Policy Forum 07-087: Why Ichiro Ozawa is America’s True Hope and Why Shinzo Abe Never Was

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By Andrew Horvat

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Andrew Horvat, Pacific Council Adjunct Fellow on Japan, writes, "What Ozawa objects to is that the

refueling operations support U.S. unilateralism in Iraq, whereas Japanese participation in Afghanistan would be within a UN-approved multilateral framework. While such an argument may not entirely please the Bush administration, it represents the only viable formula Japan has today to contribute to international peace because it allows for overseas military action to be interpreted as being in harmony with war-renouncing Article IX of the Japanese constitution."

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II. Article by Andrew Horvat

- "Why Ichiro Ozawa is America's True Hope and Why Shinzo Abe Never Was"
By Andrew Horvat

When Prime Minister Shinzo Abe announced his resignation on September 12, blaming opposition leader Ichiro Ozawa for refusing to cooperate with him to extend the mission of Japanese tankers providing fuel for American warships in the Indian Ocean, the Washington Post lambasted Ozawa for taking "short term partisan political advantage" of the international effort to fight terrorism in Southwest Asia. The Japanese anti-terror law under which the refueling missions took place expired on November 1, forcing Maritime Self-Defense Forces tankers to return home. The Post editorial warned that Ozawa's action "would do lasting damage to American and international perceptions of Japan's reliability."

The article typifies present thinking in Washington on Japanese politics and U.S.-Japan security ties: Such thinking is unfair to Ozawa,(1) myopic about the bilateral alliance, and ignores the connection between Abe's controversial stance on the "Comfort Women" issue and his inability to make progress toward a more realistic Japanese security policy. In actual fact, Ozawa is the one Japanese political leader who has done the most to move away from self-imposed – and often self-serving – pacifism in Japan. The U.S.-Japan security relationship has been anything but ideal in recent years and Junichiro Koizumi's contribution to it was in keeping with the longstanding practice of doing the minimum necessary for the U.S. in order to extract the maximum benefits for Japan.

If any Japanese leader is aware of the obstacle posed by the 1947 Peace Constitution to Japan doing its part in the preservation of world order, it is Ichiro Ozawa. As secretary-general of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) in 1991, Ozawa argued, unsuccessfully, for sending Japanese troops to Iraq as part of Operation Desert Storm. He went on to establish the legal framework that today allows Japanese soldiers to serve overseas in a non-combat role in peace-keeping operations. In his book, A Blueprint for a New Japan, Ozawa coined the phrase "normal country" to refer to a Japan that could eventually regain the right to use force, albeit only when its troops are part of UN-approved multilateral operations. In the meantime, the term "normal country" has been appropriated by conservative nationalists to justify their agenda for full-scale Japanese rearmament.

Although Ozawa has been criticized abroad for playing politics with the War on Terror, in the weeks since he first objected to the refueling activities in the Indian Ocean, reports in the Japanese media have alleged that fuel provided by Japan ostensibly for Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan has in fact been transferred to U.S. Navy ships for use in the war against Iraq.(2) The criticism of Ozawa is also misdirected because domestic Japanese feeling is fairly evenly divided on the refueling operation. Moreover, when Ozawa made it clear that he wanted Japanese ground troops sent to Afghanistan to fight alongside NATO forces, public reaction to his suggestion was almost uniformly negative. Public statements that draw public criticism are hardly the stock in trade of a demagogue. What Ozawa objects to is that the refueling operations support U.S. unilateralism in Iraq, whereas

Japanese participation in Afghanistan would be within a UN-approved multilateral framework. While such an argument may not entirely please the Bush administration, it represents the only viable formula Japan has today to contribute to international peace because it allows for overseas military action to be interpreted as being in harmony with war-renouncing Article IX of the Japanese constitution.

American leaders have learned to live with the limitations of the U.S.-Japan security treaty because as long as the U.S. was economically and militarily in an unassailable position, it allowed Washington to project power by means of bases in Japan. Between 2001 and 2006, when the ever-smiling, Elvis-loving Koizumi served as prime minister, U.S.-Japan relations were united by convergent interests: Washington needed bases for the War on Terror, and Tokyo needed the U.S. to balance a rising China. In a remarkably candid moment, Koizumi told a roomful of reporters, "As long as U.S.-Japan relations are solid, Japan-China relations will be all right too."

Koizumi's dispatch to Iraq of Japanese troops in non-combatant roles was largely symbolic, much the same as the Indian Ocean refueling operation. The troops actually strained resources because Dutch and later Australian forces had to be stationed near Japanese bases to protect them from attack. Such complicated arrangements – so that the Japanese could build a few roads in a relatively peaceful part of Iraq – were necessitated not by the Peace Constitution but by the interpretations of it made by Tokyo politicians and bureaucrats keen to limit Japanese sacrifices.

Today the U.S.-Japan alliance may indeed rest on "shared values" as Washington officials take pains to point out, though the relationship is strained when it comes to the North Korea issue. American leaders have been alarmed by North Korea's capacity to develop and export nuclear weapons. The recent Israeli air strike against what has been described as a nuclear facility in Syria built with North Korean assistance would indicate that Washington's fears are not unfounded. Tokyo's concern, however, is focused on North Korean missiles capable of reaching Japanese territory and on the fate of Japanese citizens abducted by North Korean agents over the past several decades. It is no secret that Japanese leaders have at various times feared that their country's interests would be abandoned by the United States in negotiations with North Korea. Most recently, officials in Tokyo have been alarmed by the Bush administration's eagerness to remove Pyongyang from the list of states supporting terrorism in return for the North’s promise to dismantle nuclear facilities.

Washington has none other than Shinzo Abe to thank for Japan's inflexible North Korea policy. In September 2002, as a junior Cabinet member, Abe accompanied Koizumi to Pyongyang on a mission to normalize relations. Seeing that Japanese officials put a higher value on normalization than on the return of the abductees, Abe launched an emotional public campaign calling for the return of all abductees, including those North Korea claims have died, as a precondition for Tokyo's support of any agreement with the North. It is an ironic legacy of Abe's year in office that the Japanese public wants no part of the February 13th denuclearization agreement with Pyongyang since it fails to deal with the abductee issue. This would explain why in late October U.S. Ambassador Tom Schieffer's letter to President Bush, urging greater concern for the abductee issue, was leaked to the press apparently by the White House. The letter, though addressed to Bush, seems to have been intended for a much wider readership as a device to reassure the Japanese public of American sympathy at the highest levels.

When Abe came to office in September 2006, he must have appeared to some in Washington as a godsend. He arrived with a popularity rating of 70 percent (thanks in large part to the campaign to bring back the abductees), an unabashedly nationalistic agenda, and a huge Lower House majority inherited from Koizumi. More than anyone else, Abe should have been able to dismantle the unholy alliance between the pacifistic left and pragmatic right that has prevented Japan from fulfilling its security obligations. Abe's year in office, however, was marked by scandal, incompetence and

ultimately defeat. The headline in a popular monthly magazine recently asked, "Are you indecisive? Do you shirk your responsibilities? Are you like Shinzo Abe?" Abe's indecisiveness was illustrated by his inability to act quickly to replace with competent people the many inept ones he had put in his Cabinet. Plagued by scandal, Abe set a record for Cabinet departures: four resignations and one suicide in less than a year. The accusation that he had acted irresponsibly stems from his willful obliviousness to warnings in late 2006 that the notoriously mismanaged Social Insurance Agency had lost records of some 50 million pension payments.

But it would be simplistic to say that Abe lost the July 29th Upper House elections only because of the pension issue. Abe was prime minister at a time of rapid changes, which he either failed to understand or did not care to. One of his campaign promises was to provide a "second chance" to those disadvantaged by corporate downsizings due to globalization. Rising unemployment figures last month show that Abe failed to act on that promise. One reason for his insensitivity to bread and butter issues is that, like most of his LDP colleagues, he had been born into a life of privilege. More than half the members of his last cabinet were, like Abe himself, the sons or grandsons of politicians. Taichi Sakaiya, a former cabinet minister who did not inherit a seat from a relative, derisively referred to Abe and his cohorts as "Versailles," because the members of the Abe team paid so little attention to issues affecting ordinary people.

Abe's inability to convince Japanese voters of the high priority of defense and security policy was in fact closely linked to the Versailles factor. Haunted by an image of his grandfather, Prime Minister Nobusuke Kishi, who sacrificed his political career in order to usher through parliament an unpopular revision of the U.S.-Japan security treaty, Abe acted as if he did not care about his plummeting popularity, or for that matter, the LDP’s eroding electoral base. He openly espoused revisionist views of history, including denial of state responsibility for the mistreatment of thousands of women forced to provide sexual services for the Japanese military. But this was not an anomaly in Abe's thinking. On the contrary, denial of the past, along with the promotion of patriotic education, was part of his vision, and it was this too that Japanese voters rejected in Upper House elections. Voters were aware that Abe had kept the lid on the pension scandal so that he could use the parliamentary majority he inherited from Koizumi to ram through two laws, one that promoted patriotic education and another allowing a national referendum to pave the way for constitutional reform, a first step to eliminating Article IX.

Viewed from Washington, Abe may only have seemed inept at introducing pragmatism into Japanese security policy, but from the vantage point of Japanese voters, his security agenda was part of a package that looked an awful lot like a return to an unhappy past in which citizens had few rights but many obligations, including the duty to give up their lives for an entrenched political elite. Voters knew that this was not in their interest, and policymakers in Washington, too, should have known that the anachronistic vision of relations between citizen and state which Abe openly espoused did not represent a viable foundation for a true alliance based on shared values.

III. Citations

(1) In early November, when talks between Ozawa and Prime Minister Yasuo Fukuda aimed at forging a grand coalition between Ozawa’s opposition DPJ and Fukuda’s LDP failed, Ozawa resigned as head of his party, only to rescind his resignation three days later. Ozawa lost much public support, partly because he was characterized as having been the prime mover of the grand coalition talks, betraying voters who had backed his Democratic Party of Japan in Upper House elections on July 29. It turned out later that the grand coalition was not Ozawa’s idea at all and the talks had been set up by the chief editorial writer of the Yomiuri newspaper. Ozawa lashed out bitterly against “certain Japanese newspapers” for misrepresenting his role in the coalition talks but by that time it was too late and Ozawa was made to take the blame. Just how serious a blow these talks have dealt

to the DPJ's chances of winning Lower House elections remains to be seen. The incident does illustrate, however, that Ozawa has problems with the press both in Tokyo and Washington.

(2) The Japanese news reports are based on the work of a Japanese NGO whose staff found that some 800,000 gallons provided by a Japanese Maritime Self Defense Force tanker, the Tokiwa, to the US Navy tanker Pecos had been transferred by the Pecos to the carrier Kitty Hawk, whose planes took part in the war against Iraq. Although the refueling referred to took place approximately one month prior to the invasion of Iraq, the impression the report left with the Japanese public is that such transfers of fuel from Japanese vessels took place regularly in the following four years and that Japanese fuel probably was used by US ships and planes taking part in the Iraq war.

IV. 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 . 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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Northeast Asia Peace and Security Project (napsnet-reply@nautilus.org)
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