

How Will We Respond to the Changes in the Geopolitical Landscape After the Ukrainian Crisis?

By Masakazu Toyoda

The Ukrainian crisis showed that the international peace of the Pax Americana era is completely gone. Are we witnessing a complete turnaround from a rules-oriented to a power-oriented international order? Should a new one be conceived? How should Japan respond to this change in the geopolitical landscape? How can Japan contribute to the creation of a new international order?

Japan has at least four areas of action to consider. They range from reforming the UN, building new allies/group, strengthening its economic power, and also strengthening its defense capabilities.

First, Japan must get involved in the reform of the United Nations (UN) because its most important function which is to “maintain international peace and security” with preventive diplomacy, mediation, and peacekeeping has eroded. During the Ukrainian crisis, the UN Security Council became dysfunctional and could not reach a consensus to act against one of its members that was not abiding by the international law. If the country that breaks the international rules is also a member of the Security Council, with veto power, the United Nations cannot continue to function. How can the UN be reformed to avoid such possibility? Was it unconceivable from the beginning that none of the Security Council members would ever initiate such unacceptable actions? It is Japan’s role to make proposals regarding the reform of the UN.

Second, Japan should support the building of a new kind of allies/group, other than the existing grouping of the G7, G20, APEC, and East Asia Summit. Those existing groups can be considered inadequate or ill-equipped in dealing with the aftermaths of the Ukrainian Crisis. The G20 is the most representative of the views of a wide range of countries but because it includes Russia, it is not a cohesive body of opinion to discuss the Ukrainian crisis. Russia is also a member of the East Asia Summit and of the Asian Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), with the same influence regarding Ukraine. The G7, on the other hand, is a grouping of developed countries which does not include Russia. Unfortunately, the G7 is inadequate to incorporate or represent the views of emerging countries. Japan is an active member of all these important frameworks and can make valuable contributions. So, what can Japan do? It should understand the aspirations of both the developed and emerging countries and work to help bridge the existing gap between them while forging acceptable consensus.

It is Japan’s role to support the building of new allies/group that can be productive. In that regard, a few alliances with an eye on China have recently been formed. These include the US-led QUAD (Japan-US-Australia-India Summit), the AUKUS (Australia-UK-US Agreement), and the IPEF (Indo-Pacific Economic Framework). In 2006, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe proposed a dialogue of four heads of states, which was the trigger for QUAD and in March 2021, at the urging of President Biden, its first summit meeting took place online. AUKUS was announced by the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia in an online joint press conference in September 2021. It was an agreement that the United States and the United Kingdom

will not only cooperate with Australia in the construction of nuclear submarines, but it also included collaboration in cyber, artificial intelligence, and military affairs. Japan’s participation in AUKUS seems to be under consideration. The IPEF was convened in a hybrid format in May 2022. Although these frameworks are still in their infancy, they are international frameworks that build alliances in the Indo-Pacific. Japan’s role in their future development is expected to be significant in order to narrow the gap with its neighboring country, China

The other allies/group building framework could be the Western Pacific Union (WPU), advocated by Dr. Shinichi Kitaoka, former President of Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA). The WPU is a “soft democratic union” of Japan, Southeast Asian countries, Australia, New Zealand, and Pacific Island countries. It does not include the United States nor China. Like the European Union (EU), it aims to secure a voice that would not be sufficient on its own.

The third area of actions is to strengthen the economic power of Japan. No matter how solid the international framework may be and no matter how many friends Japan may make, no country will listen to Japan if Japan’s own economic strength is declining. It is essential for Japan to maintain its own international competitiveness. Without getting into any details, specific measures to achieve competitiveness are summarized in the Foundation’s 13 recommendations for an “evolutionary industrial policy”. In a nutshell, in addition to accelerating digitalization and through deregulation, the report stresses the importance of reviewing the lifetime employment and seniority systems that supported Japan’s rapid postwar growth that followed World War II.

The fourth area of actions is the strengthening of Japan’s defense capabilities. Although Japan has grown since the end of WWII under the peace of a Pacifist Constitution, it is undeniable that Japan has been protected by the military power of the United States, including its arsenal of nuclear weapons. When the U.S. stopped being “the” superpower and became one of the big powers, it abandoned its role as the world’s policeman. Japan is very grateful for the U.S. efforts to date, but it is now inevitable that it must strengthen its own defense capabilities in the future. Therefore, doubling the defense budget and enhancing defense capabilities, including an enemy base attack capability, are seriously being considered. As Asia becomes increasingly unstable amid the confrontation between the U.S. and China, the Japanese people need to have a strong awareness that they must first protect themselves.

Japan’s efforts in these four areas should play a major role in creating a new international order in a geopolitically destabilized world.

JS

Masakazu Toyoda is chairman and CEO of the Japan Economic Foundation (JEF). He previously served as chairman and CEO of the Institute of Energy Economics, Japan, after having been vice minister for International Affairs at the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry.