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Public Opinion and Japanese Foreign Policy-Making Processes under the Koizumi Administration

In research on Japanese public opinion the majority of scholars present the view that Japanese public opinion does not have a great impact on policy-making. However, other scholars have argued that there has been significant evidence, and that public opinion exerts some power in policy-making. Research has only recently begun to understand how and to what extent the public affects the policy-making process on salient domestic issues. Societal influence has been visible, active and effective in domestic politics of Japan. But we know far less about the relationship and causality effects of public opinion in Japan’s foreign policy-making! The Koizumi administration was an extraordinary period for Japan, not only because it survived two legislative periods and is symbolic for new institutional and societal trends and a different leadership-style, but also because Japan’s foreign policy-making reflected new developments during that time, and in some cases showed a highly visible Japanese public within the foreign policy-making process.

Research on Japanese Public Opinion, especially in foreign policy-making, is still a rather unexplored field. In particular, theoretical research on public opinion and foreign policy-making is dominated by studies involving the American public. However, obtained results have shown that public opinion indeed matters in foreign policy-making and policy-makers can benefit from an understanding of public opinion. Furthermore, public opinion affords a broader perspective of the political environment and alternate courses of action can be assessed in foreign policy matters.

This study takes a closer look at the possible role of public opinion within the foreign policy-making process of Japan during the Koizumi administration.

I argue that the combination of leadership-style and strategy, the decision context (institutional system and decision time) and situational factors such as the climate of opinion (Kuuki) and media presence determine the role of public opinion in the foreign policy-making process. Further, I assume that public opinion had a threefold role and was used mainly as a tool and as a catalyst for domestic policy-making, and thereby turned into one of the major constraints of Japanese foreign policy-making at the same time.

By analyzing and comparing cases, in which the degree of influence of public opinion varies, I will try to identify factors that indicate when public opinion becomes an important variable within the foreign policy-making process.

I will follow a qualitative research design based on theoretical assumptions of Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA) and Public Opinion Research. It is necessary to look closer into domestic political environments and general policy-making processes of a country in order to identify which actors and influences are involved. However, it is difficult to disentangle the policy processes and to determine whether it was public opinion or whether other influences played a role as well. Without doubt, public opinion is just one of many factors that might influence the foreign policy-making of Japan. By providing evidence about when and under what conditions public opinion was visible in past foreign policy decisions - in the context of the normative ideal that public opinion should play a role in democratic policy-making - this PhD thesis shall contribute to the research on 1) the nature of the linkage process
between public opinion and the decision-makers, 2) the particular role of public opinion and foreign policy-making of Japan and 3) on the validity of the theoretical assumptions of the elitist vs. the pluralist view in the case of Japan.