

# Policy Forum 06-38A: Japanese Discovery of Democracy

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# Japanese Discovery of Democracy

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Policy Forum Online 06-38A: May 16th, 2006

## "Japanese Discovery of Democracy"

Essay by Masaru Tamamoto

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### I. Introduction

Masaru Tamamoto, editor of JIIA Commentary, an information service from the Japan Institute of International Affairs, writes, "Japan is in the midst of searching for a post-economic identity in the international world, especially in Asia. The search is for a new hierarchy in which Japan can claim leadership status... Organizing the world in terms of a hierarchy of democratic evolution is another

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way of awarding Japan leadership status in Asia. But, in the end, the real question of Japanese national identity is whether Japan in Asia can develop a sense of equality."

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## **II. Essay by Masaru Tamamoto**

- Japanese Discovery of Democracy  
by Masaru Tamamoto

If civilizations tend to clash, is there among nations within the bounds of civilization a propensity toward affinity? Japanese Foreign Minister Taro Aso writes, "I welcome China's return to center stage-as long as China evolves into a liberal democracy. And I believe it will." ( *Wall Street Journal* , March 13, 2006) The Chinese foreign ministry spokesman says China is intent on isolating Japan until its neighbor shows sincerity and wisdom in handling their mutual history. Democratic evolution and historical justice are generally laudable goals. Still, given the cold diplomatic relations between Japan and China at the moment, there is certain competition for moral superiority couched in terms of democracy versus historical justice.

South Korea, which Aso heralds as one of the world's most vibrant democracies, is casting its vote on the side of historical justice. A more democratic South Korea emerging from decades of military dictatorship tends toward populism and encourages attitudes critical of Japan. Memory of the Japanese empire remains significant in the formation of both South Korean and Chinese national identities. Of late, Japan's diplomatic relations with South Korea have turned almost as cold as that with China. And arguably, a democratic China today would be markedly more anti-Japanese than the China under strict Communist Party control; much more than a tool of official manipulation, popular anti-Japanese sentiment runs deep. Irredentism-an age-old source of international conflict and fuel for nationalistic passion-over tiny islands divides Japan and South Korea, as well as Japan and China, and is making the headlines. Between Japan and South Korea, shared democratic values are not yet proving to be a source of affinity.

### Trumping the History Card

Talk of democratic Japan facing dictatorial China is commonplace in the Japanese foreign policy circle today-it is difficult to conduct reasonable discussion with a dictatorial regime. Such talk is used to explain the cold diplomatic relations of the past five years with China. Worryingly missing is any elaboration of the policy implications of framing Sino-Japanese relations in terms of an ideological divide. It is as if many believe that dismissing China as a dictatorship is in itself sufficient. But, surely, such a dismissal does not make a viable strategy. And yet, it is also true that the Japanese talk of democracy versus dictatorship became commonplace only after diplomatic relations with China had turned thoroughly cold, so the talk is more an expression of frustration and helplessness than a thought out policy.

Officials in the limelight perhaps may be excused for making such a talk, for Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi has been adamant about taking the history card out of China's hand, even at the cost of creating a diplomatic impasse. Since assuming office in 2001, Koizumi has not wavered in his promise to make an annual visit to Yasukuni, a Shinto shrine in central Tokyo where the spirits of modern Japan's war dead are enshrined. His predecessors had trodden with caution around the issue of Yasukuni, for among the 2.5 million spirits enshrined are those of 14 judged to be war criminals by the allied powers following the Second World War. Beijing's point of contention is the

14, and Yasukuni has become the central issue symbolizing Sino-Japanese friction.

While Koizumi clearly states that he has no intention of honoring the 14, and that his visits are pledges of no more war, plurality of opinion in Japan finds the diplomatic cost too high, or that Koizumi has chosen the wrong symbol to trump China's history card. The major national dailies- *Yomiuri* , *Nikkei* , *Mainichi* , and *Asahi* -have come to take a critical stance against the Yasukuni visits; *Sankei* newspaper is the exception. There is no consensus in Japan on the status of the 14, though they are far from admired-Were they responsible for starting the war? For the wartime atrocities? For prolonging a losing war? Or, for losing the war? What are the 14 guilty of? Postwar Japan's failure to satisfactorily sort out these questions lies at the root of the nagging history problem. Beijing understands well the Japanese situation and takes advantage.

Both Tokyo and Beijing are waiting for next September, when Koizumi is scheduled to step down, to try new diplomatic initiatives. Meanwhile, the Japanese dismissal of China as a dictatorship is a way of biding one's time.

### A More Assertive Japanese Foreign Policy

Those familiar with post-1945 Japanese foreign policy will readily notice that bringing ideological difference to the fore is new. After the collapse of its empire by the defeat in war, Japan had refrained from expressing value judgments on how other nations organize themselves-empires are exactly about organizing the lives of other nations. Today's new talk of democracy is one manifestation of the debate as to whether Japan should begin to adopt a more assertive foreign policy. Supporting the emergence of new democracies has become a part of the foreign policy agenda, though not central.

Elevating democracy above totalitarianism, liberty above tyranny, of course, had been the language of the United States in the Cold War. Cold War thinking and habits linger in the way Tokyo and Beijing frame their security structures with each other. And Japanese pundits who pit democratic Japan against dictatorial China surely have in mind the United States as audience. Emphasizing democracy is their way of reaffirming the bond of Japan's alliance with the United States in the face of rising China. But the United States is not quite buying the Japanese rhetoric. Washington's China policy is engagement, and its slogan is turning China into the world's "responsible stakeholder." While Washington has not entirely given up on "transformational diplomacy," there is increasing impatience with the way Japan handles China; there is even concern that the U.S.-Japan security treaty might turn into a burden if Japan's alienation in East Asia were to worsen.

Many Japanese analysts agree that Japan now faces a fluid and unstable strategic environment-the issues are the rise of China and nuclear brinkmanship of North Korea. Throughout the Cold War and beyond, Japanese foreign policy has had a simple architecture. How to maintain the American relation was key, and most all else flowed from that relationship.

Following the defeat in war in 1945, Japan recoiled from the harshness of international power politics. The American victors offered vanquished Japan a deal, which was sealed with the U.S.-Japan security treaty: The United States extended a security umbrella over Japan in exchange for the use of Japanese territory as America's forward military base. The United States acted as Japan's buffer to international power politics, while Japan happily pursued the life of economism. In this way, the security treaty became Japan's highest source of authority, the functional successor to the prewar emperor, "sacred and inviolate."

The Cold War provided Japan with a stable strategic environment, the threat of nuclear annihilation of humanity notwithstanding. And there was nothing much that Japan could or was willing to do to

affect the deadlock of mutually assured destruction. This Japan could not make any value judgments about the world, according to Kiichi Miyazawa who would be prime minister in the 1990s. So the goal of Japanese foreign policy was to establish friendly relations with as many countries as possible, while under the protection of the United States, the final guarantor of Japan's willful innocence of international politics.

The question today is: To what extent should Japan continue to depend on the United States to frame its place in the world? While there is a handful of younger parliamentarians espousing the brave vision of a Japan independent and responsible for its own security, the bulk and core of the Japanese foreign policy establishment sees no wisdom in imagining a world without American protection. The current dispatch of Japanese troops to Iraq as part of the American "coalition of the willing"-Japan's first military venture abroad since 1945 without United Nations cover-is not unrelated to the Japanese calculation of the rise of China; the American insurance premium has gone up.

Japan is out of practice of thinking about international politics, and it shows. A course in strategic studies could hardly be found in universities in the Japan of willful innocence. It is only recently that those trained in strategy, mostly at American and British graduate schools, are beginning to find university and think tank jobs. They are on the whole injecting the realist assumption of conflict into Japanese discourse, introducing notions like balance of power, deterrence, land and sea powers, pre-emptive and preventive wars. They see that China poses the classic security problem of a rising power upsetting the status quo relations among great powers, which historically has tended toward conflict. They are pushing the idea that Japan should become a "normal country" and reacquire the use of force as an instrument of state policy. They are at the moment getting attention for their novelty, still the nascent field of thought requires more time and experience to achieve a desirable level of sophistication and balance.

#### The Politics of Status Affirmation

China is a source of existential angst for Japan's political class. While Japan floundered through economic deflation beginning in the early 1990s, the Chinese economy made unimagined strides. China's gross domestic product calculated by purchasing power parity is now bigger than the Japanese. And according to the Economist Intelligence Unit, China's gross domestic product will outstrip that of the United States in fifteen years, making China the largest economy in the world. China's rise has robbed Japan of its identity as the world's economic miracle.

Japanese national identity had been about catching-up with the achievements of the West. The Japanese celebrated and took their country's advances for granted as Japan's economic performance outstripped those of France, Britain, then Germany. This Japan had never been the object of catch-up, until now-and by so close a neighbor. The Japanese political class is having a difficult time mentally adjusting to China's rise; some are even sulking.

Underlying much of the discussion about China in the Japanese political class is the effort-and the psychological need-to affirm status differentiation. Status affirmation is key in the way Japanese society functions, found in everyday manners and rituals, and in restrictive rules and endless intrigues. Japan's status affirmation has its origin in Chinese tradition, of course, and China also continues to see the world in hierarchical terms. The Japanese on the whole are comfortable with "knowing one's place."

This Japan is in the midst of searching for a post-economic identity in the international world, especially in Asia. The search is for a new hierarchy in which Japan can claim leadership status. There is even talk of identifying Japan as a leader in having experienced and dealt with horrendous industrial pollution, meaning Japan has the answers to the problems of industrialization China and

others are facing. Organizing the world in terms of a hierarchy of democratic evolution is another way of awarding Japan leadership status in Asia. But, in the end, the real question of Japanese national identity is whether Japan in Asia can develop a sense of equality.

Coda

The source of affinity in East Asia is not civilization but the degree of engagement with world capitalism and middle class development-economic interdependence. China is Japan's largest trading partner, and Japan is China's second largest foreign investor. The Japanese economic class manages to cut deals and make profit, despite the cold diplomatic relations, taking little notice of any ideological divide. And the Japanese public, in contrast to the somewhat jittery political class, remains sanguine about Japan and its future with China.

### **III. Nautilus Invites Your Responses**

The Northeast Asia Peace and Security Network invites your responses to this essay. Please send responses to: [napsnet-reply@nautilus.org](mailto:napsnet-reply@nautilus.org) . Responses will be considered for redistribution to the network only if they include the author's name, affiliation, and explicit consent.

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