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ANALYSIS

WILL JAPAN BE OUT OF TUNE WITH A CONCERT OF DEMOCRACIES?

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The idea of a “league” or “concert” of democracies as an alternative to the United Nations has gained greater prominence since its appearance on the U.S. presidential campaign trail this year. Senator John McCain has repeatedly mentioned a league of democratic nations as a more effective multilateral institution than the UN for tackling global challenges and supporting peace and liberty around the world. The idea has bipartisan appeal as well. Some of Senator Barack Obama’s top foreign policy advisors also have argued for a Concert of Democracies that would handle global problems when the UN fails to take action.

Among the oft-cited nations on the shortlist for membership in a Concert of Democracies is Japan, America’s key ally in Asia and an exemplar of democracy in the world today. Indeed, if the next U.S. president were to pursue a Concert of Democracies, Japan would figure to be a shoo-in for membership, given its liberal constitution, free elections, and range of representative institutions. But would Japan be as active a member in a Concert of Democracies as its proponents envision?

Interestingly, just as the debate over a Concert of Democracies was heating up in the United States several years ago, Japan’s then-prime minister, Shinzo Abe, was experimenting with his own version of democracy-based foreign policymaking. The results of this initiative were mixed at best, but they offer a telling example of the complexities and limitations that might confront one of the presumed principal members of a Concert of Democracies. In short, Japan’s experience with values diplomacy calls into question core assumptions about whether it would be an effective contributor to a multilateral organization of states linked by shared democratic principles.

Japan’s experiment with values diplomacy was the result of a confluence of factors that coincided with the birth of the Abe Cabinet in September 2006. Mr. Abe, a conservative politician, came to power determined to stamp out Japan’s “postwar regime” in favor of a more assertive national identity and foreign policy. His foreign minister, Taro Aso, shared this vision of Japan, as well as the prime minister’s dogmatic leadership style. A coterie of influential officials in the foreign ministry—primarily made up of what may be called “America hands”—were thus charged with developing a set of policies and initiatives that would reflect the Abe Cabinet’s desire for a more assertive Japanese diplomatic agenda.

In November 2006, Mr. Aso announced the creation of a new pillar of Japanese foreign policy: a “values-oriented diplomacy” that would promote “universal” principles such as freedom, democracy, human rights, the rule of law, and free market economies. At

the same time, the foreign minister described his vision of an “Arc of Freedom and Prosperity,” a string of nations—stretching from Europe, through the Caucasus, Southeast Asia, and finally the Japanese archipelago—that would be linked by the common pursuit of democratic principles and economic growth. The Arc would be supported by Japanese Official Development Assistance (ODA) programs and training initiatives meant to encourage democratic practices and free market economic policies.

Japan’s values diplomacy initiative also served three main underlying objectives. First, it reinforced the perception of shared values underpinning the U.S.-Japan alliance, while simultaneously paralleling the Bush administration’s emphasis on spreading freedom and democracy around the world. Second, it helped to differentiate Japan from China at a time when Tokyo was fearful of rising Chinese influence. In essence, Japan sought to gain diplomatic advantage by highlighting its postwar democratic tradition in contrast with China’s authoritarian political system. Third, values diplomacy provided a new platform for Japan to seek strategic ties with other like-minded nations beyond the United States. Tokyo subsequently signed new strategic partnership agreements with India in December 2006 and Australia in March 2007.

Yet, from the start, the Abe Cabinet’s values diplomacy initiative met with numerous obstacles and challenges, both internationally and domestically. In the international context, the Arc failed to materialize into any formal organization or grouping of states—although it did succeed in raising fears in Beijing of a Japanese-led strategic encirclement of China. Doubts also surrounded Japan’s credibility as a moral authority, given its lingering wartime legacy and reluctance to criticize regimes like Burma over human rights abuses.

In the domestic context, values diplomacy never caught on outside of a limited clique of foreign ministry officials and conservative intellectuals. Ministry of Defense officials were opposed to the initiative out of concerns that Japan might be dragged into foreign interventions for the sake of spreading democracy. Public support for values diplomacy also ran shallow—according to a 2006 Cabinet Office poll, just 20 percent of the public considered promoting universal values to be a foreign policy priority.

Mr. Abe’s attempt at values diplomacy met its fate with the collapse of his cabinet in September 2007. After succeeding Mr. Abe, Prime Minister Yasuo Fukuda promptly dropped values diplomacy from his foreign policy agenda. Few inside or outside of Japan took notice. Instead, Mr. Fukuda chose to visit the birthplace of Confucius on his first official trip to China in December 2007—sending a different message that Japan also shares distinctive “Asian” values with its mainland

neighbor.

Japan’s abortive test run with values diplomacy suggests that it may not have deep support among political elites in Tokyo, and that Japan would be uncomfortable with some of the central tenets of a Concert of Democracies. No doubt, Tokyo would want to be included in such a group of nations, given the prestige associated with its membership and the substantial assets it could deliver (particularly in ODA support). But Japan might also at times prove to be a drag on the system rather than a dynamic contributor as envisioned by proponents of the idea.

One area in which Japan would likely clash with the core principles of a Concert of Democracies is over the policy of interfering in the domestic affairs of other states. Concert proponents believe that democracies have a moral duty to protect individual rights against oppressive regimes. Yet, as Tokyo’s approach to Burma shows, Japan identifies far more with the “Asian value” of non-interference than with Western notions of regime change and coercion.

Similarly, like many others in the region, Japan would be reluctant to alienate other nations, such as China and Russia, over ideological differences. This is one reason why the Arc—and its apparent encirclement of China—did not sit well even among those Japanese who supported values diplomacy in the broader sense. In short, Japan might not always join in solidarity with other Concert partners when it would require a more confrontational style of foreign policy with respect to its neighbors in the region.

Finally, Japan’s recent experience shows that a values-based foreign policy does not yet have substantial public support. Until values diplomacy resonates more deeply with the public, a more active Japanese foreign policy based on cooperation with other democracies is not likely to be sustainable. The combination of Japan’s well-known constitutional restrictions, the ongoing gridlock in the Diet (parliament), and general public apathy for a more active foreign policy, challenge the argument by Concert advocates that democratic states are *ipso facto* more effective in dealing with global problems.

All this is not to say that a Concert of Democracies is necessarily a flawed idea with no hope for successful implementation. But the assumption that its members will easily agree on common approaches to global problems may prove unrealistic. For if Japan’s experience with values diplomacy holds any lessons, it is that even countries that share an adherence to democratic values struggle to apply them to foreign policy.