

The Politics of GATT Expansion: Japanese Accession and the Domestic Political Context in Japan and the United States, 1948-1955

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Although politics is obviously inseparable from international trade, such general observations usually add little to our understanding of either. By examining an episode of decision – the admission of Japan to the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade in 1955 – this paper aims to describe more precisely the dynamics of expanding the community of trading nations to include significant new members. In the post-Cold War era, the great challenge is how to admit Russia and the People's Republic of China into the World Trade Organization. Both powers have already expressed the desire to become full members. Yet in the same way that both Russians and Chinese are wary of the world beyond their borders, others are quick to regard Russia and China as powers “not like us,” as indeed they are not in crucial respects. The difficulties associated with Japanese admission in 1955 suggest how to think about the political and economic problems associated with expansion of the WTO. Specifically, they show the ways that the broader political and military setting impinges on both the prospects for securing approval of new members and the process of resolving disputes over economic issues.

The main facts concerning the United States support of a system of multilateral trading order abroad during the 1950s are well known [Kaufman, 1982]. Scholars have also examined how Japan's Cold War partnership with the United States paved the way for its admission to GATT [Ishii, 1989; Akaneya, 1992; Eckes, 1995, pp. 168-77; and Forsberg, 1996]. Finally, there is a rich literature on how Japan's economic structure is unique [Johnson, 1982; McCraw, 1985; and Mason, 1992]. Even non-specialists are familiar with the main points of conflict in economic relations between Japan and its trading partners, particularly the prominent role of the economic bureaucracy in defining Japanese policy and the nation's reluctance to liberalize its foreign trade.

Yet our understanding of how the United States was able to secure approval for Japanese accession over foreign and domestic opposition is incomplete. Similarly, it is not fully clear why Japan's trading partners made so little progress toward securing reform of illiberal Japanese practices. It is not enough to say that American leaders gave priority to security considerations in

relations with Japan or that structural differences define Japan apart from other market economies. We must explore the specific connections between decisions on economic policy and the broader context. On both issues, considerations of politics and strategy counted for more than students of economic policy have recognized. By linking a liberal trade policy toward Japan to the United States' overall effort to contain Communist power in Asia, the administration of Dwight D. Eisenhower was able to overcome objections to GATT membership for Japan that would otherwise have carried the day. Similarly, the divided character of Japanese politics frustrated outside efforts to secure reversal of discriminatory Japanese policies and practices that protected the Japanese market from foreign competition. Both points have implications for the leadership required if the WTO is to succeed.

The Long Road to Japanese Accession

In 1945 Japan was cut off from the world. Occupation officials focused on demilitarization, institutional reforms, and reparations. As tension with the Soviet Union escalated and the Chinese Communists' power grew, however, the advisors of President Harry Truman came to see Japan as a vital ally. Since Japan was dependent upon aid for its basic welfare, they also desired to reduce the burden on the American taxpayer. In order to expand Japanese export opportunities, the administration decided in 1948 to bring Japan into closer association with GATT [Forsberg, 1996, pp. 58, 65].

Securing the approval of other nations proved time-consuming. In 1948 and again in 1949, American delegates proposed that GATT members accord Japan most-favored-nation status. Widespread opposition frustrated the United States bid, but administration officials briefed the Japanese about GATT, expecting Japan to apply for membership after the Occupation [Christoph, 1950]. In September of 1951, the month the Japanese Peace Treaty was signed, Japan asked to send an observer to the sixth session of GATT then in session. Despite opposition, voiced most openly by the United Kingdom, a majority of GATT members approved the request [Ishii, 1995, pp. 187-88].

In 1952 Japan submitted an application for membership. Opposition from the British Commonwealth and the need to secure renewal of legislation authorizing American participation in trade negotiations (the Reciprocal Trade Agreements Act), however, delayed progress. The next year Japan asked the contracting parties for admission on a temporary basis. With strong U.S. support for this proposal, a two-thirds majority at the GATT session that fall accepted Japan into the organization in a two-stage process. The contracting parties invited Japan to GATT without formal voting rights until June 30, 1955. Subsequently Japan was to become a full member pending both a round of tariff negotiations and another vote by the contracting parties [Forsberg, 1996, pp. 65-68]. When the negotiations were finally held in 1955, the bilateral talks between the U.S. and Japan overshadowed the others [U.S. Department of State, 1955]. Most of the Western European and Commonwealth nations did

not negotiate with Japan. But the member nations approved the application, and Japan became a full member in September.

The American Domestic Political Context

The main political problem for the Truman and Eisenhower administrations was that they needed to secure Congressional authority to conduct the negotiations preceding Japanese accession. This problem has been at the heart of American foreign trade policy since the Reciprocal Trade Program began in 1934. Trade legislation is complex, involves countless interests, and can bog down in Congress. Without strong executive leadership, little is likely to be accomplished [Verdier, 1994, pp. 186-217].

Expanding trade with Japan was highly unpopular in certain quarters, not least President Eisenhower's own Republican Party. Resentment left over from the past war evaporated quickly as the Cold War escalated. In industrial areas, however, memories of Japan's prewar export drives remained vivid. Light industry factory owners and their employees feared that Japan would flood the American market with cheap goods. Textile makers, tuna fish packers, ceramics producers, and various other such interests turned to government for protection [Forsberg, 1996, p. 61].

The prospect of negotiating with Japan also invited criticism of both administrations' commitment to liberalizing trade. Even after two decades of trade liberalization, the Old Guard of the Republican Party still opposed GATT's mission. After regaining control of the Congress in 1953, nationalist Republicans such as Rep. Daniel Reed (R-NY) attempted to rebuild U.S. tariff walls. Reed was chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee. He simply ignored President Eisenhower's call for a three-year renewal of reciprocal trade legislation. The administration was lucky to get a one-year renewal of the act, and that came with the caveat that the United States would conduct no "major" negotiations pending a review of foreign economic policy by a special commission (the Randall Commission). Since Japan was applying to GATT, the effect was to delay the negotiations preceding Japanese accession [Forsberg, 1996, p. 65]. Japanese officials were predictably "greatly disappointed" [Araki, 1953].

In his initial appeal for renewal of the reciprocal trade act, Eisenhower insisted that liberal trade was in the nation's economic welfare. When such abstract appeals to public interest again drew no response, the administration emphasized Japan's importance in the Cold War. It was understood that in approving any reciprocal trade legislation in 1954 that the Congress was authorizing the administration to enter into tariff negotiations with Japan. A record Japanese trade deficit in 1953 focused attention on Japan's need to trade. Following the defeat of the French at Dien Bien Phu in May 1954, lawmakers were wary of appearing to undercut the United States' position in Asia. Congress approved a second one-year renewal, and preparation for the tariff negotiations with Japan went forward [Forsberg, 1996, pp. 68-69].

In 1955, following the Democrats' recapture of control of the Congress, lawmakers approved a three-year renewal of the reciprocal trade bill. Japan figured less prominently in that year's debate, but Japanese trade continued to arouse controversy when the tariff reductions agreed upon earlier in the year took effect and imports of Japanese textiles rose. The most significant change was the change in party affiliation of business interests opposing trade liberalization. During the Truman administration, the Democrats had successfully tied the cause of trade liberalization to American security policy in the Cold War. The effect, as Daniel Verdier has written, was "the transformation of tariff-making from a partisan process to an executive politics process" [Verdier, 1994, p. 204]. By 1955 the shift was complete. Whereas in previous years opponents of free trade were most closely affiliated with the Republican Party, during the 1955 debate they divided and allied with elements in both parties [Watson, 1956].

This executive triumph had several consequences. By linking trade liberalization and security, the proponents of the reciprocal trade program were able to marginalize their opponents [Verdier, 1994, p. 214]. But by highlighting the conflict between capitalism and communism, American leaders obscured the extent to which there were different varieties of capitalism [Ostry, 1997, p. 72]. Liberalizing trade for political reasons likewise distracted attention away from potential problems and reinforced the connection in the public mind between trade and security. As critics have charged, concluding trade agreements for political reasons can lead to unwise concessions [Eckes, 1995, pp. 175-77]. I think that such criticism exaggerates the risks, but Americans clearly failed to consider the long-term effects of liberalization as carefully as they should have. Implicit in American thinking during the 1950s was the confidence that the United States would retain its lead over its trading partners and that these nations' economies would become more like that of the United States as they modernized.

The Japanese Political Context

The Japanese were at the same time both more unified and more divided than their trading partners on questions relating to GATT and foreign trade. Cooperation between business interests and the Japanese Government was much closer than relations between business and government in the United States. At the same time, the ruling Japanese conservatives and the opposition socialists were at odds over the fundamental question of whether Japan should expand its trade with the West at all.

Japanese politics during the 1950s was terribly unsettled [Kataoka, 1991, pp. 129-161; Stockwin, 1982, pp. 58-74]. Parliamentary democracy was more deeply rooted in Japan than most non-Japanese believe. Yet no established framework for either political loyalties or the contours of political debate emerged until 1955. A strong majority of elected leaders described themselves as conservatives, but they were divided into the Democratic Party and the Liberal Party, which was itself divided into factions revolving around its two

most prominent leaders, Yoshida Shigeru (prime minister until December 1954) and Hatoyama Ichiro (prime minister from December 1954 until November 1956). For their part, socialists were divided between the Left Socialists and the Right Socialists. When the two socialist parties united in October 1955, their conservative opponents merged into the Liberal Democratic Party, the party that held power for the next thirty-eight years. This right-left divide was over the basic character of the postwar order itself. Under Yoshida's leadership, the conservatives chose the American side in the Cold War and sought to expand Japan's welfare by becoming a part of the U.S.-led economic order abroad. Socialists, by contrast, advocated neutrality in the Cold War and looked to other Asian nations rather than to the United States for trading opportunity [Stockwin, 1992, pp. 87-91].

Debate inside these two camps tended to revolve around personalities and calculations of political advantage rather than around the merits of a given policy. Conservatives stood together in desiring membership in GATT as part of a broader effort to rejoin the international community and promote foreign trade recovery [Akaneya, 1992, pp. 86-88]. Left and Right Socialists, by contrast, feared that the American alliance risked involving Japan in another global war. Trade policy on the left was inseparable from neutralism in political and military affairs. The Socialists' thinking on trade was not monolithic, however. In the view of the Left Socialists, American capitalism – invariably described as exploitative and aggressive – posed a vital threat to Japan. They advocated expanding trade with the Communist bloc, particularly the PRC [Nihon Shakaito (Left), 1953]. The Right Socialists were less critical of capitalism itself and not as eager to reduce American military spending in Japan. Rather than pin their hopes on trade with the Chinese mainland, they hoped to expand Japan's trade with Southeast Asia [Nihon Shakaito (Right), 1953].

Paradoxically, the gulf between the ruling conservatives and the opposition had the effect of creating relative unity on the nation's core foreign economic policies, at least from the perspective of Japan's trading partners. Since the conservatives were in power, their desire to join the U.S.-led trading system defined national policy. The relative consensus on general policy in conservative circles eliminated the need for the government to sell its policy in the Diet in the same manner as in the United States. Also, membership in GATT meant far more to the Japanese than it did to Americans. President Eisenhower made Japanese accession a top priority, but his political future did not hinge on success in the endeavor. Besides being a matter of prestige, Japan's economic performance had a direct impact on whether the conservatives would continue to hold power. Significantly, Japan was in recession in 1954.

In negotiating the terms of Japan's association with GATT and the other trading nations, the general principle of Japanese policy was to press for maximum economic advantage in exchange for the minimum possible concessions. The specific aspects of this position owed much more to the influence of Japanese business interests than most Western scholarship on

Japan suggests. It is well established that Japanese business has overwhelmingly supported conservative government, and that both business leaders and politicians cultivate close ties with officials in the bureaucracy [Fukui, 1970, pp. 162-70]. Observers note the extent to which business has been willing to accept bureaucratic guidance [Ike, 1972, pp. 42-43; Johnson, 1982, p. 20]. Although accurate, such analysis risks overstating the power of the bureaucrats and the coherence of national policy. The bureaucrats have often been divided, and business pressure has often shaped the timing and substance of government policy. On trade, for example, textiles interests were particularly active in pressing the government to apply for GATT membership [Akaneya, 1992, p. 86]. Similarly, business interests have shaped policy on foreign investment [Mason, 1992]. Since Japanese business is not monolithic and many interests are at odds with each other, the process of decision-making on trade issues has been highly informal and often confusing – a patchwork of deals, compromises, and special arrangements.

The Terms of Japanese Accession

The specific content of Japan's search for maximum concessions was twofold: tariff reductions abroad and the application of MFN treatment. The Japanese Government was particularly interested in the American market, which it correctly judged to be more open and to offer more potential for growth than those of Western Europe. During the negotiations, Japanese delegates pressed hard for concessions on products in markets where Japanese products enjoyed a comparative advantage: cotton textiles (particularly cotton velveteens and cotton outerwear), monosodium glutamate, porcelain china, optical products, and tuna fish. Since imports of these items threatened to arouse protest at home, the Eisenhower administration studied each item carefully. U.S. negotiators were careful not to breach a single "peril point" announced by the Tariff Commission (that is, the lowest duty which could be set without threatening serious harm to a domestic industry). The concessions promised improved tariff treatment on 40 percent of Japan's 1953 export trade [Forsberg, 1996, p. 74].

The desire to be treated as an equal was one of the defining features of postwar Japanese diplomacy, and it applied with particular force to trade issues. Of necessity, the Japanese Government pressed for application of the principle of equal treatment inherent in the concept of MFN status. Owing to a combination of deeply ingrained protectionist attitudes, the fear that Japan would resort to predatory trade practices, and political expediency, several GATT members followed the lead of the UK in an effort to impose special restrictions on Japanese trade. Specifically, the UK attempted to secure Japanese acquiescence in a reservation allowing prior members the right to discriminate specifically against Japanese trade as the price of Japanese membership in GATT. Japan and the United States both stood firm on the principle of equal treatment, even when it became clear that the UK and the other powers were going to invoke article 35, the general escape clause, rather

than extend GATT privileges to Japan. Thus, the price of principle was that fourteen GATT members invoked the escape clause, affecting about 40 percent of Japan's trade with GATT nations. Although some parties, including the UK, extended GATT tariff rates to Japanese trade on an ad hoc basis, not until the 1960s did Japan enjoy full GATT treatment from the other contracting parties [Forsberg, 1996, pp. 71-74].

More interesting than Japan's pursuit of opportunity abroad is the government's attempt to minimize the concessions required. Bureaucrats, conservative politicians, and business were in general agreement on policy. All exhibited a morbid fear of foreign competition. Support for liberalization of trade policies was stronger than is usually appreciated, but the dominant theme was solidarity in the face of foreign challenge.

Table 1: *Reductions in Japanese Rates of Duty on Leading Items, 1955*

Commodity Description	Before 1955	Under Agreement	Imports 1953
Automotive passenger cars over 254 cm	40%	35%	\$24,383,000
Lubricating oils	30%	22.5%	3,901,000
Bourbon and rye whiskies	50%	45%	3,446,000
Tetraethyl lead	20%	10%	3,050,000
Airplanes, four-engine or more	15%	10%	3,050,000
Aureomycin [chlortetracycline]	20%	17.5%	2,715,000
Tomato paste and puree	25%	duty free	1,209,000
Measuring and testing instruments	20%	10%	1,210,000
Statistical card system punching machines	15%	10%	1,682,000
Other machines	15%	10%	1,590,000
Television receivers with cathode tubes of 23" and over	30%	25%	1,017,000
Cash registers	20%	15%	708,000

Source: U.S. Department of State (1955).

Note: All figures pertain to imports from the United States.

This attitude revealed itself in Japan's reluctance to make any meaningful concessions in 1955. The U.S. delegation made its best offers at the outset of the tariff negotiations. This approach was standard practice in GATT negotiations. The aim was to force the other side to match the American offers. At first the Japanese refused to believe that the United States would not improve its offers. In the American view, the Japanese list of proposed concessions "offered no basis for negotiations" [Minutes, 1955]. The talks consisted of repeated U.S. demands for additional offers from a stubborn Japanese delegation. On items produced by Japanese industries the government hoped to promote, such as television receivers, and big- and medium-sized passenger automobiles, the Japanese were particularly reluctant to budge very

far (Table 1). Recognizing that some concessions were required, the Japanese preferred to consent to reductions or bindings on raw materials rather than manufactured goods (Table 2). Since finding markets for agricultural products and raw materials was a high priority of the Eisenhower administration, Japanese concessions matched American interests to a greater degree than later generations have appreciated.

Table 2: *Bindings of Japanese Rates of Duty on Leading Items, 1955*

Commodity Description	Before 1955	Under Agreement	Imports 1953
Raw cotton, ginned	free	free	\$122,009,000
Bituminous coal (for coking)	free	free	57,437,000
Soybeans	10%	10%	49,933,000
Beef tallow	5%	5%	14,719,000
Corn, unmilled, for feedstuffs	10%	10%	11,549,000
Bituminous coal (other than for coking)	free	free	8,274,000
Airplanes less than four-engine	15%	15%	4,513,000
Raw petroleum coke	5%	5%	4,441,000

Source: U.S. Department of State (1955).

Note: all figures pertain to imports from the United States.

Japan's great advantage in the negotiations stemmed from the divided character of the nation's politics. The conservatives were the only politicians with whom the Americans wanted to deal, and they knew it. Japan's economic weakness during the fifties reinforced the Americans desire to promote the nation's economic welfare. Thus, the American alliance conferred an intangible economic advantage on Japan far beyond any direct assistance. As a Commerce Department representative commented in his report on the 1955 negotiations, "They [the Japanese] knew very well that the United States considered a trade agreement with Japan to be extremely important to the United States as well as to Japan." Reasoning that the United States "cannot risk to lose such an agreement because of the importance we attach to Japan," the Japanese "played their hand well being certain that we would not permit the negotiations to fail" [quoted in Eckes, p. 173].

What the diplomats could not achieve at the negotiating table, the government attempted to accomplish by non-tariff barriers. Under the terms of the Foreign Exchange and Foreign Trade Control Law of 1949, for example, the bureaucrats were able to restrict the import of automobiles, electronics products, or any item competing with domestic production. The law authorized the Ministry of International Trade and Industry to allocate foreign exchange as it saw fit. Japan's precarious balance of payments position justified the imposition of such controls, but the incidental protection they provided was significant [Johnson, 1982, p. 215].

Similarly, the restrictive screening process for all incoming foreign investment established by the Foreign Investment Law of 1950 served to shield

the Japanese economy from foreign equity investment while allowing the purchase of foreign technology. The ostensible aim of the law was to insure that the government approved only those investments beneficial to Japan. Japanese business feared that foreign interests could easily buy up Japanese companies or establish controlling shares in joint ventures. Yet these same foreign interests possessed the new technologies that Japanese industrialists badly wanted. The lengthy approval process under the FIL allowed the Japanese Government to separate the valuable technology from the foreign control [Mason, 1992, p. 151]. During the negotiation of the U.S.-Japan treaty of Friendship, Commerce, and Navigation of 1953, Japan pressed the United States hard to allow retention of this screening system [Memorandum of Conversations, 1955]. Some of the officials, particularly Yukawa Morio (head of the Bureau of Economic Affairs at the Foreign Ministry) and Otabe Kenichi (a negotiator), were the same figures who were responsible for the negotiations relating to GATT. U.S. officials, not expecting the boom in foreign direct investment that came only five years later, agreed, and a special protocol allowed Japan special rights to restrict trade in the interest of foreign exchange stability [Forsberg, 1996, pp. 62-65]. Thus emerged a profound structural difference between Japan and its trading partners – a domestic market which for the next three decades remained highly impervious to FDI [Encarnation, 1986, p. 119].

In retrospect, 1955 represents the great turning point in Japan's early postwar history. At home the LDP consolidated its hold on political power. Japan's admission to GATT represented the nation's return to the international community. The economy pulled out of recession, and the nation's export trade began the sustained growth which contributed to the nation's prosperity during the years of high-speed growth. The nation was, for the first time in years, justifiably confident.

Conclusions

There are important differences between the Japanese example and the cases of Russia and China today. The most obvious is that we know a lot more about economic growth now than we did decades ago. We recognize that there are many varieties of capitalism [Gerlach, 1992]. Although no one anticipated the Japanese "miracle" before the fact, it is now part of our intellectual landscape. Already observers are asking what is necessary for there to be a "chudo," or Russian economic miracle [Yergin and Gustafson, 1993, p. 158; Smith, 1993]. Interest in the prospects for China is also widespread [*Economist*, 1997].

The parallels between the Japanese example and the challenges of the future, however, are significant. In the strategic realm, the world is now as then in a postwar environment. The end of the Cold War is harder to define, and the burden of postwar reconstruction is less immediately pressing this time around, but the strategic problem is the same. The challenge is to fit China and Russia

into the emerging world order. Like Japan then, they are capable of becoming formidable rivals.

Second, although the scale is much larger, both the PRC and Russia are in the middle of making the economic transition to capitalism. Both are abandoning destructive radical alternatives to liberal democratic capitalism. The gap between current practice and international norms in both countries is certain to lead to considerable friction across a wide range of issues – from the degree of foreign control of joint ventures to accounting standards – as was the case with Japanese integration. Controversies will need to be resolved in the context of broader political and defense concerns. Since the political opposition may appear more unpalatable (if it exists at all), one effect may be to reduce the ability of outsiders to secure removal of discriminatory economic practices.

Finally, in the same manner that Japan's application was a fundamental test of whether GATT would work, managing the entry of Russia and China poses a crucial test of the World Trade Organization. On paper the WTO's mandate is much broader, and it is much better prepared to handle conflicts over non-tariff issues than GATT ever was. The question is whether the will exists to deal with them. That depends in a large measure on the United States, particularly the executive branch. Yet, as of this writing, American trade policy is not clearly committed to continued multilateral liberalization of trade [Bhagwati, 1997]. In the case of the U.S. policy toward the China, debate continues to revolve around familiar issues of business opportunity and human rights rather than issues of long-term stability such as whether a stable system of rule by law is taking shape in the PRC [Minxin Pei, 1998]. Others are simply pessimistic about the future of Russia and China. It is easy to forget that Japan's problems in the fifties seemed immense [Hashimoto, 1995, p. 4]. Yet, given the chance Japan surpassed all expectations. The United States provided the leadership necessary to make GATT viable. United States policy will be decisive in determining the fate of the WTO, and with it continued economic advance.

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