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The Enemy of My Enemy: Japanese Relations with the US and China

Sometimes history is forgotten, but very rarely is it forgiven. Japan and the United States were able to reconcile in the aftermath of a bitter conflict in order to forge a strong alliance and even friendship. Japan and China, too, have shared a long, bloody history. They have both made attempts to come together through treaties, trade, and cultural exchange, yet Sino-Japanese relations have deteriorated over the last century without much improvement. This presents a puzzling contrast in international relations: why can some nations overcome a turbulent history and become friends while other nations remain at odds? The solution to this international puzzle presents itself in three ways: regional history, national security, and ideology. This answer is not entirely realist in nature, nor is it liberalist. Just as the solutions overlap, so do the theories they embody.

Firstly, regional history between Japan and China has made it less likely that they would be allies. Consider the matter of geographic proximity, for example. Japan and China are practically next door neighbors in East Asia. This lends itself to natural friction and competition, especially over limited resources. In the East China Sea, China and Japan are still competing over the right to exploit natural oil and gas resources¹. Geographic proximity also contributes to the disputed territory claims that sour many Sino-Japanese interactions. In the past, Japan has attempted to claim Taiwan, the Liaosong Peninsula, and Manchuria through devastating wars. In more recent times, Japan has attempted to lay claim politically to several territories that China

¹ Yann-huei Song, "Peaceful Proposals and Maritime Cooperation between Mainland China, Japan, and Taiwan in the East China Sea: Progress Made and Challenges Ahead," in Seokwoo Lee et al. ed., *Asian Yearbook of International Law: Volume 22 (2016)*, Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2019, pp. 20–49.

considers its own territory, specifically the Diaoyu Islands². Even islands in Washington at the Heritage Foundation became subject to this sort of tug-of-war between the two nations in 2012³. While these incidents seem small, it is easy for the situation to escalate when relations are already poor⁴ as they are between China and Japan.

Relations between the two are already strained by shifting regional power dynamics. China and Japan have been top dogs in Asia for thousands of years, both economically, militarily, and politically dominating the Eastern sphere of influence. Until only the last two hundred years, however, it was clear to everyone that China's relationship with Japan could be compared to a teacher-student relationship. China was older and wealthier than Japan, with ties to powerful empires around the globe and a population that far surpassed that of the small island nation. China was simply stronger. Of course, true to the realist concept of the Thucydides Trap, Japan became a rising industrial power after opening up and reforming while China lagged behind as an agricultural state.⁵ This completely upset the balance between Japan and China. As a result, wars broke out between the two powers. In the late 19th and 20th century, China lost almost every single war with Japan⁶. These losses were violent and humiliating to China, earning this period of Chinese history the fitting title, "The Century of Humiliation." After losing territory in Taiwan and areas of the Liaosong peninsula to the Japanese in the aftermath of the Sino-Japanese war, China had to pick up the pieces of the Russian Manchurian Operation, where

² The Brookings Institute

<https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/01_east_asia_chu.pdf> accessed on November 28, 2020

³ Yann-huei Song, "Peaceful Proposals and Maritime Cooperation between Mainland China, Japan, and Taiwan in the East China Sea: Progress Made and Challenges Ahead," in Seokwoo Lee et al. ed., *Asian Yearbook of International Law: Volume 22 (2016)*, Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2019, pp. 20–49.

⁴ Brookings

⁵ Brookings

⁶ Brookings

the Japanese believed that China should have been grateful to them from removing the Russian threat from Southern Manchuria⁷. Of course, the Chinese did not feel the same way, and instead became even more wary of Japanese incursions. Those suspicions were justified by the 1931 Manchurian Crisis. Many scholars refer to the Manchurian crisis as the turning point in Sino-Japanese relations⁸. After the Mukden incident, reconciliation between Japan and China seemed impossible. This was only underlined by Japan's perception that China was disorganized and a threat to the stability of the region⁹. Japan's relative success in Manchuria in the 1930s combined with their newfound nationalistic identity created the perfect setup for Japan's invasion of China during WWII. The Japanese government did little to recognize the war crimes they committed in China during WWII. Even today, Japan would rather move on and away from its actions during the Second World War, believing that it has done enough to apologize and that it is time to pursue a "new and normal" Japan moving forward.¹⁰ For China, the memory of a humiliating past and Japanese denial creates a rocky road to diplomacy.

The United States and Japan, on the other hand, do not share the same regional history that Japan and China do. Japan and the US are divided by an entire sea, so they are not geographically proximate to one another, which decreases competition of natural resources and lessens the inherent friction between neighbors. Additionally, because of the distance between the US and Asia, the US does not *directly* participate in regional power games. It chooses instead to influence the area through diplomacy and trade. That is not to say that Japanese and the US

⁷ Ian Nish, "An Overview of Relations between China and Japan, 1895-1945," *The China Quarterly*, no. 124 (1990), pp. 601–623

⁸ Ibid

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ The Brookings Institute

<https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/01_east_asia_chu.pdf> accessed on November 28, 2020

have always had completely neutral relations. US-Japanese relations in the 20th century have been defined by one major world event: the Second World War. Japan and the United States had been allies in WWI, but due to a surge of Japanese nationalism in the 1930s and a sudden desire to reject Western influence and conquer the Pacific, Japan and the US were primed to go to war with one another in WWII. The war between Japan and the US began when, in retaliation to an oil embargo on US exports, Japan invaded Southeast Asia, causing tensions to escalate dramatically. The attack on Pearl Harbor was only the beginning of a series of planned attacks on the Dutch East Indies and the rest of the Pacific. Once Japan made its first move, the US declared war on Japan and the bitter struggle began. Atrocities were committed on both sides, but the war finally concluded with the nuclear obliteration of two Japanese cities. The US left Japan weak, defenseless, and broken, but the US was able to use this to its advantage. Whereas China was powerless against Japan, the US had power over Japan. Despite the strong anti-American rhetoric that had permeated Japan during the war, the US was able to quietly rebuild Japan as an democratic ally by investing time and resources into Japanese relief. General MacArthur was able to directly promote the development of democracy in Japan by reforming Japanese law, education, labor, and government¹¹. The transition was surprisingly smooth, but it was nonetheless a forced transition. After all, the Japanese had little choice after suffering such a defeat.¹²

Today, despite years of struggle and violence, Japanese-US relations are steadily improving, and have been especially strong since the end of the Cold War¹³. In fact, it was the

¹¹ Constitutional Rights Foundation,
<<https://www.crf-usa.org/election-central/bringing-democracy-to-japan.html>> accessed on November 28, 2020

¹² Ibid

¹³ The Brookings Institute
<https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/01_east_asia_chu.pdf> accessed on November 28, 2020

Cold War that brought Japan and the US together even in the aftermath of WWII. This brings us to the second solution to the original puzzle: security. While Japan was still recovering from a devastating war, the USSR loomed in the north. Japan already had an unstable relationship with Russia owing to their geographic proximity and competition over disputed territories that culminated in the Russo-Japanese War that lasted from 1904 to 1905, a war that many argue was a response to the strategic danger presented by Russian occupation of Manchuria¹⁴. Japan managed to drive the Russians out of Manchuria in the early, but the threat of Russian military action weighed heavily on Japan during the Cold War when the USSR was quickly becoming the most influential power in Asia. The Cold War and mutual conflict with the USSR left Japan and the US no choice but to put aside their differences and work together to build a strong democratic alliance in Asia that served both nations' interests. The United States supported a once hated enemy, and the Japanese abandoned their anti-American rhetoric in order to unify against a powerful threat. This "enemy of my enemy" philosophy was the start of a new friendship between the two nations moving into the late 20th century.

China had no such opportunity to come together with Japan in the Cold War. In addition to having a strong anti-Japanese attitude following WWII, China had a preexisting relationship with Russia and by extension the USSR. Indeed, in the late 19th century, China entered into several compacts with Russia which essentially secured a sort of alliance between the two against Japan.¹⁵ In the mid-20th century, when Japan was concerned with Russian threats, it could not consider China to be a secure ally against Russia.

Even without Sino-Russian relations complicating Japan's prospects for a Chinese alliance, China was not the strong, wealthy nation Japan needed to secure their interests both in

¹⁴ Ian Nish, "An Overview of Relations between China and Japan, 1895-1945," *The China Quarterly*, no. 124 (1990), pp. 601–623

¹⁵ Ibid

East Asia and on the global stage during the 1950s and 60s. To simplify a great deal of history, the early 20th century saw a decade of revolution in China beginning with the Wuchang Uprising and ending with the conflict between the KMT and the CCP. This conflict was interrupted by the Japanese invasion during WWII, and the resulting instability provided the perfect opportunity for the CCP to stake their claim in Beijing. In 1949, Mao Zedong officially announced the founding of the PRC. This shift in government was not without consequence. For the next decade, China was rife with domestic turmoil and suffered a complete collapse of infrastructure worsened by the onset of a famine¹⁶. China had the backing of the USSR, but until the 1970s, it was not a serious threat to Japan nor was it viable as a potential ally. As a result its relations with Japan did not have the chance to develop through the 20th century as US-Japanese relations had.

These first two solutions, regional history and security, are both Realist solutions in nature. The shifting power dynamics between China and Japan entailed in their regional history is a classic example of the famous realist theory of the Thucydides Trap which theorizes that there can never be a peaceful transfer of power between an existing power and a rising power. For most of its history, China was the existing power in East Asia, and only in the last two hundred years has it become surpassed by Japan, a country believed to be weaker. This shift has been violent, creating a rift between the two that could not be reconciled as that between the US and Japan. The security solution is also realist because it makes certain assumptions about the power Russia and America have over Japan due to their wealth, size, and military strength. Realism defines power in terms of relationships; essentially that an actor has power over another when they are able to make the other actor do something it would not otherwise do. By this definition, Russia has power over Japan by forcing it to seek alliances with a former enemy,

¹⁶ Ian Nish, "An Overview of Relations between China and Japan, 1895-1945," *The China Quarterly*, no. 124 (1990), pp. 601–623

something it would not ever do without the threat of military actions by the USSR. China, on the other hand, had very little hard power over Japan in the 20th century.

America too has power over Japan, though it was able to achieve this through strategic diplomacy that created a new system of government more likely to be favorable towards America. Yet the idea that creating a democratic government in Japan would make it more likely to become allies with an existing democratic country is perhaps better explained by the liberalist theory of the Democratic Peace. Thus we arrive at the third and possibly the most convincing reason why modern US-Japanese relations have formed so differently from Sino-Japanese relations: ideology.

Japan was not always a democracy, but after undergoing reformation in the aftermath of WWII, it was recognized as such. Today, it is recognized by the 2019 EIU Democracy Index as a “flawed democracy” with a democracy score of 7.99. This score places it only one space above the US in the international ranking of democracy scores, with the US being defined as a “flawed democracy” with a score of 7.96.¹⁷ By this metric, the US and Japan are nearly identical in terms of ideology. They are even a part of many of the same international organizations, and the US State Department has recognized that the two share the same ideals and interests.¹⁸ This creates a sharp contrast to China’s current governing system, which is recognized by the Democracy Index as a “authoritative regime,” or a nation with nonexistent or severely limited political pluralism, with a score of 2.26.¹⁹

¹⁷ The Economist Intelligence Unit <<https://www.eiu.com/topic/democracy-index>> accessed on November 29, 2020

¹⁸ US Department of State <<https://www.state.gov/u-s-relations-with-japan/>> accessed November 29, 2020

¹⁹ The Economist Intelligence Unit <<https://www.eiu.com/topic/democracy-index>> accessed on November 29, 2020

What this proves is that the US is a democratic nation, albeit one with a flawed democracy, intent on spreading democracy to the rest of the world through diplomacy, trade, and even espionage. The US makes a point to be friendly with other democracies, including Japan. China has a complex relationship with democracy, but since the PRC came into power over fifty years ago, China has since rejected democracy in favor of a system with little political plurality. China still maintains trade and diplomacy with democratic nation, but as China becomes increasingly nationalistic, so too has it become more and more anti-democratic in a movement that is reminiscent of previous nationistic sentiments of the 1910s that coincided with anti-Japanese sentiment and xenophobia.²⁰ The governing ideology in both China and the US has directly shaped both Sino-Japanese relations and US-Japanese relations. This is because Japan itself is a democracy and, according to Democratic Peace theory, Japan is more likely to maintain positive relations with other democratic nations and conflict with nondemocratic nations.

Democratic Peace, developed by Michael Doyle, suggests that democracies do not fight other democracies because they share common values, commerce, and political cultures. Wars between democracies are extremely rare, and even when democracies face conflicts, they are likely to be resolved without a declaration of war and little violence.²¹ There have been several scholarly critiques of this theory, the most common being that there are always outliers. However, democratic peace goes beyond correlation, even when considering all of the factors that could play a role of democratic relations, including shared norms, institutional constraints, and strategic behavior.²² What proponents of democratic peace have found is that democratic nations are significantly less likely to engage in conflict, just as Japan and the US are less likely

²⁰ Ian Nish, "An Overview of Relations between China and Japan, 1895-1945," *The China Quarterly*, no. 124 (1990), pp. 601–623

²¹ Michael Doyle, et al. "The Democratic Peace." *International Security* 19, no. 4 (1995), pp. 164-184

²² Ibid

to engage in conflict in the late 20th and 21st century, and that two democratic entities are less likely to engage in conflict than two entities where one or both are not democratic, such as China and Japan.²³ It is no coincidence that Japan and China, two nations where one is democratic where the other is not, have come into conflict in recent years with relations between the two only continuing to deteriorate. Based on democratic peace, it is reasonable to conclude that Japan and the US are currently allied because of their shared ideology, which the US has spent the better part of a century cultivating. Japan and China come into conflict because of ideological differences. This conclusion is only reinforced by recent anti-Japanese rhetoric in China that is influenced by conflicts between their two governments.²⁴ Sino-Japanese relations have even been relatively stable up until the 1970s, but when their opposite governing ideologies began to implement structural change in how diplomacy and trade were carried out both domestically and internationally, then relations between the two really began to fall apart again.²⁵

Democratic peace is a liberalist theory that poses an “apparent anomaly to realism”²⁶ which has defined relations between the US and Japan as well as Sino-Japanese relations for the past fifty years. However, it would be unwise to assume that a solution derived from liberalism is superior to anything realism could present. Even democratic peace proponents admit that shared democracy is not the only influence in international relations, and that power and strategic

²³ Michael Doyle, et al. “The Democratic Peace.” *International Security* 19, no. 4 (1995), pp. 164-184

²⁴ Jing Sun, “Growing Diplomacy, Retreating Diplomats-How the Chinese Foreign Ministry has been Marginalized in Foreign Policymaking,” *Journal of Contemporary China* 26, no. 105 (Nov 2016), pp. 413-43

²⁵ The Brookings Institute

<https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/01_east_asia_chu.pdf> accessed on November 28, 2020

²⁶ John Owen. “How Liberalism Produces Democratic Peace,” *International Security* 19, no. 3 (1994), pp. 87-125

interest greatly affect even democracies.²⁷ That is not to say that shared democracy is irrelevant. Democracy would be better understood as a sufficient condition of international relations, not a necessary condition.²⁸ Because democracy is a sufficient condition, and one that takes on aspects of diplomacy and conflict that realism cannot, a synthesis between realist and liberalist ideas would best explain the current state of relations between the US, Japan, and China. That is what I have attempted to do here.

Realism explains the history of each nation and how it factors into modern relations, but if Realism is taken by itself, then we have a brutal depiction of international relations where power is the only deciding factor. That is a 2D view of a much more complex relationship, because it really does not consider a very important factor: ideology. There have been many conflicts of interest between democracies that were settled amicably, even when realist ideas of power and regional history predicted such a conclusion would be incredibly unlikely. When realism fails to accurately predict the outcome, a liberalist explanation of shared democratic norms and institutions provides the necessary perspective to create a logical explanation.²⁹ Liberalism helps explain the status quo and makes a projection based on current observations of ideological systems and governments. Still, taken on its own without consideration of history, power, and strategy, it would simply fall flat. A nation is not only its government and the system it chooses to follow. It is a multi-faceted system that is only possible through a synthesis of liberalism and realism. Would China be authoritarian if not for its struggles with foreign powers and domestic economy? Would Japan be democratic without the assistance of an ally it needed during the Cold War? Would the US have developed its relationship with Japan if not for the

²⁷ Michael Doyle, et al. "The Democratic Peace." *International Security* 19, no. 4 (1995), pp. 164-184

²⁸ Ibid

²⁹ Michael Doyle, et al. "The Democratic Peace." *International Security* 19, no. 4 (1995), pp. 164-184

influence of regional hard power? Of course not. The situation between Japan and two ideologically different nations best exemplifies that basic idea that democratic peace theory does not work without some aspects of realism, just as realism cannot be applied without theories of liberalism.

The factors that separate US-Japanese relations and Sino-Japanese relations are important to understand as China continues to grow and even surpass both Japan and the US, two incredibly influential actors on the global stage, in GDP to become the largest economy in Asia and the second largest economy in the world.³⁰ Sino-Japanese relations are of particular importance as China continues to rise. If the factors that have caused the divide between these two nations are recognized, then it is possible for the two to take the necessary steps to reconcile and improve their relationship. If that occurs, then there could be greater global accountability, improved communications between the US, China, and Japan; there could even be progress towards regional stability as China and Japan come closer together in the same way that Japan and the US have.³¹ Prime Minister Suga, successor to former Prime Minister Abe, will not have an easy task of negotiating relations with either the US or China moving forward, but it may be possible through multilateral diplomacy and global institutions.³² It is only a matter of whether or not China and Japan can set aside their differences and reconcile their history as Japan and the US did nearly fifty years ago.

³⁰ The Brookings Institute

<https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/01_east_asia_chu.pdf> accessed on November 28, 2020

³¹ Zijia He, “A Friend of a Friend: How Better China-Japan Relations Benefit the United States,” *New Perspectives in Foreign Policy* 17, no.5 (Spring 2019), pp. 26-29.

³² The Diplomat

<<https://thediplomat.com/2020/09/abes-regional-diplomacy-results-and-limitations/>> accessed on November 30, 2020