

Japan's Role in Rebuilding the Rules-Based International Order

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Keywords

Rules-based international order, Japan's leadership, Summit diplomacy, Middle power strategy, Rule of law

Abstract

There exists some consensus that the liberal international order now is in crisis. It is both urgent and important to rebuild the rules-based international order. If the liberal international order is based on the Pax Americana, then the rules-based international order is based on the shared norms and consensus of most members of the international community. Given the strategic rivalry between the US and China, Japan should take the duty and leadership to rebuild the rules-based international order. Specifically speaking, Japan can play the following roles to contribute to the rebuilding of the rules-based international order: taking the leadership; promoting summit diplomacy; practicing the middle power strategy; and strengthening the rule of law.

1. The Crisis of the Liberal International Order

There exists some consensus that the liberal international order now is in crisis. Needless to say, this crisis has caught tremendous concerns both in the US and Japan. In recent years, academic scholars and policy practitioners have been debating on the question whether the liberal order will survive or not. For example, in early 2017, the Foreign Affairs featured a special issue entitled "Out of order? The future of the international system" to discuss the fate of the liberal international order. The Japanese Institute of International Affairs also convened a roundtable discussion on the dissolving of the international order in its academic journal *International Affairs* in early 2018.

As Walter Russell Mead argued at the Wall Street Journal at the end of 2018, "2018's biggest loser was the liberal international order" (Mead, 2018). The well-known realist John J. Mearsheimer went even further to conclude that the liberal international order had already collapsed and it was bound to fail. He claimed that the time had come for the US foreign policy establishment to recognize that the liberal international order was a failed enterprise with no future (Mearsheimer, 2019).

What are the reasons for the crisis of the liberal international order? Yoichi Funabashi argues that the liberal international order has finally reached a crisis point, due to the populism and economic nationalism of Trump's America, as well as Russia and China's geopolitical offensive (Funabashi, 2018). Thomas S. Wilkins argues that the rules-based order is facing disruptive challenges largely from North Korean provocations, Chinese assertiveness and Russian revisionism (Wilkins, 2018). On the surface, it is reasonable to believe that the American populism represented by the unilateral policy of former President Trump and the rise of authoritarian China with rapidly increasing economic and military power are the two most important factors contributing to the current crisis of liberal international order.

However, the big picture is that a transition of international order is taking place due to dramatic power transition in the international society. On the one hand, the US willingness to provide public goods as a benign and liberal hegemony is on the decline. Even if the United States continues to possess more military, economic, and soft-power resources than any other country, it may choose not to use those resources to provide public goods for the international system at large (Nye, 2017). In addition, America is dismantling the multilateral order it built over the past 70 years and taking a bilateral approach that will force allies to pay for their own defense, cut trade deficits and play by American-made rules (Sheng, 2018). On the other hand, China is not ready to take full leadership to replace the US and convince other countries to follow its way. Although its hard power has increased significantly, China so far has no enough soft power to assume the leadership as a superpower of the international system.

2. Rebuilding the Rules-Based International Order

Without the existence of a supra-national government, the international society is anarchy if it is out of order. It is both urgent and important to save the liberal international order. However, this does not necessarily mean to completely return to the post-war or post-cold war order. The two terms "liberal international order" and "rules-based international order" are sometimes used inter-changeably, although there are some subtle nuances of differences. If the liberal international order is based on the Pax Americana, then the rules-based international order is based on the shared norms and consensus of most members of the international community. Rather than to restore the liberal international order, instead it is more practical to rebuild the rules-based international order. As Amitav Acharya suggests, instead of helping the West to resurrect the liberal order, Asia will lead the transition to a different type of world order

(Acharya, 2018). He also describes the emerging order as a “multiplex world” in which elements of the old liberal order will survive, but will have to accommodate new actors and approaches that do not bend to America’s commands and preferences (Acharya, 2017).

What is the rules-based international order that we should rebuild? The definition is still open to debate. The United Nations Association of Australia defines that the rules-based international order can generally be described as a shared commitment by all countries to conduct their activities in accordance with agreed rules that evolve over time, such as international law, regional security arrangements, trade agreements, immigration protocols, and cultural arrangements (United Nations Association of Australia, 2015). In the official document of the Chatham House, the concept of the rules-based international order is embodied in a variety of multilateral institutions, starting with the United Nations and running through various functional architectures such as the Bretton Woods system, the corpus of international law and other regimes and treaties, down to various regional instances where sovereignty is pooled or where powers have been delegated consensually by states on a particular issue (Ward, 2019). Similar to the concept of “multiplex world”, the rules-based international order attaches importance to clinging to the valuable norms, rules and institutions that have maintained the postwar peace in the past several decades.

How to rebuild the rules-based international order? At least this question can be discussed from both the perspectives of international economic order and political order. Economic and political upheavals are emboldening challengers to the rules-based international system, and to the liberal Western values it embodies (Chatham House, 2015). To rebuild the international economic order, first of all, the norms of economic globalization and free trade need to be restored. As Shujiro Urata warned, the free trade system is facing the threat of collapse, due to the spread of protectionism and the breakout of US-China trade war. He suggested that to return to a rules-based trade system, countries that share interests in common, like Japan and the EU, should involve the US in efforts to reform the World Trade Organization (Urata, 2019). The sentiment of anti-globalization has been on the rise in recent years. It is true that globalization is irreversible. However, just like the global financial crisis has warned us, economic growth could be handicapped by the flaws of international economic system. People need to rethink rather than ignore the problems such as widening wealth gap caused by globalization and capitalism. How to ensure that development and prosperity can

benefit most of, if not all, countries and people in the world remains a challenge for the emerging economic order.

The international political order is also in danger with the collapse of power balance, institutional norms and rules. The world has become more turbulent as conflicts and disputes are happening more frequently than before. With the rise of authoritarian powers like China and Russia, it seems that it was too early for Francis Fukuyama to conclude “the end of history”. Democracy is facing even more challenges than before. The legitimacy of spreading the US style of liberal democracy to other regions or countries has been questioned. The emerging political order is much more complicated than the cold-war era. It is not simply democracy versus authoritarianism. Rather it is becoming a system with diverse political ideologies and values.

It is also inevitable to talk about the international order without mentioning China nowadays. Some western China watchers agree that China recognizes that international rules and institutions have provided a stable platform for its economic development, and that China has a strong incentive not to disrupt or damage the existing order, although it does not mean China is satisfied with the current international system (British House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee, 2019). Some Chinese scholars argue that although China is not a simple rule-taker content to preserve the existing order, it is not yet a revolutionary power discontent with and willing to undermine the existing order (Zhao, 2016). At least there are some degree of consensus between the Western and Chinese views, though their focuses might be different. How to understand China’s thoughts about the international order and encourage China to play a stabilizing role for the international society is closely associated with the rebuilding of the rules-based international order. For example, the policy recommendation of the Japanese Institute of International Affairs suggests that it is necessary to both engage and balance China in order to maintain and deepen the rules-based order (The Japanese Institute of International Affairs, 2012).

3. Japan’s Role in Rebuilding the Rules-Based International Order

The international environment surrounding Japan has experienced fierce changes during the past decade. As the Japanese government often stresses, Japan’s security environment is becoming severer with dramatic shift in the global power balance. The rise of China and its global strategies such as the Belt and Road Initiative have raised extensive concerns and anxieties. The US, Japan and other countries in the region are

trying to counterbalance China with the Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy. The Indo-Pacific region is the core of the world's vitality, and at the same time, it faces various security challenges (Japan's Ministry of Defense, 2021). Under such circumstances, it is also in Japan's national interest to help rebuild of the rules-based international order.

In rebuilding the rules-based international order, Japan has a big role to play. Given the strategic rivalry between the US and China, Japan should take the duty and leadership to rebuild the rules-based international order. Tokyo is highly satisfied with the current order, because it has benefited the country greatly, ensuring the peace and stability Japan needed to recover and prosper after World War II (Hornung, 2018). Just as Hiroshi Nakanishi pointed out, "Japan should enhance the ability to make strategic adjustments that determine the allocation of limited resources in order to maintain its peace and stability in such a turbulence world" (Nakanishi, 2019). Specifically speaking, Japan can play the following roles to contribute to the rebuilding of the rules-based international order.

3.1 Taking the Leadership

Japan should assume more leadership in the emerging so-called G-Zero world in which global leadership is absent. Just as Yoichi Funabashi pointed out, Japan could treat the new American absence as a historic opportunity to pursue a proactive Asian foreign policy (Funabashi, 2017). But Japan's leadership should not be limited in Asia. It is time for Japan to take even some global leadership.

Japan's leadership is also expected from the international society. For example, G. John Ikenberry said that to preserve the liberal international order, much would rest on the shoulders of former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe of Japan and former Chancellor Angela Merkel of Germany (Ikenberry, 2017). In fact, Japan has already taken some action to fulfill its leadership. For example, in the economic area, Japan has continued to lead the Trans-Pacific Partnership talks after the US retreated from it. In the security area, Japan has also been the major advocator of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy to balance China's rising military presence in the Asia Pacific.

There are much more areas in which Japan can take leadership. According to Stephen R. Nagy, at least Japan can play its leadership role in forging a new rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific and globally in a variety of areas such as multilateral trade, preventing the

balkanization of the internet, developing shared 5G standards, promoting rules-based behavior in humanitarian and development assistance, and climate change (Nagy, 2019).

3.2 Promoting Summit Diplomacy

The Abe administration had conducted comprehensive diplomacy at the international stage so far. In particular, former Prime Minister Abe Shinzo has attached importance to summit diplomacy, be it bilateral or multilateral. For example, Abe has made use of the United Nations General Assembly as a platform to call for international cooperation and express Japanese standpoints. Abe promised to defend free trade while resolving long-standing issues with Japan's neighbors in his speech to the United Nations General Assembly in September 2018 (Hurst, 2018). Abe also made it clear that Japan would try to protect and rebuild the rules-based international order, as he said "Should Japan, the country that reaped the greatest benefits of all under this system, ever fail to support maintaining and strengthening that system, who else should we wait for to rise in support of it? Japan's responsibility is tremendous indeed" (Abe, 2018). The new administration should continue to promote Japan's summit diplomacy.

Another example is the G20 summit held in Osaka in June 2019. At the third annual Tokyo Conference organized by the Genron think-tank, then Japanese Deputy Chief Secretary Yasutoshi Nishimura said Japan would take the lead, as host of the year's Group of 20 summit in Osaka in June, to push for reforms to modernize age-old institutions like the World Trade Organization (Sim, 2019). Japan also tried to make the G20 summit as a forum to discuss the rebuilding of the rules-based international order. At the Osaka G20 Summit, then Japanese Foreign Minister Kono said that "our highest priority is to support the liberal international order, including a free and fair trading system" (Glaser, 2019).

Multilateral summits can do a lot to rebuild the rules-based international order, as they are exactly the practice of international rules and norms. For example, participants of the G20 Leaders' Summit in Buenos Aires in late 2018 reaffirmed their commitment to a rules-based international order (Herszenhorn, 2018). There is huge potential for Japan to expand its role in the summits to protect global interests and international norms.

3.3 Practicing the Middle Power Strategy

Japan has the strategic and technical potential of middlepowermanship to contribute to the rebuilding of international order (Cox, 1989). With middle power diplomacy, Japan

could appeal its commitment to multilateralism through global institutions and alliance with other middle powers. The two superpowers, the US and China, are said to carry on a “new cold war”, as they are seeing each other as strategic competitors. The confrontation between the two giants has intensified since the trade war started by the Trump administration and will continue for years to come. Under current international situation, instead of stuck between the US and China, Japan should take its own initiative to mediate between the two giants. Japan has its advantage for doing such a job, as Japan is both Western and Eastern. It also has close security and economic relationships with both countries. No country is in a better position than Japan to practice the middle power strategy to help alleviate the geopolitical rivalry and improve the bilateral relationship between the US and China, and thus help rebuild the rules-based international order.

In addition, Japan should play a leadership role among the middle powers. If the US and China are not concerned about the stabilization of the rules-based international order, then middle powers should unite together to protect the order. The virtue of middle powers is internationalism, where cooperation with like-minded states in order to strengthen a liberal and open international order is key to any aspect of strategy (Soeya, 2012). More than ever middle powers will have to work together and be proactive and creative in their pursuit to save what they can of the rules-based order (Armstrong, 2019).

To better practice the middle power strategy, Japan needs to promote soft power diplomacy. Traditionally the PKO (Peace Keeping Operation) and ODA (Official Development Assistance) were said to be Japan's major contribution to the international society. However, both the military and economic means have their limitations. As Japanese economy witnessed so-called “lost decade” in the 1990s and another two decades of low growth in the 21th century, Japan's ODA had to be adjusted and even cut down. The limitation of activities of Japan's Self-Defense Forces is also self-evident. Therefore, soft power is a reasonable choice for Japan to broaden and deepen its international engagement. According to a study report by the Brand Finance (2021), Japan ranked No.2 in the recently released Global Soft Power Index 2021, only next to Germany. There is no doubt that Japan has abundant soft power resources. The problem is how to transform these soft power resources into effective policies. Expanding public diplomacy should be one of the ways for Japan to make full use of its soft power. A sophisticated middle power strategy needs to rely more on soft power diplomacy.

3.4 Strengthening the Rule of Law

The crisis of the liberal international order is largely attributed to the weakening of the rule of law, including the insufficiency of international laws and the low consciousness of the spirit of the rule of law. For example, while many Asian nations advocate the need for a rules-based regional order, there are different visions of the rules-based regional order within or beyond the existing framework of international law (Nasu and Tan, 2017). As a result, territorial disputes such as maritime disputes in the East China Sea and the South China Sea become more challenging for related countries to solve. When international law, norms and rules lose their authority, power politics will rein the order.

To rebuild the rules-based international order, it is urgent to strengthen the rule of law in the international society. There is an opportunity for Japan to play a role in the development of international law in global governance in the existing institutions, such as the G20 and the climate change regime. Bringing normative, international law and rules-based approaches to these institutions can be critical contribution that will prevent them from solely focusing on power (Tay, 2015).

Japan has its advantage to shoulder the duty of strengthening the rule of law. Not only does Japan proactively cooperate with international legal organizations such as the International Court of Justice (ICJ) and the International Criminal Court, but prominent Japanese legal scholars have long served as justices on the ICJ—a testament to the importance the country places on the rule of law (Hornung, 2018).

4. Conclusion

There exists some consensus that the liberal international order now is in crisis. It is both urgent and important to rebuild the rules-based international order. If the liberal international order is based on the Pax Americana, then the rules-based international order is based on the shared norms and consensus of most members of the international community. Given the strategic rivalry between the US and China, Japan should take the duty and leadership to rebuild the rules-based international order. Specifically speaking, Japan can play the following roles to contribute to the rebuilding of the rules-based international order: taking the leadership; promoting summit diplomacy; practicing the middle power strategy; and strengthening the rule of law.

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要旨

「ルールに基づく国際秩序」の再建における日本の役割

謝 志海

近年、国際社会において、戦後以来、アメリカが主導してきたいわゆる「自由主義国際秩序」(Liberal International Order)あるいは「ルールに基づく国際秩序」(Rules-Based International Order)が崩壊の危機に直面していると言われている。「ルールに基づく国際秩序」の再建はひとつの話題となっている。本稿はこの国際秩序の再建に、日本がどのような役割を果たすべきかを検証してゆく。論文は概ね、下記3つの部分に構成される：第1、自由主義国際秩序の危機；第2、ルールに基づく国際秩序の再建への試み；第3、日本の役割。論文の重点である第3部分では、リーダーシップの発揮、サミット外交、ミドルパワー戦略、法的支配等の側面から「ルールに基づく国際秩序」の再建における日本の役割について詳しく論ずる。