

Soft power and Japan's growing role in a complex world

The nation has so much more to offer beyond Hello Kitty and *kaijū* monsters

JOSHUA W. WALKER
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

With the continuing drama in the U.S. House of Representatives paired with the upcoming presidential elections in America and continued speculation of a snap election bubbling under the surface in Japan, politics will continue to capture the headlines through at least 2024.

But let's not take the bait, at least not all the time. In the midst of domestic and global politics, there is something that's even more important to keep in mind in U.S.-Japan relations — the enduring resiliency and value of Japan's unique soft power and as a cultural superpower that is often underappreciated in America.

In 1983, then-Prime Minister Yasuhiro Nakasone was interviewed for a special issue of Time Magazine in August of 1983 titled, "Japan: A Nation in Search of Itself," that stated: "Japan may be a bit like sugar or salt: unless one tries to taste it, one may never be able to understand Japan. In the past, we have been lacking in our efforts to publicize Japan culturally. We have done quite well in exporting products. But from now on, we must make greater efforts in exporting cultural information."

It's been 40 years since, but some are saying that this moment feels like 1980s Japan, part of a recurring 20-year boom and bust cycle. However, we are in the 21st century now and as U.S.-Japan relations have strengthened, they have also grown beyond the bilateral to the truly global as we have seen from the start of the war in Ukraine and Israel. U.S. President Joe Biden defines this moment as a global "inflection point."

As the first and third largest economies in the world, the U.S. and Japan set the stage for major economic and financial decisions along with being leading democracies that define the rules based international system. With the 2024 U.S. presidential election on the horizon that will shape America's global role and ongoing domestic political challenges in Japan, how each of today's leading democracies formulate their foreign policies and shape the global agenda is critical



A Hello Kitty balloon is paraded down 6th Ave during the 91st Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade in New York City in November 2017. REUTERS

for the future world order.

But that's not all. I've been thinking a lot about Japan's soft power — the economic and political value of Japanese culture and how it is integral to the nation's position in the world. "Soft power" as conceptualized by Joseph Nye focused on the nonmilitary and intangible elements of a country's appeal, but very similar in capturing the appeal and influence of Japan's culture throughout the world.

There is something truly uplifting about the world that Japanese artists and creators have made for us — whether in movies, anime or games — that has universal appeal. They have merged high culture and pop culture in a way that is uniquely relevant for us all. In the same way that Captain America,

Mickey Mouse or Superman captures the American sense of grandeur and greatness on the global stage, there is an enduring appeal to superheroes from Japan that speaks to the character and creativity of Japanese society.

They may come in the smaller form of kawaii (cute) culture's Hello Kitty or the *kaijū* monsters like Godzilla or of the supernatural varieties like those of the "Dragon Ball" anime characters, but they all hold unique appeal across the world.

Japan shouldn't shy away from or discount the enormous value of its creative power even as others including neighbors South Korea and Taiwan are catching up. Japan's soft power is a global economic force that entertains and informs multiple generations,

and because of that, it's also political.

The nation's creative power is not only filled with the spirit of Japan, it's actually about what the country means to the world — and its importance in maintaining a stable future for a free and open global society.

Japan should take note of how South Korea and Taiwan are actively promoting themselves through their own soft power on global stages, including New York, Tokyo and Dubai. There's a lesson to be learned here and an opportunity.

The country isn't just sugar or salt, Japan is now mainstream — it's a multicourse meal. But the point that Nakasone made in 1983 is still valid. Until you experience Japan, you don't really know it. Even now where you can basically experience almost anything vir-

tually or in the metaverse, there's something refreshingly analog about Japan whether in its art or bathhouses.

It's ironic that the title of that special 1983 edition of Time was "Japan: A Nation in Search of Itself," because in 21st-century America, we also don't know quite what America is anymore. We have a founding myth and we have a certain set of ideals, including freedom and inclusion, that we can choose to rally around or not.

Japan, I believe, doesn't have one thing that people rally around — except for the sensibility of being Japanese — the aesthetics of its art, architecture, minimalism, food and so on. If you're from Japan or spent any time there, you know that right away.

But for most Americans, what they associ-

ate with Japan is generally Eastern, Oriental or Asian.

Yet there's so much more. That's where Japan's soft power comes into play. While hard power zeroes in on what can be physically controlled such as an empire by force, soft power is an empire by invitation — an invitation and escape that feeds the soul. Art lets you go beyond yourself. There's no beginning and no end; it's a way of understanding and feeling. That's what our world needs now — a little less hardness and more kindness, less preaching and more mindfulness.

We need answers, but we need to ask the right questions before we can find those answers. What is true freedom? How can democracy coexist with security in a dangerous world? How can nearly 8 billion humans live in harmony with nature that defines our experience on this planet with the reality of climate change? How can technology complement our humanity? And the list goes on.

There's something amazingly resilient about the human spirit and there's something about U.S.-Japan relations that emphasizes that point even more than any other two nations. Starting with our very first national encounters from Commodore Matthew Perry's black ships to the Meiji Revolution, from World War II to the Tokyo Olympics, from 9/11 to 3/11, there has been a deep spiritual bond or *kizuna* that has defined the American and Japanese peoples, their cultures and their societies.

Japan opens the door to exploring different perspectives and viewing ourselves through a different lens than just the Western lifestyle. The nation's soft power is an amplifier and a catalyst, so that even as its population decreases and its military increases amid numerous global challenges, Japan remains America's anchor in Asia, the most dynamic and interesting region of the world at this critical global inflection point.

Joshua W. Walker is president and CEO of Japan Society. He has held various positions in both the private and public sectors, including the Eurasia Group, the USA Pavilion in the 2017 World Expo and APSCO Worldwide, as well as in the U.S. Department of State and the U.S. Department of Defense.

New mantra for U.S. diplomacy: First, do no harm

Brad Glosserman



"American leadership is what holds the world together," insisted U.S. President Joe Biden last week in a speech to the U.S. public.

His Oval Office address sought to explain his support for Israel and Ukraine and to rally his audience behind him. Biden couched those efforts not as a choice, but as a responsibility. The language — and the moral sensibility that employs it — has long gripped the most senior representatives of U.S. politics.

The accuracy of that characterization faces a growing challenge, however, and its utility as an animating force in U.S. politics is declining as a consequence. American politicians and the public must recognize and acknowledge the difference between myth and reality, and develop a new guide for diplomatic engagement.

In his remarks, Biden asserted that "America is a beacon to the world still. Still, we are, as my friend Madeleine Albright said, 'the indispensable nation.' Tonight, there are innocent people all over the world who hope because of us, who believe in a better life because of us, who are desperate not be forgotten by us, and who are waiting for us."

This thinking well predates Albright, who served just under two decades ago as Bill

Clinton's secretary of state. The original formulation was of the United States as "a shining city on a hill," an image first articulated by Puritan pastor John Winthrop in a sermon in 1630. John Kennedy embraced that image in a 1961 speech and it was the cornerstone of President Ronald Reagan's vision for the United States during his campaign for the presidency in 1980.

The idea, writes historian Adam Tooze in his always compelling Substack, "that there is a 'place' in the world, which is that of 'America as the organizer,' and that without America occupying that place and doing its job, the world will fall apart, or some other power will take America's place as the organizer, is deep-seated in U.S. policy circles." It is also, he adds, "silly and self-deluding." Moreover, "it is bizarre to imagine that the world needs America to 'hold it together.' America itself is hardly in one piece."

Biden conceded that last point, admitting that "we have our divisions at home. We have to get past them. We can't let petty, partisan, angry politics get in the way of our responsibilities as a great nation."

There's that word again — responsibility. It is a signal that he is speaking to Americans, not the world. He is reminding them of their obligations — and the self-interest upon which they rest. Alliances keep the U.S. safe, but its "values are what make us a partner that other nations want to work with" and that is put at risk if the U.S. walks away from Ukraine and turns its back on Israel.

There are two problems with his logic. The

first is that relative U.S. power has diminished and the overweening advantage it enjoyed in almost all fields in the aftermath of World War II, even at the end of the Cold War, has dissipated. Fortunately, many of the nations that closed the gap are allies and partners and we can add their capabilities to our side of the ledger when totting the global balance of power. Yet even that cumulative strength doesn't allow the U.S. and its allies to dictate outcomes.

Contributing to this recalibration has been the empowerment of the individual and the democratization of destruction. This creates a new dynamic: one that transforms the meaning of power and undermines traditional indices of strength. The U.S. military, which Biden rightly called the mightiest in human history in an interview over the weekend, can blow things up, but Washington has proven time and time again unable to build much from that rubble. That impotence reflects this new equilibrium.

Biden's assertion is more substantively undercut by what can only be called the abdication of U.S. leadership in key areas — mostly economic. U.S. leaders have focused on the high-visibility public goods that their country provides — typically the military — and ignored other dimensions of power that provide more immediate impacts and benefits to citizens around the world.

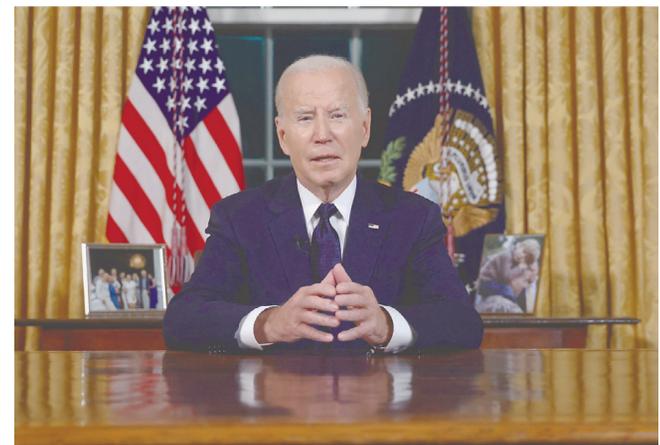
Peace and stability are prerequisites to growth and prosperity, but security is like oxygen — you don't notice it til it's gone. The fight for a better life is a daily struggle and the

means by which it is delivered are tangible and visible: You can see the bridge and the factory that enable development and you can hold in your hand its fruits — a phone, keys to a vehicle or new clothes.

The U.S. is not contesting that space. Withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership and refusal to join its successor is a damaging blow to U.S. status, credibility and leadership. The effort to catch up with China's Belt and Road Initiative would be comical if the stakes weren't so high. The Blue Dot Network morphed into the Build Back Better World initiative, which is now the Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment. Rebranding hasn't masked the failure to put something substantive on the table.

Then there is the U.S. reluctance to open its home markets to foreign goods, the one sure-fire way to improve prospects for developing nations, and be shown to be doing so. It's not as obvious — and thus less of a benefit in the fight for global support — but Washington's continuing obstinacy and blocking of the World Trade Organization's appellate body is another blow to U.S. claims of leadership.

Tooze calls the Biden administration a destructive force in the U.N. negotiations to set up a loss and damage fund to ameliorate harm done by climate change. The U.S. is advancing largely non-negotiable positions that are "unacceptable to the vast majority of the rest of the world." This, says Tooze "provokes indignation, a breakdown in trust, deadlock and thus the perpetuation of a disorganized status quo.... In this role, America



U.S. President Joe Biden addresses the nation about the war in Israel and Ukraine from the Oval Office on Thursday. JONATHAN ERNST / POOL VIA THE NEW YORK TIMES

becomes a force that does not hold the world together but blows it apart."

Power alone does not enable leadership. Far more important is how that power is exercised. That doesn't mean that the U.S. must do all the heavy lifting. It must devise new ways to mobilize resources — its own and those of its allies and partners — to create new divisions of labor and responsibility. Facilitating new forms of cooperation will demonstrate leadership of a different type. The U.S. must trust its allies to act on behalf of shared interests. In Ukraine, the Biden administration has shown a capacity to lead and to innovate the ways of doing so.

Above all, the U.S. must learn the limits of

power. America must be able to discriminate among its interests even as they are global in scope. The U.S. must learn to get out of the way when other nations devise solutions to big problems. It must ensure that it does not contribute to instability.

A Hippocratic oath of diplomacy should guide the U.S. First, do no harm.

Brad Glosserman is deputy director of and visiting professor at the Center for Rule-Making Strategies at Tama University as well as senior adviser (nonresident) at Pacific Forum. He is the author of "Peak Japan: The End of Great Ambitions" (Georgetown University Press, 2019).