Women Leaders in Diplomacy across the Pacific

Michael A. Schneider

Between 1997 and 2013, women occupied the post of U.S. Secretary of State almost continuously, the sole interruption to female incumbency being the first African-American male to serve in that capacity. Between 2001 and 2004, coinciding with serious reflection and reorientation of Japanese security policy, Tanaka Makiko and Kawaguchi Yoriko served as the first two women to hold the post of Japanese Foreign Minister (Kawaguchi was rumored for the post again in 2012). Though high-ranking women in Chinese foreign relations have been few, in the midst of simmering tensions over the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands in late 2012, Ms. Hua Chunying became an official English spokesperson for the Chinese Foreign Ministry. Park Geun-hye was elected President of South Korea in December 2012, becoming the first female head of state in modern East Asian history, and was engaged immediately by serious negotiations involving North Korea. The first female ambassadors from the United States to South Korea and Japan, Kathleen Stephens and Caroline Kennedy, respectively, were appointed during the Obama Administration.

While the rising prominence of women as the diplomatic face of countries across the Pacific is striking, this observation is not the same thing as declaring that their prominence has been decisive or transformative in East Asian foreign relations. The appearance of female leadership in diplomacy does not automatically mean that issues of women have risen higher on the list of diplomatic priorities. Nor does it necessarily prove that issues of gender in the production of domestic and foreign policies have received increased public scrutiny. Neither should one infer that the involvement of women necessarily resulted in the pursuit of different foreign policy strategies or resulted in different diplomatic outcomes. Whether the arc of foreign relations has fundamentally shifted as a result of female participation may take decades to assess. Or whether the increasing presence of women in diplomatic posts will result instead in international relations becoming increasingly inter-military or inter-business relations, where women may be less prominent, is also worth watching.
At the same time, it is more than coincidental that women’s leadership in diplomacy has emerged in the aftermath of the Cold War, where the search for a post-post-World War II order has begun in earnest. And it is hard to be persuaded that this leadership is not important simply because, in most of the books published on East Asian foreign relations in the past two decades—a veritable renaissance for serious thought about foreign policy in the region—issues of gender and even the names of these important female political figures are downplayed and often entirely absent. One might observe that these new women leaders have emerged during a period of increasingly assertive foreign policies in each of these countries. This chapter argues that women’s increasing leadership presence reflects the uncertainty in national foreign policies and the process of redefinition of diplomatic and security strategies. The U.S. “pivot to Asia,” the bilateral territorial disputes between Japan and its neighbors, the new nationalist voices on foreign policy in Japan—the many specific events that indicate that East Asia is moving toward a post-post-war era—are expressions of this process of redefinition. In this context, it is especially noteworthy that women have risen to prominence as Pacific nations have struggled to strike a balance between their internationalist postures in a multilateral environment and the impulse to adopt unilateral solutions in an era of national unease.

**Albright and Rice in the post-Cold War environment**

The Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995 marked the high tide for the informal diplomatic approach of women in the post-World War II international order. The end of the Cold War inspired greater emphasis on the role of cultural diplomacy broadly. Released from the bipolar framework of the Cold War, states could promote national interests while also promoting the good work of the international system in shaping and bolstering new frameworks of cooperation. Cultural diplomacy, moreover, had served as the more conventional arena for women’s participation in foreign relations throughout the modern era. International women’s conferences, an avenue for informal diplomacy, were similarly a conventional path for independent women’s voices throughout the 20th century. For example, Fujita Sugi (1898–1993), who served as the head of the Japanese delegation to First World Conference on Women in 1975, had participated in the 1928 Pan-Pacific Women’s Conference, one of the most prominent pre-World War II conferences. The 1995 conference, however, shifted that calculus. As the high point of the United Nations-led “Year of the Woman” movement, the Beijing conference adopted a more overtly political posture, and the final declaration openly stated that development depended on “participation in the decision-making process and access to power.” In the U.S., United Nations envoy Madeline Albright lobbied to lead the U.S. delegation and succeeded on two fronts. Although her role in the Beijing conference was