

# A New Era of Nationalism?

By Sasaki Takeshi

When confronted with the question of whether nationalism is on the rise in Japan, the best reply is that “in a sense, it is.” Of course, this reply can harbor a variety of nuances according to how one interprets the qualifier “in a sense.” As it would be somewhat negligent to try and explain this “in a sense” by simply alluding to isolated statements or policies, I would like instead to begin my discussion by considering the historical context of nationalism.

## 1. The Historical Background to Japanese Nationalism

After World War II, Japan started out from a position of political and military ruin – a result of the ultra-nationalism of the 1930s. This historical legacy made it extremely difficult for the Japanese to think of a nationalism based on historical continuity. Japan’s loss of World War II in 1945 represented such a huge historical interruption for the Japanese that when the issue of nationalism appeared later on, it was in a very twisted form. Put simply, Japan differed from surrounding Asian nations in that it had difficulty responding to nationalism in a straightforward and natural way. Some theorists characterize this as a loss of nationalistic “virginity.” Whatever the case, Japan was stuck in international community between its Asian neighbors on one side, capable of enjoying youthful, nationalistic energy in a frank way, and those of North America on the other, who enjoyed a nationalism that had almost never known setbacks. The effect these factors had on Japanese nationalism could not be ignored.

Post-war Japanese nationalism can be



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Prime Minister Ikeda Hayato (1899-1965) outlining an “income doubling” policy, which symbolizes Japan’s economic nationalism, in Osaka in 1963

divided into three main periods. The first was one of fierce domestic conflict over the Cold War. With the after-effects of ultra-nationalism and the enactment of a Constitution that renounced war, Japan set out to overcome its past. Before steps could be taken to settle such issues, however, occupied Japan was swept by shockwaves from the Cold War. With the Cold War, Japan’s alliance with the US was of strategic importance against the USSR, and had the effect of putting off examinations of Japanese nationalism. As a result, the nationalism of the time manifested itself in two different ways. One was revivalism, rooted in nostalgia for the pre-war political system. While revivalism might not have rejected the alliance with the US, it urged that Japan’s defense capabilities be stepped up (and the necessary revisions made to the Constitution), and stressed Japan’s diplomatic autonomy. The other mani-

festation of nationalism was the trend to oppose Japan’s incorporation into the western camp, represented by left and center-left elements, and to seek neutralism. The pro-American path represented by Prime Minister Yoshida Shigeru was clearly viewed as subordination to the US, and not as embodying nationalism.

The second period was that of economically focused nationalism. It was the “golden ‘60s” that saw an easing in the tension between the Cold War order and nationalism, and a new consensus arising among the Japanese. At the heart of this consensus was not defense policy or foreign policy, but economic growth. Japanese nationalism became duly reinstated as one centered on economic growth. The Japan-US Security Treaty was justified

by the claim that it facilitated economic growth, while the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) policy of light armaments and economic growth was a tacit alliance with nationalism. Japan’s economic miracle of the 1960s reinforced this nationalism, leading to a period of upward spiral in which nationalism further accelerated economic growth. Japan survived two oil shocks, becoming so successful that in the late 1970s the phrase “Japan as number one” came into use overseas. Japan’s admission into the developed countries’ summit meetings represented one accomplishment of this type of nationalism.

In the 1980s, Japan became one of the world’s few creditor nations, and its increasing global influence spread into the financial sector. The US-Japan relationship saw the continuation of chronic friction over economics and trade, with US demands on Japan frequently colliding with Japanese nation-

alism. As the end of the Cold War came within sight and it became clear that the days of the arms race would soon be over, Japan was credited with basing its decisions on economic growth, rather than on the overemphasis on military force, and anticipating appropriate decisions for a post-Cold War era. "The Cold War is over, and Japan won" became a catch phrase, and nothing could have been more appealing to Japanese post-war nationalism. The late 1980s saw a rapid increase in the economic presence of Japanese companies, meaning post-war economic nationalism had reached its apex. The central theme of debate at this time was how Japan, as the world's largest creditor nation, should best contribute to the world.

The acceleration of Japan's economic success saw signs of a subtle change in the country's brand of nationalism. This took the form of a desire to justify Japan's economic success in terms of Japanese culture and traditions. There was a gradual change from economic nationalism to a type of cultural nationalism that stressed Japan's uniqueness. This change represented an increase in self-complacency and a desire for self-justification. It was argued that Japan's economic success, rather than being a product of rational policies and rational judgment, resulted from a social system rooted in cultural tradition. These domestic trends, and the "revisionist" theories that created such a stir in American journalism were two sides of the same coin. What is important here is that Japan's economic success did not metamorphose into political and military nationalism. In the Nakasone-Reagan era, the Japanese Government made a show of engaging in Cold War rhetoric, but this still fell within the category of endorsing a bolstered Japan-US alliance. Japan's alliance with the US came to be justified as a "stopper" to restrain Japanese military expansion, but there was little serious opposition to this from within Japan.

The third period spans from the burst of Japan's economic bubble until the present. The "bubble period" was the biggest and final celebration for the



Japanese people marching against the enactment of guideline laws

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post-war Japanese economy. When it ended, the bubble burst and financial systems encountered very serious difficulties. The burst of the bubble not only hurt individual businesses, but also damaged trust in financial institutions and in the financial system. It also gave rise to serious doubts over the ability of government and bureaucracy to solve the financial system's problems. In this sense, the bubble's collapse dealt a serious blow to governmental and social systems as a whole, including denting faith in leaders, and undermined the very framework that had supported post-war nationalism. Nationalism, which had grown as one with economic success, suddenly lost its foundation. The question now is: to what extent should the factors believed to hold the secret to economic success be revised, and to what extent should they be discarded, so that further economic growth can be achieved? That is, the relationship between economic growth and nationalism has changed drastically, and there is now a belief that economic growth should keep pace with globalization. As long as nationalism is equated with the successful system of the past, it goes against globalism. Nationalism is permeated by nostalgia for a Japanese-style system, and is viewed not as the key to a successful future, but as being driven by nostalgia.

While post-war Japan's brand of nationalism had enjoyed a honeymoon with economic growth, it has rapidly

lost its appeal. All areas of Japanese society have been afflicted by a loss of direction and function, and social consensus, once held up as the secret to success, is now viewed as an obstacle to further growth. Bureaucracy, once seen as important in facilitating economic success, is now seen as the largest obstacle to economic growth, leading to a sharp drop in the social authority of the bureaucracy. Naturally the LDP, which had mustered support under a slogan of prosperity through nationalism, has seen a weakening in its political base and a loss in mobilizing power. The emergence of inter-generational conflict and conflict between urban cities and rural areas suggest the beginning of the end for consensus politics reliant on economic success.

## 2. Trends in Nationalism after the Burst of the Bubble Economy

What sort of path is Japanese nationalism trying to follow? What will take the place of old-style nationalism? There are two main options here.

The first option involves dispensing completely with the old success story and making renewed attempts to unite economic growth and nationalism. Maintaining economic success and international competitiveness above a certain level is essential for Japan, when one considers the aging population and other issues. For this reason, this option enjoys some support.

However, such a necessity does not immediately translate into a reconstruction of the former model, under which the entire social system and the energy of the people were mobilized in the interests of economic growth. The task of discarding the old success story and the system that supported it and starting afresh is a difficult one. Consequently, we will not see an immediate restart to attempts to unite economic growth and nationalism.

The second option involves a wounded nationalism wandering in search of new goals, and in turn giving rise to instability. This might, for example, take the form of trying to forge links with past success, in its various forms. As mentioned earlier, the trend to interpret Japan's economic success as being due to specific cultural and social conditions has appeared before. This same attitude would proceed to criticize the new growing economic system, equating globalization with Americanization. This could be termed a passive form of nationalism that promotes the maintenance of a Japanese-style system, and it can be widely seen amongst LDP supporters. However, with the increasing perception that the economy cannot form the core of the new breed of nationalism, so begins the search for a new identity. This can be characterized as nationalism's emergence. Nationalism's emergence was delayed by the Cold War and economic success – a kind of global alignment. It exists in the form of a vague sense of expectation regarding Japan's political self-assertion, but here too the manifestation of nationalism seems to be distorted.

If we take, for example, Japan's method of self-assertion, we can see that it is more or less passive. It comes across as a nervous, defensive reaction to the political dealings, words and actions involved in diplomatic contact with neighbors such as Russia, China, South Korea and North Korea. In the past, right wing powers criticized Japan's humiliating diplomatic stance, but now, clear rejection of foreign leaders' criticism of Japan is widely evident

from within Japan. What is important here is that as power is transferred to a new generation, the older generation, whose members experienced the events of the past, dwindles, and the younger generation, who can face reality head on with none of the trauma of the past, rises up. As far as the younger generation is concerned, overseas leaders who appear to derive satisfaction from mentioning World War II and Japan's colonial rule appear quite alien; the young probably think that such statements are made simply to unsettle the Japanese. This form of nationalism cannot be ignored.

Earlier, I described this type of nationalism as passive. It is passive, in the sense that it has no active political or policy vision for the future. For example, while many foreigners live in Japan, we have seen no movements whereby groups such as Skinheads are violent towards them. There are certainly no political parties that present "anti-immigration" as a point of political debate. Further, while mentioning that the past relationship with neighboring countries meets with a nervous reaction, there is no clear, tangible movement that looks at how these relationships should be built up and handled. That is, there may be no need to become overly nervous about

relations with these countries in the future. In fact, Japan's relationship with South Korea, thanks to the future-oriented policy of both governments, has improved to unprecedented levels.

If we are to regard these trends as nationalism, they are, to an extent, sensitive to the past, but are characterized by a lack of political planning ability for the future. In relation to this, there have recently been conspicuous attempts to justify Japan's past policies, including those of the 1930s and 40s. This line of argument also ties in to the desire to deny the logic of the International Military Tribunal for the Far East held after the war. While many regard this denial as dangerous, it is not easy to see what is behind these attempts at self-justification through the past. They appear to be an attempt at psychological compensation – restoring confidence by freeing oneself from trauma. Alternatively, post-war nationalism might foster a new sense of national collective identity by showing its limitations. It is, however, extremely difficult to determine the significance these attempts hold for government and policy. Immediately after the Second World War, such arguments would have led to revivalism and attempts to reinstate the pre-war national order, but this is now virtually



Representatives casting their votes on the Law on the National Flag and National Anthem at the plenary session of the Lower House on July 22, 1999

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impossible. While these arguments are probably an attempt to "grant an indulgence," thereby licensing the Japanese to enact tough policies against neighboring countries, we should ask just what kind of tough policies they are supporting. Or are they just promoting a brand of nationalism with a more military flavor? There is little evidence on which to base a judgement about this issue.

It is not easy to identify a relationship between the transformation in Japanese nationalism and specific policy. Recent years have seen the enactment of guideline laws on cooperation between the US military and the Self-Defense Forces in crises around Japan, as well as an increase in the dispatch of Self-Defense Forces personnel to peace-keeping operations and the like, and the announcement that Japan would cooperate with the US in Theater Missile Defense development. Rather than interpreting these events as manifestations of nationalism, they should be seen as initiatives undertaken as an extension of Japan's alliance with the US, and as global cooperation. Even the new guideline laws have been something of an unresolved problem during the Cold War, and on this issue the Japanese Government does not triumphantly seek to enhance national glory, but rather takes the position that involvement in international cooperation is to an extent unavoidable. When North Korea fired a missile over Japan, the Japanese people became much more aware of security issues, but this represented nothing more than being

shaken out of what had been a very naive perception of reality.

It is true that the Constitutional Investigation Committee was set up within the Diet, but its main activities are research and gathering opinions, and we are still far from seeing concrete plans on constitutional reform. Also, constitutional reform has been invariably assumed to mean the reform of Article 9, which stipulates renunciation of war and non-maintenance of war potential, and tends to again be associated with the rise of Japanese nationalism. In particular, there is a strong tendency to jump on the bandwagon with this stereotypical reaction overseas. The Japanese are less "allergic" to constitutional amendment than they were twenty or thirty years ago. At the same time, many alternative constitutional amendments have been proposed, and the assumption that reforming the Constitution means reforming Article 9 is certainly no longer dominant. Recent opinion polls on constitutional reform have found that, more than anything else, it is the Diet system with which the Japanese people are dissatisfied and that they want to change. Needless to say, this widespread dissatisfaction over political dysfunction is not directly related to nationalism. There is of course a possibility that a reform of Article 9 will one day be on the agenda, but not many politicians want to kick off constitutional reform by changing Article 9. With regard to the suggestion that constitutional reform could link to nationalism, I feel this would involve

replacing the Diet with a presidential system, rather than the reform of Article 9. In this event, there is a chance that passive nationalism would acquire a "brain" and become active.

I would like to end by considering Prime Minister Mori Yoshiro's statements that Japan is a "divine nation," and last year's passing of the Law on the National Flag and National Anthem. These are seen as being backed by strategic intent, and embraced by the pre-war style of nationalist, but they can also be interpreted as the waning influence of the nationalism that connected to economic success, and as a transitory response to a loss of identity and direction. What is certain is that interpreting these developments as the re-emergence of aggressive, pre-war nationalism is not only mistaken, but also harmful. As mentioned earlier, such developments are intimately linked to the hollowing-out of the postwar economic-growth style of nationalism, the decline of social consensus and the search for a new identity. While the knowledge that an archaic reaction may emerge from this is unpleasant, it can be probable. It is to be expected in general that the rise of globalism will agitate and activate these archaic elements.

If Japanese nationalism harbors danger, this is because Japan, historically, was forced to undergo extreme expansion then extreme contraction, and has little experience of building itself up while maintaining a balanced relationship with surrounding countries. A way to overcome this fragility would be for Japan to cultivate realism, and for surrounding countries to call for a future-oriented policy. We should remember that in the same way, when we seize on a single social element and declare that aggressive, pre-war nationalism is making a comeback, the act of declaration itself holds the possibility of exacerbating the danger. **NTI**

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