


Policy Forum 01-06A: Managing Perception Gaps in the US-Japan Partnership

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Managing Perception Gaps in the US-Japan Partnership

By Katsuhisa Furukawa and Amiko Nobori

Contents:

[I. Introduction](#)

[II. Essay by Katsuhisa Furukawa and Amiko Nobori](#)

[III. Nautilus Invites Your Responses](#)

I. Introduction

The following essay was contributed by Katsuhisa Furukawa, a Research Associate at the Council on Foreign Relations, and Amiko Nobori, a Visiting Scholar at the Sigur Center for Asian Studies, George Washington University.

The authors argue that the media in both the US and Japan distort the true nature of the other party, creating gaps between perception and reality. They warn that the perception gap must be closed to help build the strategic partnership between the two countries.

II. Essay by Katsuhisa Furukawa and Amiko Nobori

"Managing Perception Gaps in the U.S.-Japan Partnership" by Katsuhisa Furukawa and Amiko Nobori

Both the U.S. and Japan have consistently stated that they regard their bilateral alliance as one of the major pillars of their national security strategies. "Low level" political events, however, have continuously interceded to prevent the two countries from acting on their pledges to strengthen the strategic alliance partnership. The United States and Japan will be increasingly required to carefully manage their different perceptions over non-strategic factors, most of which used to be considered domestic issues in both countries.

The latest round of difficulties was set off by the arrest of U.S. Air Force Sergeant Timothy Woodland on charges of having raped a Japanese woman in Okinawa on June 29, 2001. Far from commemorating the U.S.-Japan summit meeting that took place right after this incident, American media began questioning the Japanese judicial system's commitment to civil liberties in connection with this arrest. The U.S. media carried articles introducing the concerns of American officials about the suspect's human rights under this system and the anger of the U.S. servicemen in Japan that Sergeant Woodland was a sacrificial lamb. More recently, the U.S. media even combined their criticism of the Japanese judiciary system with that of the Japanese government's approval of the history textbooks that allegedly gloss over Japanese atrocities during World War II, and concluded that "awkward Japan" will have a hard time becoming a first-rank power.

Tit-for-tat, Japanese news coverage sought to contrast the U.S.'s concerns for the human rights of its serviceman with its relative disregard for those of his alleged victim. Many Japanese readers have seized on the U.S. media's decision to combine two totally different issues--history textbooks and the judicial system--as an attempt to criticize Japan's system and policy simply for not conforming to U.S. "global" standards.

These mutual recriminations come at a time when serious discussion about the future of the U.S.-Japan relationship--particularly over defining the new roles of the United States and Japan in shaping a stable environment in Asia--is sorely needed. Rather than advancing a constructive dialogue, the media of both countries are contributing to a growing gap in perceptions through incomplete or misleading reports.

The Japanese news media's coverage of the alleged rape incident has been rather emotional. Without reporting the details of this incident, the media dealt with this case as if they were already convinced of this serviceman's guilt. The Japanese media simply focused on how long it would take for the U.S. to hand over the suspect to the Japanese police and fiercely attacked the U.S. for delaying this transfer. The media scarcely referred to the fact that convicted rapists are more severely punished in the U.S. than in Japan. Moreover, even before being handed over to the

Japanese police, the suspect had already been in "virtual custody" and had voluntarily subjected himself to intense questioning by the Japanese police (presumably at the urging of the U.S. government), but the media barely appreciated this initiative. Also, Japan is the only country to which the U.S. government has ever agreed to hand over an American servicemen suspected of a crime before conviction. Experts say that Japan has the best bilateral agreement in the world that governs the presence of U.S. forces. However, again, this aspect of the relationship has rarely been stressed in the Japanese media.

On the other hand, the U.S. media also nurtures misleading perceptions about Japan, as its presentation of events misses several important elements.

First, in bringing up the issue of history textbooks, it is inappropriate to speak of Japan as though it were a single entity. The U.S. media presumes that the Japanese government and public solidly support a conservative view of Japan's history education. This is simply not true. The appearance of conservative voices should not be construed as a dangerous expression of Japan's nationalism or militarism, but rather as a reflection of increasing pluralism in Japanese society in the midst of globalization. In fact, another new liberal historical school, as represented by the historian Yoshihiko Amino, rejects the traditional conservative concept of "national history" and has also gained popular attention.

The controversial history textbook is only one of eight textbooks that the Japanese government approved for junior high-school education. This textbook has already been marginalized at the school education, nor does it represent a mainstream view of Japanese history education by any standard. The presence of "liberal" or non-conservative textbooks, which have been dominant since the end of the Second World War, remains strong.

The American media criticizes that Japan's school textbooks do not emphasize the Japanese imperial army's massacre at the Nanking or their sexual enslavement of women as much as they do the U.S. atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. This criticism is not false but misses an important fact that these issues have already been extensively covered by various reference materials as well as numerous books, articles and media reports. History textbooks are not the only tool for learning history after all.

The U.S. criticism of Japan's judicial system is not without merit but also overlooks important facts. As the U.S. media and the U.N. Human Rights Committee point out, Japan's handling of suspects could surely be improved. But it is not appropriate to base criticism of the Japan's entire judicial system on the fact that the Japanese public prosecutors secure convictions in an astonishing 99 percent of criminal cases. Suggestions that this conviction rate is the result of serious human rights violations, including coercion of suspects through torture, misrepresent the problem. In fact, the suspected American servicemen can meet with their lawyers flexibly and the U.S. government has announced its satisfaction with the human rights conditions of these servicemen. Besides, the above "astonishing 99 percent of criminal cases" constitute less than 60 percent of all criminal cases presented to the public prosecutors. More than 40 percent of the criminal cases are not even prosecuted. There are also claims among Japanese critics that these prosecutors are overly cautious: unless they are almost absolutely sure that they can secure a conviction, they are very reluctant to prosecute a case.

Frustration has been mounting in Japan over the criminal acts committed by American servicemen. Take, for example, their crimes since last fall: murder, arson, robbery, violence, drunken driving, illegal acts of obscenity, etc. And Japan has been enduring numerous crimes by American servicemen since the U.S. occupation started in 1945. It is little wonder that the Japanese public doubts the American military leadership's ability to maintain discipline among its servicemen.

Truly, Japan may look awkward. But so does the U.S. in the eyes of many Japanese.

Despite the arrival of the information age, we are witnessing a divergence of perceptions over a wide range of issues on both sides of the Pacific. It will remain vital for the two countries to avoid misunderstandings that could develop into a major political confrontation. The recent controversy should provide impetus and serve as a lesson as the two countries adapt their strategic partnership for the twenty-first century.

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The Northeast Asia Peace and Security Network invites your responses to this essay. Please send responses to: napsnet-reply@nautilus.org . Responses will be considered for redistribution to the network only if they include the author's name, affiliation, and explicit consent.

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[Return to top](#)

[back to top](#)

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