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"Conservatism" and "Nationalism". The Japan Puzzle

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Japanese politics are characterized by two related paradoxes: first, that the word "conservative" is usually applied to those who insist on the need to remake Japan's postwar society, including its constitution, and who in other words are actually radicals, while those who insist on "conserving" Japan's postwar democratic institutions are labeled radicals or leftists; and second, that those who most insist that Japan subordinate itself to the United States describe themselves as "nationalists," while those who seek to prioritize Japanese over US interests are suspected of being somehow "un-Japanese." It is an Alice in Wonderland confusion!

The thrust of the "reforms" undertaken by the Koizumi and Abe governments between 2001 and 2007 was to bring Japan closer in line with the United States in both security and economic terms. On the former, in 2003 Japan's armed forces were for the first time sent to a theatre of conflict at US behest and "conservatives" since then have attached the highest priority to trying to ensure that in future Japan could do more by joining the United States in collective security actions (read: wars) as an East Asian Great Britain. On the latter, the same "conservatives" have been intent on "liberalizing" the Japanese economy by the removal of remaining obstacles to the penetration of US and international capital. Currently, Japanese politics are in a state of frozen immobility, the Fukuda government having lost control over the Upper House but too fearful of annihilation at the polls to seek a mandate. Though immobilized, however, Fukuda faces the same direction as his predecessors.

The fact that the United States – the model for Japanese so-called conservatives on both strategic and economic fronts – is engaged on a catastrophic and illegal war that has virtually destroyed one major country and destabilized an entire region, and that the excesses of its unregulated capitalism have plunged the world economy into the greatest crisis in a generation, should give pause to the proponents of such an agenda; but it seems not to.

The ink had scarcely dried on the 1946 constitution, incorporating the three principles of pacifism, human rights, and political democracy, before the US regretted it. Ever since then, it has been urging Japan to revise it. The brunt of US attention is directed to Article 9, the so-called pacifist clause. [The Japanese and English texts of Article 9 are available here.]

For half a century, Japanese "conservatives," intent on remaking the country to American design, sought to revise (or neutralise) Article 9, but constitutionalist forces were simply too strong, both in the Diet and in the country at large. They had to be content with steadily watering it down by widening and loosening the way it was interpreted. Now, however, that is no longer enough. As Japan wavered in 2007 over whether to renew its naval mission to the Indian Ocean, withdrawing and then resending its fleet, and as the reorganization of US military bases in Japan (agreed in 2005-2006), and Japan's conversion of its armed forces from what former Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld contemptuously called a "boy scout" corps to a real fighting army, both proceed far too slowly for the Bush administration, American impatience mounted. Only with explicit revision can Japan's SDF become a regular national army (kokugun) able to fight alongside their American allies. Prime Minister Abe in May 2007 succeeded in railroading through the Diet a law spelling out procedures for such a revision. In doing so, however, he so alienated the voting public that he and his government were resoundingly defeated at the Upper House election two months later. He had to resign shortly afterwards. In another "Wonderland" kind of paradox Japanese revisionists, denouncing the existing constitution as an American imposition but insisting above all on American priorities for revision, actually replicate the events of six decades ago.

They now have a two-pronged strategy to meet American demands. In the short term, they hope to secure passage of a permanent law to authorize the overseas despatch of Japanese Self-Defence Forces for "international cooperation activities." That would obviate the current need for a "Special Measures Law" (with attendant Diet debate and inevitable restrictions and conditions) every time the SDF is to be sent on a mission. For the longer term, 239 present and former members of the national parliament joined on 1 May in a new organization, the Diet Members Alliance to Establish a New Constitution. Unlike its predecessors, this Association incorporates prominent members of the opposition Democratic Party of Japan. By thus incorporating the opposition, the revision requirement of a two-thirds parliamentary majority becomes feasible.

Prime Minister Abe opening the first Diet session of 2007

Outside the Diet, however, to the dismay of revisionists the more they attack Article 9 the stronger public support for it becomes, reaching two-thirds in the May 2008 Asahi opinion survey. The Article 9 Society, established in 2004 by prominent intellectuals and public figures, has now grown to have 7,000 branches nationwide, rivalling as a grassroots political mobilization the anti-Vietnam war movement in the 1960s and 1970s. Where revisionists are ashamed by the constitution, A9 Society members propagate it as a global model. In May 2008 they filled to overflowing a vast convention centre just outside Tokyo under the slogan "The world has begun to choose Article 9."

As the "conservatives" revise their strategy for revision, they also display a disturbing contempt for constitutional principle. In April, when the Nagoya High Court found that the Koizumi and Abe governments had acted in breach of the constitution by consenting to US demands to "show the flag" and put Japanese "boots on the ground" in Iraq, and that therefore the Japanese troop presence in Iraq was both unconstitutional and illegal, the Prime Minister, Chief Cabinet Secretary, Minister of Defence, and the Chief of Staff of the Air Self Defence Forces all dismissed it, insisting that such a judgment would have no effect whatever on Japan's troop deployment. The rule of law and the separation of powers seemed to them irrelevant.

Nor is constitutionalism just about matters of war and peace. The LDP constitutional proposal would restore the Meiji Constitution's condition to human rights clauses: "so long as this does not interfere with public order (chitsujo)." It would restore the emperor to the preamble, legitimise state involvement in Yasukuni rituals and subtly erode local self-government, even striking out Article 95.

Before any revision, already constitutional guarantees (in Article 25) of "minimum standards of wholesome and cultured living" and (in Article 21) of freedom of expression ring just as hollow for the irregularly employed, freeters, pacifists and critics of society, as does Article 9's pledge that Japan will not possess "land, sea, or air forces." As neo-liberal "reform" spreads and deepens, further American-izing Japanese society, one in three Japanese workers is now exploited and impoverished as an "irregular," constituting a new class of working poor known as the "precariat," those living at the margins. Shocking reports of the poor and the sick starving to death (one leaving a pathetic note saying how he longed for a rice ball…) or being reduced to homelessness or snatching sleep in all-night internet cafes, are common. Relative poverty levels (within the OECD) are worse only in the United States. As for freedom of expression, a recent court judgment affirmed the conviction (on trespass charges) of the "Tachikawa Three" for inserting leaflets opposing the dispatch of Japanese forces to Iraq into the letterboxes of defence force staff in 2003. For their "crime" of protesting a troop despatch that the Nagoya court has now found to have been illegal and unconstitutional, they were arrested and held for 75 days in detention - as if they were criminals.

Article 9 (war) and Article 25 (livelihood) may also be closely related. Late in 2007, one desperate young freeter published an essay that encapsulated the social despair that currently spreads, especially among young people. For him, only the prospect of a war offered hope, since, he believed, only in a state of war could there be the sort of upheaval of society from which betterment might come.

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