

Brexit: The View from Japan (or the "Tokyo Consensus")

Written by Tomohiko Taniguchi

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TOMOHIKO TANIGUCHI, APR 2 2017

Since the United Kingdom chose to leave the EU, a new consensus has emerged amongst Tokyo-based policy-makers, such as members of Japan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and those close to Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, myself included. Call it the "Tokyo Consensus." It assumes that, as far as Japan's national interest is concerned, Brexit may well turn out a blessing in disguise. The benefits of Brexit for Japan, which are largely geo-political, could offset its costs, which are mostly economic. This assumption appears to be shared internationally. Conversations with diplomats and visitors from Australia, New Zealand, India and the US, amongst others, have given me a sense that the "Tokyo Consensus" may have a wider, Indo-Pacific, application.

The reasoning behind the Tokyo Consensus goes as follows. Post-Brexit Britain will no longer be able to identify with Europe the way as it did pre-Brexit. A soul-searching Britain will instead seek to rediscover, and reinvest into, an older self-image which holds that, relative to nations on the Continent, Britain is still a great sea-faring country with global interests that cover much of the English speaking world, a remnant of the once glorious empire, be that as it may.

Still proud of its Royal Navy, a respected institution that is well connected with its counterparts in Australia, Brunei, Malaysia, New Zealand and Singapore, (viz. the "Five Powers"), the UK will be more motivated than at any time since it left Hong Kong to show its flag in Indo-Pacific waters. Still an integral part of the Five Eyes, the UK, post-Brexit, will also be more keen to market its capabilities for gathering and analysis of sensitive intelligence to potential customers, such as Japan. If it fails to pursue such avenues of influence, the UK will find its voice heard by fewer and still fewer, its status as one of the P5 nations increasingly questioned. In short, the need to manage assets and liabilities will lead Britain to recognise that now is the time to make its military and diplomatic presence more felt when and where doing so will help sustain its position as a leading world power, so the reasoning goes.

After all, doing so would not cost much. Officers must be paid, ships fuelled, aircraft flown and well-maintained, whether they are stuck on Britain's soil or displayed around the world. Whether Britain will be sufficiently bold and innovative to turn Brexit into a geopolitical advantage is the question.

For now, Britain's actions appear assuring. Late last year, the Royal Air Force sent its Typhoon fighter squadron to Japan for the first time. After engaging the Japan Air Self-Defence Force in an intensive joint drill, they returned home by flying through the air space above the sea which Beijing claims to be its own, possibly not unintentionally. London has also agreed with Tokyo to scale new heights in jointly developing military technologies, starting with a more robust missile system.

According to current discussions, either the HMS Queen Elizabeth II or HMS Prince of Wales Royal Navy aircraft carriers currently being built, might in future be deployed to Asian waters. This writer would welcome such a move, for it could send an unequivocal signal to the wider region that both Japan and the UK have come a long way and that wartime bitterness has long gone. It is said to be likely, also, that the Royal Navy will send one of its boats, soon to be commissioned, to East Asia as a law enforcer. All these developments would be welcome, and it is Tokyo's hope that they will indeed materialise.

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Let us turn now to why Tokyo thinks this way, by looking at where Japan currently stands.

The countries in the Indo-Pacific region observe, almost daily, a steady and uninterrupted expansion of Chinese influence by means both hard and soft, and in relation to interests both economic and territorial. That expansion is being felt most acutely by the island nation, Japan, given that Japan's sovereignty over some of its islands and waters has been forcefully complicated by the actions undertaken by Chinese military and para-military organs over some ten years.

Sitting in a geo-psychological cul-de-sac, Japan finds itself cornered by three nuclear powers (one 'would-be' nuclear-power, North Korea, included), some of which are religiously hostile toward Japan—a situation the country has never faced before. Japan's strategic space consequentially seems destined to become yet narrower down the road.

For well over 15 years Tokyo has responded to the evolving geo-strategic reality by reinvesting in its time-honoured alliance with the United States and by attempting to bring Japan closer to nations with similar political values and geo-strategic interests, mainly sea-faring democracies such as Australia and India amongst others, since a rules-based maritime order is in Japan's vital national interest.

These attempts, pushed harder still by the current administration led by Shinzo Abe, have not been without success, with both Canberra and Delhi now viewing Tokyo amongst their closest strategic partners. For Malcolm Turnbull, Australian Premier, for instance, Japan is his country's "all-weather friend," according to a joint press conference he gave with Shinzo Abe in Sydney earlier this year.

Tokyo's view of these developments remains sober, however. Neither Australia nor India might likely put their service men and women in harm's way should Sino-Japan military conflict ever erupt. So be it, they say in Tokyo. Raising the political price of revisionist policies in order to deter the ambitions of those discontented with the status-quo, in itself, does great service to Japan's safety.

It is against this backdrop Brexit occurred, and, as expected, Tokyo has since seen a surge in the number of visitors from Whitehall, as well as from UK military organisations.

It is said that history never repeats itself but rhymes. In different circumstances in the past, the UK and Japan were firmly allied. Indeed, this year marks a century since boats from the Imperial Japanese Navy rescued passengers of the sunken SS Transylvania in the Mediterranean. In the 1940s, however, the two island nations were sworn enemies. Now, in yet a different geo-strategic environment it is as though they are meeting one another again and finding a common ground to strengthen their respective international standings. Brexit was a catalyst, and could further accelerate this development.

About the author:

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