

# EAST ASIA INSIGHTS

## TOWARD COMMUNITY BUILDING

**JCIE** Japan Center for International Exchange

Vol. 2 No. 1 | January 2007

## Nationalistic Sentiments in Japan and their Foreign Policy Implications

HITOSHI TANAKA, *Senior Fellow, JCIE*

Nationalism can be a combination of love and pride for one's country, self-assertiveness, and, at times, arrogance. In recent years, foreign observers have reported that Japanese nationalism has taken on some of these characteristics. There has been an increasing trend toward nationalistic pride, which has been reflected in a flurry of right-wing commentary and provocative statements by conservative politicians. The media has aggravated matters with overly simplistic reporting that sensationalizes nationalistic remarks while failing to provide objective analysis on Japan's foreign relations.

Whether or not it is categorized as nationalism, the growing prominence of public sentiment in Japan is rooted in frustration over dual gaps, one between Japan's security policy and the reality of today's world and the second between contemporary Japan and its wartime past. Japan's humiliation during the 1991 Persian Gulf War first revealed the gap between the constraints of its peace constitution and the demands of the post-Cold War world, and Japan's security policies continue to fuel domestic frustration. Meanwhile, the issue of Japan's wartime past has loomed over its relations with its neighbors and has created an opening for a harmful strain of nationalism. Neighboring countries argue that Japanese leaders' visits to Yasukuni Shrine and the disputes over history textbooks are

evidence that Japan has not fully addressed its war responsibilities, but Japanese are weary of such criticism in light of their country's sixty-year record as a full-fledged democracy and its remarkable achievements and international contributions.

Japan's close relationship with the United States is not entirely unrelated to the current emergence of nationalistic sentiments. The United States has played an invaluable role in Japan's development as a member of the international community and, at the same time, the close bilateral relationship featuring the United States as the guarantor of Japan's security has allowed Japan to avoid dealing with its long-standing dual gaps. If these gaps are allowed to persist, they will not only damage Japan's national interest, they may also undermine the Japan-U.S. relationship.

This rise of nationalistic sentiments is very worrying because it may turn into a strain of exclusive, confrontational nationalism, but this is neither unavoidable nor irreversible. The gaps that have fueled these sentiments can and must be bridged, and the solution lies in designing policies that clearly articulate Japan's role as a normal, responsible member of the international community. This has become all the more pressing because the new prime minister, Shinzo Abe, is regarded as one of the leading proponents of conservative and, at times, nationalistic views on issues such as relations with North

Korea and China. His successful trip to Beijing and Seoul was a welcome and positive step, but it still remains to be seen how his administration will address the dual gaps that have become so acute. The best way for Japan to proceed would be to formulate a security policy that can meet the demands of the post–Cold War world while simultaneously working to strengthen Japan’s relations with its neighbors, especially through the promotion of regional community building in East Asia.

### **Public Sentiment in Postwar Japan**

The thrust of public sentiment in Japan today is entirely different from the economic nationalism of several decades ago. After the United States helped to quickly rebuild postwar Japan as a democracy with a market-based economy, Prime Minister Shigeru Yoshida put forward rapid economic recovery as the most important national goal. This was encouraged and sustained as the U.S. emphasis on fighting communism gave rise to pressures for Japan to quickly recover and become a part of the West. The efforts helped lead to a stunning series of economic successes in the following decades. Japan met its export target of US\$10 billion by 1967, it joined the G7 in 1975, and it began to rival the United States in key industries such as automobiles and steel in the 1980s. Economic achievement became a source of national pride, and this absorbed some of the underlying frustrations related to Japan’s external affairs.

Then, in the 1990s, Japan lost much of its confidence after an embarrassing combination of events raised questions about its place in the international community. The “economic miracle” began to unravel, and the economy stagnated. The government’s monetary contributions to the Persian Gulf War were disparagingly labeled as checkbook diplomacy, and the United States criticized Japanese support for the war effort as “too little, too late.” Japan’s inept handling of the 1993–1994 nuclear showdown with North Korea demonstrated that it was ill prepared to cope with regional contingencies in a post–Cold War world. More recently, the rise of China and the revelation of abductions of Japanese citizens by North Korean agents have deepened Japan’s feelings of uncertainty about its contemporary surroundings.

At the root of many of these difficulties is the fact that the fictions and taboos that undergird its security policy have kept Japan from facing up to the security demands of the post–Cold War world while a focus on the past has continued to loom over Japan’s relations with its neighbors. Over the past 15 years, Japan has struggled in a rapidly changing global environment to reconcile these constraints with its desire to become a normal and responsible member of the international community. In the process, however, many frustrations have erupted to the surface.

### **Growing Influence of Domestic Politics in Foreign Policy**

The changes in Japan’s political scene over the past few decades have played a major role in shaping the current situation. Until the 1990s, politics were defined by an ideological split between the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) on one side and the Japan Socialist Party (JSP) and the Japanese Communist Party (JCP) on the other. With the end of the Cold War, the JCP began to decline and elements of the LDP, the JSP, and several other parties banded together to create the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ). What remains today are two main parties—the LDP and the DPJ—that share a similar ideology: faith in a market economy and in the Japan-U.S. alliance.

Political observers were surprised when Junichiro Koizumi, an LDP member, was elected prime minister in 2000 on a platform of broad political and social reform. One of his major promises was to eradicate the influence of vested interest groups on government, but Koizumi realized that he could not rely on his party to advance this reform. Instead, he decided to rely upon public opinion. But his strength was not in following public opinion; his strength was in changing public opinion and being able to win public election. This strategy became a hallmark of Koizumi’s style. By mobilizing public opinion, he was able to successfully buck the party line and fulfill his campaign promises.

One major consequence of this strategy, however, is that the policymaking process has become increasingly influenced by populist appeals to public opinion. In the case of foreign policy, this can have dangerous consequences. Koizumi’s visits

to Yasukuni Shrine, for example, continued in the face of strong opposition by China and Korea, partly because of their domestic appeal.

### **Resolving the Gaps**

The key to operating in this climate is a set of policies that absorb the frustrations associated with Japan's external stance by articulating a constructive role for Japan as a responsible member of the international community, based on its values and its achievements. This involves a two-pronged approach. On the one hand, it is critical that Japan reconcile the gap between its security policy constraints and current international realities. On the other hand, Japan has a crucial stake in the future of East Asia, and it therefore needs to focus on building more positive regional relations through the construction of an East Asia community.

### **Revising Japan's Security Policy**

For more than sixty years, Japan has been faced with a contradiction between its peace constitution and its security policy: how can Japan be ideologically committed to renouncing the use of force to resolve conflict if it depends on its closest ally's military power to ensure its own security? During the Cold War, the threat of a Soviet attack meant that there was no other choice but to rely on the United States as the guarantor of Japan's security. When the Soviet Union fell, however, this rationale weakened, and Japan has struggled ever since with this contradiction. Its uncertainty has only grown as the need for multilateral peacekeeping operations and for ways to combat new threats such as terrorism has intensified.

In recent years, Japan has tried to more actively participate in the international community by enacting measures authorizing it to deal more directly with regional contingencies. These include the signing of the Guidelines for Japan-U.S. Defense Cooperation in 1997 and the passage of the associated implementing laws; the enactment of wartime contingency legislation; and the Anti-Terrorism Special Measures Law of 2001, which permitted the Japan Self-Defense Forces (JSDF) to provide logistical support to the United States and other countries conducting counterterrorism activities in the Indian Ocean.

However, despite these advances, Japan has still not fully resolved the contradictions of its security policy. For example, it is prohibited from directly engaging in military operations, including multi-lateral operations to maintain international peace. The JSDF's record in Iraq is a telling example. Forces were sent to "non-combat areas" to provide humanitarian assistance and assist with reconstruction efforts. Yet the widespread nature of the conflict in Iraq has essentially meant that the JSDF ended up operating in a politically unstable area where involvement in a combat situation could never be ruled out.

In light of domestic and foreign expectations for Japan to contribute internationally and to assume a greater role in its own security, a major debate has emerged on revising Article 9, the "no war" clause of the peace constitution, to permit the use of force. The people involved in this debate come to it with a variety of differing agendas, but the fact remains that Japan now has to face security challenges that are very different from when its constitution was promulgated in 1946 and from what we encountered during the Cold War. The international community faces nontraditional threats such as terrorism and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, and the regional and global security environment has become much more complex. To adequately respond, Japan needs to discard the fictions and taboos constraining its security policy and articulate how and when it might use force, not as a means of resolving international disputes, but in collective self defense of the international community.

### **Japan's East Asia Policy**

Moves to reconcile the contradictions inherent in Japan's current security policy are best complemented by efforts to improve ties with Japan's East Asian neighbors and to help build a more peaceful, prosperous, and cooperative region. Intraregional exchange and interaction continue to deepen, and there is a growing sense that a regional community is beginning to emerge. Over the long term, it is even plausible to think that nationalism in the region can eventually be complemented and perhaps absorbed by a sense of regionalism and common identity. Japan has much to contribute to this

process and, with its achievements in the areas of political and economic governance over the past six decades, it can, in a sense, serve as one model for the development of a better Asia.

One obstacle to the improvement of regional ties has clearly been the issue of history. Japan inflicted enormous suffering on neighboring nations during World War II. We should not forget this, but we cannot be haunted by this forever. A focus merely on history issues will just exacerbate rather than diminish tensions, so there should be an understanding on all sides that we need to stop politicizing history issues. The focal point of regional relations needs to lie elsewhere, and this can most constructively lie in expanding and deepening regional cooperation.

Of course, the question of China's future role in East Asia also looms large over discussions of regional community. Many in the region are concerned that the unpredictability inherent in China's rapid economic rise, combined with its lack of political freedom and internal social problems, may eventually cause difficulties for the region. The lack of checks and balances in the Communist Party are also a source of concern. However, China is going through changes and by engaging it as a great power and encouraging it to align its interests with the rest of the region—in essence by embedding it in regional cooperation—Japan can contribute greatly to the region's future.

The key to building a prosperous and stable East Asia is to strengthen a sense of regional community by developing common interests in various functional arenas in ways that are appropriate for each particular function. By identifying potential areas of regional interest and then working jointly on them step by step, we can encourage the development of a spirit of cooperation and stronger networks at different levels of society. And this process need not be done in opposition to public opinion; instead these efforts will naturally build domestic constituencies for deeper cooperation.

Regional community building can proceed on more than one track. Bilateral security arrangements are still vital, but there is clearly a common regional security interest and this means that there is a pressing need to multilateralize security cooperation in some areas through the construction of

a regional security community. This is something that ought to be done in close cooperation with the United States and in such a way that ensures the continued active engagement of the United States in the region.

Similarly, there is also substantial room for more regional cooperation on so-called functional issues, in some cases including the United States and other countries outside of East Asia. Energy, environmental protection, growing income disparities, and nontraditional and human security issues such as AIDS and piracy could all be sources of shared regional interest and create an impetus for even deeper cooperative relationships. Japan's experiences can be particularly useful in this regard. For example, in the 1970s, many experts predicted that Japan could not effectively cope with a severe oil supply shock, but it succeeded remarkably in reducing its dependence upon oil in the ensuing years. Japan can serve as a model for neighboring countries that seek to diversify their energy supplies in an environmentally sustainable fashion, and the technologies it has developed can help make this possible.

At the same time, there is much that East Asian countries can do on their own, and this should be pursued through the process of building an East Asia economic community. The basis for economic integration should be the ASEAN+6 countries—including the traditional ASEAN+3 members plus Australia, New Zealand, and India—who participate in the East Asia Summit. To date, bilateral free trade agreements, economic partnership agreements, and foreign direct investment have been the foundation of common economic interest. There is huge potential for this foundation to expand as the various strengths of the region's members encourage the growth of new economic synergies, although care should be given to undertaking this integration in an open fashion that is consistent with global liberalization.

The rise of nationalistic sentiments has clearly become one of the major challenges facing Japan as it debates its international identity in the post-Cold War world. It is time that the dual gaps that give rise to these sentiments are bridged so that nationalism can be channeled in a constructive direction. Many Japanese want to be proud

of their country, and Japan has much to be proud of with its six postwar decades of achievements. A two-pronged approach—revising outdated security policies and building an East Asia community—would allow Japan to contribute more fully as a responsible member of the international community. This is necessary in enabling Japan to live

up to its potential to serve as a respected leader in the region and in the broader international community.

---

*Hitoshi Tanaka was Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs of Japan until August 2005. He is currently a Senior Fellow at JCIE.*

---

## *East Asia Insights*

*East Asia Insights* is an occasional newsletter focusing on East Asia community building from a Japanese perspective.

Published by: Tadashi Yamamoto, President, JCIE

Please direct any comments or questions to [eainsights@jcie.or.jp](mailto:eainsights@jcie.or.jp).

Japan Center for International Exchange  
[www.jcie.or.jp](http://www.jcie.or.jp)

Japan Center for International Exchange, Inc. (JCIE/USA)  
[www.jcie.org](http://www.jcie.org)