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Asia in 2020: Coping with COVID-19 and other crises

Edited by
Michelguglielmo Torri
Nicola Mocci
Filippo Boni

viella



CENTRO STUDI PER I POPOLI EXTRA-EUROPEI “CESARE BONACOSSA” - UNIVERSITÀ DI PAVIA

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The Journal of the Italian think tank on Asia founded by Giorgio Borsa in 1989

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CONTENTS

- 9 FILIPPO BONI, *Foreword. Asia in 2020: The COVID-19 pandemic and its impact*
- 19 FRANCESCA CONGIU, *China 2020: The successful struggle against the COVID-19 pandemic and the Xinjiang question*
- 45 SILVIA MENEGAZZI, *China 2020: A foreign policy characterized by growing resilience, fading responsibility and increasing uncertainty*
- 71 MARCO MILANI, *Korean peninsula 2020: Overcoming the challenges of COVID-19*
- 103 COREY WALLACE & GIULIO PUGLIESE, *Japan 2020: Abe's well-laid plans go awry*
- 147 SHELDON WONG, *Hong Kong 2020: The downfall of «one country two systems»*
- 181 AURELIO INSISA, *Taiwan 2020: Crossroads of COVID-19 international politics*
- 205 YVAN YSMAEL T. YONAHA & ESTHER MARY L. CALVO, *The Philippines 2020: The gamble of the populist leadership*
- 223 RUI GRAÇA FEIJÓ, *Timor-Leste in 2020: Containing the pandemic in a changing political environment*
- 241 SALEENA SALEEM, *Malaysia 2020: Democratic backsliding amid the COVID-19 pandemic*
- 259 MATTEO FUMAGALLI, *Myanmar 2020: Elections in a pandemic*
- 275 SILVIA TIERI, *Bangladesh 2019-2020: Issues of democracy, disasters, development*
- 305 DIEGO MAIORANO, *India 2020: Under the COVID hammer*
- 331 MICHELUGUGLIELMO TORRI, *India 2020: The deepening crisis of democracy*
- 377 MICHELUGUGLIELMO TORRI, *India 2020: Confronting China, aligning with the US*
- 407 SHAMARA WETTIMUNY, *Sri Lanka 2019-2020: Extremism, elections and economic uncertainty at the time of COVID-19*
- 441 MARCO CORSI, *Pakistan 2020: The PTI government amidst COVID-19 pandemic*
- 465 FILIPPO BONI, *Afghanistan 2020: The US-Taliban peace deal, intra-Afghan talks and regional implications*
- 479 LUCIANO ZACCARA, *Iran 2019-2020: The double impact of crippling sanctions and the COVID-19 pandemic*
- 505 PAOLO SORBELLO, *Kazakhstan 2020: Between a rock and a hard place*
- 521 *Reviews*
- 557 *Appendix*

JAPAN'S SEARCH FOR A FOREIGN POLICY PATH BETWEEN CHINA AND THE US

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Victor Teo, *Japan's Arduous Rejuvenation as a Global Power: Democratic Resilience and the US-China Challenge*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019, 242 pp. (ISBN 9789811361890).

Victor Teo's *Japan's Arduous Rejuvenation as a Global Power* is a study of Japanese foreign relations in the contemporary times that offers a new perspective, mostly based on a survey of official documents and scholarly debates. In the author's framework, the fundamental challenge for Japan's foreign policy today is how it manoeuvres between China, the neighbouring global power on the rise, and the United States, the world's biggest military power and a long-time ally, while avoiding abandonment by both. There is no question that this is a crucial challenge for Japanese diplomacy. It is also a difficult one to address given the fleeting relationships among the governments considered.

The core argument of the book is that, in contrast to most existing scholarship and commentary that assumes a zero-sum structure between the two neighbours, it is possible for Japan to be more independent from the vestiges of security alliance with the United States without unconditionally accepting the pro-China stance. Teo asserts that «Tokyo could forge constructive relations with Beijing by engaging China in joint projects inside and outside of the Asia-Pacific, in issue areas such as infrastructure development or the provision of international public goods» (vii). In his view this can be achieved through the departure from unconditional prioritization of the alignment with the American strategies, and closer working relations with China. Teo explains that such a strategy allows Japan to successfully pursue «normalization and rejuvenation» and to rise to the status of a global power. Overall, the tone of the book is hopeful for the future of Japan's foreign relations. Throughout the chapters he shows a clear sympathy toward the blueprint of Shinzo Abe, a conservative politician who became the longest-serving Japanese prime minister before his second resignation due to ill health in September 2020. His catchphrase of «beautiful Japan» is shared by Teo as the key goal of the country's diplomatic reorientation.

Chapter 1 opens with a description of the summit meeting between Donald Trump and Kim Jong-un of North Korea in Singapore in 2018. Teo uses the episode to ask the readers what the Japanese foreign policy should aim for in such a situation where the American interests and the Japanese one do not coincide (p. 4). Together with a broad literature review, Teo

introduces the key concepts of normalization and rejuvenation. Normalization is a familiar concept for scholars of Japanese foreign policy, as the conservative-minded politicians in Tokyo have used it since the early post-war era to call for the revision of the US-imposed constitution and the US-Japan Security Treaty. Teo himself defines it as «socialization of Japan as a power with political status and strategic capabilities that are commensurate with its economic achievements and the acceptance of the international community of the greater role Japan may play in international affair» (p. 16). Rejuvenation, on the other hand, is explained to mean «becom[ing] the nation-state par excellence» (p. 6). Teo also notes that the two concepts are «essentially two sides of the same coin» (p. 6).

Chapter 2 provides a historical perspective on Japanese foreign policy. The author asserts that dealing with and learning from a powerful neighbour while at the same time seeking political independence has been a consistent undercurrent in the history of Japan (p. 47). Based on this he implies that Japan has every reason to attempt to become a «normal» country and a global power. Rather than explaining why this «normalization» should be adopted as the overall goal of Japanese foreign policy, Teo seems to accept that this is the desired direction of the current Japanese government and focuses on developing a prescription on how it could be accomplished. The chapter does not offer substantial discussion of how decision makers in Japan feel about such an approach. Readers would have benefited from learning more about whether Japanese diplomats and political leaders are indeed trying this out as a viable long-term policy initiative, and what their experiences have been from their viewpoint. In a similar vein, Chapter 3 argues that Japan should cultivate closer ties with ASEAN countries «to transcend the hegemonic struggle between China and the US» (p. 130). This is easier said than done. The chapter explains how such a diplomatic overture is helpful for Japan to strike a balance through the explanation of the nature of island disputes. Again, one wonders how diplomats and military officers – including those in the ASEAN countries – respond depending on their respective foreign policy priorities.

Chapter 4 and 5 turn to the Middle East, and they are the crucial pieces in the author's overall argument. Discussing Japan's involvement in the Arab-Israeli peace negotiations process and the anti-piracy effort in the Gulf of Aden respectively, Teo urges Japan to pursue policies independent of the American interests in the region and points out that cooperation with China is possible in this realm. The most interesting discussion is found in Chapter 5, where Teo recounts the Japanese participation in anti-piracy operation in the Gulf of Aden in the 2010s. Teo argues that China and Japan both successfully participated in the multilateral anti-piracy mission and through that process gained experience of cooperation. Chapter 6 concludes the book with the summary of his argument, stressing the benefit of Sino-Japanese cooperation for all parties involved, including the United States.

The book comes with a few curious blind spots. One of the most noticeable is the virtual non-treatment of the Japan's recent enactment of the «Security Bills». This set of laws passed in the summer of 2015 was arguably the biggest legislative results during the second Abe cabinet, allowing for the Japanese Self-Defence Forces to exercise the right of collective self-defence. It dominated the headlines of national presses across the political spectrum for months, and hundreds of thousands of protestors gathered in front of the national Diet building as they saw it unconstitutional. When they passed, the laws enabled the Japanese government to expand the scope of activities for armed Japanese personnel in UN Peacekeeping missions, starting from those stationed in South Sudan in 2016. While this legislation gets only a passing mention in the book, readers would want to learn more about how this legislative and political turning point can be placed in what the author characterizes as the path toward Japan's rejuvenation. In addition, Teo cites little evidence when he makes claims on beliefs, feelings, and the opinions of the Japanese and Chinese general public. Although most of them do not seem implausible, for a scholarly publication it would have been wise to base such claims on verifiable data. Lastly, what looks like the lack of close copyediting hinders readers' experience, especially with regards to people's names. Some Japanese names are written family names first, while others have the first names first.

In sum, Teo's book raises more questions than it provides answers. His point that Japanese foreign policy can and should find more independence from the alliance with the United States will find sympathetic listeners in Tokyo as well as Beijing (and even in Washington D.C.). The vital question then is to what extent Japanese, Chinese, and American diplomats and military officers find the course proposed by Teo ready for implementation. The book will be read with interest by students and scholars of East Asian international relations, and policymakers who want to find a fresh re-thinking of the Japanese foreign policy strategies and how Japan's relations with China can be approached without limiting themselves to the East Asian contexts.