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Prioritizing Japan-U.S. Relations or a Multilateral Diplomacy?

by Fujiwara Kiichi

The rebuilding of both a nuclear nonproliferation system and a framework for multilateral consultations in Asia toes the line of postwar Japanese foreign policy.

There is no denying that Japanese diplomacy is being tested by the threat of North Korea's nuclear weapons program. However, the problems of Japanese foreign policy lie not only outside Japan but also within.

The first is the future of a Japanese foreign policy that gives top priority to U.S. relations. Given that it is difficult to think about Japan's security without the deterrence of U.S. forces, it is understandable Japan attaches importance to U.S. relations.

Because Japan has been a U.S. ally, it was able to win international trust. Even China now accepts the Japan-U.S. security system as a fait accompli. There is some truth in the argument that Japan-U.S. relations serve the foundation of Japan's role in international society.

However, when the United States resorts to unilateralism, the policy that gives precedence to Japan-U.S. relations undermines international and regional organizations. This is because international organizations cannot function properly when major powers disregard their rules.

The U.S. inclination to act on its own is apparent in the way it refused to accept the Kyoto Protocol on global warming and its struggle with the U.N. Security Council over Iraqi intervention. When the United States withdrew from peacekeeping activities after it lost U.S. soldiers in Somalia, U.N. peacekeeping operations came to a standstill. After the administration of Bill Clinton lost interest in the World Trade Organization (WTO) and the Group of Seven summit, their roles waned as never before.

If Japan gives precedence to U.S. relations, international organizations will grow weaker, further eroding international cooperation. This is not a wise choice for Japan, which attaches equal importance to the United Nations as it does to U.S. relations as the basis of its foreign policy.

Overestimating military role

It is also unreasonable to place too much hope on the United States to take the lead in maintaining world order. About a year ago, experts on international politics both at home and abroad pointed out that the North Korean threat was more pressing than Iraq. But the administration of George W. Bush disregarded the argument and went ahead with Iraqi intervention. As a result, it allowed the North Korean situation to aggravate to the point where the country openly admitted to developing nuclear weapons.

Over the last year, the Bush administration kept wavering between hard-line policies and reconciliation in dealing with North Korea. Now, it is reportedly seeking to settle the situation by diplomatic means. But looking at the way the United States overthrew the Saddam Hussein regime, which did not possess nuclear weapons, and is ready to negotiate with North Korea, whose nuclear armament has virtually become a fait accompli, I cannot help but question the soundness of its decision.

When faced with an opponent against whom a country cannot expect to instantly win a war, it cannot maintain order with military threats alone. In the past, Japanese pacifism placed too much confidence in unarmed peace. If so, current realism overestimates military strength in maintaining order.

Moreover, if Japan relies on the power of U.S. forces alone to settle the North Korean crisis, it will also weaken its ties with not only South Korea but also with Russia and China.

If Japan seeks to manage risks with Japan-U.S. relations alone, both countries must be prepared to put up with isolation from international society.

The second problem facing Japanese diplomacy is isolation from international society caused by the history problem. People in Japan may be able to recognize U.S. unilateralism and international isolation. But it may be difficult for them to see how the history problem is undermining the trust of Japanese diplomacy and people. Many people may find it hard to understand why they have to take responsibility for Japanese colonial rule and a war that happened more than half a century ago. In some cases, people demanding that Japan take responsibility are doing so not purely out of just criticism but also out of prejudice against Japan. Many people may also be put off by the term isolation.

But seen from the outside, it is Japan, where lawmakers and Cabinet ministers who try to justify Japan's involvement in the war are active, that is abnormal. No matter how many times the Japanese government makes an official apology, as long as politicians of ruling parties continue to make statements to the contrary, the apology cannot be taken seriously. Arguments to justify Japan's past is hurting Japan's present.

It is probably true that the media and the governments of China and other Asian countries used Japan's war responsibility and colonial rule to stir nationalism as a means to bring the people together and to get economic aid.

Distrust in Japanese society

However, it does not mean that if governments and the media "act like grown-ups," the history problem would go away. This is because distrust toward Japanese society is at the root of the problem.

The history problem, which used to be one between governments, has transformed into one between societies. In the 1980s, it was characterized by government and media-led criticism against Japan. But now, controversies over the prime minister's visit to Yasukuni Shrine and history textbooks are started by Chinese and South Korean people, rather than their governments, who are critical of Japan. In fact, it is not uncommon for governments and even the media to try to quell anti-Japanese popular sentiments

rather than incite them.

In some cases, the criticisms contain misconceptions and prejudice. However, so long as Japanese leaders keep making comments that even most Japanese people find biased, it is unreasonable to expect the Chinese and South Korean people to squarely face their own prejudice against Japan. Discord between governments may be settled if they "act like grown-ups." But it is much more difficult to dispel distrust and prejudice that keep societies apart.

The policy to give first priority to Japan-U.S. relations and the hard-line policy concerning the history problem are both characteristics of the Junichiro Koizumi administration. But neither can be called wise. What, then, should be and can be done?

The first thing Japan must strive to advance is the control of weapons of mass destruction.

As if to respond to the U.S. appellation of "axis of evil," North Korea openly advanced its nuclear weapons program in defiance of international criticism. The United States reacted by weakening its hard-line policy to seek a diplomatic solution. But such a shift could give the false impression that possessing nuclear weapons is the best defense against the United States. Despite the advance of U.S.-Russia nuclear arms reduction with the end of the Cold War, never before has international control of weapons of mass destruction been weaker than it is now.

The weakness of sanctions in the existing nuclear nonproliferation system is one reason behind the trend. But the Bush administration's departure from the nonproliferation system is an even greater factor. Today, the United States is calling for the establishment of a new system to control weapons of mass destruction. It should be a system of nonproliferation not only aimed at checking countries that might be contemplating nuclear development but one that also takes into consideration the reduction of nuclear weapons possessed by nuclear powers.

The North Korean problem may provide an opportunity to build a new framework of nonproliferation. In international relations, it is not unusual for a new system to take shape with the settlement of a crisis that could lead to war. Unlike in 1994 at the time of the last crisis, this time, not only Japan and the United States but also China, South Korea and Russia are calling for North Korea's nuclear disarmament.

The important thing is to advance negotiations to broaden North Korean denuclearization to East Asian denuclearization so that efforts for Korean Peninsula denuclearization will be expanded to check China's further nuclear armament.
It is a good chance for Japan to advance the initiative by using its tragic experience as the only country that was attacked by atomic bombs. But Japan must not resort to empty slogans-it must take concrete diplomatic action.

Japan as a team player

Second, a stronger regional framework to advance multilateral talks needs to be established in Asia. Unfortunately, Japanese diplomacy by itself is weak compared with that of the United States and China. However, it has proved itself capable in organizing multilateral negotiations. As a team player, Japan has supported cooperation with Southeast Asian countries. As a result, Southeast Asia now has one of the world's most advanced regional systems to coordinate policies.

Furthermore, consultations within the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) region have spread to East Asia in the forms of the ASEAN Regional Forum and ASEAN plus three (Japan, South Korea and China). The Chiang Mai initiative has also been proposed to deal with the currency problem.

With the inauguration of the Yoshiro Mori and Koizumi administrations, Japan has come to attach greater importance to U.S. relations. As a result, multilateral talks have often come to a standstill. Japan needs to re-examine the significance of multilateral consultations to advance its initiative.

The rebuilding of both a nuclear nonproliferation system and a framework for multilateral consultations in Asia toes the line of postwar Japanese foreign policy.

Traditionally, Japan has maintained a firm stand against nuclear weapons by advocating its three non-nuclear principles-not to possess, make or introduce them-while relying on the U.S. nuclear deterrent and basing its foreign policy on Japan-U.S. relations. It has striven to win the trust of Southeast Asian nations, which it invaded in the past, by making a steady effort to prove itself as a team player while establishing itself as an economic power.

Japan should take pride in its postwar accomplishments and advance them further to build regional order and a system to settle conflicts that are also advantageous to the United States. I believe doing so is more meaningful than revising the Constitution or glorifying its wartime deeds.

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