Snow on the Pine

Japan's Quest for
a Leadership Role in Asia

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a Leadership Role in Asia

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For Ayami and Hisaya Uesugi

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Foreword

*Courageous Pine —
enduring the snow
that is piling up,
color unchanging.
Let people be like this*

Emperor Hirohito, as quoted in Dower (1999, p. 318).

It is difficult to convince a trained economist that economic incentives are not the mainspring of all human actions. These narrowly focused academic scribblers are inclined to replace the dramatic heart of darkness dwelling at the center of daily activity with a more comprehensible and pointedly mundane cash register. Naturally then, their immediate impulse when confronted by the measured phrases of the professional diplomat is to begin an extensive search for vested economic interests.

As a result, the initial suggestion by my co-author that economics was only a means of achieving clear-cut foreign policy objectives was met with a good deal of scepticism on my part. As an economist, I implicitly assumed that foreign policy was only economic competition by some other means. This firmly held belief was then further aggravated by a determined insistence that the underlying motivation of post-war policy in Japan was not only innocent of purely economic motivations but entirely consistent with a foreign policy stance that stretched back to the Meiji period. As an analytical position, this was far removed from the received wisdom on this subject and, at least superficially, distinctly detached from more obvious explanations of post-war events. However, when dealing with matters Japanese, a researcher should be well aware that it is often wise to eschew superficial appearances (*tatemae*) and

instead dig much deeper in the hope of discovering at least a small chunk of reality (*bonne*).

Economic issues have always been a crucial motivating element behind policy measures. Losing the Pacific War did nothing to change that. But economic interests have always composed only one among a number of threads forming foreign policy decisions. What my astute co-author makes clear is that the drive to dominate and influence East Asia has been the consistent determinant motivating Japan's diplomatic maneuvers since the Meiji restoration. Tactics and even strategies over time have changed to meet the ever-evolving economic and political environment, but the overall objective has remained much the same. Thus, foreign policy has not simply been a stripped-down vehicle to assist Japanese economic development. Instead, we have become increasingly convinced that understanding foreign policy is not simply a matter of searching for and assigning the relevant set of economic incentives to each critical event. If it was, then Japan's long-running battle over its insistence on conducting what it has fancifully labeled "scientific whaling" could only be described as downright lunacy. Japan's refusal to budge from this stubbornly held position in recent years has had little, if anything, to do with economic consequences or advantages.

We find a policy that has almost carelessly irritated two of its major trading partners, Australia and the US, both of which must face widespread public displeasure at what is often portrayed as a needless slaughter of whales. Even so, such a policy might begin to make some economic sense if it was clearly a matter of appeasing some key domestic special interest.¹ But not only is whaling a non-viable industry that requires explicit subsidisation to survive; it affects and has the support of no discernable voting group. Instead, we seem to have a distinct instance of diplomatic symbolism. Whaling has been transformed into an issue of Japanese nationalism, namely the right of Japan as a sovereign nation to make its own, independent decisions, even if such decisions seem to be conspicuously devoid of any overt rationality or

¹We have often thought that a campaign which would transform whales into lovably cute cartoon figures would end the whaling issue by mobilizing the Japanese population against destroying such adorable animals.

even intelligence. It is an assertion of self that is more commonly stumbled across in the writing of Dostoevsky than in the more turgid pages of an economics textbook.

In much the same way, reducing post-war diplomacy to a simple effort to foster economic interests misses much of the real purpose behind Japanese diplomacy and other overseas activity. Our modest contribution then seeks to correct such a simple-minded approach. To read this account is to understand the consistency of Japanese foreign policy, instead of viewing such diplomatic efforts as episodic and ever changing. The snow melts, the pine endures.

Kyoko Hatakeyama and Craig Freedman
August 2009

Reference

Dower JW. (1999) *Embracing Defeat*. W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., New York.

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The first 10 chapters derive largely from the work that Kyoko Hatakeyama developed as a PhD student under the supervision of Craig Freedman. Of course, over the years, this work has been mutually fertilized by numerous discussions between the two authors.

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