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Does Japan Have a National Strategy?

By Richard Tanter and Honda Masaru

Anxious Nation: Japanese Perspectives on National Strategy

By Richard Tanter

From the centre of empire, the map of the rest of the world is largely blank, assumed either to be "just like us" and hence boring, or alternatively "not like us" and hence of marginal interest. Either way, the rest of the world is of little concern to those at the centre, at least until ugly blotches of "trouble spots" crack the surface glaze of imperial narcissism.

Countries on the edge of empire need to know much more about geography, simply to stay out of the way. Even if, like post-war Japan and Australia, they are allied to the supreme power and face no serious external military threat, their history is surprisingly often written as a narrative of anxiety. They are worriers, those two, always looking out and up to the centre, worrying if they are doing the right thing by the centre, worrying if they are doing too much, or too little. Either way, autonomous strategic thinking is rarely in evidence. Political elites are usually highly conformist, and careers are made by connections to the relevant departments of the imperial centre.

Honda Masaru's recent series in the Asahi Shimbun catches Japanese elite thinking about the direction in which they feel they should nudge the country at an interesting moment – possibly one that will later be seen as close to a turning point. Speaking to 40 academics, government officials and political figures, active and retired, Honda conveys glimpses of the anxieties of hawks and doves, at a moment when the hawks are very definitely stretching their wings.

The series opens with one of the motifs of Japanese narratives of modern history – "Japan's infamous past mistakes". It's a curious phrase referring to the colonialism, militarism and aggressive wars of the first portion of the reign of the Showa emperor (1925-45). The phrase thus represents a re-framing of what went before that was more or less acceptable to most of those who rebuilt the country, as John Dower put it, by embracing defeat, but with different emotions. It's an uneasy phrase, a reluctant balancing act of public rhetoric, between those who would speak of the wars in terms of the crimes committed by Japan in the China and Pacific wars and those who, like many close to the prime minister, now speak with pride of Japan's role in the Great East Asian War. "Mistakes" is a trope that both sides can interpret differently to their own satisfaction.

Honda's interviews are best on the question of autonomy and dependence and the thinking of the new generations who resent the acceptance, and even the embrace, of defeat. This is elite nationalism – resentful and angry. Honda is superb in conveying the anxious and hawkish voices not only of the usual suspects such as former Prime Minister Nakasone Yasuhiro and the hyperbolic Morimoto Satoshi, but also those of un-named contemporary figures high in the security establishment. One of "many defence specialists" who agrees with Nakasone raged that the US "engulfed Japan with the bilateral treaty system" and "dragged Japan into the American market". "Japan was", in its greed for economic growth, "so content with the arrangement that it forgot the reality of being so extraordinarily dependent on [the US]."

Honda complements the standard accounts of the Yoshida doctrine – knuckle under to the United States, abjure its demands for excessive re-militarization, and set course for serious mercantilist money-making – with his interviewees' complaints about some of the less recognized dysfunctional consequences. On the conservative side one key is a crisis of governance itself: an apparent failure to effectively integrate the policy machineries of power and wealth – or diplomacy, force and economics. For most nationalist conservatives – and for their vocal supporters in Washington - this is most evident in the legal and administrative limits on the ability of the SDF to act as the army of a "normal country", and the "deficits" of the country's security decision-making apparatus. "National strategy" must, perforce, be absent in the face of such deficiencies.

We do not hear the voices of all of Honda's interviewees, but there are some who raise different versions of these problems. Former diplomat Ogura Kazuo points to the obvious question that should be asked before Japan acquiesces irreversibly to the intense and sustained US pressure to "shoulder its global responsibilities" against China and "global terror": "[t]he global order Japan envisions may not be the same as the international order the United States is trying to build." We hear too little of Ogura to be sure of his particular concerns, but in such circles differences might encompass the distribution of power in global economic institutions such as the IMF and the World Bank, and consequently the type of structural "advice" meted out in crises of globalisation like the Asian currency crisis of 1997-98; responses to the challenge of climate change; the wisdom of aligning so closely with the United States over both Middle East and East Asian policy, in each case needlessly betting with the imperial center against the likely long run winners.

The series is in fact short, and corners are necessarily cut in the account of both dependence and dysfunction. On the day when Japan's permanent semi-sovereign status in the post-war order was formalised in San Francisco with the signing of the peace treaty and the Japan-US security treaty, Prime Minister Yoshida also signed a note written for him by John Foster Dulles abjuring the possibility of independent Japan establishing diplomatic relations with newborn communist China. Yoshida did the best he could with the tools at hand, but the country indeed has never recovered full sovereignty. The rhetoric of re-establishing a normal state masks both the complexity of that task and the risks of the presently dominant nationalist pathway. Indeed, the success of the insertion of that phrase – "recovering Japan as a normal state" – into both the national and international public agendas, has been one of the great successes of post-Cold War nationalism. Thus "normalised", the idea of Japan as a normal state itself becomes, dangerously, a phrase that means quite different things in different quarters.

While Japanese nationalists rage about the dysfunctional consequences of long alliance dependence in terms of the "emasculation of the Japanese state", Japanese democrats point to the crushing of the social and political foundations for a parliamentary alternative. It is no surprise that over five decades in politics Nakasone has chosen defense and education as his two key fields for "settling post-war accounts" – with the US, which in Nakasone's eyes have hamstrung the Japanese state.

But what is dismaying is that democrats in Japan have been unable to articulate a sustained and sustainable alternative to the present system inherited from and imposed by the United States. There is no significant extra-parliamentary oppositional force,

parliamentary opposition is toothless, and there is no prospect of any variation in one (or one-and-a-half) party government in the foreseeable future. Resistance to ever increasing pressures from the US and nationalists almost always takes the form of reactive and determined defense of the status quo – most evidently around the constitution, and from there, flag, anthem, and SDF. Stated differently, even the most trenchant critics rarely offer strategic alternatives to the status quo that relies on American power to define Japan's global role.

A few honourable exceptions apart, strategic questions are rarely debated in public in such a way as to build public belief in the possibility of an alternative path. Moreover, the best of conservative dovish thinking in the post-war period – which rejected participation in the Korean and Vietnam wars, the civilian and military security community's spurning of Japanese partnership for the Weinberger fantasies about "protection of the sea lines of communication" in the days of the "Soviet threat in the Pacific", the remarkably innovative reflections of the culture of Article 9 in 1970s and 1980s Japanese thinking about "human security" and "comprehensive security" – is now almost forgotten.

There is in Japan widespread concern about the direction of current strategic policy, but almost all of it is ineffective. Often mistaken for determination, rigidly reactive positions always lose in the long run in politics. Unless an alternative Japanese vision of depth and pulling power is articulated soon, almost all of the benefits of the culture produced by Article 9 will have evaporated in the face of the onslaught of nationalist sentiment, albeit a nationalism quite firmly embedded in a reinvigorated and now globally articulated, US alliance.

Concern about the strategy of national governments is even more important in the face of uneven and unequal economic and cultural globalisation than it has ever been, precisely because the powers of national governments are in decline. Much of the internationalism that was borne of the culture of Article 9 has ebbed with the passing of the generations that knew the war directly. The faith in and commitment to the international security role of the United Nations that so long distinguished Japan amongst the advanced industrial countries has been somewhat, though not completely, eroded by nationalist and American assaults, and by sheer disappointment in the post-Cold War UN itself.
Contemporary Japanese nationalism, like that of Australia, encompasses both a radical nationalist opposition to alliance, always looking for a pathway to genuine independence, and a more moderate nationalism that sees no contradiction between loyalty to country and loyalty to empire. Nakasone came to power speaking the language of the first camp, and then, deeply embarrassed, found himself required to play second banana to Ronald Reagan in the Ron-Yasu show, to the mockery of his former comrades such as Ishihara Shintaro. Two decades later, his most evidently nationalist successor, Koizumi Junichiro, is presiding over a dual-function securitisation of Japanese national strategy based on a form of re-militarization which largely manages to meet both the continually escalating demands from Washington and those of an increasingly legitimised and potent nationalism.

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Seeking New Strategies: Japan's Struggle to Think for Itself in National Strategy

By Masaru Honda

Talk of Japan's "National strategy" has often been avoided in this country since the end of World War II, largely because of Japan's infamous past mistakes.

Japan is a regional Asian power and is the second-largest economy in the world.

Its actions cause ripples on a global scale whether it likes it or not.

And when powerful nations err in their strategies or fail to clarify them, their neighbors get worried.
The Asahi Shimbun interviewed 40 experts about Japan's national strategy, or lack thereof, over the past six decades. From academics to policy-makers, a summation of their views is offered below.

Independence

Most of the experts The Asahi Shimbun spoke with said that in their opinion, from the end of the Cold War to the present, Japan has not had a national strategy.

However, opinion regarding the period between Japan's independence and the early 1970s is divided.
The difference seems to depend on whether the so-called Yoshida doctrine of 1951 to 1972, a path established by former Prime Minister Yoshida Shigeru, should be considered an actual national strategy per se.

The period extends from the end of Japan's occupation by the Allied Forces to the time that Okinawa was handed back to Japan from U.S. control.

Nakanishi Hiroshi, professor of international politics at Kyoto University, is of the opinion that Japan's postwar course, as set by Yoshida, was indeed "a national strategy of sorts."

In Nakanishi's opinion, three elements--moving on from the aftermath of being a defeated nation, cooperating with the United States and Britain, and economic recovery--overlapped and merged into a single strategy.

"In terms of diplomacy, in particular, in Japan's effort to become a normal nation and shed the status of a defeated nation, Yoshida likely judged that the quick and easy way to do so was to gain the help of the United States," Nakanishi said.

"This path was further shaped by his successors, such as prime ministers Ikeda Hayato and Sato Eisaku, and took root among the public in the 1960s."

This view is shared by many Foreign Ministry officials. Kuriyama Takakazu, former ambassador to the United States, thinks the Yoshida doctrine fostered peace in the nation and helped its postwar recovery.

"It formed the basis of its development later, and therefore, this national strategy proved to be a great success," said Kuriyama.

Former Prime Minister Nakasone Yasuhiro, on the other hand, is critical of Yoshida's path.
"That was a policy of conforming to the United States," Nakasone said.

"In essence, the priority was on economic recovery, and there was no room for independently establishing a strategy."

Nakasone says that Yoshida's course lacked a vision of postwar nation-building regarding issues like the Constitution, education and defense.

"It lacked the notion of national initiative," he said.

He also argues Japan should have worked jointly with the United States to form a global strategy, even while under the Japan-U.S. Security Treaty arrangement, by expressing its recommendations to Washington.

Similar criticism can also be heard from many defense specialists.

"The wealthy United States engulfed Japan with the bilateral security treaty system," said one senior Defense Agency official who has spent time in the United States studying national strategy. "It dragged Japan into the American market, and as much as possible accepted Japan's selfishness so that Japan could be maintained as a front for fighting communism.

"Japan was so content with the arrangement that it forgot the reality of being extraordinarily dependent on it."

These contrasting views are two sides of the same coin. The consensus seems to be that the Yoshida doctrine chose prosperity for Japan at the cost of its autonomy. Judging the value of that path depends on whether one focuses on its advantages or drawbacks.

Cold War

The diplomacy of former Prime Minister Kishi Nobusuke revolved around three principles: centering Japan's diplomacy on the United Nations, cooperating with the free world, and maintaining Japan's position in Asia.

Subsequent administrations seemed to maintain those principles, at least on the surface. The reality, though, is that the Japan-U.S. relationship has formed the bedrock of Japanese foreign policy.

Although there have been efforts to devise an Asian policy that was independent, such as the Fukuda doctrine in the late 1970s, they were always within the limits of what Washington's Cold War policies would tolerate.

"Having principles saves contemplation and time," said one top-level Foreign Ministry official.

"If we have an established principle, then we won't have to doubt it each time we debate something.
"In my case, I never doubt the principle that the development of the Japan-U.S. alliance is in Japan's interests. My rationalization is to concentrate efforts on managing that alliance."

The official's comments suggest that for someone involved in diplomacy at the working level there is no room to be constantly rethinking basic strategies.

Indeed, managing the bilateral alliance has become a complicated task.

Although the United States accounted for half the world's GDP in the 1950s, that figure fell to around 30 percent in the 1980s. Japan's GDP, on the other hand, rose to fully half of the United States'. This change became the major cause of trade friction between the two nations, and the reason Washington began calling on Tokyo to take a bigger role in the alliance.

Some in the United States began complaining that Yoshida's path amounted to nothing more than mercantilism.

Nevertheless, Tokyo did not conduct a fundamental review of Japanese diplomatic policy, opting for stopgap measures instead, all the while repeating the mantra at home that "Japan-U.S. relations have never been better."

Then in 1989, the Cold War ended.

One high-level former Foreign Ministry official, someone who was at the very core of the ministry, admitted on condition of anonymity that both politicians and the ministry itself have lacked the proper mindset for strategy.

"Under the Cold War system, we didn't have to think about strategy regarding the general course we should aim for and what we should do to get there," the official said.

"With the collapse of the system, we became all the more conscious that we have to think for ourselves."

Politicians and ministry officials were so accustomed to not having to think that after the Cold War ended they were at a total loss as to what to rely on or how to go about thinking for themselves, the official said.

It is a situation, the official acknowledges, that continues to this day.

In the post-Cold War period

Japan now faces the immense task of helping to build and maintain the global order in the new age. We can no longer merely look after the nation's interests in the existing order.

Dispatching the Self-Defense Forces to participate in U.N. peacekeeping operations was part of that direction. Another was Tokyo's proposal to reform the U.N. Security Council.

Of vital importance, however, is whether Japan has a comprehensive strategy to back such policy decisions.

In their May 2003 summit, Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro and U.S. President George W. Bush agreed the Japan-U.S. alliance should play a key role in world affairs. The first result of that agreement was Tokyo's dispatch of SDF troops to Iraq.

But Koizumi's explanations of that move did not appear to have been based on a comprehensive strategy.

"The Japan-U.S. alliance shifted from protecting Japan to the two nations jointly shouldering responsibility for the international community," said Kazuo Ogura, Japan Foundation president.

"However, the global order Japan envisions may not be the same as the international order the United States is trying to build. Is it? Japan now faces that big question," said Ogura, who previously held the posts of Japanese ambassador to South Korea and France.

In February 2005, Tokyo and Washington set up common strategic goals within the process of the U.S. military's global transformation, including issues concerning China and Taiwan. Japan a few months earlier had revised the nation's long-term basic defense plan.

The revamped Japanese policy included strengthening the Japan-U.S. security alliance while improving security in the international arena so that Japan would not face any threats.

The latter is a new addition to the defense policy, and it requires the expansion of SDF operations. A senior Defense Agency official called the plan "a defense strategy." Clearly describing the nation's national strategy in this way was necessary to ensure civilian control over the SDF. However, because the government has yet to formulate and communicate clear national or diplomatic strategies, the defense strategy triggered concerns among Japan's Asian neighbors. These countries wonder what Japan is up to.

At this juncture, Japan must compile a comprehensive national strategy that reflects the country's views on how to build and maintain international order, taking into consideration the opinions of both the United States and Asia.

That will be the first step toward rebuilding Japan's diplomacy that appears to have recently lost direction in waves of nationalism and populism.

The experts interviewed by The Asahi Shimbun expressed similar views concerning the critical situation facing Japan's diplomacy and security.

Lack of a unified strategy

Coming up with a national strategy involves deciding which of the many national interests should take priority. The policies formed by the prime minister and his top advisers must be included in this process. Yet, they have not been. And that has led to confusion about priorities.

"Economics and diplomacy must work hand in hand. But there have been no moves to integrate their actions," Sakakibara Eisuke, a former vice finance minister for international affairs, recalled of his days in that powerful role.

"The Finance Ministry presided over international monetary diplomacy without consulting the Foreign Ministry, which mainly oversaw diplomacy over security issues. I think the former Ministry of International Trade and Industry also worked independently to settle trade issues with other nations," he said. "There was no mechanism in the Japanese government to integrate all that, nor did politicians even try to."

Now a professor at Waseda University, Sakakibara said the situation has not changed.

Even at the Foreign Ministry, it seems little effort is made among officials to set priorities for diplomatic policies.

"The Foreign Ministry deftly uses prime ministers and foreign ministers in different ways, to its own advantage," said a senior government official.

A diplomatic policy issue may be initially handled by a division chief, then passed up to the bureau director before reaching the administrative vice minister. Some issues then go to the foreign minister, while other more important issues go to the prime minister. It is a rigid vertical structure that leaves little room for debate among policymakers.

"There is hardly any discussion among officials on what options are available before a particular decision is made," the former government official said.

In 1986, the government set up the Security Council of Japan to handle national security decisions. Chaired by the prime minister, the council included Cabinet ministers in charge of foreign affairs, finance, trade and economy and defense, among others. It was set up to fortify the function of the Cabinet in setting national defense policies.

Yet, Morimoto Satoshi, a former senior Foreign Ministry official involved in security policies who is now a professor of security issues at Tokyo's Takushoku University, cast doubt on the council's independence.

He said that every ministers' statement in the Security Council was decided at meetings among senior officials of related ministries and agencies more than one day before the council. He said the council meetings of Cabinet members were merely rubber-stamp "ceremonies."

"Bureaucracy takes the lead. The council meetings have little substance. Ministries divide up the power according to their policy territories," Morimoto said. "The system makes it impossible to form a (unified) national strategy."

An advisory panel to the prime minister on diplomacy, headed by former diplomat Yukio Okamoto, in 2002 advised a security council be set up within the Cabinet. However, the prime minister appears to have so far ignored that report.

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