

Background Research  
Gates Forum I

A Reliable Friend and Strategic  
Partner in the Indo-Pacific Region:  
Japan's Strategic Communications  
and Public Diplomacy

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# Executive Summary

## Japan's Strengths in Alliance with the US

- Tokyo and Washington are in policy alignment with regard to Chinese unilateral intentions to create a Sino-centric order in the East China Sea and South China Sea.
- Both democratic capitals perceive China as a hegemonic threat to the rules-based order and universal values (democracy, freedom, human rights) that form the foundation of US-Japan relations.
- Shinzo Abe's legacy vision of a Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP), along with regional Japan-led initiatives like the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue ("The Quad"), are designed to serve as both a security counterbalance to China's military activities in the South China Sea and to offer a regional aspirational alternative to ambivalent ASEAN states.
- The Japan-US Alliance remains unshakeable, reinforced by quadrilateral cooperation among "The Quad" (Japan, US, Australia, and India).
- Official development assistance (ODA) & multilateralism leadership

## Japan's Strengths on Its Own

- Global goodwill and a high degree of trust are advantages over China.
- Japan enjoys cultural superpower status.
- Japan's *Toitsu* 統 unity in purpose that characterizes the country in response to natural disasters is a strength of national character, with applications for building a strategic communications response to international crises.
- Japan invests heavily in Southeast Asia to promote intra-regional economic integration and strategic autonomy when ASEAN makes choices involving China.
- Japan is a trusted bilateral partner to the United States and the most trusted extra-regional nation in Southeast Asia.

- Japan's diplomacy advantage is listening. As Fumio Kishida, Japan's Prime Minister, has stated, "The key to diplomacy is to listen to what the other person has to say first. Everything starts from there. You must not push your ideas onto the other country. If you do, the other side will not accept them."
- Japan seeks to be a rising role model in Asia in rule-making and maintaining order, as a means to move away from its reputation as strictly a US surrogate country.
- Japan's closeness with India translates into a common concern about China's growing military presence in the region and the concomitant pressure to maintain peace and security.
- Japan is growing as a "third option" (neither the US nor China) for Southeast Asians who view Japan as somewhat removed from great power competition that forces choosing sides.
- Since the majority of Southeast Asian publics do not wish to be part of an ideological battleground between China and the US, this offers Japan the opportunity to build a strategic communications profile distinct from the US.

## Japan's Weaknesses

- A new National Security Strategy is still on the drawing table.
- Japan's lack of a formalized national security apparatus until this century delayed the application of strategic communications to policy goals and forces a catch-up strategy.
- The lack of a strong political will or political participation in Japan makes strategic communications much less visible than in the US, where there is a 20-year precedent associated with post-9/11 actions.
- Japan's public diplomacy and strategic communications (PD/SC) is conservative, controlled, and centered in Tokyo. Unlike Washington, which has advocated for more integration of purpose by agency and personnel,

Japan maintains a traditional one-way PR “push posture” with both domestic and foreign publics, as opposed to an interactive, two-way model that seeks feedback and employs iterative and summative evaluation.

- Japan puts the command—not the audience—at the center of narrative crafting.
- Japan favors policy messaging over policy actions, which keeps Japan as the much weaker partner to the US in PD/SC.
- Japan’s public affairs and global media relations apparatus pales in comparison to the US. The recent Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD8) in Tunisia received minimal publicity, due in part to low interaction by Japan state actors with foreign press.
- In contrast to the US, Japan’s attitude is that “good deeds speak for themselves” and need no extra messaging.
- NHK is no CGTN—Japan’s state-sponsored global broadcasting is weak compared to competitors.
- Japan lacks an educational foundation in public relations, marketing, and communications—its institutions of higher education tend not to offer these as a major course of study, only some coursework on the subject..
- There has been a gradual decline of foreign press presence in Japan and government-press relations.
- Japan’s relationship-building and networking overall lags in comparison to its G7 peers.
- A poor digital media presence in English hampers Japan’s global outreach efforts; many sites are not available in English.
- Significant gaps exist in Japan’s leadership on gender and global higher education.

### Opportunities for Japan

- Japan’s goodwill reputation in Southeast Asia creates opportunities for more collaboration: Japan could improve its strategic partnership ties

with Vietnam through more investment in Vietnam’s ten-year socio-economic goals.

- Japan’s international cooperation agenda and reputation through an agency like JICA creates enormous potential for a stronger PD/SC mission.
- Japan-India common concerns over regional security create opportunities to engage in SC collaboration involving development and economic security.
- Japan can tap into its goodwill through allowing allied actors, including sympathetic media outlets, to advocate on the primary source’s behalf. This is much more likely to enhance credibility if a third-party actor is involved.
- Japan can also tap into the Japanese public’s support for the UN system and multilateral relations.

### Threats to Japan

- China’s global media presence continues to increase in sync with China’s global rise.
- Growing fears of a US-China geopolitical rivalry and possible violent confrontation, accidental or otherwise, has a spillover effect in Japan due to its close relationship with the United States.
- There is a notable dearth of intellectual exchanges and cultural engagements between Japan and other countries, compared to great power competitors like China. So long as Japan (and the US) continue to view the international exchange of persons as more of a resume enhancer and individual life changer, China will continue to have an enormous advantage over them. This is coupled with a perception of cultural insularity: do Japan’s people care about what is happening globally?
- Japan’s careful avoidance of its wartime history hampers the improvement of relations today.

### Recommendations for Japan and the US

- Japan needs to have a national discourse strategy with its own people to explain policy changes in response to the defiance of the

international order from regional neighbors Russia, China, and North Korea.

- Japan's popular narrative of a post-WWII pacifist country no longer applies in light of international instability that mandates doubling of defense budget increases and a NATO partnership upgrade.
- Tokyo should engage with global publics generally and Indo-Pacific publics specifically to make the case for US-Japan leadership in the region as a trusted and counterbalanced economic security partner to offset China's economic and security ambitions as well as threats from the North Korean and Russian regimes.
- The US and Japan together and separately need to practice more active listening, not just repeat declarations ("lecturing") about universal and democratic values.

- Prioritizing stronger economic ties with target nations, particularly in Southeast Asia, will do more to persuade publics than security goals alone.
- Both the US and Japan need to show more care for the needs and wants of foreign and domestic publics to move PD/SC away from the policy elites and intellectual realm.
- Japan should put the audience—not the command—at the center of narrative crafting.
- Narrative framing (i.e., storytelling) should be made a higher priority in the government, higher education, and public affairs. Issues don't market policies effectively, only the stories about those policies.

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# Japan's Strategic Communications

There is no relationship like that between the US and Japan which lends itself better to an opportunity for a more synchronized approach to strategic communications (SC). However, Japan's geostrategic and political imperative for pursuing a more active SC has evolved slowly in the last two decades and has not reached the level of conscious awareness that it has in the United States. "Strategic communications" is not only a different word in Japan, but its practice and study are a new frontier in an almost exclusive domain of the Self Defense Force (SDF). The term Strat Com, commonly employed by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the United States, has an altogether different connotation in Japan. In Japan, Strat Com refers to the United States Strategic Command (USSTRATCOM). Defense circles in Japan use the abbreviation "SC" to refer to strategic communications.

Two events drove Japan's awakening in the twenty-first century for a National Security Strategy and National Security Council: 9/11 in the United States and the triple disaster in Tohoku, Japan known as March 11 (3/11). On 9/11, there was no National Security Council counterpart to Washington in Tokyo, and Japan felt vulnerable to violent attacks from extremists. Japan had no named Ministry of Defense until 2007. Before then, it was called the Japan Defense Agency, a diminutive title for an agency that represented 250,000 SDF personnel consisting of air, maritime, and naval self-defense forces. Japan's National Security Council was finally formulated on December 4, 2013, one year after Shinzo Abe assumed his second term as Prime Minister and over a decade after 9/11.

Within Japan's SC circles, Prime Minister Abe's second term as prime minister (2012-2020) is viewed in the context of a strategic communications rise, due to the overlap with the creation of Japan's national security infrastructure. Abe utilized global outreach better than any of his predecessors. He was a proactive but controversial driver in shaping Japan's revisionist grand narrative who used a small, talented team of overseas-trained Japanese to amplify his vision to the world. Abe's speechwriter, Tomohiko Taniguchi, a former journalist turned strategic communications expert, was always by Abe's side, as Karl Rove was to George W. Bush. Taniguchi shared Abe's strategic vision and added new ideas to Abe's speeches. This hybrid nature, of Mr. Abe's political will and Taniguchi's skill in strategic communications, has not been replicated in the subsequent Suga and Kishida administrations.

The US has always taken the lead in defining Japan's strategic communications through its efforts to increase Japan's security responsibilities in the Greater Asia region. First, in Afghanistan, the Obama administration and NATO called on the SDF for capacity-building, following the US-led surge operation in Afghanistan. After 3/11 and the success of Operation Tomodachi to help restore the damaged Tohoku area, Obama initiated the "Pivot to East Asia" that included strengthening relations with not only bilateral security partners like Japan but also emerging powers like China. The US called on Japan to step up its defense engagement, not only in Northeast Asia but also toward ASEAN countries and the Indo-Pacific region (e.g., India), while also supporting US efforts in the Middle East and with official development assistance (ODA).

Japan's response to US pressure was to streamline a seamless strategic response across a wide swath of the government, from the four-minister level (Prime Minister, Cabinet Secretary, Minister of Defense, Minister of Foreign Affairs) at the top down to the Japanese Coast Guard, transportation, police and defense personnel. This was a natural adaptation to the needs of the multilateral security operations that necessitated strategic communications. Adding SC to an operation changed the level of urgency; strategy referred to military but also took on a meaning of "very important" or "critical importance." Strategic communications in Japan is therefore not limited to military discourse but also refers to critical messages to be sent.

A strategic communications narrative is not coordinated closely with university partners or think tanks in Tokyo, in contrast to Washington. Japan's emphasis is elite-directed and elite-targeted, centralized in Tokyo among a few state actors and alphabet agencies of the government: the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA), the Prime Minister's Office (PMO), the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT), the Ministry of Defense (MOD), and the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI). Outside of the MOD, SC is a much lesser-known and practiced concept in Japan, with a few exceptions. One is the Graduate School of Public Policy at the University of Tokyo (Aoi, 2017) that announced the establishment of a Strategic Communications Education and Research Unit in July 2022 (University of Tokyo, 2022). This new unit adopted a NATO Strategic Communications Center of Excellence definition (2020) of strategic communications based on "[a] holistic approach to communication based on values

and interests that encompasses everything an actor does to achieve objectives in a contested environment” (Aoi, 2021, pp. 2-3).

Japan’s greatest SC challenge is domestic. The government is reluctant to explain the need for more defense expenditures and shared military responsibility to a public beholden to the pacifist image and peace brand of postwar Japan. As Associated Press (AP) reporter Mari Yamaguchi (2021) observed: “It’s not an easy sell. In a nation still reviled by many of its neighbors for its past military actions, and where domestic pacifism runs high, any military buildup is controversial. Japan has focused on its defensive capabilities and carefully avoids using the word ‘military’ for its troops. But as it looks to defend its territorial and military interests against an assertive China, North Korea and Russia, officials in Tokyo are pushing citizens to put aside widespread unease over a more robust role for the military and support increased defense spending.”

## Japan’s Public Diplomacy

Japan’s public diplomacy could benefit more from what it is well known for in the classroom and in the workplace: active listening. In Japanese society, from K-12 through higher education to the workplace and in everyday communication, the premium norm is to listen before speaking. The *sensei* (“a teacher”) is perceived as all-knowing and the *senpai* (“senior”) is deferred to by the *kohai* (“junior”), even if the age difference is one day. As a high-context, communicative culture when compared to the low-context culture of the US, Japan relies more on nonverbal cues to relay messages, intentions, feelings and information. In the Buddhist and Shinto traditions, silence is seen as a virtue. Members of your own group do not need words to communicate; you know each other intuitively. In a Japanese context, using many words to explain is a sign that you are communicating with someone from outside your group. Your ability to hold your tongue from lashing out repressed emotions symbolizes having a sense of the divine and respecting others. Japan’s domestic culture advantages fewer words and silence as powerful forms of communication, but these are a disadvantage internationally. Competitive public diplomacy places a premium on listening that leads to effective advocacy of policies.

Westerners often find themselves on the short end of the negotiating stick because they emphasize declarative statements and speak first and often in order to advantage their position in negotiations. The Asian states, to varying degrees, frown upon coming to conclusions too early before the relationship has been established and secured. This is why listening closely to a proposal is highly valued, and an absolutist response to that proposal is avoided. Where this becomes problematic is when one considers the second approach that nation-state actors use to engage foreign publics: advocacy. Advocacy is especially difficult for the conflict-avoiding, risk-averse Japanese and places them in a disadvantaged public diplomacy position to China, whose culture is more extroverted and accepting of risk than Japan.

## Advocacy

According to Cull (2019, p. 4), advocacy refers to “an actor’s attempt to manage the international environment by presenting a particular policy, idea or the actor’s general interest to a foreign public.” By definition it is proactive, not reactive, and its products include social media outreach, embassy press relations, and press briefings to foreign journalists. One example is the Foreign Press Center Japan (FPCJ)<sup>1</sup> that was founded in 1976, when Japan was garnering global appeal for its economic miracle. Today, key Government of Japan ministries and agencies—PMO, MOD, MOFA, METI, and Tokyo Metropolitan Government—advocate their policies to the “375 reporters affiliated with 132 media organizations from 25 countries and regions working in Japan to transmit news from Japan to the world” (FPCJ brochure).

There are major challenges facing the advocacy element of Japan’s public diplomacy. One is that the scarcity of in-country members of the foreign press leads to few opportunities to strengthen press-government relations. The height of global media interest in Japan came with its economic superpower days. Today’s digital media world doesn’t require a journalist to be stationed in-country, and members of the foreign press who do not speak Japanese have concerns about getting access to sources who may not be bilingual. While fewer Western media are coming to cover Japan, countries in Southeast Asia as well as China and South Korea are sending

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<sup>1</sup> FPCJ Mission Statement: “The FPCJ proactively supports foreign media in order to promote the diversity and accuracy of foreign reporting from Japan. It is also actively engaged in getting valuable information sent out from many different places and fields in Japan to the world. Through these activities, the FPCJ brings “Japan as it really is” to the world, gives in-depth understanding of Japan, and helps create an international society where people respect different cultures and values. It also aims to make a difference to global peace and development.”

more correspondents and launching Japanese language services, as is the case with China.<sup>2</sup>

To address global media gap challenges, the Government of Japan is actively promoting the idea that Tokyo, consistently named among the most popular places to live in the world,<sup>3</sup> also become a Fin City (Financial City) and a Global Media City with CNN International headquarters shifting from Hong Kong to Tokyo (personal communication, Shikata, April 2022).

Coupled with a lack of foreign press in place is the low level of media literacy in government and higher education. Japanese universities do not have public relations and communications as a major course of study, only some coursework on the subject. Employees get assigned to public relations rotations, but with no background in the subject, they often flounder. In media monitoring reports to the government, traditional elite media sources are preferred, almost exclusively from the US, the UK, or Japan. In both listening and advocacy, Japan might consider applying the wisdom of a friend of both Japan and China, Ezra Vogel, who said, “The Chinese have a saying, ‘bystanders can be clearer’ (*pangguanzhe qing*), and the Japanese have made this expression into a Japanese expression as well” (Vogel, 2019, viii). In other words, Japan should not narrow the media landscape to elite media only but rather add bystander media in other parts of the world, including India, Singapore, Australia, Africa, and Latin America.

This tendency to listen to the opinions of elite media at the top also applies to Japanese institutions of higher education. The country has over 700 colleges and universities (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, or MEXT) and yet just a handful of universities that rank in the annual *Times Higher Education* World University Rankings.<sup>4</sup> In 2015, China’s Top 20 in higher education outranked Japan for the first time, five years after China had surpassed Japan’s GDP. Abe’s aim for the internationalization of Japan’s higher education in his second term as prime minister was to move ten Japanese universities into the Top 100 by 2020, an as yet unrealized goal.

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<sup>2</sup> The State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China. Press Release. Xinhua launches Japanese News Service. February 1, 2018. <http://www.scio.gov.cn/32618/Document/1618692/1618692.htm>

<sup>3</sup> The Global Power City Index (GPCI) ranks the major cities of the world according to their “magnetism,” the power to attract people, capital, and enterprises from around the world. It does so through measuring six functions—Economy, Research and Development, Cultural Interaction, Livability, Environment, and Accessibility—providing a multidimensional ranking. Tokyo ranks third, behind London and New York.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings>

## Cultural Diplomacy and Exchanges

Further complicating Japan's ability to compete in global persuasion is that China is the "lodestar" in educational exchange and cultural diplomacy. In 2002, China hosted about 85,000 foreign students. By 2016, that number had increased to over 440,000, according to China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (CSIS, 2017). Meanwhile, Japan hosted 300,000 foreign students in 2019, an increase of 200,000 over two decades (Horie, 2002; JASSO, 2020).

In comparison to Japan, China understands national brand management across the entire political economy, and to that end focuses on person-to-person engagement and exchange diplomacy. China leads the world in elite-to-elite diplomacy (Custer et al., 2018). Before Covid-19, China entertained more visiting dignitaries and its faculty and students traveled more globally, all with an emphasis on building closer ties: China to the world and the world to China. China's sister-city ties have expanded 115 percent since 2000, with 950 sister cities in the Asia-Pacific region, including 337 in Japan (Custe et al., 2018). China has also doubled down on informational diplomacy. Japan has no comparable conceptual paradigm. NHK (the Japan Broadcasting Corporation), which may desire to expand its international and regional reputation, can't compete with China's state-owned media companies that are integrated with China's messaging and targeting of global publics. At the time of Xi Jinping's election to a second presidential term in March 2018, China announced the merger of China Central Television (CCTV), China Radio International, and China National Radio under a single network, China Media Group, also known as "Voice of China," whose purpose includes strengthening international communication and telling good China stories. CNN business writer Steven Jiang (2018) reported about it with the headline, "Beijing has a new propaganda weapon: Voice of China." In this case, the headline was accurate, not sensational. China's full-spectrum approach to information openly engages the world with state-sponsored propaganda media. Free and open societies like Japan and the United States may eschew the propaganda label, but they also have engaged in propaganda campaigns, as the US did to rally public support during World War II.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> This online exhibit of The National Archives in Washington, DC features 11 posters, 2 audio files and a video from a more extensive exhibition that was on view at the National Archives Museum in Washington, DC from May 1994 to

Former president of The Japan Foundation, Kazuo Ogoura (2009) defines cultural diplomacy as “the use of cultural means to enhance a nation’s political influence.” Japan has many cultural touchstones that have gone global, from cherry blossoms and Mount Fuji to Noh theater and more recent Japan House cultural centers in London, Los Angeles, and Sao Paolo. In postwar Japan, Kabuki was performed first in China in 1955.

Cultural diplomacy and cultural and educational exchanges are often used interchangeably in Japan as part of its soft power footprint. Cultural exchange takes on a higher public policy element due to Japan’s decades-long emphasis on internationalization through exchanges.

The Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Program began in 1987 “with the purpose of increasing mutual understanding between the people of Japan and the people of other nations,” but also in response to outside pressure to internationalize and diversify the country and to help Japanese students learn English from native speakers.<sup>6</sup>

It is hard to believe it now, but well into the 1980s and post-Cold War 1990s, Japan was known as an economic giant with a questionable stance in global communication and likeability. A Dutch foreign correspondent in Japan, Karel van Wolferen, referred to Japan as an “enigma power” (1989): “Japan perplexes the world. It has become a major world power, yet it does not behave the way most of the world expects a world power to behave; sometimes it even gives the impression of not wanting to belong to the world at all.” The Tokyo-born Harvard University professor and US Ambassador to Japan (1961-1966) Edwin O. Reischauer said about the Japanese in the 1980s: “The greatest single problem the Japanese face today is their relationship with other peoples...Japan naturally is much admired but is not naturally liked or trusted” (Reischauer, 1988). Sophia University management professor James C. Abegglen (quoted in Wood, 1988) wrote, “Japan urgently needs to change its pattern of interaction with the world, since the consequences of Japan’s past and present

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February 1995. Like the original, this exhibit is divided into two parts, which represent two psychological approaches used in rallying public support for World War II.

<sup>6</sup> See: <https://www.jlfc.org/activities/jet/>.

self-centered behavior are being felt...the passive, receptive role Japan still plays in the international arena is now obsolete, and the burden of change rests with Japan.”

By the late 1980s, the US referred to Japan in terms like “Japan, Inc.” or “Confucian capitalist,” and it was seen as both a competitor and ally to the United States. As Japan’s economic engines slowed in the 1990s and the country began its first “lost decade,” the government of Japan began to shift its policy focus from solely economics to culture. Minister Junichiro Koizumi (2001-2006) established the Council on Promotion of Cultural Diplomacy. In 2002, Douglas McGray published “Japan’s Gross National Cool” in *Foreign Policy* to much fanfare among the bureaucrats in Japan. Now Japan had a hook—culture power—which it thought might help it rise up from economic decline. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs merged international cultural exchange with public relations to create a new Public Diplomacy Department in 2004, and Japan was on its way to creating an infrastructure for public diplomacy and strategic communications.

## International Broadcasting: The Weakest Link

It is well accepted that news and international broadcasting are major elements of public diplomacy and strategic communications. NHK is Japan’s flagship international broadcaster, but it has a very small footprint in the world, with so little global name recognition that it elected to rebrand its “NHK World” name to “NHK World-Japan.” As a public broadcaster, it models itself after the BBC, but it has increasingly been overshadowed by China’s broadcasting ventures (Snow, 2019; Kaori, 2014; Seaton, 2017; Yamamoto, 2013).

The United States is the leading country in the world in the manufacturing and management of public diplomacy and strategic communications (SC). Japan is a soft power cultural superpower, but a weaker link in presenting and managing its global story (Snow, 2020). A major contributing factor to Japan’s global communications challenges is that the country is a victim of its own economic success. As Japanologist Alex Kerr (2001, p. 348) says, “For forty years after the war, Japan was not only ‘Number One in Asia,’ it was the ‘Only One.’” A historically ‘Only One’ nation does not have a sense of urgency about mastering the dominant shared language of commerce, diplomacy, social media, and higher education. In addition, an ‘Only One’ or former ‘Only One’ with a contested history in the Asia-Pacific and Indo-Pacific regions will have more challenges in figuring out an audience-first

proactive narrative. Japan's policy advocacy often messages from the perspective of its own narrative, not the interests of its target audience. A case in point is the disputed islands. There is no global public caring about the Senkaku Islands, but Shinzo Abe made the disputed islands a feature of his storyline about Japan's relations in the region. Today, much time and attention is still paid to the strategic significance of the Senkaku Islands, illustrated by one of the most well-presented web pages of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Situation of the Senkaku Islands | Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan). Far right-leaning media often cover the islands, but the heat generated is for a domestic audience, not a global one (Sankei Shimbun, 2022). Alas, the time and attention paid to preparing specialized content that appeals only to one's domestic audience makes Japan's strategic communications anything but strategic.

## Japan's Strategic Communications (SC) and Public Diplomacy: Strength in Personality, Not Institution

Japan is one of Asia's oldest democracies (Solis, 2021) and the strongest economic and security partner to the United States in the Indo-Pacific region. The world's second-largest democratic economy, Japan has three nuclear powers as neighbors, two of which are P5 members: China and Russia. Anything that Japan projects onto the world must be viewed in the context of a narrative brand that is well beyond *kawaii* culture or Cool Japan (Otmazgin, 2018, Snow 2021). Japan sits in a particularly dangerous neighborhood that requires frontline security from 55,000 stationed troops supplied by the world's largest military and nuclear power, the United States. This soft power/hard power neighborhood (McCarthy, 2018) is a hotbed of competing national interests and national security storylines across a continuum of democracy and authoritarianism political economy systems.

The US-Japan Alliance, the bedrock of bilateral relations, has no peer in the world, serving as the "cornerstone of peace, security, and stability in the Asia-Pacific region" (Chicago Council 2022). Despite the combined global financial crisis and devastating 9.0 earthquake and tsunami with nuclear fallout, known in Japan as 3/11, Japan has remained a tier-one country (in media buying and media relations, tier-one countries represent strong, established economies and correspond to the World Bank's list of high-income nations). Under Japan's longest-serving prime

minister, Shinzo Abe, Japan promised a “safe pair of hands” (Mander & Soble, 2013) to secure the Tokyo 2020 Summer Olympics and Paralympics. Japan took more of the reins of responsibility in the Asia-Pacific region with a rhetorical frame that has the continuity of fifteen years, the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP). Abe first defined FOIP at the Sixth Tokyo International Conference on African Development in Nairobi, Kenya, but it was first hatched as a Japanese take on “sea to shining sea,” the American idiom meaning “from the Atlantic Ocean to the Pacific Ocean.” Mr. Abe referred to the “Confluence of the Two Seas” at the Parliament of the Republic of India in 2007.

Like a Japanese version of a Great Communicator Ronald Reagan or Bill Clinton, Abe used the bully pulpit approach to advance Japan’s global communications. He presided over the 2016 Ise-Shima Summit, after which American President Barack Obama and Shinzo Abe made historic remarks at the Hiroshima Peace Memorial (The Whitehouse, 2016). In 2019, Japan was the host of the G20 Summit in Osaka, one of the last in-person gatherings of the world’s leading economies before Covid-19 struck. In a flurry of speeches at home and abroad, including an unprecedented invitation to address a joint meeting of the US Congress during the Obama Administration (PMO, 2015), Abe called on the Japanese people to feel good about Japan and its global leadership through “proactive peace” and “values-led diplomacy,” including its strong official development assistance (ODA) posture that makes it oftenthe only other country to compete with China for large infrastructure projects. Japan’s recognized leadership in overseas development assistance and its trusted Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) have led to research on it as a soft power tool of public diplomacy and strategic communications (see Iwata, 2013; King, 2016).

Unlike any prime minister before him and perhaps ever to follow, Abe had the personal charisma to use his confident personality to communicate a vision of a “beautiful Japan” that projected its values and policies onto the global community. Abe was a gifted visionary leader, with many global admirers like Asia Society President and former Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd (2022) who said that “Shinzo Abe is the most important Japanese leader in the past 50 years.” The merits of relying on a charismatic leader rest with Abe’s proactive agenda that defied Japanese negative stereotypes of passivity and inertia in decision making.

Abe was able to marshal support for institutional growth in SC as the “face” of Japan’s strategic communications. “To critics, he represented a dangerous strain of nationalist revisionism. To supporters, he was the realist visionary Japan needed in a more turbulent modern world,” *The Economist* eulogized on July 8, 2022. The drawbacks of relying on a personalized or individuated approach in SC are that once that leader is gone, there may be no one up to the job of replicating that style. A leader may adopt some of the characteristics of a charismatic leader but more often than not, as in the American presidents Clinton, Reagan, and Obama, charismatic leadership is a combination of events and personality. Abe’s weakness was that he looked backward as much as forward. His record is mixed in threading the needle of Japan’s pre-war history into the present. There were many missteps along the way, including an inability to reconcile with Japan’s pre-war history to 1945, one of war-making, occupation (Taiwan, China, Korea) and imperial ambitions that extended well beyond Asia. The carryover to today is the strong tendency for the Government of Japan—the main driver of global persuasion—to overreach in its attempt to control Japan’s narrative. Abe made some major communicative blunders, including seeking too much government intervention in Japan’s public broadcaster, NHK; attempting to erase so-called “Comfort Women” content from a popular US high school textbook; and making the rookie foul decision to visit Yasukuni Shrine in 2013 (Kolmas, 2019). For better or for worse, Brand Abe will remain the national face of Brand Japan in the twenty-first century through his extraordinary rhetorical legacy in the Free and Open Indo-Pacific, which has cemented US-Japan relations in democracy promotion against the rise of China and Russia. In 2022, the US and Japan must move beyond personality-driven to alliance-driven SC.

## The US-Japan Alliance: The Cornerstone of Japan’s PD and SC

The US and Japan are more than allies; they are “Tomodachi.”<sup>7</sup> The bond began with ignominious defeat for Japan and spoils to the victor for the United States in 1945. August 15 is known in Japan as “the day for mourning of war dead and

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<sup>7</sup> The TOMODACHI Initiative is a public-private partnership, born out of support for Japan’s recovery from the Great East Japan Earthquake, that invests in the next generation of Japanese and American leaders through educational and cultural exchanges as well as leadership programs.

praying for peace,” Japan’s version of Memorial Day, while August 14 in the US is remembered as V-J Day (Victory over Japan) Day, although only one state, Rhode Island, still commemorates it (NPR, 2021).

Two years after World War II ended and during the seven-year American Occupation of Japan (1947-1952), the United States drafted Japan’s Post-War Constitution, also known as the Peace Constitution or MacArthur Constitution. Staff of the Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers (SCAP) General Douglas MacArthur wrote the draft and allowed Japanese legal scholars to review and modify the democratic cornerstone with final approval by the emperor of Japan whose sovereignty was ceded to the people of Japan by becoming a non-sacred symbol of the state and unity among its people (Moritsugu, 2016; Richter, 2016). At 5,000 words with 103 articles,<sup>8</sup> it is one of the shortest Constitutions and “is the oldest, unamended constitution in the world today” (McElwain, 2017). The pacifism clause Article 9 is its most famous passage, which the US included so that Japan would never again aspire to be an imperial war state. With Shinzo Abe’s passing, Article 9 and Constitutional Revisionism are likely to become more prominently discussed as part of Japan’s national identity and image projected onto the world (Kelly and Toyoda, 2022; Siow, 2022). The push for updating Japan’s Constitution has been decades in the making, along with calls for UN Security Council membership and military deployment to allow Japan to assume more control over its security beyond the US umbrella. These policy advocacies position Japan, at least in its aspirations, as a great power (Kelly, 2007).

## Japan’s Main Competitor: China’s Global Media Outreach

China’s global rise is a well-told story. Google it and you get 595 million results. Google the US-Japan Alliance and you get one-fifth that number, 107 million. As of September 15, 2022, the English-language China Global Television Network (<https://twitter.com/cgtnofficial>) had 13.2 million Twitter followers, while its competitor NHK World News ([https://www.twitter.com/NHKWORLD\\_news](https://www.twitter.com/NHKWORLD_news)) had 155,000 followers. While Japan continues to do PowerPoint presentations to advocate its position on the Russian war in Ukraine or Prime Minister Fumio Kishida’s Realism Diplomacy, China is unleashing a new generation of “wolf warriors” and

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<sup>8</sup> The Constitution of Japan. Ministry of Foreign Affairs.  
[https://japan.kantei.go.jp/constitution\\_and\\_government\\_of\\_japan/constitution\\_e.html](https://japan.kantei.go.jp/constitution_and_government_of_japan/constitution_e.html)

civilian “netizens” who fearlessly and aggressively defend China’s policies online (Martin, 2021). The Twitter account of Zhao Lijian ([@zlj517](#)), Deputy Director-General of the Information Department of China’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs, illustrates the aggressive China approach to that of its seemingly stiff and boring neighbor. It is unthinkable to imagine Japan training its government officials to assert themselves through social media. It’s too risky a venture and not in keeping with Japan’s diplomatic posture of restraint and reserve. China views risk differently. It frees up its officials to gain followers with the attitude that any publicity is better than none at all. China’s government spokespeople and diplomats enjoy celebrity status, while Japan’s exist almost without notice. Zhao is the most famous of the wolf warrior breed of diplomats with 1.8 million Twitter followers, while the Prime Minister of Japan’s English Twitter account has 268,800 followers.

China approaches its global communications as a national security priority and unity in purpose domestic practice. Every elite person, especially the large number of China’s best and brightest civilians who engage in study abroad in record numbers, sees themselves along a continuum from information warriors to defenders or explainers of China’s foreign policy, people, and nation. It is baked into their upbringing without the need of top-down enforcement. If they are labeled propagandists, then so be it, because propaganda is just information in service to the nation-state. In contrast, a Japanese student on study abroad, much less an American or European student, would not likely view an overseas study experience as a contributing factor to the national interests, much less national security goals, of one’s native country. But it is in China. Research by Brady (2017) on China’s influence in New Zealand concludes that the CCP, in its relationship to overseas Chinese, including students, does not want to be seen as leading them but rather guiding: “The goal of successful overseas Chinese work is to get the community to proactively and even better, spontaneously, engage in activities which enhance China’s foreign policy agenda.” Likewise, a report on Chinese influence activities in the United States by Diamond and Schell (2019, xii) for Stanford University’s Hoover Institution, concluded that the People’s Republic of China “united front” influence bureaucracy views the Chinese diaspora as “overseas compatriots,” who owe a measure of loyalty to “the Chinese Motherland.”

So long as free and open societies like the US and Japan continue to view the international exchange of persons as more of a resume enhancer and individual life changer, then China will continue to have an enormous advantage over its great

power competitors. We may not agree with China's wolf warrior foreign policy or its autocratic regime, but we fail ourselves if we too quickly dismiss the wolf warrior phenomenon as over-the-top. When we do, we forget that most of the developing world, including countries in Southeast Asia, are seated in a spectator stand with no interest or involvement in the US-China showdown. Harvard University sociologist Ezra Vogel, a favorite son of China and Japan, makes this clear in his final book before his death in 2020, *China and Japan: Facing History* (2019). Vogel explains that what has influenced China's national identity, and what likely drives its defensive to aggressive foreign relations communications today, is a sense of victimization suffered at the hands of others, especially Japan. Martin (2021) explains the rise of China's civilian information warriors on TikTok and other social media platforms in the same light—to overcome a sense of indignity and dehumanization—along with Chinese diplomats who have a mandate from Xi to use all of the communication tools available to tell China's story to the world. As Xi sees it, "The amount of information controlled has become an important indicator of a nation's soft power and competitiveness" (Smith, 2021), which is why Xi called on China in May 2021 to build its own R&D strategic communications with "distinctive" Chinese characteristics (Isisa, 2021).

Japan talks about a seamless approach to strategic communications (SC), but its SC is hidden from view, embedded in its military sector. China's strategic communications are public and operate across multiple platforms, including the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the BRICS countries, and the China Media Group. As noted in a study on China's international broadcasting, "China's state media has been pragmatically deployed as an instrument for international propaganda, as part of China's soft power initiative in its pursuit of an improved global image" (Zhu, 2022). It is my experience with teaching in China and Japan that the Chinese are much more adept at studying the way that others think. Japan, known for its contemplative, consensus and methodical approach to decision making, does not utilize the way that others think in a pragmatic sense like the Chinese. For example, when I first taught at Tsinghua University in 2007, I was invited to present lectures to state government officials and students about how to work effectively with Western media. This was on the precipice of the Beijing Summer Olympics. In contrast, the Japanese approach to global media is to pay fees to both Japanese and international public relations firms for guidance and largely ignore the expertise and insight of non-Japanese thought leaders.

China's strategic communications will continue to rise in volume and breadth, and as it does, so should the story of the ties that bind the United States and Japan be told at a higher volume and with broader reach and depth. Abe's greatest legacy in strategic communications is that he left democratic partner countries with a strategic roadmap for more cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region. China will push back on the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) concept, but we should expect that, because an alternative vision in China's backyard is exactly what China does not want. As Mazarr et al (2022) note in a recent RAND report, challenger nations like China and Russia "are determined to claim greater international influence and reduce US power—and, in China's case, become the preeminent power in Asia." Right now, we do not see enough of a concerted effort being made by Japan's "Sakura warriors" in the international influence sphere to balance a power grab by China which, if it succeeds, will not only reduce US power but also place Japan in its most vulnerable position since the end of WWII.

## Conclusion

Japan echoes the US model in strategic communications (SC) by emphasizing national self-interest and self-help first, partnership with its closest bilateral ally second, and the global agenda third. Its greatest complement to US SC is a shared philosophy about joining efforts to counter China's rise as a unilateral hegemon in Greater Asia, as well as countering the influence of other authoritarian powers. As noted in a Brookings article on Japan's democratic renewal, "even though Washington and Tokyo have not historically aligned on a strategy of democracy promotion, they can coordinate efforts to ensure democratic resilience and the survival of the liberal order" (Mireya Solis, 2021). The challenge will be around how Japan to a greater degree and the US to a lesser degree can overcome the lack of public interest and engagement in global security matters. The world's attention is moving away from Russia's war in Ukraine to worries about a global recession. Publics are not amenable to higher military expenditures related to SC or even upticks in public diplomacy (PD) budgets when their own bank account balances are dwindling.

According to a 2021 Pew Research Center survey of 17 advanced economies, the US is acknowledged widely around the world for its military strength, higher education institutions, technology and entertainment sectors—a combined hard and soft power projection. Japan is renowned exclusively for its cultural superpower

projection in the arts, architecture, cuisine, temple traditions, and craftsmanship, along with its well-known J-pop fantasy culture in manga, anime, and video games. Until and unless Japan has a more open national conversation about how public it wants to make its military and defense sector, SC will play second fiddle to PD. Even the Prime Minister of Japan from Hiroshima is hedging his bets, between advocacy for ridding the world of nuclear weapons and promoting a realism diplomacy that calls for a doubling of the defense budget and support for NATO deterrence backed by force. The 2015 Legislation for Peace and Security in Japan expanded its Self Defense Forces' global response to "Survival-Threatening Situations" and "Situations that Will Have an Important Influence." Japan's strong defense posture, buttressed by a growing seamless defense posture to international crises, will be an ongoing conundrum for the Japanese people to reconcile with their peace-loving, pacifistic posture that contrasts to that of the United States.

Japan's PD is more unique, due to the Nihonjinron model of Japanese exceptionalism with its cultural contrast to the West and North America. It employs soft-sell tactics to promote its global image; these include its world-renowned cuisine, traditional, and modern culture, and a reputation for being a nice, pleasant, clean and safe place to visit at the top of a traveler's bucket list. Japan's PD does not have much of any overlap with its SC—unlike the US, which utilizes a toolkit integrating public affairs (PA) with psychological operations (PSYOP) and public diplomacy. In the unique case of Japan, it is difficult to integrate a soft power tool like "Cool Japan," with its focus on cultural and exchange diplomacy, into strategic communications that are exclusively associated with the Ministry of Defense and Japan's Self Defense Forces. The prowess of the Japanese military sector (among the top ten in the world) is relatively unknown and not discussed among the Japanese. "Cool Japan" does not wear a uniform. Even the word "military" is avoided in polite conversation, so as not to ruffle the widely accepted image of Japan as a pacifist nation. This lack of acknowledgement means that there is no domestic constituency from which to advocate for more funding or legislative changes. The US has no issue with public awareness of its military, and its PD agenda has a much larger footprint in the academy, where both public relations and public diplomacy have a strong research and training agenda. Japan has no public relations or public diplomacy programs in higher education, only a few courses here and there. To note, I was the first full-time public diplomacy professor appointed to a Japanese university.

Japan is much more elite-driven in its SC/PD than the egalitarian model of the US. The US military sector, where SC dominates, has a heavy focus on diversity and inclusion. D&I initiatives are at the beginning stage in Japan and are more prevalent in international than domestic sectors. The US does a much better job with networking and outreach from the government to the public. The Japan model narrow casts and works with a select few who speak on behalf of Japan, the so-called Japan hands. How does this impact Japan's SC/PD? It makes it less creative, more constrained by consensus-driven approaches and makes it function more like an echo chamber.

In addition to a fiscal crisis of stagnant wages and a weakened yen, Japan is wrestling with a domestic crisis, the Abe Legacy vs. Unitarian Church controversy, that has eroded support for the Kishida administration. As stated earlier, Japan's SC profile is driven by domestic politics and the domestic economy. If the Prime Minister of Japan cannot manage to handle this internal crisis, this will make not only his global agenda difficult but also strengthening and broadening SC more challenging. So long as Japan associates SC with the defense sector, then the public will remain marginalized from forming a better understanding and support for its role in helping to shape Japan's regional and global priorities.

## Looking Forward: Strengthen US-Japan SC/PD Coordination

I would primarily recommend that the US play to its existing strengths in Japan, including the US-Japan Alliance, and work closer with the PD sector to initiate more content that informs, engages and influences about the importance of preserving and strengthening these bilateral ties. Secondly, the US should invite more collaboration and involvement of its strategic partners in the region, such as Australia, India, and Japan, to capitalize on the goodwill extended to Japan following Abe's assassination. Programming should emphasize the need to create a counterbalance to China's military and economic strength in the FOIP region, as a consequence of economic and security measures that have a demonstrable common good. South Korea and Japan should seek closer integration of purpose in PD/SC strategies where win-win outcomes are possible, avoiding pitfalls into historical debates that detract from larger issues at hand.

Japan's responsibilities in public diplomacy have only intensified since I published a white paper on the topic of Japan's public diplomacy for the French Institute of International Relations (Snow, February 2016). Northeast Asia is a much more complicated region to navigate despite strong economic interdependence. China still remains Japan's top trading partner. Democratic and authoritarian states are jockeying for influence in the great power competition era. In the immediate aftermath of Abe's assassination, Japan will likely build up a reservoir of goodwill and sympathy. But during the Abe years, Japan had to balance its image between the Cool Japan brand, full of cute idols, anime and pop music (Otmazgin, 2018), and a darker portrait, of a revisionist, ultra-nationalist Japan that sought to normalize its military status and reinterpret in a rosier view its war history (Patrick, 2022). Today, Japan has yet to develop efficient tools to communicate with the world. If Shinzo Abe were successful in giving a new impetus to develop a truly global public diplomacy and new tools and narratives, his legacy is still mixed. Therefore, Japan must not only welcome the best aspects of the Abe Legacy but also go beyond the political personality of Abe to promote its public diplomacy and strategic communications in a systemic, research-driven, active-listening manner. Abe's powerful appeal casts a large shadow on Japanese society, but Japan needs to train the next generation of Japanese spokespeople and trainers in effective and critical communication, in order to take on the challenges of narrative competition among great powers. If Japan cannot tell its own story, it will leave a vacuum for others to fill—namely China and Russia. It should expand skills in strategic communications and public diplomacy studies in higher education. The July 2022 announcement from the University of Tokyo, about the country's first research and education lab in strategic communications, is an important first step in linking the academy with the government and military/defense sectors, but this will likely take some time to build up to the level of a department or degree program (University of Tokyo, 2022). Nevertheless, it is a hopeful sign that Japan is taking international political communication seriously. Finally, PD and SC should target not only foreign governments but also foreign publics. Japan tends to seek the influence of elites only, and it often misses out on how to influence mass publics. Japan has such a reservoir of goodwill now with the world that global publics will be eager to not only visit the country in person, but also hear many more stories about the everyday lives of the Japanese people. Japan's greatest natural resource remains its people, and their time is now to engage with the world.

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