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The Ideal of Soft Power Diplomacy for a Liberal International Order

By WATANABE Yasushi

Last month, I attended a lecture meeting and seminar on soft power hosted by the London-based Daiwa Anglo-Japanese Foundation. This meeting gave me the opportunity to extensively exchange ideas with ambassadors and other dignitaries from major countries, which was a fruitful experience to me. At the meeting, I heard many people express anxieties about the future of international order itself rather than individual issues lying between Japan and China and between Japan and South Korea. Of course, behind their concerns was the Crimean crisis that was becoming increasingly tense. The option of imposing military sanctions on Russia will be too high a cost to the West. Economic sanctions may be somewhat effective in the long term. However, unlike the Cold War era, in the current situation in which countries around the world are closely interconnected by global interdependence, economic sanctions are unlikely to work at least as the solution to the pressing issue of the Crimean crisis. That is, hard power has limitations. This leads us to consider the option of, for example, increasing international pressure on Russia, or of excluding Russia from the Group of Eight (G-8). This option means depriving Russia of its allure, reliability and legitimacy, that is, soft power. However, if this approach is ineffective to prompt Russian President Vladimir Putin to listen to the West, it will have limitations. Many people present at the meeting were concerned that a similar situation was being created by China in the East China Sea and South China Sea. Their concerns were about the fact that emerging economies, such as China and Russia, which were expected to act and rise as “responsible stakeholders” in the international community, are actually driving the “game of changing the status quo by power.” That is, they are becoming irresponsible game changers against a liberal international order based on the “rule of law” that was established through the empirical process from World War II to the Cold War. In addition, China and Russia are permanent members on the United Nations Security Council.

Meanwhile, the United States, which led the world in establishing a liberal international order in the post-World War II era, is now facing the rise of emerging economies and is also affected by its domestic political factors, such as financial distress,

war weariness and partisan confrontations. In addition, the Obama administration is committed to the principle of international cooperation, which means burden-sharing among countries around the world. For the Republican Party, which is becoming increasingly anti-Obama, some factions claim that the United States should adopt isolationism from the perspective of libertarianism and others criticize Obama for his “namby-pamby diplomacy” from the perspective of neo-conservatism. Indeed, the Republican Party is confused. In the eyes of Japan, the Obama administration appears weak in its commitment to Asia despite its policy shift to “rebalancing to Asia” Even if it is due to its consideration of China that the United States does not declare that Japan has the dominion over the Senkaku Islands (the Diaoyu Islands in Chinese), the United States looks weak-kneed as an ally of Japan. This is also the case with the U.S. handling of the issue of the Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ). In addition, the United States expressed disappointment over Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe’s visit to the Yasukuni war shrine last December. The U.S. ambassador to Japan, Caroline Kennedy, also expressed deep concern about the Japanese tradition of “drive-hunting” dolphins this January. Some complain that these U.S. expressions of “disappointment” and “opposition” are “too much” even if they are pieces of advice to a “friend.”

Japanese people are also irritated by South Korea’s repeated requests for apologies for what they did to the Koreans during World War II. The atmosphere of the so-called Korean fatigue is spreading around the country. Some say that South Korea may even start to blame Japan for its Korean Massacre in the aftermath of the Great Kanto Earthquake of 1923 someday. In addition, China and South Korea are promoting an anti-Japan “discount Japan propaganda campaign” and “tattletale” diplomacy all around the world. Amidst this situation, even if people know that the slogan, “Hate Korea and hate China!,” which is disseminated by some media outlets, is an extreme and dangerous idea, they find it more and more difficult to object to it according to their ordinary civil sense. Needless to say, North Korea is a country that is far more difficult to handle.

I sincerely hope that to break out of this stifling atmosphere, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and U.S. President Barack Obama will show the determination to protect a liberal international order to the last and stronger bilateral commitments for that at their meeting scheduled on April 24. From the standpoint of China and South Korea, the United States still retains a huge presence. If Japan unites with the United States, it can have a large presence and a negotiating power. Of course, Japan’s

solidarity with the United States is not a purpose in itself. To live in a liberal international order based on the “rule of law” is the best policy for boosting Japan’s national interest and the unity with the United States is an effective and beneficial strategy for that. It is essential for our country to induce rapidly growing emerging economies into a liberal international order and to show them that participating in the framework will be much more beneficial in the long term than trying to change it by force while Japan unites with the United States and keeps friendly relationships with the international community. At the above-mentioned meeting in London, many people argued that Great Britain, which used to be a close ally of Japan, should bolster its relationship with the Asian country from this perspective while the United States well understands the circumstances of Japan, which is its only ally. This way of thinking is exactly the same as mine. To make such more friends is an imminent challenge in promoting soft power diplomacy and is also the core value of soft power diplomacy.

(This is the English translation of an article written by WATANABE Yasushi, Professor, Keio University, which originally appeared on the e - Forum “Giron-Hyakushutsu” of GFJ on April 2, 2014.)