

Acknowledging Japan's Potential

The latest Public Opinion Survey of Foreign Policy reveals some interesting changes in attitudes toward foreign policy among Japanese people.

With the exception of 1976, the Cabinet Office has been conducting a Public Opinion Survey of Foreign Policy every year since 1975. Last year, the survey was conducted in October and targeted 3,000 respondents aged twenty or older nationwide (response rate 60.9%) with the results published in December 2008. The objective of the survey is to gain an understanding of public awareness of foreign diplomacy and to reflect this in policies. The survey results capture changes in public awareness that reflect changes in the international community and domestic affairs.

Japan and Relations with Foreign Countries

Broadly speaking, the key points of relations between Japan and foreign countries fall into two groups: changes in attitudes toward relations with the United States and with China. With respect to Japan-U.S. relations, those who responded "I think relations are amicable" fell by 7.4 percentage points compared to 2007 to a recent low of 68.9%, while those who responded "I do not think relations are amicable" increased by 7.7 percentage points to a recent high of 28.1%. With regard to Japan-China relations, 23.7% responded "I think relations are amicable" (a decrease of 2.7 percentage points compared to 2007), while 71.9% (up by 3.9 percentage points) responded "I do not think relations are amicable."

Two broad-based reasons can be given to explain the changes in Japan-U.S. relations.

One factor is the growing sense of uncertainty about the economy caused by the financial crisis that began in the United States in the summer of 2008, and the other factor is that on October 11, directly after the opinion poll was launched, the U.S. government re-

moved its designation of North Korea as a state that sponsors terrorism. In their view, the former factor caused share prices in Japan to fall and also had a great impact on the lackluster economy, whereas public opinion took the latter factor as an indicator that Japan-U.S. relations are not necessarily amicable, all the more because Japan, which is still working toward an overall resolution to the kidnapping issue, had continued to exert strong pressure on the United States government not to remove the designation of North Korea. Actually, the survey indicates that the issue of North Korea's kidnapping of Japanese citizens is of the highest concern to the Japanese public with 88.1% listing it in response to "Matters of concern regarding North Korea" (multiple responses).

However, public attitudes toward Japan-U.S. relations are highly stable over the long term and the relationship is amicable. The question format was somewhat different ("Do you or do you not feel a sense of affinity?") but past surveys registered a decrease in 1981 when the United States imposed restraints on Japanese automobile exports (69.4%), and again in 1986, the year after the Plaza Accord, a joint intervention to resolve the trade imbalance with the United States which set off a rapid appreciation of the yen (67.5%). With these two exceptions, responses to "Do you feel a sense of affinity?" toward the United States have never fallen below 70%. Incidentally, the results of the current survey put "feeling a sense of affinity" at 73.3% (a drop of 2.3 percentage points compared to 2007) and "feel no sense of affinity" at 24.8% (down by 2.0 percentage points).

With regards to Japan-China relations, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs points to a series of food safety issues including the suspected health hazards of the tainted Chinese dumplings that

were discovered in January 2008. It appears that public awareness reflects the fact that imports of products from China are expanding with a direct impact on the daily lives of people in Japan, as well as the measures taken by the Japanese government directly after the problems occurred to resolve the issue including discussions with the Chinese government.

Moreover, these issues were also raised at a top-level meeting between Japan and China at the time of the ASEM summit held in Beijing in October 2008. Prime Minister Taro Aso addressed Premier Wen Jiabao seeking measures by China from the viewpoint that cooperation between Japan and China is an urgent matter with respect to removing consumer anxiety and distrust of food safety. In his response, Premier Wen Jiabao said that the Chinese government accepts responsibility and he stressed that China wants to continue its cooperation with Japan. Both countries are continuing bilateral measures.

Economic Cooperation

On the point of economic cooperation with developing countries, 30.4% of respondents answered that "it should be actively promoted," which is an increase of 5.6 percentage points from 2007. Among the stated reasons, "Japan should utilize its technology and experience to solve environmental problems in developing countries" had the most responses (50.9%), eclipsing the top-ranked responses of the previous year, "To contribute to stability in developing countries and serve world peace" (47.5%, 64.7% in 2007) and "As an industrialized country, Japan has a humanitarian duty to assist developing countries" (46.8%, 60.6% in 2007) (multiple responses).

This change can be set in context by looking at changes to the other responses. One might say that responses such as "Economic cooperation is an important means of advancing Japan's foreign policy" (45.9%, an increase of

14.2 percentage points compared to 2007), “Without political stability and economic growth in developing countries, there will be no economic growth in Japan” (42.4%, an increase of 11.9 percentage points), and “Economic assistance to developing countries contributes to securing a stable supply of energy resources” (42.1%, up by 13.2 percentage points) indicate that the nation shares in the importance of strategic economic cooperation with developing countries.

The Role of Japan in the United Nations

Pursuant to the International Peace Cooperation Law, Japan has dispatched peacekeepers to Cambodia, the Golan Heights and East Timor, participated in international humanitarian aid activities to assist refugees from Iraq and served as international election monitors in Kosovo and elsewhere. With respect to the future, there were no major changes from the preceding year in terms of responses to “Japan should be a more active participant” (25.1%), “Japan should continue to participate to the same extent” (51.6%), “Japan should participate as little as possible” (16.0%), and “Japan should not participate” (3.1%), indicating that the importance of Japan’s contribution to international peace is embedded in the nation’s awareness.

With respect to Japan’s bid to obtain a permanent seat on the UN Security Council, 78.9% agreed (a decrease of 1.3 percentage points over the previous year). The reasons given for agreement included “It is odd that Japan does not participate in important decision-making despite substantial financial contributions to the UN” (29.9%), and “It will serve world peace if Japan joins in its capacity of a nuclear-free, pacifist nation” (26.9%).

Foreign Economic Policy and Cultural Exchange

With regards to issues of first importance in foreign economic policy, most respondents cited “Securing energy resources” (68.2%) due to the impact of the sharp rise in the price of resources since the fall of 2004, fol-

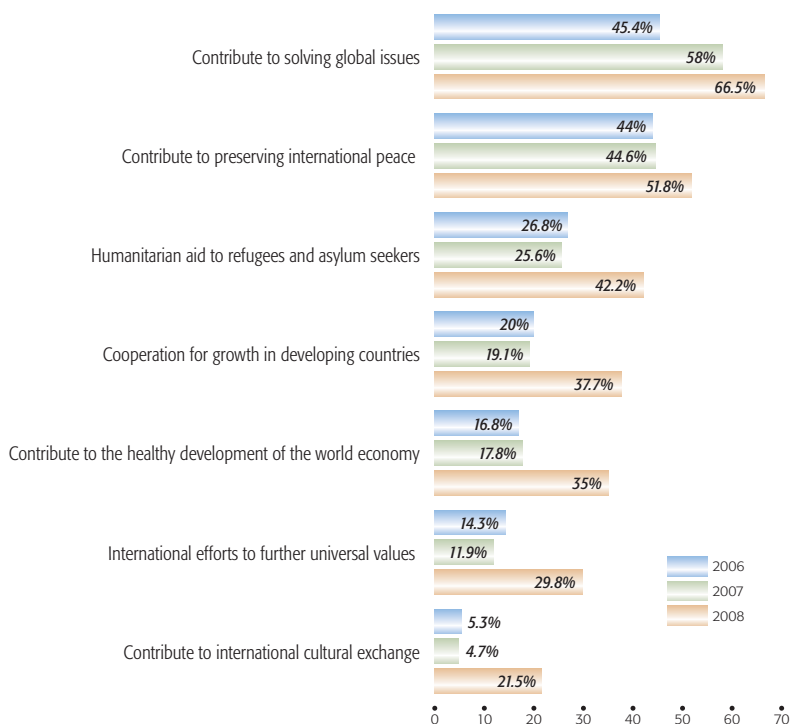
lowed by “Securing food supplies” (52.7%), “Lifting controls on trade and investment” (28.8%), and “Support the activities of Japanese corporations abroad” (27.9%) (multiple responses). In particular “Securing food supplies” rose by 8.4 percentage points from 2007 in line with the recent expansion in the use of agricultural produce for biofuel, the food safety anxieties mentioned above, and the low degree of food self-sufficiency.

In terms of areas to emphasize in cultural exchange with foreign countries, respondents cited “Youth and student exchanges” (57.7%), “Sports exchanges” (48.8%), “Academic, artistic and cultural exchanges” (40.4%), “Introducing traditional Japanese culture” (34.3%) and “Cooperation to preserve historic sites and cultural assets overseas and to promote national cultures” (31.5%) (multiple responses).

Japan’s Role in the International Community

As for the role that Japan should play in the international community, the majority of respondents cited “Contribute to solving issues on a global scale like global environmental issues

The role that Japan should play (top-ranked responses)



and global warming problems” (66.5%, up by 8.5 percentage points compared to 2007), followed by “Contribute to maintaining international peace including disarmament and nonproliferation and to efforts to find peaceful settlements to regional conflicts including humanitarian aid” (51.8%, up by 7.2 percentage points), “Humanitarian assistance to refugees and asylum seekers” (42.2%, up by 16.6 percentage points), “Cooperation for growth in developing countries” (37.7%, an increase of 25.8 percentage points) and “Contribute to the healthy development of the world economy” (35.0%, up by 17.2 percentage points) (multiple responses; see figure for year-on-year comparison, but note that multiple answers were limited to two by 2007.)

To provide some context for these changes, the results reflect a broader public understanding of the abilities and potential of Japan with respect to solving the problems facing the international community brought on by the TICAD IV summit, other summit related meetings, and the Hokkaido Toyako Summit when Japan held the G8 presidency last year. □

Hitoshi Chiba, The Japan Journal