

Special Address

Risk Communication and the Formation of Public Opinion

Miura Lully

The End of the Post-Cold War Era

Today, it is clear that the major challenges of our time remain the same as at the end of the Cold War more than three decades ago: resolving interstate conflicts and deterring war. The “post-Cold War era” was a time when the powers driving change were merely flexing their muscles, and while we in the Western Bloc were discussing the peace dividend, China, a different kind of superpower, was steadily growing its power. Meanwhile, Russia was becoming increasingly motivated to intervene aggressively in former Soviet countries. In February 2022, it finally escalated its conflict with Ukraine into a full-scale war for the first time since 2014.

Russia’s war with Ukraine has forced the United States and the Western Bloc—which once saw themselves as the victors of the Cold War-era struggle between the East and West over institutions and ideology, ranging from economic systems to political culture—to revise their self-image and address the issue of how to coexist with the rising superpower of China. The long-prevailing argument after the end of the Cold War—that is, the discourse that we had won the Cold War—reinforced the belief that the rationale of democracy and liberalism, as well as all the other values we had defended, were superior and universal. However, in competitive coexistence with China, that argument could be reversed if the West were to fall.

The right side does not always win. This is a fact taken for granted in human history. We must not neglect our security efforts to defend the values we hold dear and avoid tasting the bitterness of defeat. I believe that this fact has been driven home during the past 20 years since entering the 21st century.

In light of these times, we must discuss the China risk, the Russia risk, as well as developed country risks. Developed country risks are, first and foremost, political risks, by which I am referring to public opinion risks. Second, developed country risks also include risks due to the difficulty of moving and enacting change, brought about by the structure of mature economies and societies. How can societies in developed countries avoid making the wrong choices? How can they powerfully enhance their national strength? These are the main challenges of the 21st century, at a time when the international order is about to change. In recent years, public opinion, in particular, has become increasingly important in the area of security.

Let us look back on various times in history within one country, the United States. World War II was a war of total mobilization. More than 10 percent of the total population participated in the military, which was an even higher mobilization rate than during the Revolutionary War or the American Civil War. It was not until the Korean and Vietnam wars that the size of its military force was reduced to well below half of that level. However, the existence of a draft turned young people toward the anti-war movement. Once the military moved to an

all-volunteer force, it learned that public support was essential to its ability to continue the war. It became more cautious about launching an intervention with no fixed term based solely on the decisions of politicians, unless buttressed by public support. At the same time, instead of revealing every aspect of the war to the public, the military tried to show only its highlights and attempted to keep the war at a distance from the people.

In this sense, the Gulf War was a war that emphasized only its glorious aspects, aiming for limited intervention in a short period of time with a large number of troops. However, the goal—of a professional military giving sound advice to politicians, of politicians making prudent decisions, and of keeping the bulk of military operations away from the public—was not always realized. The military had no power to stop what I once defined as “civilian wars,” wars promoted by the civilian population in a democracy despite the opposition of the military.

Since that time, there have also been revolutionary advances in technology and their practical applications in the field of information and communications. The Gulf War was talked about as the first war to be televised live. With the proliferation of the Internet and social media, the cycle of popular opinion either supporting or opposing war in an irregular and vacillating manner is becoming even shorter. Against this backdrop, the war on terrorism, which had been waged for two decades since 2001, lost public support. That said, it can be argued that the impact of these wars was not so great as to determine the fate of the country. In an era of confrontation with China, however, one compelling perspective is that it is not enough to only consider such interventionist wars or covert operations, which are currently being used extensively.

As long as a war does not necessarily stop at small-scale, limited intervention, the approach of keeping the public at a distance from the war, which became widespread as a lesson from the Vietnam War, may be reaching its limit. This is because modern wars must be prepared for and deterred in a manner that involves public opinion. In the unfortunate event that a war does break out, it will affect the lives of the people, and public support and understanding are essential to ensure the ability to continue the war both in name and in reality.

Lessons from the War in Ukraine

What can the Ukrainian experience with the Russian invasion teach us? The war in Ukraine has demonstrated once again that modern warfare is about the hearts and minds of the people. It also laid bare the fact that interstate war still remains a major threat. The lessons of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine are especially poignant for Japan, which finds itself in a particularly volatile security environment. These very real and vivid examples include the failure of nuclear stability to deter invasion by conventional forces, lack of vigilance around the former, populist intervention that overestimates its country’s military power, and the continuous procurement of support through highly effective information warfare.

For example, the danger exists that civilians will “overestimate their abilities” when push comes to shove, as is especially the case with President Putin and the older generation of Russian citizens. Conversely, public support, a key factor in supporting the military and government in the fight, can be too weak. As a country that should have been divided and

in disarray, Ukraine has been able to effectively appeal to the West and the international community for support precisely because it succeeded in rallying a significant body of domestic public opinion in response to the recent invasion. Ukraine has also been able to respond nimbly, such as by promptly disseminating information when events that deviate from the message they want to send occur. In this respect, the Ukrainian government at least excels in its strategic communication to the West. I will not list individual examples here, but the war between Russia and Ukraine is a great case study, both in the field of information warfare and in strategic communication as a whole.

Although we are not participating in the war itself, we are experiencing a kind of similar dynamic in that we are coordinating with NATO countries and others in imposing broad economic sanctions on Russia and need to procure continuous support for them. The Czech Republic just recently saw a large-scale demonstration with an estimated 70,000 people in attendance, and there is noticeable disagreement in Europe, at least in terms of nuance, regarding the confrontational stance toward Russia. In particular, given the risk factors for the Kishida administration, such as soaring electricity prices, a weak yen, and rising corporate goods prices, the fact that the Kishida administration has gained popularity by taking a bold approach to NATO cooperation on sanctions against Russia could, on the contrary, backfire.

As for the logic and justification of the economic sanctions, I should mention that the messages issued by the countries that initially imposed the sanctions were well calculated. However, cooperation with experts in the area of energy sanctions did not make much progress, and when it came to financial sanctions, it became obvious that the relevant knowledge possessed by diplomacy and security experts was extremely limited. In order to procure lasting support for measures that will have a significant impact on these multiple areas and, by extension, on the lives of the public, interprofessional cooperation is first and foremost essential.

Because large-scale economic sanctions are policies with specific objectives, some believe that it is better to avoid asking interested parties for their opinions in advance. For example, an energy expert in Japan once presented the opinion that banning Russia from using SWIFT would not be possible in principle because payments would still need to be made unless Japan was willing to abandon energy transactions with Russia altogether. What actually happened was that Russia was able to be excluded from SWIFT. On the other hand, European countries were forced to have two accounts in Gazprombank, in which they converted euros into rubles. This has been treated as unavoidable, but the failure to explain the discrepancy between appearance and substance of the sanctions from the outset has made Russia's information warfare in the Third World all the more convincing.

It is quite difficult to say whether the energy sanctions against Russia are really effective or not, because energy prices have soared, boosting Russian profits, and the damage suffered by those imposing the sanctions has been enormous. In addition, only those close to the frontlines understand exactly what will happen after Western companies withdraw from various schemes and what loopholes can be created. This was also the case when sanctions against Hong Kong were discussed. Whether or not a government has established relationships with oil major executives and financial and energy analysts who have a view of the entire industry, and is able to seek their advice promptly in a crisis, can make a substantial difference in its capabilities.

We cannot take all the opinions of experts at face value, but we can start to ask the right questions. Just as it is difficult to continue to procure support for a war initiated by a very narrow group of people, it is essential to secure cooperation for sanctions if they are to be implemented long-term.

In a democracy, no matter how strong the leadership of the government, it cannot make the economy do what it wants. For example, the Chinese government can order increased coal production to a significant degree contrary to its original policy. What matters is securing that winter energy resource for the people because China is not accountable to investors for ensuring that it pays off eventually, as in a market economy. However, the Biden administration, which has been trying to accelerate the green energy transition to meet carbon neutrality goals, has become disinclined to invest because of those future goals, and it cannot switch shale gas and shale oil development on and off as it wishes. This is why the pluralistic nature of liberal societies can stand in the way of flexibility.

Needless to say, China is envisioning “Three Warfares” as part of its military’s political strategy: public opinion warfare, psychological warfare, and legal warfare, and we can expect China to redouble its efforts to present a unified message as a nation. Given that patriotism has been raised as a priority item in the wake of the Hong Kong protests, indoctrination activities among the people will become increasingly intense.

In the new competitive coexistence with China that I mentioned in the beginning, the liberal camp faces significant challenges in communicating with the domestic private sector and public opinion.

How should risks be communicated?

Continuing to use prolonged economic sanctions as an example, broad economic sanctions, as with war, require that goals be stated, and recognition be given to their achievement when they are reached to some degree. Of course, if the original goals cannot be achieved, it is essential to politically adjust those goals, as continued insistence on unattainable goals will jeopardize support. The important thing is to first strive to communicate that the worst-case scenario will be prevented, and to have the public accept in advance that other goals will be dealt with flexibly depending on their degree of achievement. Goals can change. How this change is expressed makes all the difference in the impression of sincerity conveyed to those bearing the costs of the sanctions.

In addition, whether the costs incurred in the process are considered a necessary investment or a pure loss will depend on future projections. In a space where trust has been completely lost with Russia, the world cannot be restored to its original state. But if the outlook—or to put it casually, the market outlook—on how far it cannot be restored is as bleak as it seems, then Western leaders will face one difficulty after another. While government practitioners should not forget what they themselves have said and keep changing their explanations over and over, it is important to recognize the uncertainty of public opinion and to control expectations appropriately.

Risk is always a “negative factor.” Even if politicians are not ones causing a risk, it is

difficult to get the public to accept it naturally, unlike in the case of profits. In this regard, the “level of trust in government” can make a substantial difference in available resources. Although not necessarily comparable in all respects, China leads the world in the level of trust in government, at around 90 percent in several attitude surveys. In democracies, the freedom not to trust the government is ensured. This is the flip side of having a diverse array of opinions, but it also means that trust becomes a limiting factor when communicating with various sectors.

We have recently experienced a case with great lessons to be learned regarding how the public perceives risk communication from the government, or simply put, how much the public is willing to accept regulations and costs. The differences between measures taken during the COVID-19 pandemic and public reactions to them have re-invigorated the debate about democratic versus authoritarian regimes. Today, China’s zero-COVID policy is nothing more than a liability to the global economy, but initially it was even seen as an object of envy. Even now, the argument continues to persist that authoritarian regimes may be nimbler in implementing stronger infection control measures, and are therefore the more competent form of government. However, there are some democracies, such as Sweden, which have systematically adopted policies emphasizing social distancing that differ slightly from those of other European countries. In my opinion, it is the ability of democracies to flexibly alter their course that should be focused on instead.

Japan’s experience with the COVID-19 pandemic is instructive when considering how to communicate with the public and promote integrated policies regarding security in the broad sense of the word. I have been conducting a series of interviews with politicians and experts as part of a project to examine the government’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic, and the lessons that have emerged from these interviews can naturally be applied to the field of security in a narrower sense: 1) The government failed to advance cooperation between experts across sectors, despite the fact that it took measures that had extremely broad social impacts. 2) Once a message was sent out, it was difficult for even the administration to change course. 3) In the first place, the government was unskilled at evidence-based communication. 4) It struggled to discuss specific policy issues. All of these are weaknesses of Japan.

The result was the message that “COVID-19 is very scary,” with discussion stopping at the symbolic level as to what specific policies should be put in place. I believe that what is happening now in the field of security in the narrow sense has a similar dynamic. The result is that many people are concerned about a Taiwan contingency, but specific policies are not necessarily being actively discussed or supported. As for the Taiwan issue, I will present data from an awareness survey and discuss it in more detail later on, but the key point about risk communication is that it is not enough to simply scare people.

Finally, an important aspect of risk communication is the timing by which knowledge and opinions are conveyed. In contrast to in-depth discussions among experts, or in forums for long-term, long-range discussions, the cycles of trends in the era of the open Internet and social media are becoming shorter and shorter. While energy issues were at the forefront of experts’ minds in March following the sanctions against Russia, it was not until the government requested the public to conserve electricity amid a record-breaking heat wave that discussions

about restarting nuclear power plants picked up steam. Many economic indicators and political and social movements are scheduled to some extent, but we need to analyze public opinion more broadly to see what constitutes a good opportunity for appealing to the public.

Japanese assumptions in the event of a Taiwan contingency

Within Japan, the difficulty of enacting change in security policy is largely due to constitutional constraints. This is because any change that exceeds precedent and certain standards gives rise to tremendous accountability to explain why that change must be made now. This may be a point that is slowly starting to change, but at least for major reforms such as security legislation, major barriers still stand in the way.

An explanation of why a change must be made now is needed because many people see the exertion of efforts toward security only as a negative factor. Their thought process is: “If it can’t be helped, I’ll tolerate it. But since there are no major incidents happening at the moment, I wonder whether it really is something that can’t be helped.” This attitude calls for the indispensability, not the necessity, of the measures under discussion. It is extremely difficult to provide a persuasive explanation for those who take this position. This is because what is indispensable ultimately comes down to a question of one’s values. Events such as the emergence of the Trump administration and Russia’s invasion of Ukraine have made the case for security legislation more persuasive, but only after the fact. President Trump said he felt the U.S.-Japan alliance was unilateral and one-sided, obliging only the U.S. to provide defense, and routinely grumbled that it was unfair. However, few would go as far as to say that the Japan-U.S. alliance would have been broken if Japan had not introduced security legislation. It is not fair for the side not responsible for anything to demand one-sided proof from the responsible side.

From this perspective, there remains much to be desired in terms of making scenario analysis more commonplace among the population in order to shape the direction of debate and change public opinion. The idea is to involve many people in considering multiple scenarios together, with the prior understanding that there will be divergent opinions. To raise one example: what is the future of the U.S.-China conflict, and what could be possible ignition points?

For example, suppose that the United States stepped up the offensive in an attempt to eliminate Chinese companies from a Southeast Asian country, and the country’s administration yielded to U.S. pressure. However, what if this country’s military and bureaucracy were dependent on technical assistance from the People’s Liberation Army and financial support from Chinese financial institutions? Chinese maneuvers could lead to a coup d’état in the country. Or pre-existing ethnic conflicts could intensify. Border disputes with neighboring countries could flare up again. In any case, the meaning of the U.S.-China conflict would be assigned to a small dispute that originally had no significance in world history. From there, one enters a realm in which the logic of conflict sets the wheels in motion for more conflict. The public should be able to imagine that conflicts are not something that start by declaring war one day.

Alternatively, they could consider a Taiwan contingency. Various scenarios have already been discussed here, but there is likely to be significant variation in the public’s exposure to them.

Danger to Japan in the event of military conflict between China and Taiwan

Regarding the danger to Japan in the event of a military conflict between China and Taiwan, 72.6% of respondents answered “I think Japan would be in danger,” 8.1% answered “I do not think Japan would be in danger,” and 19.3% answered “I don’t know.” The percentage of respondents who said “I think Japan would be in danger” was higher among males by gender, higher among those in their 60s and older by age, and higher among those who gave a high rating to the LDP (“I give them a very high performance rating” and “I give them a high performance rating”), at around 80%.

Q: The distance between Taiwan and Japan’s Yonaguni Island is about 110 kilometers (about the same as the straight-line distance between Tokyo and Fuji City). Recently, China has been increasing its military activities around Taiwan. In the event of a military conflict between China and Taiwan, do you think Japan would be in danger?

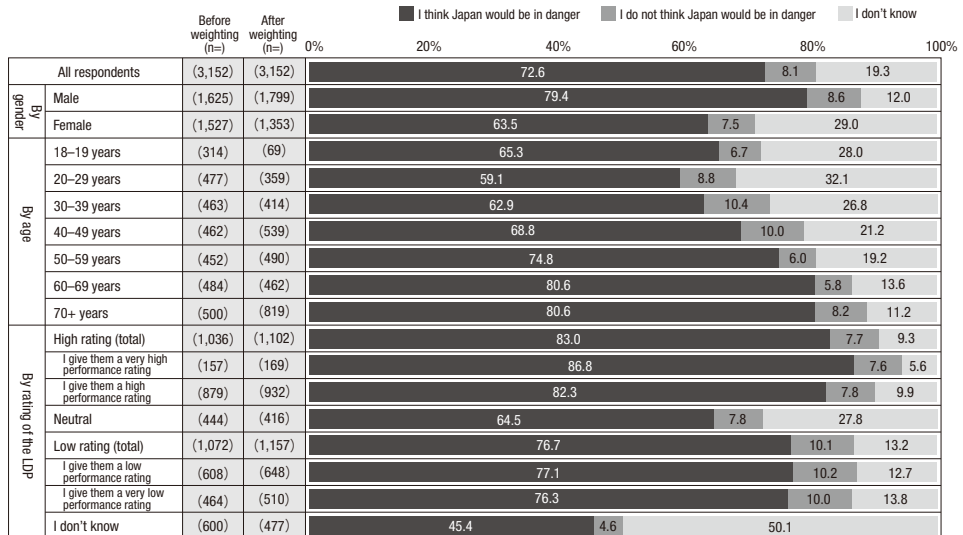


Figure 1. From “Japanese Values Today 2022”: Danger to Japan in the event of military conflict between China and Taiwan

Figure 1 is our second survey of Japanese values, which we conducted at the end of February 2022 as an Internet survey with 3,152 respondents. After mentioning the distance between Taiwan and Japan's Yonaguni Island, respondents were asked whether they thought that Japan would be in danger in the event of a military conflict between China and Taiwan, given China's recent increased military activities in and around Taiwan. Overall, 72.6 percent of respondents said they thought Japan would be in danger. However, the overall results are not the only point that should be noted in this awareness survey. Compared to a difference of only about 6 points in the perception of danger between those who approve of and disapprove of the Liberal Democratic Party, there is a gap of about 16 points between men and women, and as much as 21 points between respondents in their 20s and those in their 70s or older. This means that there are bigger differences by age and by gender than by partisanship, despite the fact that attitudes toward the Constitution and the U.S.-Japan alliance should be widely divided by partisan identity.

As Figure 2 shows, when respondents were asked whether Japan should provide military assistance to other countries in the event of a military conflict between China and Taiwan in which those other countries were providing support to Taiwan, 45.8 percent answered that Japan should provide assistance, while 32.5 percent answered that Japan should not. However, when we look only at the segment of respondents in their 60s and 70s and above, the majority answered that Japan should provide assistance.

Japan's military assistance in the case that other countries provide assistance to Taiwan

Regarding Japan's military assistance in the case that other countries provide support to Taiwan, 45.8% of respondents answered that Japan should provide assistance. Looking at the breakdown, 22.0% said "Japan should provide military assistance," while 23.8% answered, "If I had to choose, I would say that Japan should provide military assistance." By age, respondents in their 60s and older scored higher for "Japan should provide military assistance (total)." In addition, the score for "Japan should provide military assistance (total)" tends to increase with age.

By respondents' rating of the LDP, the percentage of respondents who answered "Japan should provide assistance (total)" was about 6–7% higher among those who gave a high rating to the LDP ("I give them a very high performance rating" and "I give them a high performance rating") than among those who rated the LDP poorly.

Q: In the event of a military conflict between China and Taiwan in which other countries provide support to Taiwan, do you think Japan should provide military assistance to those other countries?

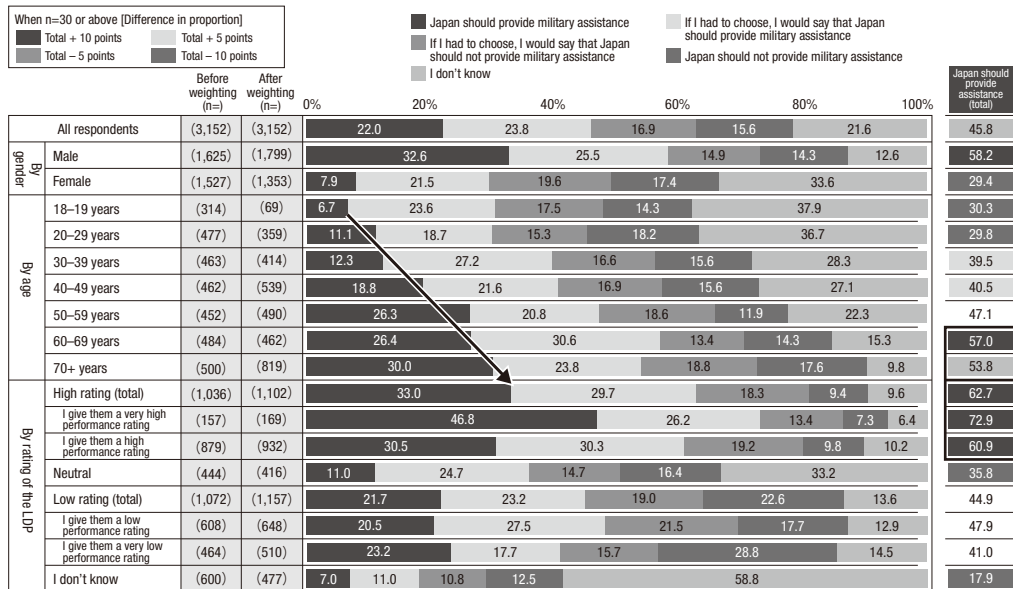


Figure 2. From “Japanese Values Today 2022”: Japan’s military assistance to Taiwan in the case that other countries provide assistance to Taiwan

What is interesting here is that while the respondents are aware of the danger, not only is there is no consensus on what specific actions to take, but there is also a wide variation that cannot be explained by values, the degree to which respondents are informed, or the context of existing party conflict.

This is precisely what was referring to when I made the point that, as with the COVID-19 pandemic, even if the public recognizes the “scare” with regard to security in the narrow sense, there is no deepening of discussion on specific policies. Rather than proponents and opponents who are vehemently opposed to each other, people are in different environments, and this determines whether or not they are able to think further. Perhaps the distance from these affairs differs from person to person.

Figure 3 shows the results of answers to the question asking respondents what they thought about possessing missiles for counterstrike capabilities. While neighboring countries possess numerous missiles within striking range of Japan and are developing related technologies, Japan does not possess such missiles. There is an argument that states that Japan should possess strike capabilities, including missiles to counterattack in the event of a missile attack on Japan. When asked whether Japan should or should not have such a capability, respondents were divided, with 49.3 percent answering that it should and 34.2 percent answering that it should not. However, as with the question in Figure 2, there was a large 35.8-point split between those in their teens and those in their 70s and older who were in favor of the idea, and a more than two-fold gap between men and women in favor of the idea. A point of great interest is that

there is a partisanship gap of nearly 24 points, but the difference between men and women or by age is even more significant.

Possession of missiles for counterstrike purposes

Regarding Japan’s possession of missiles for counterstrike purposes, 49.3% of respondents answered that Japan should possess missile capabilities. By age, the score was higher among those in their 60s and older, and that score tended to increase with age. By respondents’ rating of the LDP, the percentage of respondents who gave a high rating to the LDP and answered that Japan should possess missile capabilities stands out at around 70%.

Q: While neighboring countries possess numerous missiles within striking range of Japan and are developing related technologies, Japan does not possess such missiles. There is an argument that states that Japan should possess strike capabilities, including missiles to counterattack in the event of a missile attack on Japan. Do you think Japan should or should not possess such capabilities?

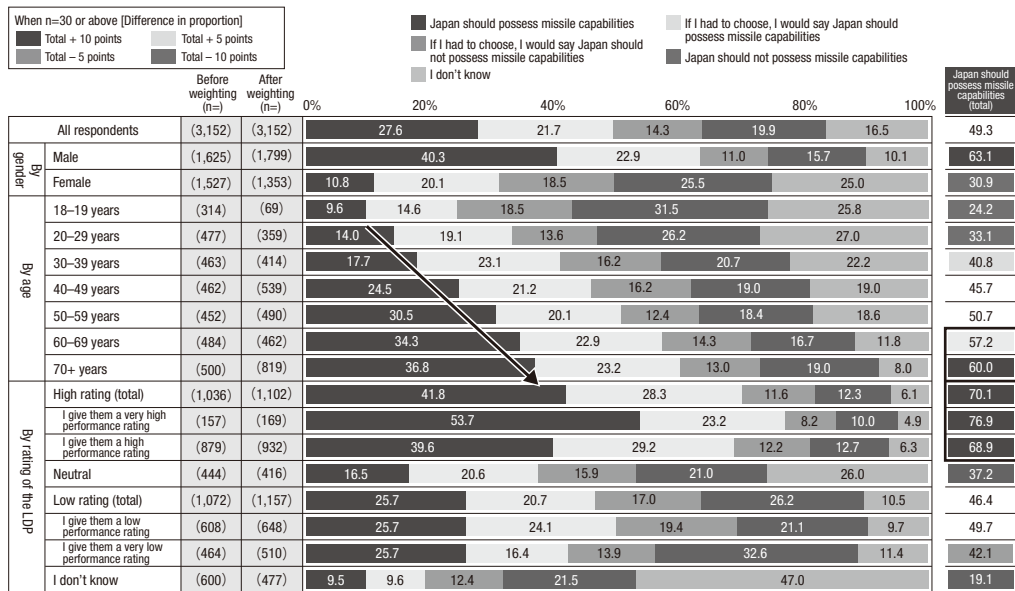


Figure 3. From “Japanese Values Today 2022”: Possession of missiles for counterstrike purposes

Furthermore, those who do not have an opinion on the Liberal Democratic Party (whether good or bad) are the most reluctant to agree in any of the survey questions. In light of this, it cannot be said that all security reform in Japan is necessarily inhibited by partisanship. Rather, it may be that we are not fostering the climate for such discussions in the first place, or that the government may not be communicating appropriately to the right target audiences. There is also the question of whether those who are reluctant to accept changes in security policy “really know much” about the subject of a rising China. Developing a broad knowledge of foreign countries among the public, and not just in terms of perceived threats, is also an important perspective for fostering public opinion. From this perspective, although the incident itself was unfortunate, I think Russia’s invasion of Ukraine played a significant role in getting the Japanese people to take a greater interest in foreign countries. I also think that there has been a slight expansion of the awareness that we cannot protect our people without the state. However, awareness has not deepened to the point of reflection on the fact that future wars will inevitably involve the public.

China, despite being a closed system domestically, is more overseas oriented and growth oriented than Japan, which is more inward-looking. China will be working on full-scale reforms involving both the public and private sectors over the next one to two decades to build an economic zone free from the risks posed by the United States. Inevitably, China will gradually increase its influence in domestic public opinion in the region.

It has been clear from my own Japan China Korea Public Opinion Survey that I have been conducting since 2014 that the Chinese people have a simple trust and admiration for the United States, but this trend is changing. The Chinese authorities are also clearly aware of this. Even propaganda that seems blatant and artificial at first will gradually permeate the public consciousness if it is imprinted on people’s minds over a period of years. On the other side, Japanese diplomacy has not developed the same level of mastery as public diplomacy abroad, and its ability to shape domestic public opinion is inadequate. This is because officials lack the imagination to put themselves in the other person’s shoes. Strategic communication, as it is often called, is about integrated efforts and the efficiency of the message, but to be efficient, the messenger must have the imagination to think from the perspective of the other party. China, too, will gradually broaden its appeal to the Third World, if not to the West, although this is lacking at the moment.

With regard to a Taiwan contingency, it will also be important to engage in communication targeting the Taiwanese people. This is the area in which China is focusing most of its efforts. Is Japan really succeeding in communicating with a wide range of sectors? We need to verify on a daily basis that we are not biased toward pro-Japanese segments that are more engaged in activism.

Infiltration of Foreign Powers

Finally, I would like to address the issue of information warfare and the infiltration of “foreign powers.”

Russian intelligence operations were a hot topic during the U.S. presidential election in

2016. As for Taiwan, China's efforts to shape public opinion are also being closely watched, as their language is almost identical to that of Taiwan. The 2020 presidential election saw notable caution regarding intervention by "foreign powers" on social networking sites and other media. Drawing on the lessons learned in 2016, social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook have tightened their rules on ad placement and account creation by foreign companies and individuals. Accompanying this, self-imposed restrictions on hate speech are also underway. While there are major differences in values between the United States and Europe in terms of how the Internet is regulated, the United States has a large presence in Japan's predominant platforms, and if anything, the Japanese approach is closer to that of the American model.

Intervention from foreign powers has become a matter of concern shared among advanced democracies, affecting the very foundations of each country's democracy. However, in Japan, this has been considered an issue that is difficult to talk about. The reason is that it was a sensitive issue directly related to discrimination and division within the country. However, the "domestic Cold War"—that is, the old left-right divide in Japan—is now outdated. Foreign powers are believed to be infiltrating a wide range of groups on both the right and the left through fake accounts. It is not hard to imagine that this is done not only to encourage the formation of certain public opinions, such as distrust of the U.S. military, but also to cause more division and confusion that prevents the formation of public opinion itself. This is exactly what Russia's meddling in the 2016 U.S. presidential election has indicated.

It thwarts the integrated efforts of the government. It makes it difficult to get messages to the public. It incites hatred and distrust. Meddling for such purposes is difficult to eliminate. We must redouble our efforts to overcome such attempts.

So far, we have covered the end of the post-Cold War era, the limits of an approach that keeps the public at a distance from war and security, lessons from the Russo-Ukrainian War, the ideal form of risk communication and challenges for Japan, domestic public opinion regarding a Taiwan contingency, and measures to deal with the infiltration of foreign powers. I would be happy to contribute in any way I can to discussions surrounding security and risk communication.