

# The Japan that can say yes

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Japan

Japan under Koizumi has become a more assertive country in world affairs; a certain intransigence can be observed in its foreign policy. Contemporary Japanese self-assertion is driven by an internal logic set in motion by Japan's defeat in World War Two, given new scope for expression by changes in the international environment.

By Kazuhiko Togo

Japan had not been defeated and occupied by outside forces prior to 1945. Defeat in World War Two was nothing short of traumatic for the majority of the population. The Allied Occupation had as its initial goal the complete and permanent demilitarisation of Japan. Article 9 of the Constitution, promulgated in 1946, stated: 'the Japanese people forever renounce war as a sovereign right of the nation... Land, sea, and air forces, as well as other war potential, will never be maintained.' Pacifist idealism, a major current running through post-war Japanese society, dates from this period.

The Cold War descended on East Asia in 1947. Under the US strategy of containing communism, Japan re-emerged as Western democracy's bulwark in East Asia. Economic recovery became the priority; with its newly established Self Defence Forces, Japan entered a security alliance with the US. Those prepared to face the reality which surrounded Japan welcomed this change. But their views clashed with pacifist idealism, which had established itself in the vacuum of defeat. Under the iron umbrella of US-Soviet rivalry, a deep rift descended on Japanese society. Pacifist idealism was supported by the Socialist and Communist Parties, labour unions, the media, influential intellectuals, and public opinion. The conservative parties, government agencies and a minority of intellectuals espoused realism.

The end of the Cold War transformed the context of Japanese foreign and security policy and brought the country into the arena of international politics. Japan's internal political power structure changed as well. In 1993, forty years of Liberal Democratic Party rule was brought to an end by a reform-minded coalition government. In 1994, the LDP returned to power in a most unlikely coalition with the Socialist Party. Reversing its previous stance of unarmed neutrality, the Socialist Party acknowledged the legality of the Self Defence Forces and the security treaty with the United States. The largest political party carrying the banner of pacifism thereby lost its *raison-d'être*; the newly formed Democratic Party, with a much more pro-active security policy, became the opposition in 1996.

Against the background of these internal and external changes, Japan moved towards a more realistic, proactive and responsible stance in international affairs. Offended by the derision that met Japan's \$14 billion contribution to the 1990-91 Gulf War, many Japanese became convinced that active participation in the international arena required political and military contributions. The Peace Keeping Operations (PKO) Law was passed in 1992, enabling troops to be sent to Cambodia, the Golan Height and East Timor on UN peacekeeping operations. The 1993-94 North Korean nuclear crisis and the 1995-96 Taiwan Strait crisis resulted in the reaffirmation of the US-Japan security alliance in 1996 and 1997. North Korean encroachments by



Koizumi inspecting troops heading for Iraq

sea and sky in 1998-99 further enhanced awareness of Japan's own responsibilities for national self-defence.

## 9/11, North Korea, and Koizumi's security policy

Koizumi came to power in April 2001 and was immediately faced with the challenge of global terrorism. Declaring any terrorist attack to be an attack on Japan's security, Koizumi ordered the Maritime Self Defence Forces to the Indian Ocean to offer logistical support to US, UK and other coalition forces. In October 2002, the North Korean nuclear crisis erupted, further heightening Japan's sense of vulnerability. Tokyo reacted by enacting new laws to respond to armed attack; a missile defence program was introduced in the 2004 budget.

Koizumi's decision to send troops to Iraq must be understood as part of Japan's readiness to bear greater responsibilities towards global security. While the government came under heavy criticism for following America's lead, its decision was based on a calculation of long-term Japanese strategic interests. Had its security policy been more mature, Japan, while still supporting the US, could have entered into dialogue with nations in the Middle East and Europe and pushed for a greater United Nations role.

## Koizumi's foreign policy

Under Koizumi a new intransigence has appeared in important foreign policy arenas. As a result, Japan missed several opportunities to strengthen its foreign policy leverage. If the 1990s were a period of realist victory over pacifist idealism, the turn of the century witnessed the beginning of a new rift between realists and nationalists pursuing narrowly – and emotionally – defined national interests

The first sign of intransigence appeared immediately after Koizumi took power, in his policy towards Russia. Japan and Russia had been working to settle the territorial dispute over four islands northeast of Hokkaido since the late 1980s. Both sides had failed to grasp opportunities during the Gorbachev and Yeltsin presidencies. In 2000-01, Prime Minister Mori and President Putin came close to resolving the issue and signing a peace treaty. After Koizumi came to power, confusion reigned within the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, while raging public sentiment against compromise practically crushed the accumulated results of a decade of negotiations.

*'the Japanese people forever renounce war as a sovereign right of the nation... Land, sea, and air forces, as well as other war potential, will never be maintained'* - Japanese Constitution, 1946, Article IX

Intransigence was evident in Koizumi's policy towards North Korea. Public outrage following Koizumi's visit to Pyongyang – when it was revealed that eight of the thirteen Japanese abducted by North Korean agents were dead – was understandable, but the anger froze Japanese policy, preventing it from acknowledging Kim Jong Il's unexpected apology. Public pressure compelled the government to take a tough position; Japan thus lost important diplomatic leverage in the ongoing North Korean nuclear crisis.

Japanese policy towards China remains difficult. On the one hand, the policy of engagement has been consistent since the end of the 1970s. China's growing military power, assertiveness in the South China Sea, and continuous pursuit of Japanese war guilt has, however, fuelled antipathy in Japan,

particularly since the mid 1990s. Tokyo's policy of continuing Official Development Assistance while the economy was in the doldrums only added fuel to the fire.

The issue of Taiwan has only complicated matters. Following Japan's diplomatic recognition of the People's Republic of China in 1972, Japan severed relations with the Republic of China, though the island remained a major trading partner. Taiwan's democratisation, affirmation of national identity, and Li Deng-hui's praise of Japanese colonial governance appealed to certain politicians and intellectuals; anti-Chinese feelings became mixed up with pro-Taiwanese emotion.

Koizumi's China policy rests on engagement, but is on delicate ground. His repeated visits to Yasukuni Shrine to pay homage to the war dead keep the two leaderships from engaging in meaningful dialogue. Japan's China and Taiwan policies remain unclear at the outset of the twenty-first century.

## Domestic terrain

Koizumi's policy of greater self-assertion cannot be understood without analysing the domestic context of its formulation. Since the end of the Cold War, the legitimacy of the iron triangle of politicians, bureaucrats and businessmen who governed post-war Japan has been shattered. The long time rule of the

Liberal Democratic Party ended in 1993, bringing fluidity to politics. Bureaucracies were brought down by a series of scandals, while the burst of the bubble economy shook financial institutions and small and middle-scale enterprises. The economic crisis, and the limitations it placed on Japan's once mighty check-book diplomacy, made the country more sensitive to its political role.

Koizumi came to power in 2001 upon a wave of popular discontent and desire for a new reform-minded leader. Public opinion favours greater Japanese self-assertion; Koizumi's policy plays to this media-led, self-assertive public opinion. Among his supporters are members of the older generation whose sense of national pride has long chafed under the post-war ascendancy of pacifism. The younger generation, too, is quite vocal in asserting Japan's need for participation in global issues of peace and security.

## Ways ahead

The momentum towards greater self-assertion in security policy will probably continue for some time. A few years hence, the revision of the Constitution's Article 9 may appear on the agenda. Realists have a crucial role to play in convincing neighbouring countries that the revision of Article 9 does not signal a Japanese return to militarism; rather, it reflects Japan's desire to become a more responsible and pro-active member of the international community. This task is important due to the legacy of war. Japan's quest for greater self-assertion has not yet found solid ground for true reconciliation with neighbouring countries.

True self-assertion can only be achieved through the understanding of the position of others. Self-assertion inevitably brings states into the international arena where the conflicting interests of other nations confront them. Without the peaceful resolution of these conflicting interests, few states will have their interests realised. Self-assertion that can understand the positions of others, however, can only be manifested when there is real national self-confidence. After the void that engulfed the country nearly 60 years ago, Japan's whole post-war history can be seen as a long painful process in trying to regain a true sense of self-confidence.

Japan's responsible and active participation in the cause of regional and global security was restricted for many decades after World War Two by the influence of pacifist idealism. One can only hope that Japan, by gaining a true sense of self-confidence, develops a wise and balanced policy, conducive to realising its true interests in harmony with its neighbours in East Asia and beyond. <

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