ($2.48 million)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mongolia</td>
<td>¥236 million ($2.42 million)</td>
<td>¥257 million ($2.64 million)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laos</td>
<td>¥250 million ($2.57 million)</td>
<td>¥215 million ($2.21 million)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sri Lanka</td>
<td>¥192 million ($1.97 million)</td>
<td>¥206 million ($2.11 million)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bangladesh</td>
<td>¥180 million ($1.85 million)</td>
<td>* for young administrators to study in Japan</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

businesses. Grassroots civil society organizations have very limited input in this process.

The year 2013 marked the 20-year anniversary of the Tokyo International Conference on African Development process, and Japan hosted its annual meeting in Yokohama. Although the recurring themes of good governance, rule of law, and consolidation of democratic governance were referred to in the official press release, Japan’s aid is heavily devoted to food assistance (despite renewed emphasis in the country’s aid policy on self-help). Moreover, aid projects in Africa have concentrated heavily on infrastructure and energy development, health and sanitation improvement, agriculture, and law enforcement—with little spent on governance and social capital development. Bilateral development assistance for governance-related administrative training in African states will likely expand, especially in Ghana. Other African states will probably receive assistance as Japan solicits votes for its next UN Security Council drive in the run-up to 2015.

Japan has actively cosponsored resolutions at the UN’s World Programme for Human Rights Education. The program’s second phase action plan (2010–14) emphasized human rights education in universities and for educators, public administrators, and law enforcement—with little spent on governance and social capital development. Bilateral development assistance for governance-related administrative training in African states will likely expand, especially in Ghana. Other African states will probably receive assistance as Japan solicits votes for its next UN Security Council drive in the run-up to 2015.

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Japan’s policy of rewarding domestic firms with official development assistance contracts takes priority over the encouragement of political reforms in Africa and Asia. In 2014, a Japanese trading firm, Marubeni, was charged by the U.S. Department of Justice with bribing Indonesian officials in connection with a power plant project funded by Japanese assistance; the company settled the case for a fine of $8.8 million. The same company also had settled a bribery case in 2012 brought by the U.S. Department of Justice in relation to development of a Nigerian liquified natural gas plant. After the Indonesian case came to light, the Japanese government suspended Marubeni from development assistance projects, but only for nine months. In 2014, another charge was brought by the Tokyo tax office against Japan Transportation Consultants for paying disguised rebates totaling nearly $1 million to Vietnamese officials in relation to an assistance project to design railroads. Although the tax office imposed punitive taxes on the firm totaling approximately $900,000, no criminal charges based on the anti-graft law have been brought against the company to date; meanwhile, the Vietnamese government quickly punished the officials involved. As Japan’s aid process is penetrated by its own business interests, incentive to use aid to improve rule of law and fight corruption in recipient states is low.

Elections

No Japanese government personnel were dispatched as election observers during the 2012–2014 period. However, although Japan has not played a proactive role in facilitating elections, it does make modest financial contributions. Japan provided ¥149 million ($1.53 million) to Nepal to assist a parliamentary election in November 2013, when that country’s monarch accepted a transition to democracy and called an election for a provisional parliament mandated to draft a new national constitution. This direct contribution to Nepal’s democratic transition was unusual given Japan’s history of political noninterference. It was preceded—and to some extent facilitated—by the dispatch of Japan Ground Self-Defense Force personnel as observers to the UN peacekeeping operation in Nepal during the early stages of a cease-fire between the national military and Maoist insurgents. Japan contributed similarly to the democratic transition within a comprehensive reconstruction framework in East Timor.

Japan’s aid to help Pakistan grow into a “moderate and modern Islamic nation” explicitly identified consolidation of democracy as one of its objectives. In 2012, Japan contributed ¥183 million ($2.29 million) to the UN Development Programme effort to assist the parliamentary election in Pakistan in the following year. Japan also provided ¥808 million ($8.29 million) in 2013 for promoting intermediate education for female students in Hyderabad and five adjacent provinces in southern Pakistan. Through close donor coordination with the United States, Japan’s aid supplements the U.S.-led effort to discourage radicalization of Islamic politics in Pakistan.

Japan took a proactive stance in hosting the Tokyo Conference on Afghanistan in July 2012 in order to publicize its contributions to Afghanistan’s reconstruction. Japan contributed to Afghanistan’s presidential and provincial parliamentary elections in 2014. After the presidential election faced charges
of fraud during the second round, Japanese foreign minister Fumio Kishida expressed the government’s concern using carefully chosen words; while he did not confirm the fraud, he acknowledged the reports of fraud.19

Japan accepted the election of former military leader Abdel Fattah el-Sisi as president of Egypt despite an opposition boycott, media bias, and a Sisi tally of 96.91 percent. The Japanese government called Sisi’s triumph "an important step towards political normalization in Egypt."20 The Japanese government has not issued any critical statement on Egypt in face of widespread allegations of electoral fraud and continuing suppression of protestors by the new government.

Disruptions of Democratic Processes

The military coup in Thailand on May 22, 2014, was a key event for Japan. In response to the coup, Japanese foreign minister Kishida called the situation “regrettable” and “strongly urged those concerned that democracy in Thailand be quickly restored.”21 However, the government did not adopt any punitive measure (including travel restrictions on high-ranking military personnel) against the coup government.

Japan welcomed the democratic transitions of the Arab Spring, but the resulting instability and economic stagnation in some countries have led Japan to support military rule. In Egypt, after the armed forces intervened to suspend the legislature in summer 2013 and suppressed the opposition Muslim Brotherhood, Japan sent its special envoy Yutaka Iimura to Egypt in April 2014 to meet Foreign Minister Nabil Fahmy. According to the foreign ministry, Iimura expressed that

(a) Japan watches closely the progress of [the] roadmap towards the normalization of [the] political situation in Egypt and hopes the coming presidential election will be conducted properly.

(b) While Japan is well aware of the efforts of the interim government for maintaining security and public order, Japan expects that issues such as human rights would be dealt with properly.

(c) Japan hopes to further strengthen the cooperative relations with Egypt. Japan will continue to extend assistance to Egypt for democratization and socio-economic stability.

In Fiji, Japan has adopted a neutral stance toward the coup regime since December 2006. Despite the provisional government’s failure to follow the road map to hold an election by March 2009 and return to democratic governance (which has resulted in Fiji’s suspension from the meetings of the Pacific Islands Forum), Japan has not suspended aid to Fiji. Japan expressed its support for Fiji’s new constitution, provisional prime minister Frank Bainimarama’s retirement from the military, and appointment of the members of the electoral commission as positive steps toward democratization.22

Gross Human Rights Violations

Myanmar’s political reform since 2011 has led to its removal from Japan’s list of gross human rights violators. In February 2013, Parliamentary Vice-Minister for Foreign Affairs Toshiko Abe attended the 22nd session of the Human Rights Council in Geneva. In her statement, Abe praised Myanmar’s democratic transition and expressed Japan’s willingness to play a “leading role” in supporting further reforms in Myanmar.23

The other main violator on Japan’s list has been North Korea. However, Japan’s diplomacy toward North Korea focuses on nuclear disarmament and the issue of abduction of Japanese citizens, with less emphasis on North Korea’s human rights abuses against its own citizens. Despite public criticism against the North Korean government for these abuses, Japan has been reluctant to accept North Korean asylum seekers and has severely curtailed the flow of remittances from North Koreans residents in Japan as a part of the economic sanctions.

Prime Minister Abe’s policy of “proactive contribution to peace”24 centers on consolidation of mutual collective defense with the United States through more active regional security roles for the Japanese Ground Self-Defense Force. The policy also encompasses broader security cooperation with other democratic allies of the United States (such as Australia and the United Kingdom) and through active contributions to and participation in UN activities. The new policy will likely involve dispatches of not only military but also civilian personnel overseas, in a broad range of peacekeeping missions, including some related to governance reform. While Japan’s currently limited civilian dispatches may expand as the country shifts to a more proactive security posture, the Ground Self-Defense Force is not likely to commit itself to more than one large peacekeep-
ing dispatch of approximately 600 personnel at any given time due to its limited human resource availability. Japan has sent a 300-member-plus contingent to the UN peacekeeping operation in South Sudan beginning November 2011—the largest deployment Japan has conducted since the withdrawal of ground troops from Iraq in 2006.

Civil Liberties
Japan has maintained silence on specific cases of restrictions on civil liberties by Asian governments. In response to notable occurrences, such as the house arrest of Myanmar opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi (1989–2010), the Japanese government has expressed moderate concern and expectation of expeditious return to normalcy.

The Japanese government strictly refrains from specific criticism of civil liberty restrictions in China. For example, the jailing of Chinese activist and Nobel Prize winner Liu Xiaobo (2009–present) hardly has been mentioned in Japanese leaders’ speeches on China. However, visits by the Dalai Lama in November 2012 and 2013 and April 2014 triggered a more forthcoming response from the Japanese government as compared to the past, in defiance of Chinese government protests. The Dalai Lama was received by senior parliamentarians on his visits and addressed large, all-party audiences from parliament.

Japanese civil society is not active in promoting democracy.

Marginalized Communities
On ethnic and other minority issues, Japan has largely refrained from criticizing other governments unless large-scale bloodshed takes place. For example, although the new civilian government of Myanmar treats the Rohingyas as illegal residents from neighboring Bangladesh, and Russia engages in official and legal discrimination against gays and lesbians, Japan has completely refrained from criticism in both cases.

Japan’s national news widely covers China’s heavy-handed crackdown on the Uighur protestors in Xinjiang, yet the government has not officially condemned China with explicit reference to the Uighurs. The Japanese government did issue a visa to the leader of a Munich-based Uighur exile organization, Rebiya Kadeer, to attend the fourth World Uighur Congress in Tokyo in May 2012.

Japan’s actions serve as a subtle reminder that its noninterference stance on China’s domestic minority issues is contingent upon China’s peaceful international behavior.

Japan’s emphasis on economic development instructs its policies toward women’s rights in other countries. While Japan has actively promoted women’s status in South Asia through economic empowerment, its emphasis is on general economic development rather than women’s rights. Even the Abe government’s setting of numerical targets for women in the Japanese workforce lacks concrete steps to improve women’s work environments through supportive measures (most importantly in the area of child care). Japan thus is not in a strong position to promote women’s rights in other countries.

ENDNOTES


10. Ibid.


17. Ibid.


Supporting Democracy Abroad: An Assessment of Leading Powers

Japan

Freedom House is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization that supports democratic change, monitors freedom, and advocates for democracy and human rights.

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