

FRS – Japan Program

What role for Japan in a post-Covid-19 world?

Interview with Nobumasa Akiyama



Professor Nobumasa Akiyama is Professor, Graduate School of Law/School of International and Public Policy, Hitotsubashi University. He was previously Minister-Counsellor at the Permanent Mission of Japan to the International organizations in Vienna. Professor Akiyama is also Member of the Public Security Examination Committee, Visiting Fellow of JIIA, Member of the Board of Nuclear Material Control Center, Member of the Group of Eminent Persons for the substantive advancement of nuclear disarmament, MOFA, Japan.

Question 1: Will globalization remain a valid concept for progress and development in a post-Covid-19 world?

The traffic of people across borders will be relatively reduced, but the distribution of products, money and information will be more active, and the flow of finance and information will be even more accelerated. Globalization as a concept to describe such a phenomenon is still valid.

In addition, financial and information flows will strengthen the entanglement among states, and states will come to increasingly share a common interest in trans-border issues such as climate change. On the other hand, these phenomena do not have positive consequences for all social groups. I would like to give one example of a new phenomenon that deserves attention as one of the impacts of Covid-19 on globalization. It is expected

that the use of information on individuals' genes and health will increase in many parts of the world for infectious disease control and disease prevention. Such data on health and the human body will be useful in establishing new drugs and treatments, and may offer growth opportunities to the pharmaceutical industry.

It will also influence the social welfare policies of each country. Competition on a global level for the collection of such extremely valuable data may intensify between China, Japan, the U.S. and Europe. In addition, cross-border competition among mega-pharma companies will intensify, and health and pharmaceuticals will become a source of national competitiveness. These are possible scenarios for the evolution of globalization in a post-Covid era.

In addition, cross-border competition among mega-pharma companies will intensify.

Question 2: What role for Japan as a normative power in the future global governance?

Currently, competition among governance models is intensifying. A major concern is whether a model based on liberal democratic values, such as those of Europe, the United States and Japan, or a model based on authoritarian values, such as those of China, will be able to respond resiliently and effectively in a national crisis such as that created by Covid-19. At present, it appears that China has been successful in containing infectious diseases and lending legitimacy to authoritarian regimes in many developing countries. Also, the political turmoil in the United States seems to be showing developing countries the fragility of democratic systems, thus reducing the attractiveness of the liberal democratic model. However, from the perspective of long-term and sustainable growth and development of a state, Japan and Western countries should be able to demonstrate the superiority of the liberal democratic model in terms of respect for the dignity and security of individual human beings.

In this context, Japan, which has successfully established a liberal democratic model of governance as a non-Western nation, can exercise its normative power by sharing its experience and providing know-how to developing countries and others.

While the Western view of modernization, including “democratization,” continues to be seen by developing countries as a justification for interference by Western countries, it is possible for Japan to serve as a normative “bridge” for Asian and Middle Eastern countries and as a model of good practice that combines Western values with unique regional values.

Question 3: Do we need a reform of global institutions such as the WHO after Covid-19?

Reforms are necessary. A question is how to improve the effectiveness and efficacy of international organizations. Given some constraints in the second approach, the following argument focuses on the first aspect. It should also be noted that reform in that direction is not easy, and if we are to reform global governance in the public health sector, there will be various political obstacles and some strong drive would be necessary to pursue the reform.

During the Covid-19 predicament, many countries complained about the way the WHO handled the crisis and information on this infectious disease. They complained that information-sharing with China was not smooth, especially in the early stages, and that the information provided by the WHO on the characteristics of Covid-19 and how to deal with it was inadequate. These complaints are understandable because Covid-19 is a new infectious disease. And the WHO as an international organization, which is a collection of sovereign states, needed to take a cooperative stance with the member states concerned in order to carry out its work. This does not mean that a review or empowerment of the WHO’s governance system is unnecessary.

However, considering the aspect of international organizations as a collection of sovereign states, it is necessary to recognize the limitations that hamper the improvement of the international cooperation system, which is to strengthen the capacity of international organizations themselves. It is also necessary to aspire to measures to strengthen the capacity of global governance through the layering and networking of various kinds of

international cooperation. Specifically, it is important to increase the commitment of various stakeholders, such as the epistemic community, industry and civil society, in order to utilize expertise and information networks at various levels and bring them into cohesive efforts for common objectives. The international community as a whole will be able to improve its capacity, in cooperation with or through orchestration by international organizations. The way the international community has responded (or failed to effectively and collectively respond) to the Covid-19 shows that this form of governance improvement is necessary and effective.

The Covid-19 is an unknown infectious disease, and its infectious power and symptoms were initially not well understood, and effective treatment has not yet been established. The capabilities of governments alone have not been enough to cope with the situation, and the role of infectious disease experts has attracted attention as governments formulate countermeasures. Furthermore, as data on the number of infected people, infection patterns, and cases began to emerge, not only the government and experts working closely with the government, but also researchers affiliated with universities and research institutes, exchanged information and knowledge through social networking services and other means, resulting in the accumulation of a variety of knowledge. Moreover, this exchange of information and accumulation of knowledge were not limited to the narrow community of medical and epidemiological experts, but expanded to include experts in diverse fields such as mathematical statistics, psychology, and big data analysis using artificial intelligence (AI).

These communities of experts (epistemic communities: groups of people with specialized knowledge) beyond borders play the role of “peer reviewers” of government measures. At times, this expertise coming from outside the government is incorporated into the government’s internal policy-making process. Needless to say, doctors and other medical personnel are the first to come into contact with infectious disease cases. During the new corona crisis, the international community was filled with dissatisfaction and distrust over the way the Chinese government provided information. If communication (reporting and information provision) with the WHO does not function properly due to national interests, one strategy would be to establish a network in which key non-governmental and civil society actors such as doctors and researchers can directly participate, provide and share information.

Early notification (warning), information sharing, and scientific verification of the information gathered through such a network of epistemic communities can be done through collective knowledge, complementing the WHO’s activities through public channels, presenting alternatives to the concerned countries and the WHO, based on accumulated data and evidence. This will enable the WHO to present alternatives to relevant countries, and to encourage them to take action based on accumulated data and evidence. The flow of information through the channels of the epistemic community, and the availability of information and knowledge backed up by a variety of specialized knowledge, will put a certain amount of peer pressure on international organizations and countries. As a result, international organizations and governments will be forced to improve their own responsiveness to crises, transparency in

information disclosure, and accountability for the validity and appropriateness of their policies, and as a result, the international community as a whole can be expected to improve its ability to respond to crises.

It should be noted that there is a possibility that a member of the epistemic community who makes an early report through the network may be punished by the government of the country in question for damaging the interests of the country. For example, information on infectious diseases is considered to be directly related to national security, and some countries prohibit the leakage of such information. From the perspective of maintaining the prestige of the government and the trust of the people, some governments may hesitate to provide information on infectious disease epidemics, which may be seen as a failure of policy.

However, in the case of a pandemic crisis that spreads beyond national borders, the international public interest should be prioritized over the national interest of a single country. Furthermore, there is a risk that covering up an outbreak of an infectious disease in one part of a country may lead to the spread of the disease to other parts of this country. Therefore, there is a need to think about how to protect the rights of experts (whistle-blowers) who have committed such “whistleblowing” acts. In this sense, the involvement of experts in human rights and democracy is also essential from the perspective of ensuring the equilibrium between security and human rights.

The Covid-19 pandemic has raised pessimism about multilateral cooperation through international organizations. However, the international community needs multilateralism at a time when

problems that require global efforts are becoming more serious (and there is no superpower that can take leadership in solving such global issues alone). In order to do so, however, we need to think flexibly and multilaterally beyond the conventional framework of reflecting on how to overcome the structural problems of institutional constraints faced by international organizations as a collection of sovereign states, without being pessimistic or clinging to idealism.

I argue that while it is important to reform the governance of international organizations themselves in order to ensure the effectiveness of multilateralism, it is also crucial for them to strengthen and improve the global governance of their policy domains in a way that ensures multi-layeredness through the networking of epistemic communities/civil society. In this paper, I discussed the direction in which international organizations can strengthen and improve global governance in the policy domain. Such multi-layeredness has already been observed in various policy areas such as development assistance and public health in the field of international health, but in the future, it will be more difficult for international organizations to monopolize policy expertise and information. Considering this, it seems natural to build an international cooperation network of another layer, the private sector (civil society), and to enhance the complementarity with the public sector international cooperation. In addition, such a multi-layered international cooperation has a high affinity with the norms of the liberal international order that emphasizes diversity and democratic values. From this point of view, it would be a good idea for volunteer democratic countries to support such multilateralism in its layering (network building).

Furthermore, while we tend to view international politics from a power politics paradigm between the two superpowers, the United States and China, which are increasingly at odds with each other, there is no other nation that can exist without ties to the international community in every respect as Japan can. For such a country, stronger and more flexible global governance, in other words, multi-layered governance, would be a great advantage in building and maintaining a favourable international environment, and Japan should have the vision to sponsor the creation of such a network. This is another important theme that has emerged during the current pandemic crisis, namely, the creation of rules and norms for the fair and equitable handling of data, which is a major issue that may define post-Covid-19 socioeconomic life and the relationship between the state and individuals.

The multi-layered governance described here is just one suggestion for improving multilateral cooperation. However, it is important for many people to share their positions and review each other's ideas on how to design and implement better multilateral cooperation and global governance. I believe that sharing and mutual review of ideas is an important principle for a democratic and transparent international governance in an uncertain environment.

Question 4: The EU and Japan do share the same values, what are the perspectives of cooperation to consolidate the liberal democratic world order?

With a view to competing with China, and also to gaining a large number of "followers" or sympathizers globally in that context, cooperation between Japan

and the EU is important in the following ways:

First, they have a role in terms of cooperating and supporting the leadership of the United States, and also to make it turn its gaze to the international community and recognize its role at a time when it becomes inward-looking (this is a trend that has been corrected with the Biden administration, but is expected to continue as a medium- to long-term trend).

Second, the liberal democratic camp, led by Japan and the European Union, will try to allocate resources more efficiently in order to reduce China's influence in the face of its money-grubbing international cooperation, and if a recipient country gets into financial or political trouble with China, they will cooperate or divide labour to come up with alternatives and support measures.

Third, Japan and the EU should demonstrate commitment to each other's geopolitical concerns. European countries' growing presence in the Indo-Pacific has been looked upon favourably by Japan, and likewise, Japan needs to be prepared to answer what it can do when Europe needs a commitment from Japan.

March 2021