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Article — Digitized Version

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Intereconomics

Suggested Citation: Williams, Ikuko Tsukuhara (1975) : Decision-making process in Japan, Intereconomics, ISSN 0020-5346, Verlag Weltarchiv, Hamburg, Vol. 10, Iss. 8, pp. 247-248, <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02929275>

This Version is available at:

<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/139246>

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Decision-making Process in Japan

by Ikuko Tsukuhara Williams, London *

As governments at last get down to business in the Tokyo Round of GATT negotiations, much is going to depend on the extent to which agreement is reached between the European Community, Japan and the United States. In this connection, it is important that people should understand the ways of the Japanese, particularly their decision-making process which somewhat seems to inhibit their ability to negotiate.

As the governments of the industrialised countries address the complex problems of a rapidly integrating world economy, it is being generally realised that unless agreement is reached between the three "economic super-powers", as they have been called, there will be no agreement at all.

Much is known of the policy or decision-making process of the United States. Something is known, too, of the way the European Community formulates its positions in international negotiations, even if it does seem to hover between economic power and political impotence.

But very little appears to be understood in the West of the policy-making process in Japan, the third of the economic super-powers, although that country's history is considerably longer than both the United States' and the European Community's.

With international negotiations now proceeding, or getting under way, on numerous economic fronts, it is appropriate to dwell on the Japanese concept of international responsibility and how it is exercised. For misunderstanding and suspicion can be easily sown in a climate of tense international relations.

"What do the people of Japan think about their role in the world? Are they aware of the responsibility their country shares — by virtue of its economic power — with the United States and the European Community for the management of the international economic order?"

When confronted with such portentous questions the answer of any member of the Japanese élite is likely to be unhesitating: "Yes of course we are aware of our responsibility. We want to cooperate in the creation of peace and harmony in the world." These words may be spoken with a tense expression. It might be as if the speaker felt that he and his countrymen were carrying the weight of the world on their shoulders.

But if they are pressed harder, and asked how they are cooperating, they are silent. A friendly smile might try to show sincere and earnest wishes for the goodwill of the world. Westerners who have had this experience are inclined to condemn the Japanese for paying mere lip-service to noble ideals. They may blame the Japanese for not being positive and speaking up in world affairs. The Japanese, though, are quietly pursuing their aims. It is just that their concept of responsibility and participation in international affairs differs from that of Western countries.

In the Western view, a responsible role in the world means much more than sending delegates to the conference table; it also means making a practical contribution by arguing out differences in order to understand the other side's point of view or by proposing a course of action. To the Japanese, however, participating is simply sending delegates to show a physical presence; it means no more than that.

Japanese people are afraid that by arguing or opposing a proposal they might offend other countries. To their mind, rejecting the proposals of another country is insulting that country, although not the specific policy. This is often reflected in Japan's votes in the United Nations. Usually its delegates support the Western countries. But as the Third World has loomed larger in world councils, particularly with the growing concern over supplies of essential raw materials, Japan has been abstaining on proposals advanced by developing countries.

The non-involvement of Japan in world politics is not only because of its resource-oriented foreign policy. It is also partly based on the Japanese way of thinking. For example, the Government of Japan has supported the British plan for recycling petro-dollars, at the same time supporting

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the proposals of the United States as a supplementary course.

In 1971 a series of events demonstrated the point. If a foreign government had a joint project or policy agreement with Tokyo and then cancelled or ignored it, the Japanese would be liable to interpret that action not in terms of the project or the agreement, but as an insult to the whole nation. Such was the case with the "Nixon shocks" over China and the temporary import surcharge. To the Japanese the lack of consultation was incredible. They cannot separate a single incident from the national position. The Japanese felt that their country had lost face by a foreign government's unilateral action.

This element in the way of thinking of the Japanese, which stems from their social behaviour, makes them reluctant to commit themselves to any specific policy or take any position in policy formulation at international level. They therefore remain silent. Whereas the Japanese consider that raising no controversy is the best way of maintaining good relations, Westerners prefer to find out all points of view, by argument if necessary, in order to establish common ground on which problems can be resolved.

Cultural and Social Influences

Japan's social structure is based on a communal society, where individualism is often an obstacle and where, too, there is no need to speak one's mind. What is more, the „life long“ employment system means that it is not necessary for an employee to "sell" his potentialities, perhaps by entertaining a superior at home.

As compared with Western civilisation, founded on the Christian religion's concept of "original sin", Japanese culture is based on the somewhat sham concept of *Hajino Bunka*, which inhibits logical reasoning but makes the individual greatly aware of what others think of him. This emphasis, *Mie*, exerts pressures on people to show themselves to be better than they can afford. It also obliges them to compete very strongly with one another.

Group-oriented behaviour makes some Japanese incapable of self-help and prevents them from developing opinions of their own. Moving like a flock of sheep is not conducive to improvements in the individual's thinking so that he can speak his mind. There is a common Japanese saying that "the nail which is sticking up must be hammered down" and therefore it is as well to remain as silent as possible during a discussion.

Even so, within a group prolonged personal contact gives the members a deep understanding of

each other, making it possible to come to agreement on a matter by a process of consensus, *Nurumayunonakadeno Ketsuron*. When opinion-forming and policy-making is by consensus, it is apt to be a time-consuming process, not suited to rapid responses to rapidly changing circumstances — either internally or externally. Once a position is agreed, however, the part to be played by those involved is usually thoroughly understood, which means that implementation of a policy is fast and efficient.

Policy-making of the Bureaucracy

This raises another aspect of the Japanese decision-making process which differs from most Western countries. For the primacy of the bureaucracy over the politicians is another inhibiting factor in Japan's role in the world. To understand the Japanese political system it is necessary to look back to the Meiji Restoration. Japan then had a feudalistic structure with an absolute monarch. When it was realised that the country was a long way behind Western industrialisation, it was decided that the best way to catch up was to institute an efficient bureaucracy, staffed by specialists in the various fields. By the 1930s it was firmly established and its efficiency was marked by the speed with which a modern industrial society was developed.

At the end of World War II, on the insistence of the United States, Japan adopted probably the most democratic and pacifist written constitution in the world. Although its form is there, in practice it has proved very difficult for the plant to take root in Japanese soil, so much better suited to the country's conditions is the "bureaucratic democracy" of earlier years.

On their retirement, senior officials in economic ministries usually assume senior positions in banks and other businesses, thus creating a stable working relationship between ministries, banks and industrial firms. The fact that this joint effort between the bureaucracy and business has been instrumental in achieving Japan's post-war success makes it extremely difficult for politicians to contribute to the policy-making process. By the time matters reach their desks they have been virtually settled by consensus at bureaucratic level.

It is therefore no exaggeration to say that Japanese policy-making is mainly in the hands of officials in the major industries of finance, trade and industry and agriculture rather than in those of the cabinet. From time to time the bureaucracy is challenged by politicians, public opinion or trade unions, but not to much lasting or significant effect.