The People vs. Koizumi?  
Japan-U.S. Relations and Japan’s Struggle for National Identity

ABSTRACT: Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi has pleased Washington by deploying Self-Defense Forces (SDF) in Iraq. But half the public remains opposed. How serious is the gap between Koizumi and the Japanese people on security affairs? This Special Report includes three very different perspectives, and extends beyond the immediate question of SDF deployment to such issues as Japan’s role in the world, the lingering legacy of World War II, and how Japan can best contribute to stability in Asia as well as the Middle East. Naoyuki Agawa of the Japanese embassy argues that the Japanese people will continue to support expansion of the SDF under the U.S. wing. According to Masaru Tamamoto, the prime minister has pushed the public farther than it wants to go in the direction of militarization—casualties in Iraq could bring down the Koizumi government. Toshio Nishi argues that increased national pride will prompt Japan toward a more independent and assertive foreign policy.

Introduction

Amy McCready

“You’re the pride of the Japanese people, the pride of the nation,” Defense Minister Shigeru Ishiba told his troops on January 16. Amid a flurry of media attention, the first members of the Self-Defense Forces (SDF) left for Samawa, Iraq. According to plan, a total of one thousand will be deployed for non-combat tasks such as humanitarian assistance, building of schools, and infrastructure improvement. The controversial mission, which has no UN mandate and could lead to the first Japanese casualties since World War II, is a milestone in Japanese foreign affairs. Japan’s participation in the Iraqi occupation illustrates the robustness of Japan-U.S. ties on the official level. The positive relationship between President George Bush and Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi, reminiscent of the “Ron-Yasu” friendship of the 1980s, is echoed down through the ranks of both governments. But public surveys show that many Japanese citizens are uneasy about what they perceive as U.S. aggressiveness. Last December, those Japanese who “do not trust the United States” topped those who “trust” on a percentage basis for the first time. Half of Japanese remain opposed to sending SDF to Iraq, and 84 percent complain that Koizumi has not been fully accountable to the public on the issue.

What will be the consequences of this perception gap between elites and ordinary Japanese? Will public attitudes shift in the government’s direction, as in the case of the 1992 peacekeeping operations law—now popular, but originally approved by only 20 percent of the public? Or will difficulties, casualties or Japanese use of firearms (only to be fired under attack) cause a new upsurge of anti-militarization and anti-Americanism?

The three essays in this Special Report, a follow-up to a Wilson Center seminar late last year, focus on Japanese involvement in Iraq, but also explore much wider issues of national identity. How is Japan’s identity shaped by the devastating defeat of World War II? What has been the effect of the North Korean threat? And how will public attitudes affect the future of the Japan-U.S. security relationship?

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The perspectives included in this report differ markedly. At first glance, the essays seem to represent three distinct groups: 1) the Koizumi administration, 2) left-leaning non-militarization, and 3) right-leaning nationalism. However, a closer examination reveals similarities as well as differences. Each contributor supports the Japan-U.S. security treaty in the name of Japan’s own interests. Each applauds, at least in some form, the idea of Japanese national pride—interestingly, even Masaru Tamamoto, who decries militarization, calls himself a “nationalist” in his essay’s title. Thus, the Special Report suggests a wide diversity of opinion in Japan that resists easy labeling.

Each of the three contributors observes a different direction of public opinion—each explicitly claims to connect with the Japanese zeitgeist. Naoyuki Agawa, a government official, asserts that a “realistic” public is coming around to the prime minister’s position of supporting U.S. overseas activities. Tamamoto sees Japanese skepticism of militarization continuing—even deepening—in response to misguided U.S. arrogance. In Toshio Nishi’s opinion, Japan is experiencing a “sea change” in the direction of constitutional revision, military expansion and hawkish self-sufficiency. Which contributor is right about the course of public opinion? The answer, in part, depends on the safety, luck, conduct, and success of the Self-Defense Forces camped on the barren stretch of land near Samawa. It depends, too, on the leadership skills of both Japanese and U.S. governments in resolving the standoff with North Korea. Whether due to Koizumi’s persuasiveness or to media fanfare, support for the Iraqi mission has grown since these essays were written—but it could easily fall again if the SDF encounters difficulties or casualties.

**THE ASIA PROGRAM**

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Naoyuki Agawa, public affairs minister and director of the Japan Information and Culture Center at the Japanese Embassy in Washington, makes a case for expanding Japanese involvement overseas under the U.S. wing. For him, the important point is to defend the prime minister’s sending troops to Iraq and otherwise assisting the Washington-led coalition in the face of public reluctance. Agawa argues that the Iraqi mission makes sense in the wider context of the Japan-U.S. alliance, which has a broad base of longstanding public support. In a sense, he agrees with the credo attributed to Tom Landry, the famous American football coach: “Leadership is getting someone to do what they don’t want to do, to achieve what they want to achieve.”

However, Agawa also makes the case that Japanese resistance to sending troops is milder than others (such as Tamamoto, later in this Special Report) claim. Japanese people, Agawa maintains, “are aware that the world is becoming increasingly dangerous” and understand Koizumi’s position in wanting to support the nation’s closest ally. Though “isolationism” will not disappear overnight, reason will prevail in an increasingly complex world where the line between individual self defense and collective self defense is becoming increasingly blurred. According to Agawa, the Iraqi mission is the next step for Japan’s gradual assumption of “standard—but still limited—actions to benefit peace in the global community.” Such actions are the responsibility of a large, prosperous country in an important geopolitical location. “Japan is no superpower, but it is not Switzerland or Denmark either,” Agawa asserts. Thus he makes an appeal to the public’s “realism,” as did Koizumi on January 6: “The logic of leaving dangerous work to the United States is no longer acceptable. The public will understand why Japan needs to send its troops.”

Agawa points out that while anti-Americanism exists in Japan, it is less prevalent than in Europe. For example, only 35 percent of Japanese dislike the
spread of American ideas and customs, compared to 50 percent of Britons and 71 percent of French. Agawa believes that much of Japanese anti-U.S. sentiment is a result of frustration and fear amid economic and political malaise. While many Japanese continue to protest against U.S. military bases on Japanese soil, the Japanese community is generally hospitable, Agawa maintains. Anti-U.S. demonstrations make the news, but quiet cooperation does not—“such is the nature of news.” Moreover, he insists that assisting the United States does not make Japan a “lapdog.” Japan can influence U.S. actions and world affairs far more easily by participating than by sitting on the sidelines, he contends.

Masaru Tamamoto, senior fellow (resident in Japan) of the World Policy Institute, sees a much greater gap between prime minister and public than does Agawa. Koizumi, he argues, has expanded the role of the Self-Defense Forces “with surprising ease and swiftness” by strengthening the SDF’s ability to respond to domestic emergencies as well as to assist U.S.-led coalitions abroad. Tamamoto’s main point is that Koizumi is more concerned with pleasing Washington than with representing the desires of the Japanese people or guarding the safety of Japanese troops (who, according to the Special Measures Law for Iraq, can only be deployed in “non-combat” areas). In Tamamoto’s view, Koizumi has taken advantage of public fears over the 1998 firing of a North Korean test missile over Japan to push the public farther than it wants to go.

According to Tamamoto, Americans and Japanese who want to expand Japan’s military role are not thinking strategically in the long term. For example, why does Japan, which is under U.S. military protection, need aircraft carriers that will provoke China to acquire its own carrier fleet? How will adding another arms exporter onto the world scene contribute to world peace or to Japanese or U.S. national security? For Tamamoto, Japan’s most productive role is to continue demonstrating the viability of constitutional pacifism to developing nations. Tamamoto calls himself a nationalist because he is proud of what he calls the “cheerful” role that Japan has played since World War II. Japan has accomplished an important task by demonstrating that economic growth and middle-class prosperity are—or can be—the business of government. In this regard, he argues, Japan has exerted a positive influence not only on small nations such as those of Southeast Asia, but on China as well, contributing to Asian peace and stability.

Toshio Nishi, research fellow at the Hoover Institution and professor at Reitaku University, delivers a third opinion. For him, to send troops is laudable but should be accompanied by constitutional amendment. While Tamamoto feels the activity should be changed to coincide with law, Nishi feels law should be altered to permit the activity. Japan should help the United States militarily as well as financially, he writes—but a government that sends troops abroad to “fight and die for peace and justice” should do so legitimately. Otherwise Japan will repeat history by allowing a “clique of all-knowing men with extra-constitutional powers” to decide the nation’s course. The “political acrobatics” necessary to keep reinterpreting the war-renouncing Article 9 only engender disrespect from within and without, Nishi complains.

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But would the Diet and two-thirds of the public ratify a constitutional amendment? Nishi offers no direct opinion, but he maintains that the public is starting to weary of an environment that prohibits “healthy” expression of national pride. Nishi writes extensively of the occupation period, of what Japan has gained and lost in its stunning rise to prosperity. According to Susumu Nishibe, a well-known right-wing commentator, the role of conservative thought is to “check and confirm what is lost and to examine what values and norms of the nation are to be protected” (discipline, the “family,” ingenuity at combining Western and Chinese ideas, or whatever else the writer values). Nishi is within this tradition. In his view, national identity—including “pride, dignity and guiding conviction”—has been mostly discarded in Japan’s drive for wealth.
According to Nishi, an economically strapped Japan wearies of paying 19 percent of the United Nation’s annual budget (the United States, with double Japan’s GNP and a seat on the UN Security Council, pays 22 percent) while still suffering criticism over World War II. Japan realizes its “duty and responsibility” for maintaining world peace, but wants more credit for the exemplary role it has played for the past six decades.

END GOALS

Though the Cold War has ended and the riotous demonstrations against the Japan-U.S. security treaty are more than four decades in the past, a split in attitudes toward the United States remains—as this Special Report makes clear. While none of the contributors opposes the security treaty, each wants to build upon it to achieve different ends.

Tamamoto speaks of pacifist Japan’s “willful innocence,” a phrase that suggests not ignorance of alternatives but deliberate action. He does not deplore U.S. military strength or the alliance’s lopsided nature, at least insofar as the security umbrella makes Japanese non-militarization possible. He does, however, decry that (in his view) “the treaty stands above the constitution, presumably the highest law of the land,” inviolable like the prewar emperor. He wants Japan to defy U.S. pressure to participate in “ill-conceived” and “extra-constitutional” activities like the Iraqi mission. In other words, he favors resisting the United States in the short term while continuing to rely on it in the long term. According to Tamamoto, Japanese fears of abandonment by the United States are unfounded. Why would Washington walk away from a situation that benefits it by allowing a strong U.S. presence in Asia? Neither Japan nor the United States would profit from Japan’s becoming a “normal nation” with collective defense capabilities. Tamamoto asserts. U.S. and Japanese officials are foolish to fix what is not broken.

Nishi’s position is somewhat the opposite—he speaks positively of the alliance in the short term, but ultimately wants to do away with it, or at least its necessity. He calls the United States Japan’s “closest ally in the world” and firmly believes that America holds the moral high ground in Iraq and the war against terrorism. “We Japanese should help as much as we can,” he writes. In the long term, however, he wants Japan to be “a proud nation that can defend itself without anybody’s help, even that of our closest friend across the Pacific.”

Pleasing the United States in Iraq is not Nishi’s only, or even primary, concern. His clear choice is to amend the constitution before sending troops overseas. Even if the Diet and the majority of the Japanese population are already prepared to ratify an amendment, the process will take considerable time, and the United States wants “boots on the ground” as quickly as possible to improve the international credibility of its coalition.

The heat of the militarization debate is evident from the tone, as well as the substance, of Tamamoto and Nishi’s arguments. Each sees himself as a hard-nosed surveyor of the facts, while criticizing opposing views as unrealistic in the extreme. Tamamoto denounces the “romantic and emotional” militarization movement while Nishi decries those on the left who “ignore ugly reality” and are “addicted to the purest grade of pacifism.” According to Tamamoto, to dismiss China’s concerns about Japanese militarization (and thereby destabilize China-Japan relations) is “stunningly” naïve. Nishi writes that mollifying China is “absurd.”

And what of the Koizumi government? Of the three essays, Agawa’s is the most straightforwardly supportive of the United States. The government has shown its strategy to be one of “act now, ratify later”—and Agawa’s essay does not suggest any hint that the interests of Tokyo and Washington may diverge. Critics of Koizumi’s Liberal Democratic Party claim it is using the curtain of the alliance (as of the UN) to expand the SDF’s role. However, Agawa gives no hint that Nishi’s goal—a Japan that “can defend itself without anybody’s help”—is worth the cost of achieving it. Instead, he writes of increased defense integration between the U.S. military and the Japanese SDF in a world where “allies must share and act upon information instantly.” Similarly, Akihiko Tanaka of Tokyo University calls Japan’s strategy the “Yoshida doctrine plus,” emphasizing continuity in Japan’s reliance on the United States (begun under Prime Minister Shigeru Yoshida). Tanaka contends that Koizumi, like his predecessors, is “reactive” in his diplomacy—he’s just better at it than they were. According to Victor Cha, the government is following the strategy of “defensive realism”—increasing Japan’s relative power moderately
and carefully steering between strength (to discourage influence-seeking by other countries), and weakness (to avoid inciting regional suspicions and anti-Japan balancing coalitions).8

The Japanese Public

Which of these contributors is correct in representing the views of the Japanese public? Agawa claims that the Japanese people will gradually rally around the prime minister, because of basic underlying support for the U.S.-Japan alliance. His position is reinforced by the fact that approval of Japanese activities in Iraq has risen.9 However, the main reason given for approval is not that “Japan’s bilateral relationship with the United States is important” (6 percent and falling), but that “Iraqi reconstruction is necessary” (53 percent).10 Therefore the public may be readier to think and act outside the framework of the alliance than Agawa admits.

Does that mean that the Japanese public wants a country that can go its own way without U.S. assistance, as Nishi proposes? Nishi speaks of a “deep sea change of emotions” in Japan, and many commentators observe a mainstream surge of nationalism. For example, the national anthem and Hinomaru flag are gaining wider acceptance. But the movement called “nationalism” is perhaps too fragmented to influence national policy. Nishi’s conservative intellectual colleagues are split between pro-U.S. and anti-U.S. factions, lessening their impact,11 and many business-oriented nationalists are focused on reforming and growing the economy rather than footing the bill for major military expansion. Japan is most likely to be jolted into militarization if a major shock, (such as a terrorist attack or perceived betrayal by Washington) occurs. Meanwhile, according to a study by the Center for Strategic and International Studies, many Japanese leaders are concerned about a lack of national identity in Japan, especially among the young.12 Nishi’s contention that national pride is growing is not easily proved.

Tamamoto’s claim that the Japanese public is “simply not ready to see their soldiers return in body bags” is supported by opinion polls—more than half of the respondents think Japan should withdraw the SDF from Iraq if casualties are sustained. As Tamamoto points out, Japanese troops have neither engaged in combat nor suffered casualties since World War II, and the government can offer no guarantees that Iraq is safe. However, if government officials are “following their own agenda at the expense of what most Japanese want” as Tamamoto argues, why is Koizumi not already in political crisis? Where is the public outrage?

Perhaps all three contributors to this Special Report could be charged with overestimating the public’s concern with Japan’s overseas role, as opposed to domestic issues (such as the economy and employment) that affect people’s daily lives. Ikuo Kabashima, one of Japan’s leading public opinion analysts, maintains that SDF casualties may not be enough even to affect the upper house election,13 much less spur major changes in national policy. Sheldon Garon of Princeton University argues that the average Japanese has responded to economic stagnation by “embracing a less ambitious and more socially minded national identity”14 that is less preoccupied with Japan’s “role” than any of these three essays. For better or worse, many Japanese are more concerned with employment than deployment, more worried about the economic ramifications of the aging population than about the World War II legacy. The Wilson Center Asia Program hopes that these essays will serve as a springboard for a discussion of the complex formation of Japanese postwar identity that is closely entwined with—but not defined by—the U.S.-Japan alliance and the SDF’s expansion.

For better or worse, many Japanese are more concerned with employment than deployment.

Endnotes

2. Yomiuri-Gallup public opinion poll, Yomiuri Shimbun, December 15, 2003, 1. Forty-one percent of the Japanese respondents answered they trust the U.S., showing a decrease of 8 points.
3. Those for and against SDF Iraq dispatch are each at 47 percent. Public opinion poll, Mainichi Shimbun, January 26, 2004, 1.
9. Public opinion poll, Mainichi Shimbun, January 26, 2004, 1. The anti-dispatch figure dropped 7 percentage points from 54 percent in the last survey conducted in December last year, and the pro-dispatch figure increased 12 points from 35 percent.
10. Ibid. The percentage of pro-dispatch responders who cited the reason “Because Japan should cooperate with the United States” was down 4 points since December.
11. Yasushi Watanabe, “The Loci of ‘America’ in Japan Today” (unpublished manuscript), 29. For example, Kanji Nishio, a longtime critic of the United States, has turned more sympathetic, to the dismay of his collaborators Yoshinori Kobayashi and Susumu Nishibe.
Japan-U.S. Relations and the Japanese Public

The warm relations between President George Bush and Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi are truly remarkable, perhaps unprecedented. Everything I hear confirms that the relationship involves a frank exchange of views—Mr. Koizumi talks as much as he listens, departing from the typical behavior of prime ministers with U.S. presidents.

The health of Japan-U.S. ties goes beyond the top leaders’ personal friendship. Under Koizumi, Japan has improved security relations by deploying a Maritime Self Defense Force fleet to the Indian Ocean to assist the U.S.-led war against terrorism. The overall relationship has matured, and there are no major trade conflicts, as during the 1980s. Now the Koizumi government plans to support U.S. efforts by dispatching Self-Defense Forces (SDF) to Iraq, as soon as the situation proves stable enough.

But what of the Japanese public? How robust are Japan-U.S. ties at the grassroots level? Is the situation more accurately described as “The People Vs. Koizumi” or “The People with Koizumi”? This is both a short- and long-term question. In this paper I argue that while most Japanese currently oppose, or are at least cautious about, sending troops to Iraq, they support and value the Japan-U.S. alliance. While pacifist sentiments are still strong in Japan, people understand the Koizumi government’s position of wanting to support the nation’s closest ally.

Regarding the Iraq situation, it is clear that the Japanese public is reluctant to send troops and is critical of U.S. actions. A poll conducted by the Mainichi newspaper on Nov. 29-30 shows that 43 percent of respondents were opposed to the government’s plan to dispatch SDF to Iraq, regardless of timing. Another 40 percent expressed caution, saying Japan “should dispatch SDF personnel after seeing stability in the Iraqi situation.” Only 9 percent supported an early dispatch. Moreover, many anti-U.S. articles have appeared in the left-of-center Asahi newspaper, as well as right-wing magazines such as Hatsugensha and Seiron.

On the other hand, the vast majority—73 percent, according to a survey by the Cabinet Office in January 2003—expressed support for the Japan-U.S. alliance. 80 percent have a positive impression of the SDF. While isolationism persists in Japan, people are aware that the world is becoming increasingly dangerous, particularly close to home on the Korean peninsula. They are realistic in recognizing that the United States’ presence is crucial to Asia’s stability, and this realism reduces their reluctance to send troops to Iraq for fear of casualties.

Will the Japanese public continue to support the alliance for years to come? What is the long-term future of the relationship? On the one hand, the Japanese seem to share Europeans’ concern about

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American unilateralism. The sole-superpower status of the United States makes many people uneasy, and this contributes to a vague, sometimes unconscious, anti-Americanism on both the left and the right. Much of anti-Americanism, however, is not prompted by U.S. actions but by Japan’s domestic situation—it is an expression of frustration against the current economic and political malaise. As recently pointed out by Fouad Ajami in his article “The Falseness of Anti-Americanism,” resentment against the United States predated the current Bush administration, and often stems from fear of change. Ajami’s analysis of France, Germany, Greece and Muslim countries can be applied to Japan as well.

The truth is that Japan is much less vehemently anti-American than Europe or the Middle East, as can be seen in the Pew Research Center’s World Values Survey, published last January. For example, only 35 percent of Japanese dislike the spread of American ideas and customs, compared to 50 percent of Britons, 67 percent of Germans, 71 percent of French, 73 percent of Indonesians and 84 percent of Egyptians. Only 27 percent of Japanese dislike American ideas about democracy, a smaller proportion than in European countries such as Britain (42 percent), Germany (45 percent), or France (53 percent). In Japan, 88 percent feel that the world would be more dangerous if another country matched the United States militarily, compared to 64 percent in France. There is, it seems, a great reservoir of pro-American feeling in Japan.

What of protest against U.S. military bases? Is this not strong evidence of anti-Americanism? In fact, the Japanese community is generally hospitable—that is why the bases remain year after year. Anti-U.S. demonstrations make the news, but quiet cooperation does not. Such is the nature of news. To be sure, the situation will never be trouble-free, and Okinawa suffers from hosting a disproportionate number of troops. But Okinawa’s problems must be seen in the overall context of the reciprocal alliance. The very fact that the United States restored Okinawa—territory won by blood in war—to Japan in 1972 is astonishing from a historical perspective. The Americans returned Okinawa because they valued the Japan-U.S. relationship strategically and otherwise, and the U.S. military manages to coexist tolerably with the wider population. Admiral Robert Chaplin, ex-commander of naval forces in Japan, once told me that he has seen Japanese protesters sweep the streets after demonstrating in front of U.S. bases. That image tells you a lot about the strength of the Japan-U.S. alliance.

My personal observation is that Japanese people hold a wide variety of opinions on the United States. For example, every time I write a pro-American article, I get one positive letter for every negative. The positive letters, which enthusiastically praise America as a great country, are usually from people who have lived in the States or have some other kind of personal relationship with Americans. The negative letters question my sanity for liking such a terrible country.

Can the United States ultimately share not only interests but also values with the Japanese? Last January, The Economist quoted an interesting study by the University of Michigan on two types of values: “survival” and “self-expression.” “Survival” values involve economic and physical security, while “self-expression” values include tolerance of diversity, inclination to civic protest, liberty aspirations, and so on. Of all Asian countries, Japan is the closest to the United States in terms of self-expression values. Surprisingly, Taiwan, China and South Korea are all still on the “survival” side of the spectrum. However, in terms of “secular” versus “traditional” values, which was discussed in the same Michigan University study, Japan scores quite differently than the United States. Japan is closer to northern European countries in de-emphasizing such traditional authorities as religion, family and country.

One can draw a variety of conclusions from these surveys. Ultimately, however, I am of the view that shared values come out of common experiences. The more common experiences people have, the more values do they share. We, the Japanese and Americans, have indeed shared much in the past half century. By supporting each other, we can become even closer. My hope and belief is that the United

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States and Japan will move in the same direction, sharing more experiences and sharing more values.

Eventually, I hope that the Japan-U.S. alliance can become stronger and more reciprocal. There will be challenges. Will the warm personal relations that exist between individuals in the U.S. military and Japanese SDF (about which I have written elsewhere,6) continue to help cement the alliance? What effect will the “revolution in military affairs”—the astonishing advance in military technology and organizational methods—have? Will the line between individual self-defense and collective self-defense become increasingly blurred, as allies must share and act upon information instantly? After all, the whole Japan-U.S. security relationship is based on, and therefore restrained by, the fact that Japan does not exercise its right to collective self-defense.

If these challenges can be met, the interests of Japan will be served. History has shown that Japan can impact U.S. policy more by committing itself to security matters than by staying out of the picture. The United States will never regard Japan as a complete equal, but will see it as a vital friend. That is, supporting the United States does not make the Japanese “lapdogs,” but rather increases their influence on U.S. actions and thereby on world events. The United States values the contributions that its ally has been making over the past 10 years. That is why we should move gradually toward more standard—but still limited—actions to benefit peace in the global community, if we feel the aims are worthy and justified.

A certain amount of responsibility comes along with Japan’s size, prosperity and important geopolitical location—with being in a certain part of the world at this point in history. Japan is no superpower, but it is not Switzerland or Denmark either. Nor will it ever resemble Japan of the 1930s, since that is the last thing Japanese people want. Japan has a certain power, certain position, and certain relationship with the United States that helps to determine its position in the world. I believe that a lot of Japanese people are realizing the importance of its role.

ENDNOTES

1. Mainichi Newspaper, December 1, 2003, 1.
Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi has promised to send troops to Iraq, and American officials are declaring that the U.S.-Japan security treaty is in superb shape. Koizumi’s Japan seems bent on transforming itself into a real American ally—Japanese soldiers fighting alongside American GIs in far off lands. For more than half a century, the security treaty has made the Japanese islands into an U.S. military base. Now, if Koizumi has his way, the treaty will encompass much more.

This cynic sees Koizumi trying to turn Japanese soldiers into “America’s Gurkhas” at the expense of what most Japanese want. There is a wide perception gap between the Japanese people and Koizumi’s plan for Japan’s strategic role in the world. In a public opinion poll, 70 percent opposed sending troops to Iraq. While winning American goodwill has been a sure-plus for Japanese prime ministers, Koizumi finds himself playing a perilous balancing act this time. If he falls in this act, so may his government. He could easily end up upsetting and alienating both U.S. officials and the Japanese people.

Iraq should have been pacified by now. As things stand, Koizumi hopes to dispatch Japanese Self-Defense Forces (SDF) to Iraq and bring them home safely after a short period, with none experiencing combat or being attacked. Another positive (though unlikely) scenario for Koizumi would be a public declaration by Washington that the United States does not require the assistance of Japanese troops but appreciates Japan’s loyal and thoughtful offer; the generous package of grants and loans for Iraqi reconstruction is more than sufficient.

The White House asserts, quite diplomatically, that allied governments must decide for themselves whether to send troops. Behind the scenes, however, the Pentagon presses for 1000 Japanese combat troops and helicopter gun ships. But the special (limited-time) Iraq legislation that Koizumi passed through parliament limits the SDF to non-combat duties, such as providing medical services, transporting goods, and constructing facilities. Moreover, troops can be sent only to “safe areas.” Can Koizumi please both the Japanese people and U.S. officials?

The Japanese are simply not ready to see their soldiers return in body bags. The enduring and powerful memory of soldiers’ “dog’s deaths” in World War II has helped to shape contemporary Japanese national identity. After that disastrous war, a nagging yet obviously unanswerable refrain went, “What do we who survived say to the dead?” Now, what do we say if our soldiers fall in Iraq?

The Japanese people now know that the American cause of war was dubious and based on false pretenses—there was no substantial link between Baghdad and Al-Qaeda, and there was no cache of Iraqi weapons of mass destruction. Saddam’s regime was certainly evil, but the U.S. occupation policy proves ill-conceived. There is simply no convincing and worthy reason why Japanese soldiers should risk their lives.

Koizumi’s cabinet spokesman is visibly uncomfortable as he mutters about the fight for freedom and democracy—reduced to mimicry of American sloganeering. The spokesman, an astute politician,

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must certainly know that such talk does not resonate among the Japanese people. Lacking moral clarity and authority, the government fails to persuade.

Money has become the solution to too many problems in Japanese society, and questions of morality and principle are reduced to secondary consideration. This is an unattractive side of Japanese national identity today. How much is a dead Japanese soldier worth? The price has risen in stages during these fall months, to 100 million yen (about $900,000) for the bereaved. According to the constitution, Japan cannot be at war and Japanese soldiers can fight only in territorial defense, so death in battle is not recognized legally. A dead Japanese soldier in Iraq would be considered the same as any national civil servant in Tokyo dying of overwork or an accident on the job. The government has simply raised the level of compensation by creating dubious official categories. But can the bereaved really be bought? Is the public so cynical as to let the government buy a soldier’s life for 100 million yen for a doubtful cause?

Koizumi would rather not find out the answers to these questions. When asked in parliament where the “safe areas” in Iraq are, he retorted, “How should I know?” The moment was one of rare honesty in an otherwise convoluted Japanese debate. That was early autumn. Thereafter, Koizumi was slippery. Mindful of the general election he was about to call, he skirted any serious discussion.

A chorus of pundits has Koizumi losing his hold on government if Japanese soldiers die in Iraq—no Japanese soldier has marched to battle since World War II. Koizumi would not be able to hide the coffins and avoid the funerals as President George W. Bush has been doing with America’s fallen.

Koizumi has not retracted his promise to Bush to send troops. At the same time, however, he has curtly and repeatedly stated that troops will be sent only when conditions are right and that no decision on the timing has been made. In this regard, Koizumi is a more agile politician than British Prime Minister Tony Blair, who has shown himself to be too principled for his own political good in providing legitimacy to the American war. Thus Koizumi’s Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) won the lower house election held on November 9.

Somewhat surprisingly, Iraq did not become a serious issue in the election, due in large measure to Koizumi’s slippery tactics. Two minor parties, the Social Democratic Party and the Communist Party, took a principled stand for constitutional pacifism and fared miserably; their futures as parliamentary actors are now in serious jeopardy. The Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ), the major opposition party, declared its objection to the Iraq expedition only days before the election in a last-ditch effort to win votes. But the Democrats failed to explain how they would maintain good relations with the United States and could not rally the electorate in any serious way. Still, after the election, popular support for Koizumi’s cabinet began to decline; the standing promise to Washington to send troops is taking its toll. Within a month, the popularity rating went down 6 percentage points to 44 percent. Not since 1972, when Prime Minister Kakuei Tanaka was mired in the Lockheed bribery scandal (and indicted soon after) has a cabinet lost popularity immediately following a lower house election.

Koizumi, contrary to parliamentary custom, opted to forgo a policy speech in the special session called to reelect him prime minister. How could he explain Iraq and emerge unharmed? Instead, Koizumi made sure to leak a conversation with one of his party leaders in which he never said troops would be dispatched within 2003.

This leaked statement contradicted what the people knew. Without cabinet approval, the prime minister’s office had “unofficially” instructed the Japan Defense Agency (JDA) to prepare for immediate dispatch. The media have been full of detailed reports based on a flood of leaks from the JDA. The JDA’s normally obscure workings have never been covered so clearly on the front page of newspapers. Opinion within the JDA is understandably divided—until now, it never had to contemplate going to war. Some JDA officials see Iraq as an opportunity to transform the constitutionally restricted SDF into a “normal” military force, but criticize the special Iraq legislation as inadequate, since it dangerously curtails the troops’ ability to use force even in self-defense. Others in the JDA see folly. They would prefer to limit overseas activity to participation in non-combat United Nations peacekeeping operations and humanitarian aid.

Koizumi’s government is also divided. The greatest fissure lies between the LDP and its coalition partner, the Komeito. Without the Komeito, the
LDP does not command a majority in the upper house, and 81 of the 168 LDP victories in single-seat electoral districts in the recent lower-house election hinged on Komeito cooperation. The Komeito is a creation of the Sokagakai, a disciplined Buddhist organization that can deliver votes. Since the Sokagakai is founded on anti-war principles, there is a limit to how far the Komeito can back Koizumi on Iraq. Komeito counsels caution. If Japanese soldiers were to fall in Iraq before the next upper-house election in summer 2004, the Komeito would be hard put to cooperate with the LDP again and likely would leave the coalition. And with blood on his hands, Koizumi cannot hope to win a LDP majority in the upper house.

Parliamentary politics have become important in a new way. The November lower-house election saw the beginning of a competitive two-party system. The DPJ is showing itself as a viable opposition party, a real contender for leading the government. The DPJ surpassed the LDP in the proportional-representation count, though it was vanquished (168 to 105) in single-seat constituencies. No longer can the LDP rest assured of its dominance. It will pay for its mistakes, as Koizumi knows.

When asked in parliament where the “safe areas” in Iraq are, Koizumi retorted, “How should I know?” The moment was one of rare honesty in an otherwise convoluted Japanese debate.

**IT IS NORTH KOREA, NOT IRAQ**

Then what makes American officials conclude that the U.S.-Japan security treaty is in superb shape, with expectations for an expanded strategic role for Japan? Foremost, Koizumi supported the United States promptly after 9-11. He passed the Anti-Terrorism Special Measures Law that allowed the SDF to support U.S. operations in Afghanistan, most visibly by refueling American ships at sea—a bold move given Japan’s pacifistic limitations. And, when the United States decided to go to war against Iraq, Koizumi was quick to pass the Special Measures Law for Iraq and promise to send Japanese ground troops. Also, he passed a set of emergency laws to govern SDF conduct in case Japan is attacked. Before these emergency laws, there existed no legal provision for military action; strictly speaking, army tanks rushing to meet an invading force would have had to obey normal traffic rules by stopping at red lights. Overall, Koizumi has facilitated use of the Japanese military with surprising ease and swiftness, pleasing the United States in this way more than any other previous prime minister.

It was the 1998 firing of a North Korean test missile over Japan that dissipated the generally pacifistic public sentiment that would previously have blocked Koizumi’s moves. The missile did what a few hundred nuclear-armed Soviet missiles aimed at Japan during the Cold War could not—awakened a sense of threat and need for action. Japan launched military spy satellites, empowered the coast guard, sank a North Korean spy ship, and budgeted the construction an anti-missile defense system surrounding greater Tokyo. Simply put, Koizumi could do what he did because of public outrage against North Korea.

North Korea is a real security consideration. Still, the radical change in Japanese public attitude toward military security seems disproportionate to the threat and somewhat alarming. Much more than just a rational security calculation, the response is strongly emotional—“How dare they!”—and stems from a Japanese sense of superiority and ambivalence toward Asia that was never fully resolved after Japan lost its empire. This superiority is another unattractive side of Japanese national identity. While Japan is (for now) forging positive relations with China and South Korea, North Korea manages to strike all the wrong chords.

Then there is the abduction issue. North Korean leader Kim Jong Il admitted that abductions of Japanese nationals occurred, and returned five victims without their children. He declared the other victims dead and the issue resolved—but we Japanese are not satisfied. We are upset at both North Korea and our own authorities who did nothing for too long. Our government has finally begun to attend to public concerns, but the abduction issue is not on the agenda for the six-power talks (involving
Japan, the U.S., China, South Korea and Russia) regarding future relations with North Korea. Washington counsels Japan to settle the matter bilaterally. For all Koizumi’s efforts to support America’s fights against Afghanistan and Iraq, he cannot get extra consideration in Washington for the one issue the Japanese people really care about.

THE ALLIANCE

The U.S.-Japan security treaty is the highest source of authority in Japan, the functional equivalent and successor to the pre-1945 emperor, “sacred and inviolable.” The treaty stands above the constitution, presumably the highest law of the land.

The U.S. occupation army recreated the military after drafting Japan’s 1946 constitution, which literally proscribes Japan from possessing an armed force. Underneath, many remain suspicious of an arrangement that drags Japan into America’s battles—the Iraq war is, in a sense, the treaty’s first serious trial. However, the vast majority of Japanese is content with the treaty and with Japan’s “willful innocence” in international politics, accorded by the U.S. military presence and security guarantee. The overall goal, for public and elites, is to keep the United States from abandoning Japan. The Japanese simply do not want to imagine a world without American protection.

For the Japanese sheltered by this treaty and governed by “constitutional pacifism,” treason has no meaning. There exists a law against treason, as in states everywhere, but it is valid only in time of war. Japan cannot be at war, since the Japanese people “forever renounce the use of force to settle international disputes” according to the constitution. In addition, the state has neither conscription nor law against espionage—Japan cannot be betrayed and requires no patriots. The vast majority of the Japanese are content with their “cheerful state.” In response to decades of opinion polls, most young men have said they will run away if the country is invaded.

A voice is growing among the political class that finds such cheerfulness abnormal. Koizumi and others see Japan as a historical aberration, a sort of “half state,” and want to bring it back to “normalcy.” For them, a normal state has people willing to fight to defend their land, and a military capable of force. They want to revise the constitution to equalize the U.S.-Japan security treaty and to allow the Japanese military to engage in collective security operations with the United States. Their imagination of the possibilities of statehood is limited, and their models for normalcy are either the Japanese Meiji state (1868-1945) or the contemporary United States. Since the Meiji state ended in utter disaster in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the lesson is clear, according to the normalcy advocates—Japan should stick with the United States. The Meiji state gained power and prestige as long as it remained loyal to its alliance with Britain, then the world’s dominant power. The urge for normalcy is what led Koizumi to forthrightly support the U.S. war on terrorism—though he did not expect Washington to corner him into making a decision about going to war in such short a time.

The problem with the normal-state argument is that prestige is, for the most part, romantic and emotional. The normalcy idea does not meaningfully address the hard questions of Japan’s national security. While the normalcy advocates condemn constitutional pacifism as inward looking, they fall into the same trap. In the long run, how will enhancing Japanese military capability affect ties with China—the most important issue for Japan in East Asia? Japan’s militarization will likely become a major obstacle in China-Japan relations and diminish Japan’s national security as a result. This point is dismissed by normalcy advocates, who are reluctant to be “thrown around by China” in their pursuit of Japan’s “proper rights.” Thus, they miss a fundamental point: national security is a relational matter. Their naivete is stunning. Many in this political class look down on today’s China while fearing an economically powerful China of ten years hence. In short, the normalcy advocates are dangerously unequipped to think comprehensively about national security.

In the flurry of actions by Koizumi that have so pleased American officials, there was an unnoticed announcement (buried amongst and made possible by other exciting developments): the defense agency has announced a plan to construct its first helicopter carrier ship, which easily converts to carry six or seven Harrier-type vertical takeoff and landing fighter jets. The ship is of dubious military value except to fan the pride of the navy, which dreams of
one day acquiring a full-scale blue water fleet with a “real” aircraft carrier. In an undesirable scenario, the ship could easily become China’s justification for acquiring its own carrier fleet. This is one telling example of how Japanese thinking is inadequate and fails to fit the parts to the desirable whole. And, in pushing the Japanese military toward a more active role, the United States ought to consider short-term marginal benefits in the light of likely long-term damage to East Asian peace and stability.

The normalization advocates are too smug in their dismissal of the Japanese post-1945 experience. It is no small feat in world history that Japan has proved possible the paradox of reduced international power and increased economic prosperity. Japan demonstrated the payoff of making economic growth the priority of government—to Southeast Asian countries after the Vietnam War and to post-Maoist China. During the Soviet Union’s last days, some Soviet leaders saw Japan as disproving Lenin’s equation of advanced capitalism and imperialism. In a similar vein, it is possible, if enough political resolve can be found, for Japan to show the world the cheerfulness of constitutional pacifism, the possibility of a land where treason has no meaning, a worthy vision for statehood in the 21st century.

Detractors will correctly point out that such cheerfulness in Japan has been made possible only by the lopsided American security guarantee. The U.S.-Japan security treaty is one of the continuing hypocrisies of the Cold War. Still, the two countries are not about to abrogate it. Japan will remain the linchpin of American military presence in East Asia, and the United States will act as essential keeper of order, buying time and breathing space for countries in the region to work out differences and give cheerfulness a chance. In the long run, as per-capita income levels approximate, borders will become increasing porous. In Europe, open borders result from sustained political commitment and financial investment; in 1945, predictions of a European Union would have seemed sheer folly. An East Asian version of Europe is possible and certainly would benefit the United States, since global capitalism would be the glue that binds such a union.

Such a project would be a hard sell to Bush’s United States, but American commitment is necessary. As Sherle Schwenninger argues:

The neo-conservative architects of muscular dominance . . . are wrong to make military dominance, the war on terrorism, and the Middle East the centerpieces of American grand strategy . . . . There are arguably more important international goals than the reordering of the Middle East: ensuring the peaceful evolution of great power relations among China, Japan, and Korea; completing the process of integrating Russia, China, and India into a system of middle-class commerce and international law; extending the middle-class prosperity that underpins European and North American stability to the emerging economies of Latin America, Asia, and Eastern Europe . . . . All these warrant American effort and attention and arguably are more critical to world order and U.S. interests than is an American imperial project in the Middle East.\(^2\)

The November 24 Wilson Center seminar, at which I delivered an earlier version of these remarks, began by asking whether the U.S.-Japan security treaty is in as superb shape as U.S. officials claim. There is a small clique of American defense and diplomatic officials that works on Japan, and their Japanese counterparts make up an even smaller club. These elites have a meeting of the minds, and have successfully pursued the narrow agenda of pushing Japan to assume a more active role in military affairs. Japanese people see the small clique of “Japan handlers” as fully representing the American foreign policy establishment and little recognize that Japan as a military actor is of secondary consideration in U.S. global thinking. The Japanese public would be served by easing the grip of the narrow defense cliques and—on both sides—rethinking bilateral relations more comprehensively in a manner such as outlined by Schwenninger.

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Koizumi finds himself playing a perilous balancing act. If he falls, so may his government. He could easily end up upsetting and alienating both U.S. officials and the Japanese people.
A NATIONALIST’S LAMENT

On December 9, Koizumi announced a schedule to dispatch land, sea and air forces to Iraq. If the schedule is carried out, Japan will forfeit its potential to play the role of honest broker in a region likely to see tumult for some to come. Japan as part of an occupation force will mean the end of its possibly singular status as a great power free of an imperial historical burden in the Middle East.

On December 23, Emperor Akihito celebrated his 70th birthday. It is an irony of history that the emperor stands as the defender of Japan’s constitutional pacifism, of the constitution that denies all political power to the emperor. Akihito declared in his birthday address his wish for world peace and mentioned how the militarists had once led the country astray using the name of his father, Emperor Hirohito. This is as much as today’s emperor can say about the Iraq expedition without mentioning Iraq. But Japanese foreign policy is now made in the name of the American alliance, not the emperor.

On December 26, an advance team of air force personnel departed for Kuwait in preparation for the dispatch of a full contingent of three C-130 medium-sized transport planes—certainly an insignificant force for Koizumi to play the big power game he wants to play.

In the send-off speech, Koizumi finally admitted that troops are going to a dangerous area. In effect, he owned up to the extra-legality of the scheduled military expedition to Iraq. Whether or not one sees wisdom in the Japanese involvement with Iraq, there is a prior, more fundamental question. As things stand, the dispatch of troops to areas of combat is illegal—both unconstitutional and against the Iraq legislation. The rule of law is tabled. It is certainly unwise for the United States, bent on muscular dominance or otherwise, to encourage in Japan or any other ally the habit of breaking its laws.

In a fabricated air of emergency, Koizumi seeks to fundamentally transform Japanese national identity, from a state of constitutional pacifism to a state that can go to war. Alarmingly and amazingly, there is no serious debate. And, Koizumi and his group are incognizant of the gravity of what they are doing and how they are doing it. Mistakes in judgment can fester and eventually lead to tragic consequences.

On January 1, Koizumi paid his respect at the Yasukuni Shrine, where the spirits of Japan’s war dead are honored. If Japanese soldiers fall in Iraq, the shrine will be infused with new life, for no Japanese soldier has fallen in battle since 1945. But the majority of the Japanese do not care about the symbolism of the shrine. The prime minister’s visit elicited more than the usually strong protests from China and South Korea. Koizumi brushed off the protests as something concerning the long-ago past. But the Chinese and Koreans are talking about Japan present and future. It is hard to imagine how angering our neighbors contributes to national security, while Koizumi preaches to the Japanese people that the Iraq expedition is vital for Japanese national security. The symbolism of the Yasukuni visit and the bravado associated with the Iraq expedition are not unrelated.

On January 2, also not unrelated, the secretary-general of the ruling Liberal-Democratic Party, a Koizumi ally, spoke on television that it is time to review the long-time Japanese ban on the export of weapons. How adding another arms exporter onto the world scene contributes to world peace or Japanese national security is beyond imagination. When one of the real global security concerns is nuclear proliferation, which needs to be addressed by arms control and disarmament, where are Japan’s leaders trying to take the country or the world?

This writer of republican bent almost wishes that the emperor held real power, so distasteful is the direction of Japan today.

ENDNOTES

The elation of victory in war, like a shooting star arcing across the darkness of humanity, lasts only a moment. The misery of defeat remains like a deep scar.

Born in Osaka five days after Pearl Harbor, I grew up in the terrible aftermath of World War II and Japan’s first and crushing surrender. Like all other children who survived the war, I know hunger, poverty, and the burden of my country’s defeat.

On December 7, 1941, Imperial Japan, presuming an imminent attack from the United States, crossed the international dateline and launched a massive offense against beautiful Pearl Harbor. Japan called it “the preemptive first strike.” The Island Empire, seduced by a mirage of eternal glory and underestimating the enemy, lunged forward without knowing its destination.

As the roars of feverish “Banzai!” ricocheted through the cold winter streets of Tokyo and Osaka, new battles erupted, one after another, all without front lines. The Japanese and the Americans, who had enjoyed a long relationship across the Pacific, plunged into a full-scale war of attrition, with all the vehemence of betrayed hearts. America fought back with a vengeance by firebombing the Japanese archipelago.

Imperial Japan, fiercely proud, was willing to fight to the last soldier against the strongest nation in the world. The exhausted Japanese, who had survived blanket bombings by the dreaded “flying fortress” B-29s and two atomic bombs, could no longer recall the victorious roars of that first December. Throng of women and children, who had inspired the soldiers to kill every enemy, also died in the promise of eternal glory. The Empire of the Rising Sun sacrificed everything, even its own soul, but failed to repel the American forces. In the collective Japanese mind, being alive in the aftermath of battle was tantamount to unbearable shame.

I remember leaving Osaka with my mother for the mountainous countryside, where she, a wealthy landowner, employed many tenant farmers. The windows of our train were painted black to hide from B-29s, which rained incendiary firebombs on everything visibly moving in the night. Even with that precaution, our train crawled. Soon afterward, Osaka was reduced to smoldering charcoal. I heard adults whispering that the smoke smelled of decay. It was the pungent odor of a dying empire.

Emotional liberation, which might have helped the Japanese ease their anguish, did not materialize at the cessation of killing. Only emptiness crept into their hearts, and the agony of the unconditional surrender was deep and relentless, as was hunger.

President Harry S. Truman assigned the illustrious U.S. Army general, Douglas MacArthur, to the unprecedented task of changing militant Japan to a peace-loving nation. We, conquered and starving, thought the tall, handsome, and charismatic MacArthur was “the missionary of democracy.” He told us he was. He was also a fervent Christian and
tried his best to convert the pagan Japanese to what he proclaimed “a higher spirituality.” The Japanese Christians, a very small minority in a land of numerous indigenous gods and deities, welcomed him as the “second Jesus Christ.”

My mother lost her agricultural land and forests because MacArthur said that absentee landlords like her were feudalistic and responsible for the growth of militarism. He ordered her land, which her family had owned for hundreds of years, confiscated and given to the tenants, free. She believed for a long time that MacArthur must be a Communist.

On August 30, 1945, Douglas MacArthur landed on Atsugi Airfield (a kamikaze training ground) to teach the Japanese the virtues of peace and democracy. Standing on the pinnacle of devastated Japan, MacArthur said that Japanese society was “four hundred years behind the West.” The Japanese had no willpower left to argue with the American Caesar. MacArthur’s devoted staff interpreted the Japanese acquiescence as a natural result of the General’s “brilliant appraisal of the Oriental mind.”

As a precondition for democracy, MacArthur ordered the Japanese to search out all militarists and jingoists—those who were once called “true patriots.” All conspicuous promoters of the war, who had not yet committed honorable suicide, were easily caught (they did not hide) and hanged or imprisoned after the Tokyo Military Tribunal. MacArthur’s term for cleansing the undesirable Japanese was “moral disarmament.” Words like “armament” or “military preparedness” became immoral, dirty words in the defeated nation. Such a concept was alien to the legendary land of martial arts.

MacArthur’s most urgent task was to make sure Japan would never again threaten the United States. The future Japan must be physically incapable of fighting, as MacArthur put it, “even for preserving its own security.” His determination resulted in the famous (and notorious) Article 9 of the Japanese constitution that his staff drafted in English in six days. Its first three words are: “We the People....”

MacArthur lectured on the difficult art of building a utopia to every Japanese pupil (me included). His staff censored all textbook manuscripts and deleted such unacceptable words as “patriotism.” MacArthur, a great American patriot, preached to the Japanese that patriotism implies wanting to fight for one’s country and thus contradicted Japan’s new “pacifism.”

Even now, sixty years since the end of World War II, the word “patriotism” is taboo in Japan. Even I, a Japanese patriot, hesitate to voice the word in public.

Postwar Japanese have become addicted to the purest grade of pacifism, chanting a mantra of peace and harmony, and feeling superior to warring nations, like an idealist who ignores ugly reality.

Peaceful or not, Japan cannot defend itself. Japan, an island nation smaller than California and the second largest economic power in the world, acts scared. Consequently, the Japanese depend upon the 40,000 American soldiers stationed in Japan to defend them. The price tag for such bodyguards amounts to $5 billion per year. Perhaps this military arrangement benefits the United States more than Japan, enhancing American prestige and revealing Japan’s subservience.

If the present Japanese government no longer honors the spirit and letter of Article 9 of the constitution, it should amend it.

But Japan, facing a new global war against terrorism, has realized its duty and responsibility for maintaining a peaceful world, which is the foundation for Japan’s prosperity. I say that Japan should help, financially and militarily, the United States to win the war on terrorism. The United States is Japan’s closest ally in the world. Whatever happened to Japan’s legendary courage, its famous martial spirit?

The United States occupied Japan for seven years and successfully changed the fierce regime to a peace loving, America-friendly, pacifist nation. Japan has become a shining showcase for U.S. foreign policy, a great accomplishment by any standard anywhere in the world.

For four decades beginning in the 1950s, Japan, with the national slogan of “catching up with America,” climbed out from the miserable pit of deprivation to an enviable height of affluence. In fact, Japan has considered none but the United States as a nation worthy of emulation. And even now, despite suffering an incomprehensible decade-
long recession, Japan is one of the wealthiest nations in the world, second only to the United States.

The American success in Japan, however, has raised serious questions for the Japanese people. That is, for a working democracy and prosperity that we wholeheartedly enjoy, have we traded something priceless and unrecoverable that we should have kept at all costs? Have we lost something spiritually “Japanese,” something invisible but discernable like patriotism, while pursuing hard currency and democracy, two assets that victorious America told us were most desirable in life?

We have achieved the status of wealth and are the world’s leading donors of money to ease global poverty and strife. But we still don’t feel “proud.” Is material wealth the price we have paid for losing our legendary courage, dignity, confidence, and self-reliance? Have we forsaken our 2000-year history as “shameful and barbaric” just because MacArthur called it so?

A relatively brief duration of war, from the 1931 invasion of Manchuria to the 1945 defeat in Hiroshima, does not represent the texture of our brilliant cultural heritage. In comparison, the Vietnam War lasted longer than our wars with China and the United States.

Our Asian neighbors complain of Japan’s every move, chipping at the pillar of Japanese confidence. They scrutinize each and every line of our school history textbooks, and declare that we distort facts to justify our past expansion into Asia. They conclude that we Japanese have not come to a true understanding of the objective history of the past one hundred years. They demand that we “rewrite” our textbooks and apologize to them once again (every year) and to the rest of the world for the Asia-Pacific war. We must remember that three million Japanese also died in that war. The number of Americans who died in the European and Pacific theaters was 405,399, and the number of Chinese was five million.

When Japan offers foreign aid to its neighbors, sharing its prosperity with a staggering $10 billion a year, they take it as acknowledgement of guilt.

Historical objectivity is inescapably subjective. But how has the Japanese government been responding to its neighbors’ vociferous condemnation? Tokyo, with haste bordering on recklessness, apologizes, suggesting to our neighbors that their accusations are correct. Worse yet, because we apologize readily, they now doubt our sincerity. To illustrate the absurdity of this guilt somersault, imagine the British government examining American school textbooks and demanding rewrites on the War of Independence.

Asian countries and some European nations vent their envy or resentment over Japan’s present pre-eminence by magnifying Japan’s war of sixty years ago. Japan, by a reflex that would outperform Pavlov’s dog, offers more money as if to buy their silence for a while. Japan’s foreign aid of the past ten years has amounted to $150 billion dollars, more than the United States has given.

Still, nobody forgives us Japanese—and our money has run out. Our national budget is written in bright red, while our taxes climb like there is no ceiling. Is the end of money the end of friendship? I hope so. Japan does not need the friendship only money can buy.

My generation and those younger feel neither accountable nor responsible for the war. My generation knows only the misery, hardship, and hunger of defeat and has witnessed the immense sacrifice our older generation (now only seven percent of Japan’s population) made for rebuilding the nation from the ash of defeat to the splendor of wealth. I do not have the faintest desire to blame the generations who died for the empire. We the living Japanese should express publicly our deep appreciation to them as the generation who sacrificed their lives for the country. Otherwise, there will be no closure within to our agony of the terrible war. In the United States, the same generation is called with profound respect and admiration “the greatest generation.”

Yes, I wished many times that Japan did not fight the war in China, did not bomb Pearl Harbor, or tried even harder to repair the crumbling friendship across the Pacific.

We Japanese value history as our national treasure, like our cultural DNA for future generations. But we are not the prisoners of history. We do not live in an iron cage of war guilt. We are not hostage to our past wars, to the glory of victories and the bitterness of defeat. Rather, it seems to me that the rest of the world has been entrapped within the folds of time and keeps bashing the Japanese empire that vanished almost sixty years ago.
The idea that Japan must earn “forgiveness” from the world community is a bizarre notion. Instead, the world should appreciate our enormous contribution for alleviating world poverty and suffering.

For instance, Japan pays 19 percent of the United Nations’ annual budget, while the United States, with gross national product (GNP) that is double Japan’s, gives 22 percent. Japan and the United States together provide nearly one half of the UN annual budget. That leaves 189 other member countries in the UN to pay meager amounts while making egocentric speeches.

The United States, which pays the highest percentage of the UN budget, is a permanent member of the Security Council, the five members of which each wield the “magic wand” of veto power. This Council, though recently resembling a debate society, is the single most important force in the UN. The four other permanent members are: France (which pays 6.46 percent of the UN budget), England (5.53 percent), Russia (1.20 percent), and China (1.50 percent). In other words, Japan (20 percent), non-Security Council member with no veto power and hence no respect, pays more than those four permanent members combined.

Worse yet, Japan also pays 32 percent of the UNESCO’s annual budget, while the United States, which rejoined the UNESCO in 2002 after 18 years of voluntary absence, contributes 22 percent. Again, these two nations finance more than half the budget of the 188-member UNESCO. For Japan, this is reminiscent of the days prior to the Boston Tea Party—taxation without representation.

Many Japanese, especially recently, have been asking themselves the same question. It is a question of pride, dignity, and guiding conviction, by which an aggregate of people takes a firm stand to become a nation with healthy emotional heartbeats. The pride of a person, of a nation, is something more precious than a bowl of steaming rice, more valuable than having the world’s second richest GNP. We should never lose pride, for it is rarely recoverable. Without pride there is no national identity.

The American people, who fought for the pride of independence, ought to understand our aspirations to free ourselves from the specter of war and to blossom into a proud nation that can defend itself without anybody’s help, even that of our closest friend across the Pacific.

Japan, as if haunted by the ghost of history, now faces the most critical choice of the postwar period. Should Japan send troops from its Self-Defense Forces (262,000 soldiers with an annual budget of $50 billion dollars) to Baghdad and Kabul to help its friend the United States?

Japan has a huge stake in the well-being of the United States, which cannot afford to lose this war of attrition. We Japanese should help as much as we can. After all, Japan cannot remain immune from borderless terrorism. Like it or not, Japan is already in the middle of the war on terrorism; we have seen our citizens perish at the New York Trade Center Towers and in Iraq.

But Japan should first amend Article 9 of the Japanese constitution that MacArthur wrote. Article 9 reads, “Aspiring sincerely to an international peace based on justice and order, the Japanese people forever renounce war as a sovereign right of the nation and the threat or use of force as a means of settling international dispute.” To accomplish this lofty ideal,
al interest, which is to wipe out, together with the United States, the spores of terrorism spreading throughout the world. Fighting alongside the American soldiers is the least that Japan, the second largest economy in the world, can and should do.

If the present Japanese government, dominated by the Liberal Democratic Party for half a century, no longer honors the spirit and letter of Article 9 of the constitution, it should amend it. Article 9 has been repeatedly “reinterpreted” to suit political expediency, but such political acrobatics only hurt us and engender more disrespect from within and without.

Japan has been experiencing a deep sea change of emotions: an emergence of new pride, self-respect, and appreciation for its national heritage.

Now, at the dawn of the 21st Century, is Japan’s “last stand.” It is the first and last chance to preserve its dignity as an independent nation with its own willpower.
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