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Narratives of Humiliation: Chinese and Japanese Strategic Culture

Whereas Japan has used a historical narrative of humiliation to become a pacifist state, China sees it as an opportunity to consolidate its global power status. These dynamics, however, might be about to change.

By Tom French for ISN

In our introductory podcast, we outlined how the concept of strategic culture has come under heavy criticism in recent years. A host of academics, as well as defense and security professionals reject the theory as either anachronistic, or simply inaccurate in describing the behavior of states. Indeed, Northeast Asia has traditionally been a challenging region within which to apply theories of strategic culture. In a region punctuated by large state [bureaucracies](#) or [competing factions](#) within a single party structure, it inevitably becomes a challenge to discern a cohesive strategic culture. And when dealing with organizations as opaque as that of the leadership of the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the Japanese bureaucracy a number of other issues arise. For example, are the strategic cultures of both states passed from generation to generation? And how important are domestic influences on both states' strategic cultures?

The Rise of the 'Middle Kingdom'

While the classic strategic theories of [Sun Tzu](#) continue to influence Beijing's defense and foreign policies, China also selects events from history to inform its contemporary strategic culture. The [official educational curriculum](#), for example, makes virtually no reference to domestically created calamities such as the 'Great Leap Forward' or Cultural Revolution, but instead focuses on the so called 'century of humiliation' China suffered in the 19th and early 20th century at the hands of the West and Japan. Accordingly, the 'century of humiliation' narrative stirs up a chauvinistic form of nationalism against foreign powers in general, and Japan in particular. The narrative also provides a useful 'safety valve' through which the Communist Party of China (CPC) bolsters its support and diffuses domestic tensions by evoking longstanding disputes with Japan. Emotive issues include wartime sexual slavery and ownership of the disputed Senkaku (Diaoyu) Islands in the East China Sea.

The narrative of 'national humiliation' also provides the CPC with the opportunity to portray itself as the only nationalist group that was able to force the Japanese and Western imperialists from China. Yet issues of 'national humiliation' also underscore the major prestige projects that China conducts, such as its [space program](#) and [naval ambitions](#). In demonstrating the CPC's success in restoring Chinese pride and overtaking some of the former colonial powers, the leadership re-enforces its legitimacy and continues to distract the population's attention from a host of domestic concerns.

China's contemporary strategic culture also recalls elements of the [Sinocentric](#) world view held by the leaders of the 'middle kingdom' until the early 20th century. In particular, the system of tributary supplication of neighboring states to the Chinese Emperor plays a role in the thinking of the CPC's leadership. This allows Beijing to make concessions to states that pay proper respects to China and acknowledge its re-emerging aspirations for regional hegemony. Conversely, those governments that are unwilling to accept the emergence of China to great power status attract the particular ire of the CPC. When combined with the narrative of national humiliation, Beijing may become less likely to make further concessions on issues such as territorial disputes unless the opposing claimant is willing to accept the fact that China is a dominant power. As a result, China makes few compromises or concessions over the hotly-disputed [Paracel](#) and [Spratly Islands](#) and the [Indo-Chinese border](#). Indeed, without initial offers of concessions by the rival claimants, and the all-important symbolic recognition of China's pre-eminence, it seems that these disputes will remain intractable for the foreseeable future.

Reactive, Adaptive or Proactive?

In sharp contrast to China, Japan's historical strategic culture was much more aggressive. As one of the colonial powers that wrought the 'century of humiliation' upon China, Japan also brought Korea and large parts of Southeast Asia under its rule before its eventual collapse in 1945. As a result of its defeat by the Allied powers, Japan's armed forces were disbanded and a concerted effort was made to eliminate the influence of the military in Japanese society and politics. This policy, combined with the lasting memory of the ruin the war brought upon the country, has meant that Japan's population remains largely pacifist in its appreciation of international relations and security. Indeed, [article nine](#) of Japan's post-war constitution rejects the use of military force to resolve disputes.

Yet despite the post war reconfiguration of Japan's military and society, some elements of its previous strategic culture continue to survive. Japan remains an island nation that is still [unable to feed its population](#) without importing food and other supplies. Tokyo also needs to continue safeguarding its access to overseas markets and sources of raw materials and energy to maintain its export-focused economy. Accordingly, Japan remains, as it was before 1945, a principally maritime power whose access to markets and raw materials is essential for its survival.

With an Empire and military akin to that it held before 1945 out of the question, the post-war Japanese state needed to adapt its behavior to meet the same security challenges in a new way. This new approach, often characterized as the [Yoshida doctrine](#), after the Prime Minister who first articulated the strategy, relied on economic development and trade to revive the Japanese economy while marginalizing military and diplomatic initiatives. With assistance from the United States, Japan pursued neo-mercantilist trade policies, protecting its domestic market while aggressively expanding the overseas role of Japanese corporations. In Southeast Asia and Africa this often took the form of large amounts of international aid, most of which formed an indirect subsidy for Japanese companies, often in the form of major infrastructure projects contracts, undertaken in return for access to the recipient country's markets and raw materials.

With diplomacy and conventional military power taking a backseat to economic considerations, many historians and political scientists characterize Japan's post-war international relations outside the economic sphere as being '[reactive](#)' or '[adaptive](#)'. But whether Japan can continue to be an under-represented, passive player on the international political stage when faced with a 'rising' China is one of the most significant questions facing Tokyo and the wider region today. For the time being, trade and development are likely to remain the central pillars of Japan's international relations. But as memories of World War II continue to fade, Japan's regional and global role may also begin to encompass more noticeable military and diplomatic dimensions. Indeed, the [increasing global deployment of](#) Japan's Self Defense Forces in support of peacekeeping and humanitarian operations

suggests that Tokyo is already making the strategic realignment.

Looking to the Future Through the Lenses of the Past?

As demonstrated above, elements of the concept of strategic culture have something to offer us in furthering our understanding of the contemporary defense and foreign policies of China and Japan. Both countries evoke narratives of national humiliation to underscore their international relations. Whereas China uses 'national humiliation' to justify its emergence as a major global power, Japan utilized this narrative to reconfigure its foreign policies along pacifist lines. In the latter part of the 20th century this resulted in a handing down of strategic cultures to successive ruling elites. But where China's and Japan's respective strategic cultures diverge is over the issue of nationalism. As China has continued to attain great power status it has used nationalist sentiment to garner popular support for its new-found confidence within the international system. Japan, on the other hand, has shied away from the nationalist rhetoric of its imperial past and instead focused upon sound economic ties. But with China resorting to increasingly bellicose rhetoric regarding Japan, it may well be that Tokyo's strategic culture may undergo fundamental changes in the not-too-distant future. This will inevitably have serious implications for the security dynamics of North East Asia.

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