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Asia-Pacific Security Studies

Japan Crosses the Rubicon?

This study was written by Dr. John Miller, Professor, APCSS College of Security Studies and incorporates contributions from an APCSS delegation comprising Lt. Gen. (retd) H.C. Stackpole (President), Dr. Ronald Montaperto (Dean of Academics), Dr. Satu Limaye (Director of Research), Dr. Yoichiro Sato (Assistant Professor), and Ms. Molly Broaddus (Research Fellow) that conducted consultations with Japanese counterparts in Tokyo, Japan from November 12-16, 2001.

Conclusions:

- Japan's unexpectedly quick and robust participation in the war on terrorism represents a significant step in shedding its self-imposed pacifist constraints and becoming a "normal country." It is, however, not there yet.
- PM Koizumi's unprecedented dispatch of Japanese naval forces to support coalition operations in Afghanistan, while symbolically very important, leaves intact the legal and policy constraints that grow out of Japan's "no war" constitution.
- Koizumi benefited from a national determination to avoid a repeat of the humiliation of the 1990-91 Gulf conflict, rather than any feeling that Japan's security is threatened or dropping of Japanese inhibitions against using military force.
- The prime minister nevertheless deserves full credit for seizing the opportunity to bolster the U.S.-Japan Alliance, neutralize potential Chinese objections, and position Japan to play a larger and more active role in the global war on terrorism.
- Domestically, "normalizers" (including Koizumi) are the obvious winners and old-style pacifists the main losers -- though it would be a mistake to write off the latter or underestimate their influence on Japanese policy-making.
- Koizumi may lack a "strategic vision" but he is likely to vigorously seek ways of enhancing Japan's international visibility and leadership, and continue to chip away at domestic constraints on the use of its military.
- His activism creates opportunities for the U.S. to help Japan become a stronger and more self-confident ally, but it also creates pitfalls, particularly the temptation to employ "gaiatsu" to try to force the pace of change.

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Why The Quick Response?

The speed with which Tokyo's counter-terrorism package was assembled and pushed through the Diet contrasts with the normally glacial pace of Japanese decision-making on security issues, particularly those involving the use of Japan's Self Defense Forces (SDF). What accounts for this difference?

Many of our interlocutors saw PM Koizumi's personal leadership as the key determinant of Japan's rapid response. The prime minister, they suggested, accurately read the national mood favoring decisive action and acted forcefully to give it expression. Others were not so sure. They noted Koizumi's vague and "noncommittal" pronouncements in the immediate aftermath of the September 11 attacks. According to this view, he was galvanized into action only after word came from Ambassador Yanai in Washington that the U.S. expected Japan to "show the flag" - a message reinforced by key Koizumi advisors such as former PM Nakasone and Tokyo governor Shintaro Ishihara. (Although no friend of the U.S., Ishihara is a vigorous advocate of a militarily strong Japan able to project greater political influence abroad.)

Does this mean that PM Koizumi's response was driven by American "gaiatsu" (external pressure)? Although there was some media speculation that it was, none of our informants thought so. Such pressure was hardly necessary because Japanese opinion was united in a determination to avoid a repetition of the 1990-91 Gulf War fiasco in which Japan's unwillingness to contribute troops brought international derision and sharp American criticism. The need to forestall expected "gaiatsu" was thus more important than any pressure actually exerted.

While memories of the Gulf War debacle were undoubtedly the primary driver behind Japan's quick response, a number of our interlocutors suggested that other factors were also in play, including: widespread shock at the horrific nature of the September 11 attacks; a surge of sympathy for the American victims; and a feeling that Japan, too, had in a sense been attacked - a notion reinforced by the fact that 20 Japanese citizens perished in the World Trade Center.

Some, however, cautioned against reading too much into these reactions, noting that the Japanese public's sense of complacency and insulation from external threats is still quite strong. In any case, we were told, the current mood of the Japanese public is dominated more by anxiety over Japan's parlous economic condition than by enthusiasm for enlisting in the global war on terrorism.

A "Revolutionary" Step?

The centerpiece of Japan's response is the counter-terrorism law passed by the Diet on October 30, which, among other things, authorizes the deployment of Maritime Self Defense Force (MSDF) ships to the Indian Ocean to provide noncombatant support for coalition military operations in Afghanistan. Insofar as this deployment goes beyond anything contemplated in the U.S.-Japan Guidelines (which limit the SDF to supporting U.S. forces in military contingencies near Japan), it appears to mark a major change in Japanese security thinking.

One of our interlocutors (an American) characterized the MSDF deployment as a "revolutionary" step toward Japan becoming a "normal country" with a normal military. Others, however, offered more cautious assessments. It was noted, for example, that the legislation is limited in its duration (two years), purpose (counter-terrorism), and scope (no transport of weapons or ammunition). It also imposes restrictive rules of engagement on the SDF, including no use of force except in self-defense and the avoidance of combat zones. In the event U.S. and Japanese forces are attacked, these rules presumably would require the SDF to flee the scene and refrain from using their weapons in defense of the Americans - a scenario with an obvious potential for serious embarrassment to Japan and the SDF.

Some also pointed out that the law does not directly challenge the legal and policy constraints on the use of military force - including participation in collective security arrangements -- that grow out of Article 9 of Japan's "no war" constitution. Apparently wishing to avoid a divisive and protracted constitutional debate, the Koizumi government bypassed these constraints and based the law on UN anti-terrorism resolutions. If Japan is to become a truly "normal country," however, many felt that Article 9 will eventually have to be confronted and revised.

This being said, virtually all our interlocutors agreed that the law is a significant first step toward de facto Japanese military participation in collective security actions. Even if largely symbolic, the MSDF deployment will, it was felt, accustom the Japanese people to seeing their military involved in such actions, making it easier in the future to mobilize domestic support for an SDF role in similar ventures.

A Boost for the Alliance

Another point on which there was general agreement is the boost that Japan's response gives to the U.S.-Japan Alliance. One side of this is the favorable reaction of the U.S. government and media, and the silencing of those who in the past have criticized Japan for sitting on its hands during international crises. In this connection, one of our informants, a retired MSDF admiral, expressed relief at the positive American reaction, saying that he had feared the opposite might be the case in view of the "pacifistic" constraints imposed on the MSDF ships deployed to the Indian Ocean.

Several of our interlocutors emphasized the importance of post-September 11 Japanese moves to enhance burden-sharing with American forces in Japan, such as the ordering of SDF troops to guard U.S. military facilities; the employment of SDF aircraft to bolster U.S. logistical capabilities; the relaxation of restrictions on the SDF's ability to use lethal force against suspected terrorists and infiltrators; and the tightening of espionage penalties. Like the more highly publicized Indian Ocean deployment, these moves were taken to reflect growing Japanese interest in playing a larger role in the alliance and in their own defense.

Is the boost to the alliance a temporary phenomenon, or does it portend a long-term trend toward the deepening of U.S.-Japan military and political cooperation? Most of our interlocutors thought it too early to say, but some felt that the opportunity for such an evolution had been opened up. Much would depend on how Japan implements its new

commitments and undertakings. Skepticism was, however, voiced that nettlesome issues such as those generated by U.S. bases in Okinawa would cease to impose short-term strains on the relationship.

Relations with China and Korea

One of the most noteworthy aspects of Japan's response to September 11 was PM Koizumi's use of this event to mend fences with China and South Korea and secure their acquiescence to Japan's counter-terrorism initiatives. The prime minister's success in this endeavor, underscored by his early October trips to Beijing and Seoul, was seen by many of our interlocutors as a major diplomatic accomplishment, the more so because of Beijing's often neuralgic past reactions to signs of Japanese "remilitarization" and the deep freeze into which Japan's relations with China and South Korea had been plunged by the textbook and Yasukuni Shrine controversies earlier this year.

Some noted that Beijing had reasons of its own for receiving Koizumi and muting its criticism of his counter-terrorism plans, including its desire to keep Japanese aid and investment flowing into China and ensure the success of the Shanghai APEC summit. It was also noted that the prime minister's visit to Seoul had perhaps done less than might be supposed to soothe South Korean bitterness over the textbook and Yasukuni imbroglios. According to one view, the ROK government initially had been inclined to turn down Koizumi's request to visit and relented only after China's invitation made it unseemly to do so.

Japan's "history problem" with its neighbors, particularly the ROK, has not gone away and can be expected to flare up at some point in the future. Still, Koizumi's relatively forthright apologies for Imperial Japan's misdeeds and his symbolically important appearances at the Marco Polo Bridge outside Beijing and the site of the former Sodaemun Prison in Seoul - both shrines of a sort to anti-Japanese sentiment -- have at least temporarily defused this issue, making it more difficult for China and the ROK to make common cause against Japan.

Looked at from a broader angle, Japan's relatively robust participation in the war on terrorism and the consequent bolstering of the U.S.-Japan alliance have strengthened Tokyo's position vis-à-vis Beijing. This development could enhance the influence of those in China who favor abandoning the "history card" in favor of more pragmatic engagement with Japan.

Winners and Losers

If one were to identify domestic political "winners and losers" in Japan's response to September 11, PM Koizumi would top the list of winners. Whatever his initial hesitation, the prime minister deserves full credit for putting together and selling an unexpectedly muscular counter-terrorism package. Given the determination of most Japanese not to repeat the mistakes of 1990-1, this package may not have been a particularly tough sell domestically. What matters, however, is that it satisfies the United States, bolsters the Alliance, and raises Japan's international standing. This, together with his diplomatic successes in Beijing and Seoul, is clearly a huge political plus for Koizumi. The big question now is whether his success will carry over to the economic reform front where he faces greater challenges and far more dangerous political pitfalls.

A second winner is the loose coalition of forces, ranging from right-wing nationalists to liberal internationalists, which is seeking to nudge Japan toward becoming a "normal country." Koizumi's counter-terrorism package may not be the breakthrough some hoped for, but it is an important incremental step in this direction. Moreover, it gives "normalizers" the initiative in policy debates, and it is a safe bet that they will play an increasingly influential role. For example, the JDA (Japan Defense Agency) and SDF - particularly the maritime SDF -- have gained greater visibility if not clout. Many JDA officials expect that their Agency, long a weak sister in Japanese bureaucratic politics and still not a full-fledged ministry, will become a more important player in the formulation of Japanese foreign and security policies.

The most obvious "loser" is Foreign Minister Tanaka who has virtually disappeared from the foreign affairs front, though not, of course, from the media which have carefully chronicled her ongoing feuds and foibles. One might assume that MOFA's influence, too, has been eclipsed, but this is not necessarily the case. MOFA officials and diplomats like Ambassador Yanai clearly played a key role in Japan's response to September 11. With Tanaka out of the picture, Koizumi has acted as his own foreign minister, bespeaking at least a temporary shift to a "presidential" style of leadership.

Other losers are old-school pacifists and "neo-pacifist" proponents of non-military approaches to national and international security. The shock of September 11 and the specter of a replay of Japan's 1990-1 national humiliation reduced them to fighting a rearguard action against Koizumi's insistence on dispatching the SDF. It would be a mistake, however, to write them off. After all, they held the line against any frontal assault on Article 9 and succeeded in hedging in the SDF deployment with so many restrictions as to render it largely symbolic. If Japan's war on terrorism results in SDF casualties or some other dramatic setback, moreover, their influence on Japanese policy-making could sharply increase.

Where is Japan Headed?

Where does Japan go from here? Will it follow up its initial response to September 11 and, if so how? And does it have a long-term strategy?

It is tempting to suppose that September 11 marks a Copernican Revolution in Japanese security thinking away from pacifist isolationism toward political-military normalcy or "realism." There are, however, grounds for skepticism. For one thing, this shift has been underway for more than a decade; September 11 merely gave it another push. Moreover, as noted above, there are a number of obstacles to rapid change, including: Article 9 legal and policy constraints; the still formidable influence of pacifists; the detachment of the Japanese public from the wider world; and its preoccupation with Japan's economic problems.

It is possible that PM Koizumi has a "strategic vision" and a game plan for implementing it. It is noteworthy, however, that none of our interlocutors thought so. Many saw the prime minister's counter-terrorism package as a hastily improvised and somewhat opportunistic hodgepodge of measures, some of which (like the authorization to fire on "spy ships") were long pending and long overdue.

All this being said, Japan's response is unlikely to be a one-shot affair that will soon peter out. With Chinese objections muted, the U.S. strongly supportive, and domestic pacifists on the defensive, "normalizers" (including Koizumi) are on a roll. They can be expected to keep up the momentum by seizing opportunities to enhance Japan's international visibility and leadership in the global war on terrorism and to continue to chip away at Article 9 constraints on the use of the SDF. Signs of this activism are evident, for example, in Tokyo's interest in playing a post-conflict role in Afghanistan, and in moves to revise Japan's PKO (UN Peacekeeping) Law to permit SDF participation in a wider range of peacekeeping operations.

Implications for the U.S.

The Koizumi government's activism creates opportunities for the U.S. to help steer Japan in the direction of becoming a stronger, more self-confident and capable ally. But it also opens up several pitfalls.

Perhaps the most obvious of these is overestimating the pace and extent of the changes underway in Japan. Americans have fallen into this trap before, notably during the Gulf War. Their chagrin and shock at Japan's non-response on this occasion were inspired, in part, by unrealistic expectations generated by the rhetoric and symbolism of the Nakasone years: Japan was assumed to be willing and able to deliver more than it in fact could. This is not, of course, to suggest that Japan is the same country it was in 1990-91. Indeed, to assume that it is leads to another pitfall - the view that Japan is incapable of meaningful change that hopes to the contrary are illusory.

A further snare awaiting the U.S. is the temptation to indulge in "gaiatsu." With Japanese policy in flux and resource constraints tightening, one can expect various bureaucratic players to look to the U.S. for help against rivals and opponents, especially since American pressure is still assumed by many to be a natural and indeed necessary part of Japan's policy-making process. Such intervention may sometimes work in the short-run, but only at the cost of feeding resentment and dependence. Moreover, it is out of place in an increasingly nationalistic Japan.

The challenge for the U.S. is to devise more subtle ways of influencing Japanese policy. This will require patience and the forgoing of attempts to force the pace of change. It will also require creative thinking about ways to support and encourage Japanese initiatives without appearing to be orchestrating them from behind the scenes.

The Asia-Pacific Studies series presents research and analysis by security specialists and contributes to the Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies' (APCSS) mission to enhance the region's security discourse. The general editor of the series is Lt. Gen. (retd.) H.C. Stackpole, President of the APCSS.

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