

Addressing a Diplomatic Issue Related to the Japanese Mentality

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(ndr. At the moment, this subject has been obliterated by the massive earthquake in Tohoku. This article was written before those tragic events).

Another minister (the Minister for Foreign Affairs) has left office, in Japan, recently. He resigned over illegal contributions made by a Korean, with a Japanese name. Of course, I do not buy the whole story built up by the media. Illegal contributions are a serious phenomenon in politics but, in my humble opinion, there is something else here, a bit more interesting, to be addressed. I think that any minister, especially if he is the head of diplomacy, might be invited to leave his job also because of problems or failures somehow connected to his direct actions. Besides, another official had to give up his position, because he signed a petition in support of a claim made by South Korea over a small island (Takeshima). I might be wrong, but there is a systemic issue related to the Japanese approach to diplomatic negotiations that most Japanese people do not consider accurately or do not see completely or if they see it, they probably think it is not relevant. It is necessary to underline such approach and the mentality behind it, for the sake of the future of this unique country of the rising sun.

Negotiation is about finding common ground with the people at the other side of the table. It is about reaching an agreement at the end of the process. It requires flexibility, an open mind and the availability to some degrees of compromising with the counterpart. Negotiation is not about winning or losing. It is not about the satisfaction of one side only. Both sides should feel satisfied in the end, with the final settlement. Otherwise there is no happy ending for any negotiation.

Here in Japan, most of the focus is on “who is right” Vs “who is wrong”. This is the first obstacle to any form of meaningful negotiation. Let say, for example, that the Japanese government is trying to negotiate with Russia, in order to get back the so called “Territories of the North”. Well, the idea to be right, might suggest to the Japanese representatives that, since they are right, they only need to ask for those territories. Something like: “We are right so, please, give us back those islands”. Asking it, over and over again. Apparently, during the last 65 years this “strategy” didn’t pay off. In fact, the Russian counterpart might always reply: “No. We are right and the Kuril Islands are our land”. In 2011 not even little kids talk like that, any longer. And to reiterate the same request few more times, it doesn’t seem a perfect strategy for the future, either.

We don’t need to misunderstand the concept. “Being right” or “being wrong” does still matter. However, the extreme obsession with it during a negotiation might be an obstacle to a satisfactory solution of the dispute. Any negotiator should keep it into consideration. Another aspect of any negotiation is the necessity of “give and take”. Most Japanese people feel pretty uncomfortable with this idea and frequently they are not willing to accept any form of give and take exchange.

However, without it, a settlement of a dispute becomes really difficult to achieve. Of course, each and every aspect of the giving and taking proposal should be balanced and fair for both parties. But, without it, how will those parties reach any final agreement? There is no way out of it.

Basically, in simple terms, it means that one side cannot have 100% of what they are asking for. If they really want the totality of what they are asking, they have to be prepared to give something truly valuable to the other side, in exchange for what they want. It is as simple as that and yet a lot of Japanese people still don’t get it.

Most important of all, any government involved in discussions with another country must work hard to minimize those small incidents that might happen at some point, between the parties (unless they want to use them as a tool or as an excuse to obtain other objectives, of course).

Two big problems are in front of the Japanese people on this matter.

First of all, there is an excess of sensitivity of the Japanese public, over a huge range of issues. Too many people, on too many occasions are likely to be outraged about something or about somebody. In Japan, too many people on too many occasions, too easily feel insulted about something or about somebody. In an international environment the variety of opinions is a normal factor, not the exception and a more flexible disposition is needed.

Occasionally, the Japanese side is willing to accept only those views similar to their own view, becoming mad at any others. Sometimes, this attitude generates troubles. In order to get a negotiation keep going smoothly, the public must be kept out of it, not at center stage.

The government has the duty to negotiate on the basis of their own people will. They also have the duty to inform the citizens about the progress they are making. But, for any politician to express openly and in front of the media their own feelings and their own remarks, just to please the Japanese public is one of the worst mistakes that any negotiator and any government can make. They should avoid doing so, by all means.

The second problem for the Japanese people comes directly from their own way of life and from their own mentality. Here in Japan the entire structure of the society is a vertical one. Any single person is used to address anybody only in two ways: from “Up” to “Down” or from “Down” to “Up”. There are no equals here or if they are, they never talk like equals.

This way of talking to each other is working perfectly well among Japanese citizens, in everyday life. They know exactly how to do it and they feel pretty comfortable during their conversations with other Japanese.

In a diplomatic dispute, particularly when the dispute is really old and it involves the administration and the possession of a piece of land, any “one up” / “one down” reference will be a blow to the negotiation. When the Japanese negotiator is talking “one up” towards the counterpart, all the people of the other nation will react badly. When the Japanese negotiator

gives the impression of talking “one down” (or lower in importance, lower in dignity, so to speak) all the Japanese people will react badly.

If, for example (this is just an example and it is not related to specific persons) the Prime Minister of Japan goes on TV and says that “... the Russians are illegally occupying the Territories of the North ...” the Japanese audience should not rejoice. On the contrary, they should feel worried and even upset by it. In fact, a symmetric reaction will immediately emerge from the Russian side. Later, a counter-reaction will be created by the Japanese side and on and on, generating an escalation frequently going out of control. In those cases the failure of the agreement is a sort of minimum damage. Much worse than that could still happen in the future.

There is also another consequence. Even when the government realizes that some of their representatives have gone too far and they try to slow down or to play a different game or they try to use a new game changer, their own audience will be angry about those second thoughts, about the change of attitude and the final result of the negotiation will be jeopardized anyway.

In relationship to a negotiation process, it is not intelligent to encourage some members of the government to use strong words or tough language towards the counterpart. If anybody wants to carry on showing off some muscular power, that person should not be rewarded for its own behavior.

Each and every one of the negotiators should do his best to keep the topics under discussion very private or even secret, if necessary. They should act and talk considering the public aspects of the negotiation like a stage, like a sort of “misekake” for the rest of the world. The real agreement will be finalized behind closed doors, not in front of the cameras.

When the citizens like to express their frustration about something, they can send e-mail, they can make telephone calls or talk to their representatives in office. They should not easily demonstrate their disapproval on the streets. That is a sort of extreme available option. In fact, any public manifestation, any street protest will generate a symmetric

response of the other side and the situation might escalate into something more problematic, than the negotiation itself.

So, let say that Japan wants back those Territories of the North, what should be a reasonable strategy towards Russia, in order to reach that objective?

Any action oriented to improve friendship between the two populations would be a very good first step, in the right direction. Friendship with Russians should be high on the list of initiatives. Increasing tourism, with more Japanese visiting Russia and more Russians visiting Japan, would also be another nice move. I am confident that Russians are easy going people, particularly in relationship with friends.

Establishing a stronger and long lasting bilateral free trade agreement would not be bad at all. A solid business, involving millions of people, will be the foundation for a productive future for both nations. Working hard to bring to final solution all the issues related to security and to military cooperation and mutual assistance will remove any doubt and any sense of diffidence, from both sides.

At that point, obtaining a larger degree of autonomy for the region including the Territories of the North will be almost automatic.

If Japan, during the next few years will be able to implement all those steps and even more than that, the negotiation regarding those disputed islands will be much easier, than it looks right now.

If, on the other hand, the Japanese side actually likes the public debate that has been taking place in the last few months, with the strong language and everything else related to it ... well, in this case, getting the negotiation to moving on is going to be much harder.

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