

Reflections on the Japan-US Parliamentary Exchange Program

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AS A LEGISLATIVE assistant to former Senator William V. Roth, Jr, early in 1974, I participated in a study trip to Japan sponsored by the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs. It was well-designed and educational, involving meetings with government officials and a travel week to Hiroshima, Nara, and Kyoto. I made some lasting friendships with other participants. But despite the value, there was something lacking. We did not hear non-government views nor was there much on the deeper historical and cultural context. Moreover, the program got the attention of a *Washington Post* journalist who implied it was a Japanese government propaganda trip. That led to revised Senate travel rules that remain in effect today.

I did not know at the time of the parliamentary exchanges then co-sponsored by Columbia University with the Japan Center for International Exchange that had begun some five years earlier and whose origins are described in the companion piece by Professor Gerald L. Curtis. But it wasn't long afterwards that I became acquainted with it. My boss was invited, and the program began with a Hill briefing in Washington that I attended. The briefing was done by two of America's foremost Japan experts, Professors Curtis and Herbert Passin. It provided something we staff members had missed with the earlier program—an outstanding contextual overview. It also gave an opportunity to the members of Congress to ask the questions they had without any official Japanese or US government presence. I used it extensively in preparing a memo for Senator Roth on what I thought he should be listening for and asking about during the trip.

There were other activities in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s that promoted parliamentary and other leadership exchanges between Japan and the United States, including one led by former Senator Bill Bradley of New Jersey and another at George Washington University. But JCIE provided the fullest and most regular suite of political leadership programs that played a critical and lasting role in maintaining and building the alliance relationship during a turbulent period.

It was, in fact, a pivotal time in the relationship. Japan had earlier been a defeated and occupied country whose recovery of independence and subsequent economic growth depended

on its US relationship. As remarkably successful as the Japan-US partnership was considering the very different cultures and histories as well as the viciousness and destruction of the war, the closeness the two countries enjoy today was not an inevitable outcome of history. Friction arose from many sources: lack of familiarity, trade conflicts that mirrored some of those in China-US relations today, and different expectations of each other and the alliance. The mutual value of the alliance was not as clear before the emergence of China as an Asian superpower. Japan was wary of being dragged into conflicts not in its own interests while the United States felt that Japan was not necessarily a reliable ally and it was at least partly free-riding on US defense. By the early 1990s following the USSR's collapse, a couple polls were even suggesting that the American public found Japan a foremost "security threat" to American well-being.¹

Tadashi Yamamoto as a Culture Broker

In my view, it was human agency – strategies, connections and the political will to overcome political challenges – as much as interests and values that steered the Japan-US alliance in the direction that it ultimately took. Among the many who played significant roles, special recognition should be given to Tadashi Yamamoto and the organization he founded. JCIE was, and remains today what some now call a "boundary organization;" it seeks to promote understanding across national, cultural, or disciplinary boundaries, and thus it has to operate on both sides of such boundaries. Like Curtis and Passin, Tadashi easily navigated across. With an American Mid-West education at St. Norbert College and Marquette University, he spoke and wrote fluently in English, but it was not just his language but the form of logic he used and his mannerisms that connected with whatever audience he was speaking with. As the former assistant to business leader Tokusaburo Kosaka, who led the Shimoda Conference and early stage of Parliamentary Exchange, and later became a member of the Japanese Diet, he had a wide circle of influential friends in business and politics in both countries, and his circles continued to expand throughout his life. I believe that he had met every American president from Lyndon Johnson to Barack Obama, and he had close relationships with leading Japanese politicians, including very close ones with several prime ministers.

Although Yamamoto had never been a Japanese public official or diplomat, in the context of parliamentary exchange this was more an asset than a drawback. Few parliamentarians in either Japan or the United States had been public servants, and many found civil servants narrowly focused, overly defensive of their countries, and hesitant to openly express their

1 Norman J. Ornstein, "Foreign Policy and the 1992 Election," *Foreign Affairs*, Summer 1992.

own opinions. Yamamoto, however, had many friends in the Japanese foreign and other ministries and made excellent use of the very best of them regardless of protocol. He was keenly aware of the limitations of government programs, and although he admired Japan's successful bureaucratically-led modernization, he deeply believed that the time had come for informed, non-governmental involvement in public affairs. In his view, the explicit purpose of the Japan-US Parliamentary Exchange program was to provide "legislators of both countries with insights into the political and economic life and issues of the other country, based not on official briefings but on face-to-face meetings with a broad spectrum of their counterparts and other leaders."²

Yamamoto knew that visiting American Congress members needed to return home reporting they had met the prime minister, foreign minister, or some internationally prominent business people like Sony's Akio Morita, and he delivered these. But he also made sure Congressional groups connected with wide array of public intellectuals in the academic, non-profit, media or business worlds. For example, Keidanren's Kazuo Nukuzawa would often provide the kind of no-nonsense, blunt but often humorous business perspective appreciated by American politicians, even if they disagreed. Asahi's star journalist Yoichi Funabashi could be counted upon to explain the webs of interactions between Japanese politics and the country's foreign policy. Yamamoto would make occasions, whether through drinks at the hotel or an invitation to his home to place these contacts in informal settings that helped move people outside the bounds of protocol and towards freer discussion and repartee.

Yamamoto told American friends that he regarded himself as a liberal. Certainly, Senator Robert F. Kennedy had been a personal hero of his. But he meant liberal less in the domestic US context of today and more in the context of his belief in the essentiality of a liberal international order. In those days, it was not hard to be a liberal and still have deep relationships with conservatives such as Donald Rumsfeld, Senator Bill Roth, or Congressman Jim Sensenbrenner. While Yamamoto was not shy in expressing his views, he was never dogmatic or dismissive of opposing opinions. His commitment to Japan-US relations was as unquestioned as his love of the Green Bay Packers. Rumsfeld once told him, "I know where you're coming from; you know where I'm coming from, but I really don't like are those people who don't let you know." One diplomat then serving in the US Embassy, he added disdainfully, "is a man for every president."

For all his talents, Yamamoto could not have conducted the parliamentary program alone. In addition to his partners in Columbia and later at Japan Society, he had outstanding backup from a highly globalized staff. When it came to US leadership programs, Peter (Hiroshi) Kamura was his right-hand man in New York, who often visited Washington and religiously

2 JCIE, Program Report 1982/83, p. ii.

cultivated staff level networks. In Tokyo, Deko (Hideko) Katsumata managed the very efficient JCIE program staff and was herself a valuable source of information and observations. Many JCIE staff had their own projects and they invariably spoke English fluently and had insights on Japanese society and foreign policy. In contrast to the government staff program I referred to at the outset of this essay, which had just one contracted escort throughout, JCIE had a rich, intergenerational staff supporting parliamentary and related programs.

A Full Suite of Programs

One reason that JCIE was such an effective sponsor of Japan-US parliamentary exchange programs was that they were embedded in and complemented by a much broader set of strategically designed and overlapping “related” JCIE programs. The most obvious was the Congressional staff exchange, begun in 1982 and continuing today. The staffs were not only connections with busy members, but resources in themselves, often with insightful observations on the local political pressures affecting the members. They were also a constantly moving target since staff turned over more quickly than members, meaning there were always fresh faces who had little or no knowledge of Japan.

Aside from the staff exchanges, a myriad of other JCIE activities reinforced the parliamentary exchanges in one way or another. The periodic larger-scale Shimoda conferences involved parliamentarians and people from other sectors in both countries. These were intended to focus on the most important issues at critical points in the relationship. Bilateral collaborative study projects also reinforced the parliamentary exchange. Young political leader exchanges, carried out in conjunction with the American Council for Young Political Leaders connected local, rising politicians in the two countries. Two binational Japan-US commissions, one for the Carter Administration, another for the Reagan Administration, involved figures in the political, business and intellectual worlds of both countries, and resulted in private sector policy recommendations on key issues. Frank R. Valeo, the former Secretary of the Senate, and I were prevailed upon to edit a book on the Congress and the Diet, looking comparatively at how each addressed important parliamentary functions. Some of the essays became background reading for parliamentarians of both countries. Over the years, JCIE has conducted many other relevant exchanges, with women leaders, African-American leaders, labor leaders, and various governors. One particularly ambitious major project looked at the relationship of every US state with Japan and every Japanese prefecture with the world. This local texture is key to understanding the positions and posturing of parliamentarians.

While these other activities added to the information available for parliamentary members, they also occasionally resulted in criticism from Congress. One US Democratic New

York Congressman wanted the Carter Administration binational commission members to meet with him when they were in Washington. The group dutifully trooped down to the House, only to find the meeting was set up as an informal hearing only so that the Congressman could berate Japan, which he proceeded to do in a 45-minute, rambling monologue. The Japanese chair, Ambassador Nobuhiko Ushiba, listened in studied silence and, to the frustration of the Congressman, declined to respond, but one of the American commission members couldn't bear it. This member, Columbia University economist Hugh Patrick, retorted to the Congressman that his argument that Japan was not a democracy because its electoral constituencies were of unequal size might be even more true for the United States, each of whose states have two senators regardless of population. It was a fact that the Congressman had conveniently overlooked.

Beyond its many bilateral Japan-US projects, JCIE also had a growing suite of regional and global programs with overlapping connections with the parliamentary exchanges. These also helped to inform the Congress-Diet dialogues. Several members of Congress, including House Speaker and later Ambassador to Japan, Thomas R. Foley, were members of the Trilateral Commission, an organization whose once Japanese, now Asian, secretariat was and still is housed at JCIE. This organization connected JCIE with Europe, while JCIE began exchanges with Southeast Asia and Korea in the late 1970s and with China after 1984. Such contacts, and the research and dialogue activities that went with them, greatly added to JCIE's breadth and enhanced the intellectual heft it brought for visiting Americans. It also gave JCIE other connections with Japanese Diet members who participated in many of these exchanges. They all fit Yamamoto's purpose—ensure not just that the Japanese bureaucracy but also its political leaders were globally knowledgeable and able to support informed, positive Japanese contributions to global governance.

Changing and Enduring Agendas

Over the last three decades of the 20th century, the agenda of Japan-US parliamentary programs significantly changed. For the US Congressional delegations, the initial emphasis was on familiarization. This shifted toward addressing bilateral problems in the middle decade and later to exploring global partnerships. These were not distinct phases since the constant influx of new parliamentarians and staff required continuous familiarization efforts, but Japan had become so prominent in the American media by the mid-1970s that virtually all members of Congress had formed some kind of opinion of the country and its impact on the United States. What made parliamentary exchanges especially critical was that many of the American perceptions were partly or almost wholly wrong. And these were often mirrored

by the misperceptions of the Japanese politicians and publics whose news media tended to highlight the most extreme anti-Japanese statements and actions that were of little interest to the American media.

Some Members of Congress in the late 1960s and early 1970s had served in the military in Japan or other Asian countries, but most had little familiarity with it. Even those who did, like Senator Roth, had had no opportunity to return since his service. Japan's rapid economic development was creating tension with the United States, but also sparking American interest. There was a great thirst for information, inspired both by the hope that Japan would be a successful pro-Western pillar of development and democracy, and by a fear that its development was coming at the expense of vast portions of American industry and jobs.

Japan, as it rose, was also invited to join the rich man's club. It became a member of the GATT trade system in 1955, then the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) in 1964. In 1967 Japan was a founding member and the leading partner in the creation of the Asian Development Bank (ADB). It seemed important to Yamamoto and his partners that the United States and West treat Japan as a truly developed, democratic country sharing similar values and problems in its development and not as an exotic culture with a distinctive set of rules. With the great interest in Japan, it was relatively easy to attract American participants in the earlier years of exchanges. By the early 1980s, some 120 Members of Congress had visited Japan as part of the JCIE parliamentary exchange program.³

By this time, tensions dominated bilateral relations and parliamentary exchanges. Japan's "hollowing" of American industries had shifted from textiles and cheap consumer goods to higher value-added manufactured goods, especially automobiles and electronics. Unlike the later US tensions with China, the vast majority of imports from Japan did not come from affiliates set up by American companies to take advantage of cheaper labor, but companies seen in the United States as powerful competitors. The increased purchasing power of the yen also gave the Japanese enormous buying power. While governors and mayors competed for investment funds, other investments became controversial including a substantial Mitsubishi investment in the Rockefeller Center in New York, Sony's purchase of Columbia Pictures, and the acquisition of nine of the ten beachside Waikiki hotel properties by Japanese interests.

There were questions as to whether the alliance relationship could even survive, but in the early 1990s, Japan entered a lost decade, and China's rapid rise, continuing into the 21st century, both altered the Japan-US dialogue, but also increasingly marginalized it. How to deal with a rising China and a complex Middle East became prominent topics, but Members of Congress were now more focused on visiting China than Japan. As wags in Tokyo put it half in relief and half ruefully, "Japan bashing" was replaced by "Japan passing."

³ JCIE, Program Report 1983-84, p. 26. The Luce Foundation was a major financial sponsor of the Congressional exchange.

Whatever the controversies or the differences, as Professor Curtis notes, members of parliaments always found they had much to share. As politicians, they all had demanding constituents to assuage, elections to win, money to be raised, issues to address, media to manage, and bureaucrats to cajole or threaten. These were part and parcel of an enduring agenda that bound parliamentarians, like any other professional community, to each other. The differences in fund-raising, party organization, and relations with constituents fascinated the politicians from the other country. I saw quite a bit of this when I worked with JCIE in the 1980s and 1990s. In one meeting, a young, rising Tokyo politician, Koji Kakizawa, proudly displayed a campaign poster inspired by literature he had seen in the United States. With bright colors and a large image of his face, it featured a map showing the location of earthquake shelters in his urban constituency which he thought every household would save. The visiting Americans clustered around it admiringly, until one of them pointed out that he always made sure his name was displayed on any useful item. He showed the abashed Kakizawa how easy it would be to tear off the shelter map to post in the kitchen while discarding all mention and image of the politician.

Informality and Unexpected Moments

I found it easier to meet visiting American Congress members in Tokyo than when I worked on the Hill. This was partly because I played a different role, but I think more importantly, the delegations traveled during Congressional recesses, and the members were essentially on break, away from the day-to-day pressures of their jobs and constituents. They were seeing each other most of the daytime and, despite Yamamoto's efforts to fill all their waking hours, socializing over breakfast or evening hours happened more easily than at home. I enjoyed the smaller one-on-one conversations with those who were naturally curious or had a deep interest in learning, and although I did not have deep Japan expertise, I often knew exactly the questions in their minds and what information would help them.

When Diet members could visit Washington, it was often more difficult to get the attention of members of Congress. Whether it was Peter Kamura for JCIE or the Japanese Embassy seeking to arrange appointments, Congressional members usually had little time to give to Japan during sessions or even to be hospitable. This was especially true of individual visits by Diet members who spoke little or no English. My boss was one of the few who seemed to almost always have time for visiting Japanese politicians. This was because he had developed a special love for the country and its people during his service in the Occupation forces. But some of his other staff members did not appreciate this use of scarce time. The press secretary, Jim Brady, later shot and terribly wounded while serving as President Reagan's press

secretary, would come by my desk after the visiting Diet member had left, sucking his lips and shaking his head since there was no press value in visiting Japanese politicians.

Occasionally though, Diet visits went differently from expected. One Diet group visiting Washington came primarily from agricultural districts, and we had managed to assemble an appropriate group to receive them, led by Senator Henry Bellmon of Oklahoma. Before the Diet delegation came into the room, Bellmon told everyone that he was fed up with Japanese trade barriers and was going to give the visitors a very hard time. Indeed, he began in this manner, but was interrupted by Koichi Kato, a Diet member from Yamagata Prefecture about 250 miles north of Tokyo. "It's about the family farm, Senator," Kato said.

The two words could not have had a more stunning effect. Senators were used to Japanese Embassy officials and trade negotiators citing statistics on how many more agricultural goods Japan imported from the United States than the other way around and how much imports had grown, but they rarely mentioned actual farmers. Bellmon was a farmer who had gone into politics. "You have family farms in Japan?" he asked quizzically as though it had never crossed his mind. Kato, a rare Harvard-educated politician who had been a diplomat, then explained that Japanese rice farmers in his district were typically older couples, often with one of them having another full-time job. The whole conversation took a totally different direction, focusing on how the two countries were trying to address the plight of family farmers.

Another moment that took an unusual turn occurred when a Congressional group was in Tokyo in the mid-1980s. One member had made it his theme through the whole trip to push Japan to spend more on defense. When they were meeting then chief cabinet secretary, later prime minister, Kiichi Miyazawa, who was fluent in English, he raised this question. Miyazawa, who had been foreign minister, at first tried to discuss the mutual benefits of the alliance. But the Congressman persisted, "I want to know can we force you to spend more on your own defense?" he asked almost rudely. "Probably the only way would be for you to end the alliance," Miyazawa said in the same matter-of-fact tone but with a smile, "Then I suppose we'd be forced to."

The Future of Parliamentary Exchange

There are many more venues for Congressional and Diet members to interact than in the past and many of these are specialized around particular issues. Some would also argue that now that the alliance is so embedded in an awareness of common values and complementary strategic interests, the need for explicit, wide-ranging Congressional-Diet exchanges has declined. But I am not fully convinced.

Some of the venues, like international and regional parliamentary meetings tend to be very large and formal affairs. Since they have some of the quality of intergovernmental meetings, Japanese and other parliamentary delegations often include government ministry officials, who for linguistic, protocol or other reasons sometimes become the face of the delegations. The business focuses on drafting resolutions that become an exercise in finding the least common denominator. While this can illustrate the political interests and pressures in different countries, the time spent on such exercises inevitably comes out of quality discussions that involve more direct learning and experience sharing rather than negotiations over language.

For American members of Congress and even staff, many of the travel opportunities are official trips (Codels). These often go to multiple countries, and do not afford much time to learn deeply or broadly about any one of them. If the subject matter is too highly focused, it inhibits understanding of the political contexts, and makes cooperation more rather than less difficult. Since meetings also tend to be arranged by embassies, they focus on those the embassies know well—that is, those already friendly. Moreover, US delegations now are more likely to be partisan, consisting wholly or in large part of members from the same political party. This inhibits one of the most important functions of parliamentary travel, getting to know better politicians from other parties in your own country.

The coronavirus pandemic sweeping the globe during the JCIE anniversary year, like the global financial crisis twelve years earlier, illustrates how “small” globalization has made the world, and the importance of international cooperation among sovereign states. Recent political developments in many states also illustrate that international cooperation cannot be simply the responsibility of diplomats and international bureaucrats, but requires the understanding, support, and leadership of political figures. While it is more difficult in today’s political and fund-raising environments to get the time and attention of politicians in the same way as for the JCIE-related parliamentary programs of earlier years, much more effort is needed to find means to try to replicate some of the same functions so well pushed forward by Tadashi Yamamoto and his colleagues: broad understanding of the politics of other societies informed by articulate local voices, discussion not overly constrained by protocol or diplomacy, a focus on cooperation in addressing issues, and active efforts to continue relationships after a program concludes.