The Japanese Decision

Takashi INOGUCHI (Professor, University of Tokyo)

Japan has been known for its anti-militarist constitution, institutions and public opinion for more than half a century. But on the eve of the Iraq war in 2003, prime minister Junichiro Koizumi announced that the government he led would lend support to the 'Coalition' forces led by the United States and Britain in their effort to enforce regime change in Iraq. It is very important to point out that Koizumi's statement referred to the fact that Iraq had consistently failed to comply with numerous United Nations resolutions since the end of the Gulf war of 1991, and that this was regarded as too serious to be left unpunished. Japan's support for the Coalition was therefore based on international law, not on any endorsement of preemptive doctrine.

This declaration of support for the Coalition, although significant, did not commit the Japanese government to active support for the military campaign. But now, in the aftermath of the war, Koizumi's government has taken the more radical step of passing legislation which permits it to send troops of the Self-Defence Forces (SDF) to Iraq to help in the social and economic recovery of the country. Why then has Japan decided to send forces when its constitution both enshrines a war-renouncing preamble and forbids military action abroad?

The domestic legislation that enables Japan to send its troops to Iraq was passed with a majority of the three governing parties voting for it and with all the opposition parties voting against it in the Diet (national parliament) in July 2003. The process was 'helped' by the fact that during it, two minor opposition parties were humiliated in public by having a parliamentarian forced to resign for sexual harassment (a Communist) and being arrested for illicit use of the legislative staff's salary (a Social Democrat).

This law is still solidly within the framework of the constitution and related laws allowing the government to send SDF troops abroad. Its self-assigned mission is to help Iraq to restore order and to reconstruct its economy with

assistance in (1) supplying electricity to hospitals to restore their functions; (2) supplying medical and hygienic assistance to Iraqi people; and (3) supplying fresh water to United States armed forces.

According to the constitution, Japanese troops are not allowed to carry heavy armour and are forbidden from being deployed in areas where a ceasefire is not effective. The current plan is to send about 1,000 troops to Iraq; the exact timing of the deployment, and the troops' destination, remain to be specified by the government. To help the mission be carried out effectively, swiftly and safely, the Japanese government recently concluded a 'status of forces' agreement with Kuwait and reactivated its cordial relationships with Jordan and Italy.

Japan in search of a global role

In my view, Japan's Iraqi decision can be most fruitfully considered in the broad context of Japan's self-defined global role in the world. Such a self-defined role normally connects the internal political dynamics and external geo-strategic conditions of a country. In the case of Japan, the country has gone through a three-step metamorphosis over the last two decades.

The 1980s: Japan as global economic power

The first period in which Japan's self-defined global role was clearly established was in the 1980s. It was only in the middle of this decade that Japan portrayed itself as a systemic supporter of the United States-led international system. Its logic was that in tandem with the growing size of Japan's economy, it could not afford to be a 'free rider' on the international economic system led by the United States. This meant Japan had to be involved with a number of international economic institutions like the GATT, the World Bank and the IMF and the Group of Five (the last of which was inaugurated in 1975 with the ostensible aim of shoring up the economic cooperation and coordination of five major advanced countries).

Needless to say, Japan was concerned to avoid being denounced as a spoiler or challenger of this system. Its self-defined role within it was narrowly

economic. Even when led by Yasuhiro Nakasone, the most nationalistically-inclined prime minister in its modern history, Japan's government and its anti-militarist public did not move very far apart throughout the 1980s. The guiding spirit was to become a good citizen of the international economic system, especially when the United States was plagued by large double deficits (federal and trade) and apprehensive about its eventual decline.

Two major noteworthy actions were taken to support this policy. One was the trade liberalisation package which enabled Japan to boast nearly zero tariffs on most manufactured goods; the other was the systematic action based on what was called the Maekawa Report, which enabled a huge amount of savings in the Japanese yen to flow to the United States and thus helped the United States economy to sustain its double deficits.

This self-defined economic role had its internal drivers as well. Japan's economic miracle had taken heavy blows from the two energy crises of the 1970s. Its vaunted developmental state started to wane also. But this was to some extent masked by the global context of economic troubles and the then somewhat exaggerated Soviet menace.

Indeed, the latter helped to stiffen the backbone of the long, post-1955 Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) rule which had been able to rely on high economic growth and the equalisation of social policy dividends. This is why the right-wing LDP politician, Yasuhiro Nakasone, became the staunchest pro-United States prime minister since Shigeru Yoshida, prime minister at the time of the San Francisco Peace Treaty of 1951. When a country is trying to adapt to an uncertain terrain, you need to articulate an appealing national identity and role.

The 1990s: Japan as global civilian power

The second phase of Japan's search for a self-defined global role came with the end of the cold war. This gave a golden opportunity for anti-militarist states like Japan and Germany to propose their ideal role: that of a global civilian power. They renounce war; they are rich; they are eager to do some virtuous things to the rest of the world in ways that suit their constitutional

and other frameworks yet are still compatible with the alliance with the United States.

By the early 1990s, the use of strategic nuclear forces ceased to be a real possibility; the obsolescence of wars among major powers looked a fairly solid reality. At the same time, the dramatically increased salience of civil conflicts and 'small' wars meant that antimilitarist states still hesitated to play a role in areas like peacekeeping and economic reconstruction in post-conflict situations.

However, with Boutros-Boutros Ghali leading the United Nations in the first half of the 1990s, Japan and Germany participated in the rising trend of worldwide civilian involvement in peacekeeping operations, refugee aid, food delivery and developmental assistance. Accordingly, domestic legislation was carried through to enable Japan to send military forces abroad for both peacekeeping and economic reconstruction purposes.

Thus, 250 Self-Defence Forces (SDF) troops were sent to Cambodia for its peace-building and peacekeeping operations in 1991-1992, the first time to a region of south-east Asia where Japan's past history had prevented the country from participating in United Nations peacekeeping operations. Though on a smaller scale, SDF troops were also sent to Namibia, Rwanda, the Golan Heights and some other places in the 1990s.

In 1999, the largest contingent yet – 750 Japanese troops – was sent to East Timor for peacekeeping and economic construction. This time its peacekeeping operations were not only in Asia but, perhaps more significantly, shoulder-to-shoulder with other Asia troops, including the Korean peacekeeping force of equal size. All of these were of course based on United Nations resolutions.

In all these operations, Japan's priorities have been peacekeeping after a ceasefire, and economic reconstruction. The key concept guiding Japanese participation is human security with an emphasis on health, food, education, water, energy, communication, transportation on the basis of law and order secured after an end to armed hostilities.

This global civilian power concept suited Japan's domestic politics as well. The end of the cold war increased the pacifist expectation that the world beyond the cold war might be a world without military alliances and that an enhanced United Nations, with Japan included as a permanent member of an enlarged Security Council, would invigorate its global role.

Since neither of these expectations proved easy to fulfil, the concept of a global civilian power turned out to be a serendipitous helping hand. At home, the 38-year long Liberal Democratic rule came to an end in 1993. A Social Democratic prime minister, Tomiichi Murayama, came to office courtesy of a coalition with the Liberal Democratic Party; Murayama's party naturally and enthusiastically rode on the concept.

It is an irony that it was this Social Democratic prime minister who had to undertake a difficult alliance adjustment when confronted by the Korean crisis of 1993-1994 and the Taiwan Strait crisis of 1995-1996. The Japan-United States defense cooperation guideline was drawn up precisely to tackle security crises of this kind.

After 2001: Japan as a global power for justice

The third phase in Japan's search for a self-defined global role opened with 11 September 2001. In its aftermath, Japan joined those partners willing to combat a form of terrorism widely-spread and of an unprecedented scale and nature. This new role is very significant in Japan's evolving conception because it combines the element of justice with the element of order.

The previously self-defined roles – of a systemic supporter and a global civilian power – each took for granted an international system led by the United States. To help sustain it was considered as Japan's priority; within that, its choice was merely to extend more help or less help.

But after 9/11, Japan had to choose between two opposing options: join the United States-led antiterrorist front or stick to the less coercive action against terrorism sanctioned by the United Nations. Needless to say, Japan

has continuously reinforced in practice the values and norms it shares with the United States, the Group of Eight (G8) countries and broadly the west as a whole whenever it carries out international action. But it is important to emphasise the fact that, this time, Japan has to choose which action carries more justice and less evil.

Thus, judgment about justice entered the vocabulary of Japanese diplomacy on a fuller and more explicit scale than ever before. This of course constitutes part of what John Vincent calls the 'diplomacy of justice'; but it represents also an unmistakable departure from those days when a Japanese political leader could be ridiculed – as in the case of a notorious remark by Charles de Gaulle – as 'a transistor salesman'.

Looked at from inside, Japan's new self-defined role as a willing partner suits the pervasive mood in Japan that one of its neighbours, North Korea, is indeed a member of the 'axis of evil' – a state which has engaged in the (now admitted) development of nuclear weapons and missiles, the illicit trade of weapons and drugs, and the abductions of Japanese citizens.

Although Japan does not want the United States to engineer a regime change in Pyongyang, as it did successively in Afghanistan and Iraq, Japan does want Pyongyang to stop what many consider uncivilized actions. While the majority of the Japanese public remains staunchly anti-militarist, the country cannot help but rely on the United States to coercively negotiate with Pyongyang to stop these uncivilized actions.

Japan in a new global landscape

Prime minister Junichiro Koizumi faces an election for the presidency of his Liberal Democratic Party in September 2003. The next general election is expected to take place in November. The two largest opposition parties, Democrats and Liberals, have recently agreed to merge their parties in an attempt to capture power from the LDP. The two major issues in the general election are likely to be the economy and policy towards the "axis of evil" countries – North Korea, Iraq and Iran.

The issue of manufacturing/manipulating intelligence to dramatically justify the Iraq war which has been haunting the United States and the United Kingdom governments has not yet seriously damaged the Japanese government. This is because – to return to the point made at the outset – Junichiro Koizumi's statement supporting the war was couched only in the language of rejection of Iraq's steadfast noncompliance with a series of United Nations resolutions since 1991; and this point was reinforced by the prime minister's pledge to President Bush (made in May 2003 at Crawford, Texas) to restrict post-war assistance to Iraq's economic reconstruction. Nevertheless, it is clear that with the war over Iraq and its painful aftermath, Japan has entered a divisive and unknown territory called justice in global politics.