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Japan's nuclear future in a Post-Iraq world May 2007

In October 2006 the chairman of Japan's ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) Research Council, Soichi Nakagawa, made headlines by arguing that the country should think about acquiring a nuclear arsenal.¹ Prime Minister Shinzo Abe added fuel to the fire by commenting that, though Japan had no intention of developing nuclear weapons, "there was still room for debate on the issue."² Since then, there has been little mention of this issue but it could well resurface later.

North Korea's atomic test lighted the fuse of this discussion. But, if Japan takes a radical turn it will not be solely on account of North Korea and of the perceived "China threat," but also as a consequence of the Post-Iraq World which could deprive Asia of the stabilizing influence of American power. If in the years following the Iraqi debacle the United States diminishes its commitments to Japan, or if Japanese policy-makers start to doubt the credibility of American guarantees, Tokyo will be pushed to reconsider its non-nuclear principles and its relatively small defense budget. The US-North Korea agreement of March 2007 may be a harbinger of growing Japanese doubts about America. Japanese officials and conservative publications were upset at what they considered to be American appeasement of the Kim Jong il regime. Regardless of the merits of the deal, it is clearly partly the result of an American desire to pacify the North, even at the cost of concessions to an Axis of Evil state, in order to free US military and diplomatic resources to the ongoing challenges posed by the Iraqi civil war and its regional consequences.

Since it recovered its independence, in 1952, following the US occupation, Japan has stuck to the Yoshida Doctrine, named after Prime Minister Shigeru Yoshida (in office 1946-47, 1948-1954). Its core principle was to maintain a close relationship with the United States, keep a low profile, and rely on the Security Treaty with America for Japan's defense. Yoshida's precepts have served Japan well, providing its citizens with the peace and prosperity that had eluded them in the preceding century.

Former Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi (2001-06) modified the Doctrine. He dispatched Japanese ships to refuel Coalition vessels in the Indian Ocean participating in the war in Afghanistan and later deployed (non-combat) troops to Iraq. But fundamentally, Yoshida's inheritance still guides Japan. Koizumi's actions in Southwest Asia were taken in close cooperation with the United States. They served to cement a

¹ Kyodo News, "LDP policy chief calls for debate on nuke option," *Japan Times*, 16 October 2006, <http://search.japantimes.co.jp/cgi-bin/nn20061016a1.html> 12 December 2006. For a detailed analysis of Japan's nuclear option, see Self, Benjamin L. and Jeffrey L. Thompson, eds. *Japan's Nuclear Option: Security, Politics, and Policy in the 21st Century*. Washington, DC: The Henry L. Stimson Center, 2003.

² Masami Ito, "Abe says no to nukes but allows discussion," 9 November 2006, <http://search.japantimes.co.jp/member/member.html?appURL=nn20061109a2.html> 12 December 2006.

stronger security relationship with Washington, in accordance with Yoshida's principle of keeping America allied to Japan.

To this day, Japan's international profile is very low for a country of its size. It only participates in peacekeeping and disaster relief where there is almost no risk of fighting. As of November 2006, 31 Japanese served in UN peacekeeping operations, as opposed to 350 Britons, 1,159 Germans, and 1,967 French.³ At the height of the Iraq operation, about one thousand Japanese soldiers were stationed abroad, compared to more than ten thousand each for Britain and France⁴ Japan's bilateral diplomacy as well as its multilateral activities within the framework of the UN and other international organizations are very limited, especially given that it is a \$5 trillion economy and by far the second-largest funder of the United Nations. For example, despite its reliance on Middle Eastern oil, Japan participates neither in the negotiations over Iran's nuclear program nor in the discussions concerning the Israeli-Arab conflict. The negotiations over North Korea's WMD program, which directly affect Japan, officially include as a member of the Six Party Talks (the two Koreas, the US, China, Japan, and Russia). But in practice, the key participants are Pyongyang, Beijing, and Washington. Germany, Britain, and France all have smaller gross national products and populations than Japan but are much more active in world affairs, and all have committed military forces to combat in the past decade.

Japan's investment in its armed forces (formally known as the Self-Defense Forces) proves that the Yoshida Doctrine remains the lodestar of its policy. Since 1994, defense spending has remained essentially flat in absolute term (at a little over \$41 billion) and constant at around 1% of national income⁵ (by some definition it may be a little higher if costs borne by other ministries are included). In the last decade, however, North Korea has tested missiles that can strike Japan and exploded a nuclear device while South Korea has shown a greater willingness to aid North Korea than to side with Japan. Though China's defense policy lacks transparency, it is clear that, if only due to its economic growth, it devotes more resources to its People's Liberation Army than ten years ago. Chinese naval incursions into Japanese waters have become more frequent. China and Japan are also locked in conflicting territorial claims over off-shore islands and natural gas fields. Taiwanese have elected a president committed to formal separation from China, which Beijing views as a *casus belli*. Russia, with which Japan also has a territorial dispute, has become more hostile to the West. Therefore, while Asia becomes more dangerous, Japan refuses to allocate more resources to its military.

The argument that Japan cannot afford a bigger defense budget has no validity. France (2.3% of GDP for the armed forces), the Netherlands (1.7%) and Britain (2.3%),

³ United Nations, "Ranking of Military and Police Contributions to UN Operations," 30 Nov. 2006. http://www.un.org/Depts/dpko/dpko/contributors/2006/nov06_2.pdf 13 December 2006.

⁴ World Wide Military Deployments, Globalsecurity.org <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/deploy.htm> 13 December 2006. Not including 22,000 UK service personnel in Germany.

⁵ Information from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) data base, http://first.sipri.org/non_first/milex.php 3 December 2006 and Richard J. Samuels, "Japan's Goldilocks Strategy," *The Washington Quarterly*, 29:4 Autumn 2006, p. 119.

which are not richer than Japan, spend much more than relative to their gross domestic product.⁶ Even Germany, criticized as a laggard in this field and shouldering over \$1 trillion of accumulated unification costs, is at 1.4%. Japan could raise its defense expenditures significantly without suffering any economic pain. A country such as Japan where consumers invest annually the equivalent of nearly 5% of their nation's defense budget in LVMH goods (Louis Vuitton purses, Givenchy shoes, Moët & Chandon champagne, Hennessy cognac, Dior watches, and other basic commodities)⁷ can surely spend more on its military without endangering its standard of living.

By keeping its military spending low, Japan is following the logic of the Yoshida Doctrine. A bigger military would not only cost more but would worsen tensions with China, South Korea, and might sow fear in other Asian nations. Moreover, unless Japan made enormous investments in defense, including acquiring a nuclear deterrent, its military will remain far less potent than America's. Therefore, it is logical to focus Japan's effort on keeping the United States committed to Asian security rather than on bolstering its own armed forces. This partly explains why Japan is willing to pay billions of dollars to help US forces in Asia finance their redeployment in the region (according to current plans, some Marines will relocate from Japan to Guam, a US Army Corps headquarter will move to Japan and there will be other enhancements in cooperation between the Japanese and US armed services).⁸ In addition, Japan's Host Nation Support budget, about \$1.8 billion for 2006, helps fund the US military in Japan, for example Japanese workers at US bases are paid from Japanese government funds.⁹ For Tokyo, money spent on the American military is a better investment than recourses allocated to its own armed forces, since this helps insure the US commitment to the defense of Japan. It is American power in Asia which provides Japan with a strong deterrent against China, North Korea, and other threats at a fairly low political and economic price.

But how secure is the keystone of the Yoshida Doctrine, namely American protection for Japan? The answer lies in the consequences of the Iraq War.

The Iraq War is America's Pearl Harbor. If asked when Japan was defeated by the United States and its Allies, a good historian will reply: December 7, 1941, Hawaii time (or December 8 for the Japanese who were on the other side of the International Date Line). Similarly, the United States lost the war on March 20, 2003, when it launched Operation Iraqi Freedom. As Hiroshima (August 6, 1945), the Soviet onslaught in Manchuria and landings in Japan's northernmost islands (August 8), and Nagasaki

⁶ "NATO-Russia Compendium of financial and economic data relating to defence," 8 Dec. 2005 Table 3, (2005 estimates), <http://www.nato.int/docu/pr/2005/p05-161.pdf> 28 October 2006.

⁷ Source www.lvmh.com 28 June 2006, 2005 company data. This excludes the not insignificant purchases by Japanese tourists in Paris and other foreign cities.

⁸ See Michael J. Green, "U.S.-Japanese Relations after Koizumi: Convergence or Cooling?" *The Washington Quarterly* 29:4 Autumn 2006, p. 106.

⁹ Foreign Press Center Japan, http://www.fpcj.jp/e/mres/publication/ff/pdf/05_defense.pdf 15 December 2006, page 3 (Yen 215 billion).

(August 9) could not be predicted in December 1941, we cannot forecast how the Iraq War will end but we already can speculate on the implications of the US defeat for Asia.

Americans talk of a post-9-11 world but this expression overstates the consequences of the hijackings. The United States remained the most powerful nation on earth as the aftermath of the attack. Within a few weeks, Washington had put together a global coalition, and secured Russian and Chinese acquiescence to American military operations close to their borders. Before the end of 2001 the US-led armies had occupied Kabul, by spring of the following year they had confined the remnants of Al-Qaeda to mountain caves.

Of course, Al-Qaeda could, and did, engage in bombings in Europe and in other countries. It might even strike again in the United States. But this is not different from the pre-9-11 era, where the Irish Republican Army, the Basques of ETA, the Palestine Liberation Organization, the Italian Red Brigades, and other terrorists killed civilians, blew up buildings, and hijacked aircraft. Neither has Osama ben-Laden been particularly effective as a terrorist. Irish terrorism gave birth to the Irish Free State in 1922. Continued terrorist activities brought about the Good Friday Agreement which pardons IRA gunmen and grants the Irish Republic some say in the affairs of the British province. The Spain's Basques would not enjoy such a high degree of autonomy if it were not for ETA terrorism. The Pentagon advises officers bound for Iraq to watch the "Battle of Algiers." Pontecorvo's film depicts the French campaign against terrorists who took less than eight years to throw out 400,000 French soldiers and one million European settlers from Algeria. Menachem Begin and Yassir Arafat began life as terrorists but went on to win Nobel Peace Prizes, an achievement which Osama ben-Laden and Mullah Omar are unlikely to match. So far, compared to these first-rate terrorists, Al Qaeda's trophies are few.

There is no post 9-11 era, but there will be a Post-Iraq World. It will be worse than the pre-Iraq World (and for perhaps hundreds of thousands of Iraqis and thousands of American and allied servicemen and it turned out to be lethal). Regardless of how Act V of the Iraq Drama plays out, it could create an allergy to foreign intervention among American voters. Operation Iraqi Freedom was ill-advised but this does not in itself indicate that all wars, including unilateral ones, should be avoided. But in practice, this is how Americans might react. Though there might not be an isolationist reaction on the scale of the one which followed World War I, the credibility of US commitments to Asia – and other regions – will be weaker in the post-Iraq world.

Moreover, the United States has enormous economic resources. In 2006, it authorized \$530 billion of spending on defense (including \$120 billion for the "war on terror")¹⁰. It could still increase its military expenditures, now running at around \$1 million per minute, which remain low, as a percentage of national income compared to

¹⁰ <http://www.whitehouse.gov/omb/budget/fy2007/pdf/07msr.pdf> 3 December 2006 (Table S-2, p. 26, DoD plus "Global War on Terror" spending).

the Cold War era.¹¹ However, the politics of post-Iraq will make it unlikely that Congress will vote for more money for the Pentagon. Moreover, a proportion of post-Iraq expenditures will go to “repairs” to fund new equipment destroyed or damaged, to rebuild units that have been through multiple deployments, and to pay the benefits of tens of thousands of wounded service members. Therefore, it is more likely than not that resources to available defend Asia will decline. It is noticeable that during the Iraq War, soldiers and Marines normally stationed in Korea and Okinawa (Japan’s southernmost prefecture) were sent to fight in the Middle East. Thus, while the Bush administration lambasted Axis-of-Evil member North Korea and the Pentagon expressed its concern at China’s growing military power¹², the United States withdrew thousand of fighting men and women from East Asia.

The end of the Iraq War will improve America’s military position but will not free it from devoting considerable resources to Southwest Asia. As long as the world economy runs on Persian Gulf oil and gas, the United States will have to maintain the ability to intervene militarily in the region. Therefore, post-Iraq, a sizeable proportion of the Pentagon’s budget will continue to be devoted Southwest Asia. Moreover, it is depressing to see that numerous American politicians, including Democrats, are almost as hysterical about the “Iranian menace” as they were about Saddam Hussein in the year leading up the invasion.

China will take note of the post-Iraq changes. Beijing may decide to use America’s weakened and demoralized position seek a partnership of equals in Asia with Washington that would exclude Tokyo. It could try to establish a new relationship with Japan, but one with China as the senior partner. It could also opt for a more aggressive posture on Taiwan. Regardless of which route China will follow, it may profit from the Post-Iraq World to challenge Japan’s national interest. At this point, this looks unlikely but in no way impossible.

In addition, America’s power is not only physical, it is also what Joseph Nye calls “soft” A war fought for no reason under false pretence, Abu Guraib, the frequent gunning down at checkpoints of Iraqi civilians by US troops put into an untenable position by the administration, and a humiliating defeat have damaged America’s moral leadership and prestige. US credibility has also been seriously hurt. Zbigniew Brzezinski, President Carter’s assistant for national security affairs, recalled former Secretary of State Dean Acheson’s visit to Paris during the Cuban missile crisis. At the end of the session, Acheson told then President Charles de Gaulle that he could show him photographs proving the presence of Soviet missiles in Cuba. De Gaulle replied that, as far as he was concerned, the word of the President of the United States was good enough

¹¹ See Information from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) data base, http://first.sipri.org/non_first/milex.php for late Cold War data, William E. Odom and Robert Dujarric, *America’s Inadvertent Empire* (Yale University Press, 2004), Table 3.5, p. 92.

¹² United States Department of Defense, Office of the Secretary of Defense. *Annual Report to Congress: Military Power of the People’s Republic of China 2006.*

for him. Who, asked Brzezinski, would now make such a remark about George W. Bush¹³?

Consequently, the post-Iraq World for Japan may be one where the American umbrella looks porous. In a worst case scenario, there may even be no umbrella left. No country can replace the United States for Japan. Even if alliances were possible with other nations, none can assume America's role as the cornerstone of East Asian and Japanese security. Therefore, without the United States, Japan will be alone in a dangerous region.

Many Japanese observers will argue that regardless of the configuration of Post-Iraq world politics, the United States must remain committed to Japan. The United States needs Japan to manage its complex relationship with China, bases in Japan allow the US to be a Western Pacific power, and without Japan America would find it hard to fulfill its obligations to Taiwan and South Korea. This is true. But policy is not always logical. Nazi Germany in 1940 and 1941 was a far greater menace to the American Republic than China and North Korea are today. Yet, the American electorate and the Congress refused to come to Britain's rescue. The Balkans were essential to European security. A small and low-cost American intervention in 1991 could have prevented much of the crisis of the 1990s, but Washington spent years doing nothing. And if a majority of the US Congress could be convinced that it was in the American national interest to authorize the invasion of Iraq, is it irrational to assume that logic always prevails?

Following the 2006 US mid-term elections, Sankei Shimbun, the most right-wing of Japan's major national dailies, published a column by Keishi Saeki of Kyoto University. In it, the author argues that it is unwise to let America decide Japan's fate. Japan needs to start internal discussions on how to defend the nation, including the nuclear option.¹⁴ So far these are very much minority views, but in a post-Iraq War, they could gain traction. Even if the United States remains committed to East Asia, the perception that its credibility is questionable could fuel a radical revision of Japan's defense posture. Therefore, in a strange way, the hunt for weapons of mass destruction in Mesopotamia will have brought about the Japanese nuclear arsenal.

This scenario is not certain. It is in fact improbable, but not outside of the realm of possibilities. It may be that the US will remain a credible ally for Japan but the Iraq War greatly increases the likelihood that Tokyo will consider the need to plan for a "post-US" world Asia. A Japan with a much stronger military and nuclear weapons is not necessarily a prelude to a major Asian war. In fact, if American power is so weakened in the Western Pacific, this outcome will be the only way to secure regional peace. It will not, however, be as stable an environment as one relying on American military hegemony.

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¹³ <http://www.prospect.org/webfeatures/2003/10/brzezinski-z-10-31.html> 3 December 2006.

¹⁴ [Sankei Shimbun](#), 15 Nov. 2006.

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