The Role of the Nation State in Addressing Global Challenges: Japan–UK Perspectives

2–3 October 2014
About the UK–Japan Global Seminar

The second conference in the UK–Japan Global Seminar Series was held in Tokyo on 2–3 October 2014 on the theme of ‘The Role of the Nation State in Addressing Global Challenges: Japan–UK Perspectives’. It considered what role individual leadership, public opinion and domestic governmental and non-governmental institutions play, in Japan and the UK, in contributing to an effective national response to three critical thematic challenges: the problem of failing states; natural and man-made disasters; and complex democratic transitions. It also analysed the suitability of current institutional architectures for addressing critical issues, both globally and regionally, to assess their effectiveness and sufficiency in East Asia.

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Event Participants

Aiko Doden, Senior Commentator, NHK

Nigel Fisher, O.C., former Assistant Secretary-General and Regional Humanitarian Coordinator for the Syria Crisis, United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA), Amman

Kiichi Fujiwara, Professor of International Politics, University of Tokyo

Andrew Gamble, Professor of Politics, Queens’ College, University of Cambridge

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Tim Hitchens, British Ambassador to Japan

Yuichi Hosoya, Professor, Faculty of Law, Keio University

Takashi Inoguchi, Professor Emeritus, University of Tokyo; President, University of Niigata Prefecture

Jeffrey Kingston, Director of Asian Studies, Temple University Japan

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The Rt Hon Sir John Major KG CH, Prime Minister of the United Kingdom (1990-97)

David Malone, Rector, United Nations University; Under-Secretary General, United Nations

Lt-Gen. Goro Matsumura, Commanding General, North Eastern Army, Japan Ground Self-defence Force

Lutz Mez, Professor in Political Science, Freie Universität Berlin

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Meeting Summary

Day One: Thursday 2 October

The discussions on day one began with a sobering assessment of the challenges facing the global community, and the overarching question of how best to manage risk. Tim Hitchens, the British ambassador to Japan, talked about the significance of failing states and of stalled transitions in the Middle East. He addressed a broad range of challenges, including the risk of making the planet uninhabitable as a result of climate change and the risk of pandemics. Yohei Sasakawa echoed this line, and highlighted how quickly things change, drawing attention particularly to how the challenges of the 21st century have eclipsed expectations of it being an era of peace and positive relations.

Sir John Major reiterated this theme and argued that the world is becoming more perilous. He further amplified the discussion by focusing on a key set of regional issues that are particular to Asia. Sir John emphasized the importance of recognizing Asia not merely as an economic phenomenon, but as a profoundly political part of the world. He itemized the risks of China’s growing military presence in the region, and the risk of conflict that is brought about less by design and more by accident. He discussed the challenge of a nuclear North Korea, the risk of conflict within the region and also more broadly the risk of nuclear proliferation. He talked about the risk of popular nationalism and the importance of solidifying
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democratic values, especially relevant in the current context of Hong Kong. Moreover, he pointed to the importance of energy and resource security with reference to Tibet and access to water supplies.

However, the good news is that the world, and particularly Britain and Japan, seem well prepared to address those challenges. According to Sir John, the nation state is up to the challenge and is not derelict. Great Britain and Japan share a great deal of will and common resolve. In tackling these issues, this represents a very significant change on the part of Japan over the last few years.

Tim Hitchens talked about Japan’s new proactive diplomacy, making a pitch for a more integrated approach by Britain and Japan. He emphasized the importance of a joint approach to global challenges that not only tackles individual problems and those immediate to specific countries, but also works together to respond to truly global challenges. Both Tomohiko Taniguchi and Yuichi Hosoya re-emphasized the idea that Japan is ready for such cooperation. Taniguchi argued for the importance of Japan being a goodwill investor or ‘broken window mender’. Professor Hosoya highlighted the importance of values diplomacy as part of the new agenda of the Abe administration.

Considering what can be done within this positive context is the next step. European countries, and specifically Britain, can be involved. They have served as a successful example of how to build institutions that can promote security and serve as a mediator. Sir John went a step further, providing two concrete proposals for what Britain could do working individually and also together with Japan. The first was an innovative idea for a ‘Marshall Plan’ for education in East Asia. The second was a proposal for enhancing Japan’s global presence by establishing it as a member of an expanded UN Security Council.

Failing States
The first discussion, on failing states, dealt with issues that international relations specialists and policy-makers have grappled with for many years. The speakers highlighted the importance of providing a clear definition of the term. Akihiko Tanaka singled out two key issues that mark failing states: incompetence; and having a high propensity for conflict. Adam Roberts drew attention to the need for more caution in using the term too liberally, for fear of generating a backlash from countries that are inappropriately labelled. It was also made clear that there is no ‘one-size-fits-all’ solution when contemplating the problem of state fragility.

The discussion led to the following set of policy recommendations and further ideas for future discussion. First, greater creativity on the part of governments is necessary in addressing the problems of failing states. As David Malone pointed out, financial resources should be used in a more imaginative way, such as off-budget solutions, in order to promote stability. It is also necessary to prioritize failing states that are in most need of attention from the international community, and specifically from Britain and Japan. The sustainability of international involvement in the effort to create more stability among the most vulnerable states must also be considered. A long-term approach is necessary instead of short-term fixes and simple responses, such as sponsoring elections as an exit strategy for reducing the involvement of the international community. Therefore, time horizons must be considered that contemplate how long rather than how much is enough for active international involvement.

Furthermore, the concrete areas in which there is particular need for help from Britain and Japan must be examined. The range of issues in which Britain and Japan can be legitimately involved should be considered, such as educational and maternity health support in failing states. Moreover, it is necessary to consider how to synchronize efforts with other states in order to promote greater stability. It must be borne in mind that this will not be easy. As David Steinberg pointed out, in the case of Myanmar (Burma), domestic politics could complicate the process in the response of Britain and Japan to challenges faced.
Thus, rather than simply being a technocratic problem, there is a crucial political dimension that makes the issue more complex.

**Disaster Management**

In the second session, on disaster management, the overall message of the panel was positive, providing some reassurance in the aftermath of the Fukushima triple disaster. Lt-Gen. Goro Matsumura, of the Japan Self-Defense Forces (JSDF), highlighted how much the JSDF have since achieved at a practical level on the ground. Equally important, he pointed out the shift in public attitudes towards the JSDF within Japan. The success of close collaboration with the US military, through Operation Tomodachi, has had a profound impact in changing public attitudes in Japan to a *jietai* that was seen as lacking in full legitimacy in the past.

Moreover, Lt-Gen. Matsumura pointed out that close collaboration in the context of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has been crucial in strengthening the role of the JSDF regionally. Taniguchi further stated that this shift in attitudes has had a positive effect on foreign policy. Thus, the JSDF are longer seen as a *de facto* military, nor as an agent of fear, but as an agent of love and compassion.

Margareta Wahlström presented a set of very specific policy recommendations. First, greater integration is necessary among the different bureaucratic actors in the process of disaster relief coordination. Moreover, means of dealing with excessive ‘stovepiping’ of overseas development assistance (ODA) must be developed. More emphasis must be placed on long-term reconstruction. Greater capacity for individual countries is needed in their role of engagement with the international community, as well as greater international coordination. Furthermore, closer civil–military relationships and more effective coordination are necessary.

Taniguchi also indicated the need for a more developed institutional memory. This will be more feasible in Japan in the context of the return of a reassuring degree of political stability to the office of the prime minister. There remain some important questions to consider in this regard. These cover issues such as where Britain and Japan can cooperate in the field of disaster management; whether challenges can be addressed through refining existing institutional mechanisms; and whether Japan’s National Security Council should develop a crisis management mechanism along the lines of the UK ‘Cobra’ emergency committee. It may be necessary to examine more critically some of the shortcomings that underpin disaster management, both in Japan and further afield. Sir David Warren noted the importance of accurate risk assessment, and the danger that exaggerated risk can pose with man-made and natural disasters. It may be useful to focus on the regulatory mechanism as part of the disaster prevention process, as opposed to disaster management. Moreover, more attention could be paid to the role of the private sector in this area of cooperation with the government, both internationally and domestically.

**Democracy in Transition**

The final session of day one, on democracy in transition, was the most abstract of the day’s discussions, and required closer consideration of the substantive areas in which the two countries can cooperate. The following were the key points that came out of the discussion. First, democracy is not guaranteed as a political model. Second, democracies are fragile, and can fluctuate in terms of where they are positioned on the spectrum of political regimes. Less than half of the members of the UN are unambiguously secure, stable democracies, and all countries can improve in terms of their democratic output. However, it is reassuring that there is an appetite on the part of both Britain and Japan to be engaged in the process of promoting democracy.
As Professor Hosoya stated, a new emphasis on values is emerging, based on the idea of creating an arc of freedom and prosperity. This emphasis on values is quite unusual in the context of Japanese politics. However, seen within the Asian political context, it is necessary to consider whether such an arc will be feasible, or if it will provoke a blowback by some of the key regional actors. For example, the risk of such repercussions were considered when, as foreign minister, Taro Aso introduced the idea of a quadrilateral initiative presenting and reinforcing democratic values between Japan, Australia, the United States and India. The then Australian prime minister, Kevin Rudd, was very critical, arguing that such an approach would risk increasing China’s fear of containment and thus contribute to a further deterioration of relations between the key actors in the region.

Furthermore, David Malone stated that the West is often seen as being overly ‘preachy’ in its engagement with the idea of democratization. This is particularly relevant in the context of East Asia, where North Korea all too often criticizes the West for defining democracy under its terms. Although this is a self-serving argument in the case of North Korea, the idea of respect must be recognized as an increasingly important part of the relations between nominal friends as well as enemies in East Asia.

This is a key point in relations between Japan and South Korea. One of the most frustrating elements of the current discussion is that the two countries seem incapable of cooperating despite their natural convergence of interest in dealing with some of these challenges, whether China or North Korea. Yet, in their own ways, all of these states articulate a common desire for respect and recognition of their own cultural and political traditions. This holds true for both Japan and South Korea.

The current challenge for these nation states is to move beyond this point to the next step of cooperation. In fact, considering that many states are sensitive to being told from the outside how best to manage their own political affairs, Andrew Gamble emphasized the role that international institutions could play in promoting the democratic agenda. In this case, the focus then shifts to determining which international institutions are best equipped to play this role, and the ways in which Japan and Britain can influence them in a way that advances a broad objective. Moreover, the specific means that should be adopted in promoting further democratization must be examined. Elections are important, but are not enough. Constitutional foundations are critical, and must have relevance and local legitimacy to the countries in question.

Social and educational initiatives will be vital in promoting a greater awareness of the long-term significance of democracy. As Professor Takenaka pointed out, context matters. Democratic values are more likely to be embraced by states if they are seen as a ticket or passport to a larger club of democratic nations, which offer not only political recognition but also economic advantage and institutional support. However, this presents one of the biggest problems of the democratization agenda. The club of democratic nations is no longer as secure as it once was as a result of the rise of political populism in Europe and elsewhere, which is creating alternative political models. These models are becoming more popular in a climate of increasing demagoguery, representing a real challenge to democratic ideals.

**Day Two: Friday 3 October**

Day two of the conference focused on three specific case studies of Syria, Fukushima and Myanmar. The sessions examined the critical issues and possible ways in which nation states could effectively deal with the challenges faced in the crisis in Syria; the disaster in Fukushima; and the democratic transition of Myanmar. As the panellists on day one established, the nation state still has a prominent role to play in facing these challenges. The key theme seemed to be governance, and the roles that various actors at the national, international and local levels could play in establishing greater governance. Each case indicated
that in the absence of a strong nation state founded on accountability and transparency, humanitarian and development assistance will not be sustainable, nor will it link to a long-term solution. Furthermore, the panellists discussed the potential roles of Japan and the UK in engaging with countries, and provided specific policy recommendations in each case.

Syria
The first session, on Syria, examined the crisis of the nation state in the Middle East, and what other nations and international organizations, such as the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), could do to address the lack of effective governance structures. Yoshiji Nogami pointed out the structural tension between the concept of the nation state and other unifying and motivating forces, namely pan-Arabism. The panellists agreed that the governance of Syria is fragmented and complicated; it is thus necessary to work with the numerous actors who make up Syria and are involved in the crisis, including the Assad regime, local actors, refugee host states such as Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon, as well as other countries of the region, including the Arab states and Iraq and Iran.

Kiichi Fujiwara pointed out that, although necessary, neither military involvement nor humanitarian assistance alone will fundamentally transform Syria and the greater region. Looking at the bigger picture, he argued that the root problem lies in the lack of governance structures and an accountability framework. He proposed the potential solution of establishing an accountability framework that clarifies and limits external states’ involvement and that is acceptable by local communities. Specifically, he suggested Japan’s potential role in working as a neutral middleman between Western states and Turkey.

Lord Williams of Baglan stated that it is highly unlikely that Syria will return to the status quo ante, and that we must think about how Syria and other states in the Middle East should be reconstituted. He reflected on the recent failures of international governance in addressing the crisis, and argued for the need for the UN new envoy to engage with the Syrian government. Highlighting the roles that nation states could play in the refugee crisis, he focused on the need to understand the specificities of each refugee host country, better to discern how they can help and be helped. Specifically, he proposed a possible joint project between Jordan and the UK involving unarmed military capabilities.

Fukushima
The second session, on Fukushima, reiterated the need for better governance in the nation state, focusing on the crucial elements of accountability and transparency. The discussion also brought up the concepts of central and local governance and how to balance the two in planning future energy policy. Sir David Warren raised the importance of effective risk management in the wider context of the state’s role.
Kiyoshi Kurokawa highlighted the lack of transparency and accountability by the Japanese government in handling the Fukushima accident and the consequent loss in public trust in the government. He explained that since the accident and the publishing of recommendations by various investigative panels, there has been little improvement in the governance and development of a safety culture. He recommended greater localization and regionalization of the energy industry in order to deal with the issue of regulatory capture, and proposed establishing a ‘smart grid’.

Jeffery Kingston set out the necessary steps for the government to regain trust, starting with providing precise risk calculation and risk mitigation. Echoing the problems raised about governance, he further pointed to the tension within the nation state between the central and local governments in risk management and response. He noted that the evacuation responsibility in Japan is currently outsourced to small towns with little capacity to arrange such action.

Lutz Mez provided a global context for the discussion on nuclear power in the future energy mix, referring to policy debates held in Germany and the surprisingly fast development of the renewable energy industry. He drew attention to the need to develop a long-term strategy for the future of Japan’s energy mix, as well as adequate transparency and monitoring of the energy sector. Overall, the discussion underlined the potential opportunities that crises and accidents can create in improving a country’s mechanisms for emergency responses, developing new solutions and promoting better governance.

Myanmar
The final session, on Myanmar, covered some issues in common with the Syria session, particularly the significance of the nation state’s capacity for governance and the need to understand the specific roles that the actors involved could play in the transition to democracy. Aiko Doden noted that past cases of democratic transitions have resulted in their own unique form of democracy and the peace process in Myanmar must be home-grown. David Steinberg echoed the importance of strong political structures for a successful transition to democracy. Identifying the factors that are different in Myanmar compared with other Southeast Asian countries that have experienced democratic transition, he pointed out the significant role that the commitment to a strong parliamentary system and weakened military had in Indonesia’s democratic transition.

Thant Myint-U also addressed the issue of the weak nation state, and identified the need for a stronger nation state with a greater governance capacity in order for foreign aid to be able to make a difference. As a specific policy recommendation, he pointed to the need for a substantive taxation system, as most economic revenue currently goes into private pockets. He also argued for the potential solution of federalism as an effective governance structure for managing the conflicting ethnic groups. He brought up the need to negotiate a single nationwide ceasefire agreement as the first step in establishing a treaty framework for the new government after the forthcoming elections.

The uncertainty of the political situation and the weakness of the nation state also act as obstacles to the economic development of the country. As Jonathan Head stated, short-term investment with direct, immediate returns is booming, but political instability means that investors are still wary of making long-term investments. Furthermore, the political economy centred on the minority groups that has emerged over the past 15 years will be difficult to unwind.

Another reoccurring theme was the importance of local actors, and how external bodies can work with them. Yohei Sasakawa highlighted the positive role that Japan, through the Nippon Foundation, has played in fostering local ownership and self-sustainability by working with villages in Myanmar to promote education and medical support. Noticeably, the local villages were given the responsibility to
choose the people in the community who could lead projects. He also argued for the need to invest in the ‘software’ of human resources through education and training. David Steinberg also pointed to the potentially large role Japan could play in assisting Myanmar in view of its lack of involvement in ethnic conflicts, and having provided neutral aid to the country during the 1960s and 1970s.

Conclusions

The discussions at all of the sessions held during this seminar indicated that nation states have no choice but to be involved in these critical issues, with the ramifications for our own societies being the consequence of states failing to engage. Thus, the question is not whether to, but how to, engage. The discussions clarified and fleshed out the various levels of governance within the nation state at which there can be engagement, the various actors to engage with, and the appropriate timing of involvement. The panellists provided concrete policy recommendations, emphasizing the need for early engagement with local actors, especially in the cases of Syria and Myanmar. The sessions also brought to light the need for a framework of strong political structures to be put in place in order for external assistance to be applicable and effective. Moreover, in addition to institutional and technical ‘hardware’, there must be ‘software’ that will allow accountable and transparent governance to function, as discussed in the case of Fukushima. Such foundations are fundamental to the formation of democratic relationships between the government, or the nation state, and the public. Furthermore, the UK and Japan must not only think of themselves as external actors, but must also be aware of the models of democracy that we project to the world, especially at a time when the need for regulatory reform is pressing in Japan and populist and isolationist sentiments are growing in the UK. The discussions held over the past two days should lead us to re-examine the centralized governance structures in our own nation states. As the roles of nation states and globalization evolve, we must apply these lessons and continue to develop our long-term and ‘out-of-the box’ thinking.