FRS – Japan Program

Challenges and global answers for Japan's post-Covid-19 security strategy

Interview with Hideshi Tokuchi

Professor Hideshi Tokuchi joined the Defense Agency (the predecessor of the Ministry of Defense) of Japan in 1979 and served as Japan's first-ever Vice-Minister of Defense for International Affairs from 2014 to 2015 after completing several senior assignments including the Director-General of four bureaus: Operations; Personnel and Education; Finance and Equipment; and Defense Policy.
He is the President of the Research Institute for Peace and Security (RIPS) and teaches international security studies as a visiting professor at the National Graduate Institute for Policy Studies (GRIPS).

Question 1: Covid-19 has been a dramatic health challenge to the world but also a challenge to multilateralism. In your view, are existing multilateral institutions still relevant to deal with global issues?

Pandemic is a human security issue. It is almost a *cliché* to tell that no one is safe unless everyone is safe. Likewise, no single country is safe unless every country is safe. The national interests of all countries must overlap on this point. Multilateral approaches with international institutions must work to address such global issues, but international institutions are inter-state organizations after all. It is not a panacea.

The outbreak of Covid-19 has made two facts clearer. First, international institutions such as the World Health Organization (WHO) are under strong influence of great power rivalry. Providing accurate and fresh information and data is an important role of the WHO in combating pandemics, but it failed to meet this requirement. The delay in declaring the emergency and the pandemic, the failure to search for the origin of the novel coronavirus, and the refusal to grant an observer status to Taiwan, which had successfully contained Covid-19, showed China's strong influence on the WHO. In addition, former US President Donald Trump disparaged the WHO and even declared the US withdrawal from it when

empowerment of the WHO was seriously needed.

Secondly, the role of sovereign states has been recognized anew. Major actions to respond to the pandemic such as tightening national borders, conducting threshold policy measures at seaports and airports, and rehabilitating economy are basically taken by individual sovereign states.

There is a limit in the power of international institutions, including the WHO. It is an inescapable fact because all countries try to use international institutions to promote their national interests rather than global interests and because the international community is made of independent political units.

However, we should be careful not to generalize the example of the WHO too easily. International institutions remain an important instrument for global cooperation. It would be almost impossible to imagine a world without the UN, the IBRD, the UNHCR, the FAO, and the ICAO today. They provide valuable venues for diplomatic and practical coordination. Coordination may or may not work, but it all depends on how proactive the member states are on working together in good faith. International organizations are not to lead but to be led. They are where both power play and cooperation take place.

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Question 2: Can China be a reliable and relevant partner on global issues like health or climate change?

Countries in the Western world, including the United States, France, the United Kingdom, Germany, Australia, and Japan, have been trying to maintain and strengthen the rules-based international order, which brings them peace and prosperity. It is basically a Western idea, reflecting the domestic political system of Western democracy in the international arena and centering on the principle of the rule of law.

Meanwhile, China has a different world view. It pursues a China-centered hierarchical system of international relations. China does not have a democratic political system based on the principle of division of power. Instead, it pursues "socialism with Chinese characteristics", trying to maintain the Communist Party's monopoly of power. It is reflected in China's behaviors in the international community.

Different world views cause frictions and instability. Relations with China have to be carefully managed for the differences not to develop into conflicts. Therefore, a crisis management system must be established in relation with China. Efforts to build confidence are indispensable. Areas where interests of the Western world overlap with those of China must be identified and broadened, but it is easier said than done.

Non-traditional security challenges such as natural disasters, piracy and infectious diseases are usually considered to be areas where international cooperation is relatively easy. It is no longer the case today. The great power rivalry has no limits. It has even been accelerated by the Covid-19 pandemic. China's assertive activities using its military might in the Indo-Pacific and

economic instruments, including masks and medical gears, in a number of places in the world have been continuing even as the entire world suffers from the pandemic. Meanwhile, China has lost its international reputation due to its abuse of human rights and oppression of democratic movements in Hong Kong and pressure on Taiwan. Taiwan continues to be denied an observer status in the WHO because of China's refusal.

In response, the US continues to be tough on China even after the Trump administration left the White House. More countries are becoming tough on China today. In the past, the two-track approach of economic dependence on China and dependence on the United States for national security could have been possible, but as China uses its economic instruments for political purposes, it has become more difficult to take such an approach. More countries will have to make a difficult choice between the two sides.

While China will continue to look like an attractive business partner, the world is reminded in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic that overreliance on China for supply chains is risky. Even in addressing climate change, China is not considered to be a reliable partner. It controls much of the global processing capacity for many of the materials used in key technologies for renewable energy, for example polysilicon for solar panels. The more dependent the rest of the world becomes on China for these materials, the more vulnerable they may be to China's economic statecraft.

The issue of intellectual property rights violation also erodes China's international reputation. China should become a reliable partner for global issues because those issues are issues for Beijing as well, but the

level of confidence toward China is becoming lower and lower.

Question 3: Is there a significant and specific role to play in a post-Covid world for middle powers like Japan or "different" powers like the European Union?

Due to the almost two-year long Covid-19 pandemic, the international flow of travelers, goods and materials is still restricted, but the world is more connected and globalized particularly through the cyber space. The shift is much faster than in previous years. It means that sparks from a small fire somewhere in a corner of the world will more easily leap to another place.

The United States was supposed to be a global firefighter, but its leadership role in the world and the world's confidence in Washington was deeply undermined during the Trump Administration. The Biden Administration has been rapidly trying to fix this, reengaged in world affairs, but there remains uncertainty about the United States' resilience, particularly because the American society is more divided than ever.

Other powers such as the European Union, its member states and Japan must not be reactive to the Americans. They must be more proactive. Working together, they must keep the United States engaged in the efforts to maintain and strengthen the rules-based liberal international order. They must cooperate in a number of areas, including maritime security, cyber security, space security and climate security. As the space is limited, this interview concludes with a few examples related to maritime security cooperation.

As the sea is one and all of us are connected by the sea, the rule to govern the sea must

be also one. Any negative and unilateral efforts to try to alter the *status quo* by force or coercion should be addressed together. China's maritime expansion has not stopped even during the spread of the novel coronavirus. Such assertiveness is increasing the risk of confrontation with maritime powers such as the United States and Japan in the region. The maritime balance of power in the Indo-Pacific is being tilted toward the Chinese side. In the meantime, the European Union, including France, is increasingly interested in the peace and prosperity of the Indo-Pacific. Capitalizing on the present momentum, those European countries and Indo-Pacific regional countries such as Japan should cooperate more for the maritime security of the Indo-Pacific. The *La Perouse* joint naval exercise 2021 epitomizes such efforts.

Maritime security is relevant to cyber security as well because most of international data communications are conducted through underwater cables, the security of which is critically important for safe and secure use of cyber space in the post-Covid age.

The Arctic will be of mutual interest as well. The Indo-Pacific and the Atlantic ocean are connected by the Arctic, and they will be probably more so in the future because of climate change. Meanwhile, the Arctic region is becoming a new ground for great power rivalry, including the United States, China, Russia, even India. The Europeans and the Japanese should discuss and act together for maritime security in the Arctic as well.

The European Union, its member states and Japan can and should do a lot more together to make the rules-based liberal international order robust, encouraging the US to reengage. Japan's security cooperation with the Europeans will be a major agenda item in the review work of the Japanese National Security Strategy in the coming months. An articulate guideline for cooperation toward a better future is much expected.

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