

How the National Character of the Japanese People Negatively Impacts Diplomacy and National Defense

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I first set foot in Japan in December 1971, approximately 44 years ago. Since then I have spent 85% of my time in Japan, amounting to more than 60% of my entire life, something I could never have imagined at that time.

Occasionally I am asked what I like best about Japan. I love so many things about Japan that I cannot list them all, including its climate, natural features, food, ease of living, and clean environment. But after carefully considering this question, I concluded that what I like best are the Japanese people. In other words, I believe the national character of the Japanese people is the most appealing feature of the country of Japan.

I will list some key words that come to mind to describe the national character of the Japanese people. Please forgive me for choosing some words with overlapping meanings.

Diligence, sincerity, honesty, high integrity, hardworking, amiable, kindness, consideration for others, spirit of cooperation, sense of obligation to others, modesty, courtesy, perseverance, graciousness, introspective, sense of shame, methodical, polite, fastidious, hospitality, punctual, keep promises, don't tell lies, trustworthy, dislike of conflict, don't cause trouble for others, ability to read the situation, cleanliness, etc.

I know that there are great differences among individuals and I can picture several celebrities and acquaintances to whom not one of these words applies. These people may possess Japanese citizenship, but I hesitate to acknowledge them as Japanese people. I can get along with them as acquaintances, but not as friends.

The Japanese national character should be a source of pride throughout the world. As a matter of fact, actions by Japanese people are repeatedly praised overseas. For instance, what happened at the FIFA World Cup Brazil in June 2014 was reported with surprise around the world.

When their favorite team loses at the World Cup or other major competition, soccer fans across the globe feel anger, grief, sorrow, and frustration, which can lead to unpredictable behavior. It is not unusual for these fans to set off explosives, overturn cars, break show windows, and set stores on fire.

This is common wisdom in the world of soccer. However, an unexpected incident took place right after the Japanese team lost its important first match at the World Cup Brazil. While feeling the sting of Japan's defeat, and after praising the strenuous efforts of the Japanese team, the Japanese fans in the stadium all began picking up the garbage left on the seats.

Some Japanese fans even went to the opposing team's stands and collected garbage there. I'm sure people across the world were at first unable to understand what was happening when they saw this on TV. Once they realized what was going on, they must have been shocked because the scene being played out before their eyes was unimaginable based on their common wisdom.

I heard this news on the American Forces Network (AFN) radio, and just like people all over the world I was very surprised. I immediately telephoned a Japanese friend and excitedly said, "Is this story true? If so, that's amazing!"

My friend quickly searched the internet for the true story and said, "Yes, that's what happened, but what's so amazing? That's normal for Japanese people." I was very disappointed to realize that I, who pride myself on having lived in Japan for nearly 40 years, had yet to grasp even the "normal" moral fiber of the Japanese people.

The world was also amazed by and highly praised the calm actions of the Japanese people after the Great East Japan Earthquake. For example, all of the trains in Tokyo had stopped running. The people calmly sitting on the train station stairways waiting for operations to resume were considerate enough to leave enough aisle space for other people to pass.

More than five million people in the Tokyo metropolitan area were unable to return home because public transportation was at a standstill. Many people chose to walk home, but there was no angry fighting to be heard and the long lines moved forward silently. Restaurants, convenience stores, and other facilities on the main roads allowed people to rest and use their toilets for free. These were all voluntary acts, not based on instructions or orders from anyone.

The people who lost their families and homes in the earthquake and tsunami still acted with composure in the evacuation shelters. They shared water and food with other people, and sometimes gave up their positions in line. No rioting or looting occurred. The Japan Self-Defense Forces (JSDF) were ordered to perform aid, search, and restoration activities. The JSDF members executed their duties with fierce dedication, which inspired gratitude and respect among the residents. I felt that this perfectly exemplified the Japanese people and Japan.

Prime Minister Shinzo Abe recently released a statement on the 70th anniversary of the end of World War II. The American National Security Council (NSC) responded with a statement in which spokesperson Ned Price said, “For 70 years Japan has demonstrated an abiding commitment to peace, democracy, and the rule of law. This record stands as a model for nations everywhere.” I completely agree.

Some people enjoy using the phrase “global standard.” In many cases, it seems they want to point out that Japan is lagging behind the rest of the world. I actually felt the same way for a time. However, Japanese people have long maintained the global standard at an overwhelmingly high level in spiritual aspects such as good order, moral sense, and consideration for others. I do not know of any other ethnic group that has a spiritual nature exceeding Japan’s.

Japan has a national character that is so wonderful – compassionate, highly cooperative, and considerate of other people – one might think it is ingrained in the DNA of the people. That is why I say that the Japanese people are the best thing about Japan. At some point the phrase “*kūki wo yomu*” (“reading the situation” or “sensing the atmosphere”) came into vogue. The biggest strength of the Japanese people is their ability to skillfully sense the feelings of other people and take action anticipating them.

However, unfortunately the reality of this world is a cruel one. This national character of reading a situation, of which Japanese people should be proud, is the biggest obstacle in the field of diplomacy, including military affairs.

Diplomacy involves negotiations between people of differing ethnicities with entirely different languages, customs, cultures, and values. It is dangerous to bring in values that are only accepted between Japanese people. The phrase “international community” sounds good, but it is in fact an assembly of uncivilized, selfish, egoistic people. They do not sense the atmosphere but rather forge ahead in their own ways. For that reason, the virtue, modesty, and grace of the Japanese people backfire spectacularly.

For instance, Japanese people abhor lies, but diplomacy is a world of lying and maneuvering. Japanese people also hate underhanded tactics, but in the international community these tactics – including spying, stratagems, bribery, seductive techniques, treachery, and coercion – are used as a matter of course.

Japanese people also believe they must someday return favors from other people. But upon receiving a favor, the majority of people in this world demand another one. In other words, the global standard in diplomacy is returning favors with enmity and viewing honest people as fools.

Even when Japanese people wish to have open, aboveboard discussions, it may be the case that hostile forces are already taking part in dodgy dealings. Moreover, it is especially irritating that these hostile powers may be people who possess Japanese citizenship (who I do not want to refer to as “Japanese people”) and people of Japanese descent living in other countries.

The so-called “comfort women” issue has been brought up at the United Nations (UN) Commission on Human Rights, and Radhika Coomaraswamy submitted a report on this topic that is full of errors. This is the result of lobbying by the Japan Federation of Bar Associations at the UN in full contempt of Japan. In addition, a resolution criticizing Japan was passed by the United States House of Representatives because Representative Mike Honda, an American of Japanese descent, doggedly engineered a majority with support from the Global Alliance for Preserving the History of WWII in Asia, a propaganda organization directly connected to the Chinese Communist Party.

Japanese people may believe that experts in human rights and racial discrimination issues are “defenders of justice,” but that is a fantasy. It would not be surprising to find that they actually consist of white people who feel they are members of a “chosen race” and minorities pleading for special privileges through “reverse discrimination.” This is the reality of the international community, starting with the UN.

If Japanese politicians and diplomats lack a sufficient awareness of this reality and conduct diplomacy based on the Japanese common understanding that assumes human nature is fundamentally good, Japan’s national interests will certainly be harmed in the end. An example from recent years is how the People’s Republic of China and South Korea continue to complain about Japan’s understanding of history and to make multiple demands for apologies. There is absolutely no need for Japan to apologize since all of these claims are false, including the Nanking Massacre and allegations that comfort women were forcibly recruited by the Japanese military on the Korean Peninsula.

Japanese people are quick to bow their heads on the assumption that “apologizing will assuage the feelings of the other party.” Persons that can skillfully use this method to resolve conflicts are highly regarded by the Japanese as “people of character” or “mature adults.” Yet this common knowledge only works among Japanese people, who have a culture of mutual sympathy for the feelings of others.

In China and South Korea, countries where Confucian philosophy is accepted, making an apology is an act of acknowledgement of one’s own wrongdoing, and the person apologizing is thereby confirmed as the party at fault. If Japanese people offer a simplistic apology with the intention of easily resolving a conflict with the other party, their position as the party at fault is set in cement even if they have not done anything wrong. Apologies inflame the immature popular sentiment in China and South Korea, thereby adding

fuel to the fire. The cumulative result is the current state of Japan-China and Japan-South Korea relations.

Incidentally, Japanese people wish for historical truths to be absolute, but from the outset Chinese and South Korean people do not care whether their assertions are historical truths or not. Chinese people feel that, to promote the legitimacy of a new dynasty, it does not matter if the claims repudiating the old dynasty are all false or not. And since the Korean Peninsula is dependent upon China, it has no choice but to go along with the lies of the new dynasty on the continent.

For that reason, Chinese and South Koreans feel no guilt in spewing makeshift lies to suit their own convenience. If something is revealed to be a lie, they are not perturbed. Instead they work to cover up and solidify these lies with further lies. The Japanese people are honest and cannot fathom this mentality. When Chinese and South Koreans use the phrase “historical awareness,” they are demanding that Japanese people act in the same way.

If generations of prime ministers have made simplistic apologies to China and South Korea without understanding the historical background and national characteristics involved, then their actions resulted from insufficient research. And if they were aware of these things yet still apologized, they should be denounced for purposefully acting in a way that harmed Japan’s national interests and benefitted its enemies. In either case, Japan’s diplomacy in which it apologizes and prostrates itself, which Japan has viewed as correct since the end of World War II, is the worst sort of error and should not be repeated again.

Next I will discuss the calamity of the Greater East Asian War, which is the most grievous example of how the Japanese national character harmed its national interests.

First, there are many citizens in both Japan and the U.S. who believe the war between the two nations began with a “brazen sneak attack” by the Japanese Navy on Pearl Harbor. However, there are several errors in this commonly accepted theory, which I will explain in order.

First, the attack on Pearl Harbor took place on the morning of December 7, 1941 (Hawaii time). An order to freeze the assets of Japanese people in the U.S. was put in place in July of that year, and a complete oil embargo was placed on Japan in August. Meanwhile, President Franklin D. Roosevelt continually gave aid to Nationalist China via several channels through Southeast Asia, collectively called the “Enshō Route.” In addition, he approved a secret aviation force called the “Flying Tigers,” which was disguised as a volunteer army of ex-servicemen and sent to the Asian region before the start of the war between the U.S. and Japan.

In other words, the U.S. violated international law, which must be obeyed by neutral powers in a dispute, and made steady preparations to open hostilities with Japan. The “total oil embargo” imposed was a hostile act comprising a “preemptive strike without armed might” by the U.S. on Japan. The attack on Pearl Harbor was a counterattack to this.

Second, Japan faithfully sent a declaration of war to the U.S., although its arrival was delayed because of a blunder by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA); Japan did not act in an underhanded way. The U.S. took advantage of this mistake in domestic propaganda with the slogan, “Remember Pearl Harbor.” It is ridiculous that the Japanese side unquestioningly believes this propaganda aimed at American people.

Third, the U.S. had already decrypted all of the Japanese codes before the start of the war and knew ahead of time about the timing and Combined Fleet’s configuration for the attack on Pearl Harbor. In other words, Japan had already been thoroughly defeated in information warfare before the war began, but it seems that Japan is not making use of this lesson today. The prevailing view of the past was that the U.S. had only deciphered the MOFA’s code, but research from recent years shows that it had also decrypted the Japanese Navy’s codes before the outbreak of war.

The preemptive strike by the Japanese military was brought about because no information was given to the U.S. Navy forces at Pearl Harbor (only the aircraft carriers were moved to safety on the pretext of an exercise), and through the sacrifice by their own country of American soldiers. This is not conspiracy theory; these are historical facts determined based on public evidence. In other words, the underhanded party was the U.S. led by President Roosevelt, not Japan.

Japanese people are given to self-examination, so when reproached by others they tend to start proactively looking for their own bad qualities. When they find even a small fault, they tend to overreact. In the postwar period, this self-reflective Japanese national character was successfully leveraged through the War Guilt Information Program (WGIP), which brainwashed the people to implant in them a sense of atonement for the war. It seems that some people believe the U.S. had no choice but to drop the atomic bombs as retribution for the underhanded attack on Pearl Harbor, but that is an entirely incorrect interpretation.

From the beginning, Roosevelt had absolutely no intention of holding peace talks with Japan. He was only thinking of how to make Japan strike the first blow so that the U.S. could be drawn into World War II. His strategy was to present the prideful Japanese people with the “Hull Note,” which included content that could not conceivably be accepted, compelling Japan to leave the peace negotiation table and conduct a preemptive attack. Everything went according to his scenario.

Congressional approval is required in advance before issuing an ultimatum to another country, yet Roosevelt willfully decided to present the Hull Note, a de facto ultimatum, without going through Congress. In addition to regular American citizens, the members of the Senate and House of Representatives were not made aware of the Hull Note until the war was over.

Representative Hamilton Fish III, a Republican, was a prominent opponent of the war but he believed that Japan had suddenly attacked Pearl Harbor even though it was in the middle of peace negotiations with the U.S. This belief inspired his memorable speech to Congress in which he abandoned his anti-war stance and voiced support for U.S. participation in the war.

After the war when Fish learned about the sequence of negotiations that led up to the beginning of the war between Japan and

the U.S., he came to understand that Roosevelt was in fact the ringleader in intentionally bringing about war with Japan. Roosevelt died before the end of the war, but Fish was ashamed of the speech he had given to Congress and continued saying he could not forgive Roosevelt.

Moreover, Harry Dexter White, the senior U.S. Treasury Department official who wrote the draft of the Hull Note, was a Soviet spy who was closely connected to Comintern. When this was revealed after the war, White committed suicide before he could be detained.

The “Red Scare” was a movement implemented beginning in 1950 to eradicate Communism, in which Senator Joseph McCarthy played a central role. He earned animosity for his overbearing methods and was finally punished with an official reprimand from the Senate, by which he lost standing. This led to his demise.

After the Cold War ended, the Venona Project (a project to decrypt messages) was declassified in 1995, revealing coded Soviet communications including those from during the war. This made it clear that Soviet espionage was conducted on an even greater scale than McCarthy had estimated.

In addition to the U.S., many Soviet spies had also infiltrated the central echelons of the Japanese government and army. There were many communists near the Fumimaro Konoe Cabinet, and some people even theorize that Konoe himself was a communist. In the end, it is highly possible that both Japan and the U.S. were successfully manipulated according to a large-scale plot of Joseph Stalin and fought unnecessary wars.

Regarding Soviet plots against Japan, a fascinating new theory says the 1928 “Huanggutun Incident” was actually carried out by the Soviet secret service but made to look like the work of the Kwantung Army. Unfortunately I cannot read the primary sources in Russian, but I look forward to the results of further research on this topic.

Japanese people are susceptible to plots, stratagems, and information warfare precisely because they are honest and have integrity. Accordingly, most Japanese people still have masochistic views of history. Classified documents that have been released after the war, like those from the U.S. and the Soviet Union, are a treasure trove of truths that were concealed during the war. Japan should study these in detail and discuss them freely.

Japanese people can outgrow their self-tormenting historical views if true interpretations of modern history are made common knowledge. In that way, Japan as a nation can certainly rise to a higher stage in various fields like diplomacy and national defense. As an American who regards Japan as my second home country, I sincerely hope that day comes as soon as possible.