The Influence of Culture on Japanese-American Negotiations

JAMES R. VAN DE VELDE

Japanese-American relations in recent years have been troubled by increasing tension over various international issues. In order to solve some of these dilemmas, both countries must be aware of each other's cultural heritage and the effect that cultural differences have on negotiating styles. In this essay, James Van de Velde examines the interaction between culture and diplomacy in terms of Japanese-American negotiations. This perspective relies on the semantics of Japanese words associated with the term "negotiation" as indicative of how the process is carried out and what meaning is attached to it.

During the last twelve years, a chasm has slowly widened in the relations between the United States and Japan. The close postwar relationship was first shaken by the *cause célèbre* "Nixon shocks" in 1971 and then exacerbated by the global oil crisis of the mid-1970s. Economically, the United States and Japan have been at odds over trade policies especially since the Carter Administration. In addition, the question of Japan's military responsibilities remain a point of contention between the two countries. A lack of understanding of the acute differences between American and Japanese culture may compound these growing tensions.

Before Americans launch into criticisms of Japanese stubbornness and arrogance over the trade and defense issues which highlight U.S. relations with Japan at present, they should remember certain basic cultural differences which may affect issue agenda setting in Tokyo and the "over-the-table" techniques of negotiation. An examination of these cultural differences will better explain some of the difficulties Americans experience when dealing with Japan.

Foremost in the consideration of cultural differences between America and Japan must be the orientation of the individual to others, both inside and outside his reference group. In relative terms, American culture stresses a strong sense of individualism, while Japanese culture places more importance on social identity. This fundamental difference is apparent in the decision-making styles of both countries.

James R. Van de Velde is a candidate for the MALD degree at the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy.

American policymakers and students of American-Japanese relations are familiar with the Japanese style of consensual decision making which employs the concepts called *nemawashi* and *ringisei*. By studying these concepts, one can better understand the many aspects of Japanese culture that pervade Japanese international negotiations.

The term *nemawashi* (the wrapping up of roots) evolved during Japan's long history of agriculture. Traditionally, when a plant was to be transplanted from its original environment, the new surroundings were painstakingly prepared to ensure continued life and health and the roots of the plant were carefully wrapped and protected until the plant was secure in its new location. This practice is parallelled in the Japanese tendency to engage in informal talks with other negotiators prior to formal meetings: By preparing for the "transplanting" of an idea originating from policymakers, Japanese negotiators hope to avoid future direct confrontations.

How, then, are these ideas developed by Japanese policymakers? *Ringisei* describes the system in which a proposal originates from lower rank employees, is communicated to officials at graduating levels of rank and is eventually presented to the top-level executive. This process, although long and complicated, provides for shared responsibility and consensus among the collective unit, and it allows for the modification and change necessary to elicit group support. The *ringi* system epitomizes consensus and is possible because of the homogeneity of the Japanese social structure. Certainly the process requires a great deal of time and, precisely for this reason, Americans — among others — are critical of the slow moving process, claiming that it is not rational in the modern, fast-paced world.

The *ringi* negotiating style reflects other cultural differences between the two nations. The Japanese, concerned with collectivity, always provide a united front supporting consensual decisions. American impatience with the process reflects an orientation to monochronistic promptness and a preference for adherence to schedules in contrast to the Japanese tendency to postponement.

In fact, postponing the resolution of thornier questions may well define a related Japanese negotiating practice, *atomawashi*. Should crisis situations arise in which decisions must be made comparatively quickly, *atomawashi* principles are followed, wherein negotiators agree to discuss only certain key points and to postpone other issues. These key points are usually vague abstractions which serve to bolster mutual trust — allowing controversial issues to be left to a time when compromise seems inevitable. Since Japanese negotiators have no authorization to concede an issue independently, this practice of postponement allows policymakers to buy time for the reevaluation of their position.

Another dimension of the Japanese negotiation model is termed *awase* (adjustment, adaptation, accommodation). In this framework, each side is prepared to adjust to the situation of the other, the objective being to establish personal ties between parties in order to create an atmosphere conducive to frank discussions and exchanges of favors. Specific details of each side's position are not offered; negotiations are based on adapting to mutual inferences. Particular attention is paid to special circumstances, making generalities inapplicable. *Awase* negotiations are intended to lead to relationships which permit the two parties to make exceptions for each other.

In contrast, the notion of *erabi* (choice, selection, singling out) characterizes the American style of negotiation. *Erabi* negotiations begin with each side clearly stating its stand on issues of importance, thus taking care of business immediately and directly. Once the viewpoints of both negotiating teams are assessed, possible alternatives are offered and mutual compromise leads to agreement. These *erabi* agreements are considered to be binding, with no further concessions expected or granted. In actual practice, however, negotiators from the United States often enter discussions so convinced of the correctness of the American position that they expect that the other negotiating team will conform. In essence, United States negotiators have claimed universal cause validity and have regarded their negotiating partners as being weaker.

Clearly, the difference in these negotiating models reflect dissimilarities in the cultural patterns of the United States and Japan. The Japanese term *amae* (the desire to be passively loved and cared for) helps explain these contrasting styles. *Amae* may be a universal human need but, in American society, this need is repressed to discourage dependence on others. In the Japanese society, however, an emphasis on group orientation mandates a need for interdependency and thus for *amae*. The Japanese acceptance and encouragement of *amae* behavior is notable in the nation's general desire to avoid confrontation. Instead of flatly declining a request, the Japanese often opt to soften the negative response by saying, "I am unable to do it." In America, most individuals do not want to admit or display incapabilities, but in Japan, to do so is to assume *amae* behavior. This attitude may help explain why the Japanese government insists that it still needs American military protection and that it cannot arm itself. But, just as a person can be too "*amai*," so can a nation. Japan is no longer a weak and vulnerable nation requiring special favors and protection. Japan must check itself from being too "*amai*" and realize the responsibilities that come with growing to be a major world economic power whose policies have strong and immediate international ramifications.

Related to cultural differences affecting the negotiating styles of the United States and Japan are the differences in the compositions of the teams of policymakers and negotiators. Americans expect functional specialists to guide and formulate policies related to their fields of expertise. Thus, American policymakers are recruited from a myriad of sources, depending upon particular qualifications. Additionally, in certain situations, Americans have become accustomed to relying on the advice of the intelligentsia in lieu of relying on less informed government officials.

Conversely, in Japan there tends to be a degree of static homogeneity, a uniformity of ideas and conformity to a group among foreign policymakers. This is due in great measure to the dominance of one particular group in the government and business world: the University of Tōkyo (Tōdai) Faculty of Law alumni. In 1970, 79 percent of the top Japanese government positions were occupied by Tōdai Law school graduates. (In America, the largest single group occupying similar Federal positions, Harvard Law school graduates, comprised only 11.2 percent of the total.) Furthermore, in the same year, 63 percent of those in the Ministry of International Trade and Industry (MITI) who had titles above section chief were products of the Tōdai educational machine. As Japan continually seeks acceptance as an equal member of the world community, a perceived need has arisen for competent negotiators who can move easily in dynamic international circles. Unfortunately, since recruitment to elite positions has reinforced intense educational competition, the breeding of such negotiators has been difficult.

This Japanese homogeneity is also demonstrated in the fact that the foreign policymakers usually have not been highly trained in any one specialized field. In Japanese society, the intelligentsia tends to be limited to writing foreign policy analyses for scholarly journals. It does not provide advice to the government. A qualified exception to this tendency is the *shingikai,* the joint civilian-official deliberation councils formed by MITI in 1964. In principle, the *shingikai* were set up to provide expert outside opinions to the government. In actuality, the councils have proven to be nothing more than sugar-coated mouthpieces of MITI's new policies.

Intermingled with the cultural tendencies already mentioned are a number of misperceptions which also affect American-Japanese relations. The most glaring of these is the concept of a "Japan, Inc." as an "economic animal" in which government and business groups are thought to present a united front as if they were part of a monolithic bloc. This misperception arises from the American application of the culturally bound notion that government and business in a capitalist society are inherently antagonistic to one another. In Japan, however, the tradition of cooperation between the public and private sectors encourages the political-economic leadership

which guides the country. The maintenance of government-business lines of communication is greatly assisted by the widespread practice of *amakudari* (descent from heaven) which refers to the practice of government officials retiring early and taking lucrative jobs with the boards of directors of firms dealing with public policy.

Of course, within this network of close government-business ties, constant conflict does exist. This conflict is most easily seen in studying policymaking of concern to MITI and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Historically, MITI has represented the particular protectionist interests of Japanese firms while the Foreign Ministry has sought to ensure the maintenance of friendly, non-aggressive relations between Japan and the international community. When differences in viewpoints between these two ministries arise, each ministry jealously guards its own *nawabari* (sphere of influence), and all members of a particular ministry develop a marked *nawabari ishiki* (territorial consciousness). *Nawabari ishiki,* which reflects an intense interest in protecting one's area of bureaucratic competence, is strengthened by the lifetime commitment patterns of Japanese employment.

It is clear that American views of the role of culture in Japanese economic policies and negotiation strategies are often based on incomplete knowledge and misperceptions. While problems in the American-Japanese relationship are sure to continue as long as there are substantive differences of opinion, mounting tensions may be at least partially allayed if members of both nations actively seek to recognize, understand and tolerate respective cultural differences. Perhaps by becoming aware of and sensitized to each other's differences, the people of the United States and of Japan might better be able to negotiate fair solutions to their bilateral problems.