Asian Public Diplomacy in the US: China, Japan and South Korea

By Kent E. Calder

AS NORTHEAST ASIA faces the United States at the dawn of the 21st century, it confronts a rapidly changing America. The dimensions of that transformation profoundly color the contours and the effectiveness of public diplomacy toward the US, and need to be well understood from the outset. As we shall see, China, Japan and South Korea all vary in their understanding of, and their response to, these structural changes within America — contrasting realities that, in turn, shape the nature and the effectiveness of their public-diplomacy response.

THE RISE OF ASIAN AMERICA

The most noticeable recent change of relevance to Northeast Asia in the US political economy is the demographic rise of “Asian America.” In 1960, Asian Americans constituted only 0.8 percent of the US population; by 2010, that share had reached 4.8 percent, and is expected to reach 8 percent by 2060.¹ The only major ethnic group in America whose share of the US population is rising faster are Hispanics.²

America’s Asian American population is rising for a variety of economic and policy-related reasons. Most important, the 1965 Immigration Act replaced “national origin” as a basis for immigration quotas with skills-based, family reconstitution and human-rights criteria. That change felicitously ended the discrimination that had constrained Asian immigration since the first decades of the 20th century, in the case of Japan and Korea, and the 1880s, in the case of China.

The new criteria tended to encourage immigration from Asia, because prospective Asian immigrants tended to have high skill levels, and were relatively affluent. Economic growth in Asia and political-economic liberalization, especially in China, further enhanced the ability of Asians to immigrate to the US. The end of the Vietnam War in 1975 also naturally produced a surge of immigration to the US, particularly from Southeast Asia, on human rights grounds.

Historically, Asian Americans have been heavily concentrated in Hawaii and the west coast of the US. Over the past two decades, however, they have also increased greatly in number in the northeast, the Washington DC area, and even the southern states as well. As indicated in Figure 1 above, their growth rate has been especially rapid over the past decade in the South, where today two of 14 governors (Bobby Jindal of Louisiana and Nikki Haley of South Carolina), are of Asian American origin. Several of the states where Asian American populations are rising rapidly, such as Virginia, are important swing states, thus enhancing the importance of Asian American constituencies in US presidential as well as local politics.

There are also important recent changes in the internal composition of the Asian American community that are consequential for current and future Northeast Asian public diplomacy. Most


² Between 2000 and 2010, the Hispanic/Latino population of the United States grew by 43.3 percent, while that of Asian American grew 43.0 percent. See US Census Bureau, Statistical Abstract of the United States, 2011 edition, and “2010 Census Data.”
important, as is apparent from Figure 2 above, the share of Chinese, Indians, Filipinos and Koreans in the Asian American community has increased sharply since 1965, for the historical and economic reasons noted above. Conversely, the share of Japanese Americans has gradually declined, due to the relatively slow pace of immigration from Japan.

Recent US demographic changes, as is apparent from the foregoing, have important implications for politics of Asian history issues within the US, especially in the US Congress. Asian Americans — especially Chinese, Indians and Koreans — are becoming more and more important members of local congressional constituencies, even as they are also assuming pivotal importance in major presidential election swing states such as Virginia. Congress and state legislatures are thus growing more sensitive to public diplomacy on these questions, although the US public remains adverse to manipulation of historical questions for tactical or geopolitical, as opposed to human rights, considerations.

A second major transformation in the American political economy with fateful implications for Northeast Asian public diplomacy is the Information Revolution. The coming of the Internet, podcasting, streaming video and related technologies over the past decade has greatly accelerated the “issue cycles” of American politics, and broadened the socio-political impact of dramatic, newsworthy developments, thus making rapid response to new incidents, claims, and counterclaims increasingly vital. Given the time differences between Asia and the US, “on the spot,” rapid reaction, even informal, is growing increasingly vital to shaping opinion within the US itself.

A second consequence of the Information Revolution is the rising strategic importance of major think tanks, especially those in Washington, which understand and have the financial resources to rapidly embrace the new technologies. These institutions are becoming powerful vehicles for amplifying policy messages that Northeast Asian, as well as other, governments and business interests desire to convey. At the same time, however, the same forces that are making think tanks a powerful mouthpiece for policy pronouncements are also spurring heavy financial contributions from interest groups. Such funding is encouraging a steady shift of the largest think tanks as objective agenda making think tanks a powerful mouthpiece for policy pronouncements are also spurring heavy financial contributions from interest groups. 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Each party is concerned with ‘face’ and the appearance of reliability. Each believes that the other acted in bad faith in times past. Each wants to defend its ‘principles.’ The key issue, however, is whether some kind of accommodation could create values for each party.

Notes

ing significantly. Northeast Asian nations vary in their appreciation of this changing dimension, and their strategic response, with China being the most proactive, through its establishment in Washington DC of a large CCTV broadcast facility covering all of the Western Hemisphere.

Semi-governmental agenda setting. As the Information Revolution advances, and as mass-media issue cycles shorten, semi-governmental public diplomacy mechanisms capable of quick and flexible response to rapidly moving events become an increasingly important tool of public diplomacy. Diplomatic processes that require formal consultation across the Pacific simply cannot keep up. South Korea leads in this category, with its Korea Economic Institute (KEI) providing rapid response capability, unencumbered by diplomatic consultation requirements.

Sister-city relationships. Local-level ties are an element of public diplomacy the importance of which has waxed and waned across the years. During the 1950s, inspired by people-to-people ties developed during the Second World War and the early post-war years, sister-city relationships across the Pacific were relatively active. They waned in prominence from the 1970s on, but are growing increasingly relevant as competition among Asian nations for influence in the US intensifies. Japan may have the most elaborate semi-governmental idea-industry organization, the Korea Economic Institute.

CONCLUSION

The three nations of Northeast Asia, as we have seen, all confront serious challenges in their public diplomacy toward the US, although the challenges vary substantially in character. For the Chinese, the challenge is muting perceptions of deepening geopolitical rivalry and asymmetry of trade opportunity. For the Japanese, it is a question, above all, of demonstrating positive visibility, and contributing actively to US policy debates. For South Korea, perhaps, the public diplomacy challenge is most pressing: how to offset the country’s diminutive scale, relative to its neighbors, and nevertheless achieve national ends that are at least as ambitious as its powerful neighbors.

Public-diplomacy competition among the three Northeast Asian nations is clearly deepening and broadening, we have found. Traditionally, the relations of the three nations with the US were primarily bilateral, in accordance with America’s longstanding “hub and spokes” geopolitical approach, and related political-economic realities. The relations of the Northeast Asian trio with the US focused on putting the best possible face on bilateral trade and security ties. As the economies of China and South Korea have grown more sophisticated and as globalization has proceeded, however, two important changes have occurred: competition among the Northeast Asian trio has intensified globally, and their mutual issues of concern have recently broadened, to include finance, energy and investment, as well as trade and security. And on issues ranging from exchange rates and territory to historical interpretation, the three nations are coming into direct competition with one another.

In responding to an increasingly competitive environment, the three countries employ significantly different tools. The Chinese spend huge amounts on developing sophisticated mass-media broadcasting capabilities in the US with global reach and employing many American personnel, such as CCTV’s large bureau in Washington, and its China Daily operations. Japan employs the largest corps of professional lobbyists, while South Korea operates arguably the most elaborate semi-governmental idea-industry organization, the Korea Economic Institute.

All three countries actively mobilize their ethnic kin in support of their policies, although in different ways and with differing degrees of subtlety. The South Koreans are arguably the most direct, active and successful in the ethnic dimensions of public diplomacy, due to a strong historical solidarity with roots in the pre-1945 independence struggle and the large share of Korean Americans in the US with recent and active ties to their ancestral homeland. The Chinese Americans are by far the largest Asian ethnic community in the US, with over four million members, but are inhibited in their political activities by US-China geopolitical tensions and the Taiwan Straits confrontation, which continue to divide the community. Japanese Americans, traditionally reluctant to engage in political action, finally became more active with the creation of the US-Japan Council in 2009. Yet their incentives and effectiveness in support of Japanese public diplomacy in the US continue to be constrained by the relatively small scale of the Japanese-American community—just one fourth the scale of its Chinese American counterpart—as well as its complex and distant historical relationship with Japan itself.

In generalizing from our three Northeast Asian cases, it is clear that national influence does not necessarily correlate positively with political-economic scale. In the information age now emerging, issue cycles are speeding up, and there is a rising premium placed on quick response. Smaller countries and embassies find it easier to respond rapidly, and thus more effectively, than do large ones, because they tend to be less bureaucratic and also less parochial and internally oriented. Semi-governmental agenda-setting affiliates that are both locally based within the US, and also detached from formal policy responsibility (Track 1.5 organizations such as KEI), are also configured to be effective in a short issue-cycle environment, where quick response—often without detailed diplomatic consultation—is at a premium.

Of the three countries considered here, South Korea—still smaller than its counterparts, although hardly a “shrimp among whales”—appears to face the most serious challenges. It also, however, seems to be best configured to meet the challenges of the volatile, globalized world now emerging. As so often in world affairs, crisis consciousness and vulnerability appear in Northeast Asia’s relations with the US to be exactly the catalyst that public diplomacy needs.

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