

Japan's Outreach at Crossroads

Trilateral All-Japan Strategy Needed

By Kohei MURAYAMA



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In an opinion piece published in the *Wall Street Journal*, Michael Auslin, director of Japan Studies at the American Enterprise Institute, devised a new term to describe negative US sentiment toward Japan. While the 1980s had “Japan bashing,” giving way in the early 1990s to “Japan passing,” Auslin wrote, now “Tokyo and Washington have entered a new era, which I would like to call ‘Japan dissing.’”

The reproachful view inside the Beltway goes back to April last year, when *Washington Post* columnist Al Kamen described then Japanese Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama as “hapless and increasingly loopy” due to his “flip-flop” policy over the relocation of U.S. Marine Corps Futenma Air Station in Okinawa.

It all stemmed from dashed hope for a change in Japan following the power transition from the clapped-out Liberal Democratic Party to the Democratic Party of Japan. Hatoyama’s quick disappearance did little to advance such hope. The much-anticipated “yes you Kan” government of his successor Prime Minister Naoto Kan has so far shown disappointing handling of domestic and foreign policies.

The “Japan dissing” sentiment is probably not limited to the United States. It can be heard from many corners of the world, especially in Asia, as Japan is widely seen as “the loser” after failing to turn around its economy, giving up the position of the second-biggest economy to China, caving in to Beijing’s pressure over a ship collision incident near the disputed Senkaku Islands and seeing Russian President Dmitry Medvedev become the first Russian leader to visit one of the four disputed islands off Hokkaido.

Also in the economic arena, the global status of Japanese companies – even auto giant Toyota Motor Corp. – is increasingly sinking due to their inability to adapt to rapidly evolving market needs and intensifying competition.

There are many reasons behind Japan’s declining prestige. But still, allowing the international community to go as far as “insulting” Japan suggests that fundamental problems underlie the way information reaches overseas. It is about time, if not too late, for the government, mass media and private companies to cooperate to establish an “all-Japan” outreach strategy, departing from domestic-oriented communications.

Silent Japan

Most recently, the Senkaku incident and the Russian president’s visit to Kunashiri Island shed light on the weakness of the government’s outreach arrangements.

China took full advantage of media exposure to disseminate its position and pressure Japan, waging a blistering information war through its Foreign Ministry and state-run Xinhua News Agency. It even repeatedly canceled

bilateral summit talks, while also curtailing tourism to Japan, suspending political and cultural exchanges, and stopping exports of rare earths.

Meanwhile, Japan continued to restrain its response, hoping to defuse the situation through dialogue. But the apparent weak-kneed approach resulted in a worst-case scenario. The government failed to sufficiently reach out for greater understanding of its insistence that a “territorial dispute does not exist over the Senkaku Islands,” thus leading foreign media to report that a long-standing territorial row prevails between China and Japan, giving the impression to the international audience that the two countries are fighting on equal ground.

Making things worse, Japan was widely reported as capitulating to Beijing’s pressure as it released the Chinese fishing boat’s captain soon after China’s Premier Wen Jiabao refused to meet Kan on the sidelines of a U.N. General Assembly session in New York and appeared before reporters to warn Japan of taking “further action.”

Some diplomats and experts say that China was effectively the real loser as the international community witnessed Beijing’s seeming willingness to use any tools at its disposal in pursuit of its interests. But some others are critical of Japan for allowing China to test its economic and political power to balk at international pressure.

“For Tokyo to decide to release the Chinese captain in the face of such overreaction only teaches Beijing that its policies worked,” Dean Cheng, research fellow at the Heritage Foundation’s Asian Studies Center, wrote in a commentary. “This is an extremely dangerous precedent not only for Japan but for the large East Asian region and, ultimately, even for the United States.”

After all, Japan was undoubtedly the loser. Even lawmakers of the ruling party and government officials have admitted that initial response in explaining Tokyo’s position overseas was inadequate in terms of quality, quantity and speed. Contrary to its real intentions, the government’s weak outreach strategy has led many other countries to see Japan as a nation opting to stay silent.

Apparently taking Japan’s stance for granted, Russia’s president visited the disputed island at a timing suspected by some analysts as having been arranged by Beijing and Moscow in a “tacit concerted move” against Japan.

Government Action

Repeating makeshift outreach efforts without a well prepared strategy backfires at a time of real urgency. The Senkaku incident turned out to be a genuine wake-up call to Kan’s government, leading the Prime Minister’s Office to assemble a working group of senior officials in charge of public affairs at all related ministries and agencies to craft a new outreach strategy.

In December, the group compiled a paper dubbed “Basic Strategy for Global Communications.” It calls for prompt and effective delivery of information overseas in English and various other languages by unifying the government’s global outreach, collaborating with the private sector and enhancing communication methods.

“Breaking away from a sense of introspection and stagnation, dynamic and confident interaction with the world will be sought,” the paper says.

Stressing the need to end the current method of ministries and agencies promoting public relations separately, the paper says, “The limited government resources available for global communications need to be used effectively.”

“Information sharing will be thoroughly pursued among government ministries and agencies including related organizations; duplications of efforts will be avoided; resources pooled in activities where collaboration will lead to more effectiveness; and the government will act in unison,” it says.

Noting that Japan’s image overseas is largely shaped by the private sector and well-known individuals, the paper calls for “public-private collaboration...in priority areas of global communications” and stresses the need for “well coordinated and coherent” transmission of images and messages in line with “domestic, export, and overseas operations strategies of the relevant parties in the economic arena.”

The paper identifies three priority areas: promoting Japan’s attractiveness through Japanese life and culture such as food, fashion, music, animated films, tourism and health care services; demonstrating the strengths of Japan’s innovative technology, services and social systems in dealing with the aging population and climate change; and differentiating from other countries by emphasizing the underlying philosophy of Japan’s strengths and allures.

As for enhancing communication methods, the paper calls for providing information “promptly in appropriate foreign languages” for issues attracting high levels of international interest, seeking outreach not only through media in major advanced economies but also in emerging countries, especially in Asia, adapting to new media, and making use of not only media but also think tanks, and international conferences and other forums that have international influence.

Media’s Role

The new strategy is still just paperwork. It is easier said than done. The questions are whether the old high walls between ministries and agencies can be removed, timely delivery of information in English and other languages can be realized, coordination with the private sector is really possible and professional media strategists can be accepted, as in the cases of the United States and other countries.

In figuring out the solutions, Japanese media organizations have a big role to play, and also face a daunting challenge of “breaking away from a sense of introspection and stagnation” as the government highlights in its new strategy.

Japanese news agencies should be the first providers of breaking straight news to promptly and accurately send out information overseas. In the same respect, Japanese media should also be the ones to file in-depth stories in a timely manner.

But again, it is also not so easy for news organizations to build up outgoing networks and services in English and other languages. Direct



Zhan Qixiong, the captain of a Chinese fishing boat that collided with a Japan Coast Guard ship off the disputed Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea, flashes victory signs as he boards a chartered flight carrying him home at Ishigaki airport near the islands.

translation from Japanese articles tends to result in incomprehensible stories in other languages. Specialized news writing know-how is needed for stories to be well understood by foreign readers.

The easiest answer may be using foreign mass media. But excessive reliance without an established strategy will result in unintended news reports due to differences in viewpoints, and in inaccurate stories at times as foreign media have limited manpower, information sources and backgrounds in Japan.

The prolonged global economic slump is making the situation more complicated. Hit by financial difficulties, foreign news organizations are moving to downsize or even retreat from Japan, while Japanese media are also working to streamline their operations.

But on the other hand, foreign media have started to depend more heavily on information provided by their Japanese counterparts. It has become a common practice for more than 200 foreign media to quote Kyodo News, which has a history of offering English services for more than 50 years and a distribution network around the globe, in reporting about Japan.

In the case of Toyota’s recalls last year, Kyodo was quoted by a record 900 foreign news outlets. Also providing Chinese and Korean services, Kyodo saw its Chinese news website break down due to massive access when the ship collisions occurred.

Given the shrinking domestic market, Japanese media should consider the international situation as an “opportunity.” Instead of intensifying competition for a limited pie, they should work together to build up the world’s No. 1 syndicate for providing Japan and Asian news by complementing each other and sharing assets to cushion financial burdens.

Ultimately, the government, private companies and mass media may coordinate either directly or indirectly to establish a trilateral all-Japan outreach mechanism which can readily compete with growing global media conglomerates. But it could turn out to be just paperwork as long as some politicians continue to question why Japan needs to be No. 1. **JS**

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