

The Meaning of Nationalism in Japan Today

By Ito Ken'ichi

(1) Overview of Contemporary Japan

There are some who argue that many things – such as the International Peace Cooperation Law, the New Guidelines for Defense Cooperation (the Law on [Emergency] Situations in Areas Surrounding Japan), the Law on the National Flag and National Anthem, the Wiretapping Law, the response to suspicious ships in Japanese waters, Japan-US cooperation on TMD (Theater Missile Defense) development, the Diet Investigation Committees on the Constitution, Kobayashi Yoshinori's *Senso-ron* (On the Last War), Nishio Kanji's *Kokumin no Rekishi* (History of the Japanese Nation), statements made by a former Parliamentary Vice Minister of the Defense Agency Nishimura Shingo, Prime Minister Mori Yoshiro's "divine nation" remark, and the election of Tokyo Governor Ishihara Shintaro – indicate that "Japan today is showing signs of a dangerous nationalism that has the hidden potential to promote the resurgence of the militarism witnessed before the war." The source of such statements is in Japan. But quick and violent reactions come from some quarters of China and the US. Since each of the above-listed phenomena has a distinct tale and background, I don't think much would come of a discussion that lumps them all together, but there may be some value in discussing whether together they should be seen as constituting "signs of a dangerous nationalism." I do not believe that they can in any way be construed as such, and think that those who suggest that they can are either promoting a misunderstanding out of ignorance, or have specific preconceived expectations or are developing such expectations due to the irresponsible commercialism of the media. Let me explain.

First, these phenomena constitute only a very small portion of the many

phenomena that occur in Japan today. Reviewing the overall picture of contemporary Japan unmistakably reveals that there are sweeping trends that have the potential to paralyze or destroy the functions of the state and society, quite the opposite of what is seen under militarism. Continuing incidents of suicides by school boys and girls who are harassed at school or of brutal and malicious crimes perpetrated by young people echo the collapse of the family and the ruin of the educational system in Japanese society. There is a breakdown of fundamental morals and values among adults as well, such as business managers who do not take responsibility for their mishandling, bureaucrats who accept bribes and indulge in extravagances, and politicians whose sole concern is getting re-elected and promoting their own interests. The acceptance of individualism and the development of democracy, the guiding principles of reform after World War II, are highly regarded because prewar Japan neglected such social values. However, as the maxim says, "too much of a thing is as bad as too little" in postwar Japan, the concept of public responsibility, which must counterbalance the recognition of private rights, has been neglected. As for the relationship with international society, everything revolves around money, and mainstream thought in contemporary Japan is leaning toward "one-country pacifism" and "one-country prosperity-ism," the belief that it is good enough for Japan to pursue peace and prosperity only within its own borders. Conditions in contemporary Japan can be viewed as the culmination of 50 years of postwar Japanese history, and for this reason much concern is being shown for the need to develop countermeasures to such thinking. The natural reaction is to look at this situation and think that Japan should be a more

straightforwardly "normal" nation. Concluding these phenomena as though they were evidence of a movement to further nationalistically strengthen the "normal country," even though Japan is already a "normal" country, without looking at the circumstances in which Japan finds itself today or how it got there, misses the mark.

(2) My Position

Before you start wondering what kind of person I am, wondering whether I'm one of those nationalists who likes to sing the praises of prewar Japan, and start thinking it a waste of time to listen to what someone like me has to say, let me clarify my position. Rather than explaining my position from my perspective today, I will instead explain myself by repeating a self-introduction I gave publicly many years ago.

In 1992, I visited South Korea, where I had been invited to give a presentation at a dinner meeting hosted by the Korean International Trade Association. Because the representative of the association who gave an address just before my speech, Go Kwang Hun, had expressed some misgivings about the enactment of the International Peace Cooperation Law in Japan, I refuted his comments when it was my turn to give my presentation. The relevant portions of that speech were compiled and published as *Chiheisen wo Koete: International Nationalist no Shiten Kara* (Beyond the Horizon: From an International Nationalist Perspective, 1993). I will simply reprint excerpts below (in translation):

The people of South Korea harbor a strong mistrust and suspicion of the Japanese, well understood to be the result of the cruel and barbaric deeds of Japan's colonial past. Japan's past mis-

takes are inexcusable, and I would like to express my sincerest apologies for them. However, since it seems that there has been a significant misunderstanding among South Koreans regarding the current PKO Cooperation Law, I would like to explain two fundamental facts.

First, it seems that there are still quite a large number of Koreans who think that contemporary Japan and prewar militaristic Japan are the same thing, when in fact they are not. Prewar Japanese militarism was grounded in such institutions as military cliques (*gunbatsu*), corporate conglomerates (*zaibatsu*), absentee landowners, and the peerage – institutions that were eradicated by postwar reforms. Japan today has neither the political, economic, social, nor cultural foundations for cultivating militarism or expansionism.

Second, it seems that some Koreans think that supporters of the PKO Cooperation Law are militarists, colonialists, and super-nationalists, and while it would be impossible to say that there are no such people among its supporters, the majority, including myself, are enlightened internationalists. As such, taking myself as an example, I have consistently advocated maintaining and strengthening the US-Japan alliance, granting accurate recognition to the reality of Japan's history in the neighboring countries, liberalizing the Japanese market, including the rice market, and continuing the maintenance of a small military force designed exclusively for self-defense.

I hope all these reasons eradicate concerns that the enactment of the PKO Cooperation Law could in any way lead to the reemergence of militarism in Japan.

This text goes on:

The response I received at this event was completely the opposite of what I was expecting. Never before had I been so surprised. The previous fall, I had



The PKO bill was amended and approved at the Special Committee for International Peace Cooperation in the House of Representatives (November 11, 1991)

Photo : Kyodo News

given a presentation in Europe before an audience of about 1,000 people in which I said, "Germany, which perpetrated the crime of the holocaust, and Japan, which did not, were not an accomplice in the same crime. The relationship between the victimizers and victims in the German-Soviet war and the Japanese-Soviet war was reversed. I cannot understand why these fundamental facts are ignored and Japan is criticized for not providing as much aid to the USSR as the Germans." Upon hearing this, the audience began booing and stomping their feet on the floor, a most unpleasant episode that still lingers in my memory.

Remembering this, I half-expected a similar reaction to my remarks following my presentation in South Korea, but, to my surprise, I was instead greeted with thunderous applause. The hall was filled with the cream of the South Korean society, representing academic, mass media, business and political circles, and they applauded for quite a long time. When I descended from the podium, several people who had been waiting for me approached, shook my hand, and complimented me on my talk. When I reached my seat, Go Kwang Hun, who was sitting next to me, said "I only touched on the PKO Cooperation Law to explain the fact, not for any other reason. I hope you understand." For a while I sat dumbfounded, wondering what had just happened.

This was the reaction of South Korean people to my speech.

The phrase "International Nationalist" used in the subtitle of that publication is still my way of describing myself, and is intended to convey that my perspective is neither that of a "national nationalist" who can think of nothing but his own country, nor that of an "international internationalist" whose identity is based nowhere.

(3) The International Peace Cooperation Law – A "Path toward Militarism"?

There is not enough room here to examine all of the phenomena suggested as "problematic," but let me try to examine the nature of the International Peace Cooperation Law that so concerned the people of South Korea. It is worth mentioning that in the eight years since the law was enacted, there has been absolutely no indication of a resurgence of militarism as a result of the application of this law in Japan.

When the Iraqi forces invaded Kuwait and the UN Security Council imposed sanctions on Iraq, the Japanese Self-Defense Forces (SDF) could not cooperate in this effort because such actions were not permitted under Japan's legal system. Although Japan contributed \$13 billion to the effort, this pecuniary contribution of Japan was not appreciated by the international community. Germany likewise glossed over the issue by contributing \$12 billion. Germany, by a resolution of the German Federal Constitutional Court, has adopted an interpretation of the law that says "the deployment of German forces outside the NATO region is not unconstitutional." During the conflict in the former Yugoslavia, Germany sent in several thousand ground troops accompanied by Leopold II tanks, and its Tornado bombers were used in the NATO air strikes.

How did Japan respond, by contrast? With the 1992 International Peace

Cooperation Law. However, more than anything else, this law absolutely prohibits the SDF from participating in military sanctions, such as those imposed during the Gulf War, and in the conflict in the former Yugoslavia. Consequently, it lacked from the outset the option of sending anything like the Leopold II tanks or Tornado bombers that Germany did. It goes as far as opening up the possibility for SDF cooperation in UN Peacekeeping Operations (PKO), but stops short of going beyond, for it is a product of such a compromise that the political intent to either participate in or not participate in those operations still remains unclarified.

Traditional UN PKOs have been developed on the so-called “four principles” ([1] a cease-fire must be in place, [2] the parties to the conflict must have given their consent to the operation, [3] the activities must be conducted in a strictly impartial manner, and [4] the use of weapons shall be limited to the minimum necessary to protect the life or person of the PKO personnel), although PKOs in recent years have been initiated in response to fluid conditions in regional disputes and have been less concerned with these four principles, but Japan’s International Peace Cooperation Law has added a fifth principle with further rigidity to the original four ([5] participation may be suspended or terminated if any of the above [the first, second, and third] principles ceases to be satisfied). Also, deeming the fourth principle to be insufficient on its own, this law permits the use of weapons only when the individual peacekeeper feels it is necessary to engage in self-defense and prohibits the PKO commander from making that judgment. It also prohibits peacekeepers from using military force to protect non-Japanese PKO members involved in the same operation. Consequently, Japanese PKO members “are protected by non-Japanese PKO members, but will not protect non-Japanese PKO members.” In 1998, a minor revision was made as it was evident that this was too removed from common sense, but otherwise the law remains basically unchanged.

However, this is not even the most

surprising thing about Japan’s International Peace Cooperation Law. Traditional operations carried out by UN PKOs are cease-fire monitoring, buffer zone patrols, weapons inspections, weapons disposal, cease-fire assistance, and prisoner exchanges, and thus these operations are referred to as “PKO operations proper,” but oddly, when Japan’s International Peace Cooperation Law was enacted, the implementation of these “operations proper” had to be suspended, as the law stated that “the application of this law to those ‘PKO operations proper’ is suspended until new legislation is enacted.” For this reason, all of the PKOs that Japan has participated in thus far have been behind-the-front logistical operations such as humanitarian aid and facility repair. This is what I was referring to earlier when I stated that the International Peace Cooperation Law does nothing at all to clarify the political intent to either participate in or not participate in those operations.

(4) Japan – Not a “Normal” Nation

However, Japan’s abnormalities are not limited to the way it has responded to UN Peacekeeping operations. These are emerging in all areas of the Japanese state and society as an accumulation of contradictions over the 50 years of the postwar period. If we look back at their source, we find that all of them are penalties for not resolving the various contradictions inherent in the creation of the Japanese state under the US occupation, but are also contradictions that we ourselves have magnified into their present scale. For example, the reforms imposed by General Douglas MacArthur that abolished *gunbatsu*, *zaibatsu*, absentee landowners, and the peerage served to ensure the democratization of Japan, and without them the postwar economic miracle probably would not have been possible. Consequently there is no argument advocating a criticism of these reforms. The prohibition against Japanese aggression imposed by Article 9 of the Constitution was also a natural outcome.

However, was it right to rule that

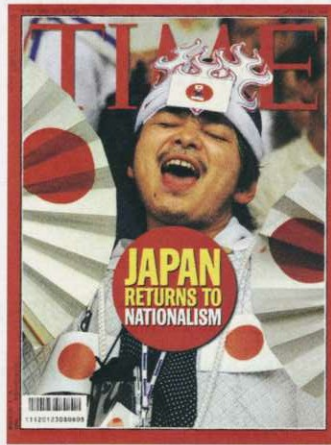
“land, sea, and air forces, as well as other war potential, will never be maintained” and thus to prohibit Japan from maintaining otherwise legitimate self-defense forces? For a long time, the SDF has not been an independent military power of an independent state, and one can argue that the same is true even today. The maritime SDF, especially, did little more than play the role of an anti-submarine unit for the US 7th fleet. The SDF does not have the capabilities of either planning or carrying out effective military operations for themselves. They rely on the US forces not only for weapons, but also for everything from intelligence to communications. They are in fact almost a part of the US military. Some might argue that this is also the case, to some degree, with other countries’ forces, due to the current collective security structure. However, looking at the debates and haggling that occur between members of NATO, and especially looking at not only the special case of France but that of other countries as well, there is no case as serious as that of the Japanese SDF. There is a huge difference in degree. The problem is that because the SDF is not a military force recognized by the Constitution, it has not been given the necessary functions, systems, and rights needed for fulfilling its responsibility of defending Japan. The SDF has neither a court-martial nor military police. Even when classified military information is leaked, the cases are tried in civilian courts, and arrests are made by the civilian police. Because the Constitution does not include stipulations for a state of emergency, if an invader attacked, and SDF tanks were deployed, they would be unable to enter private property without permission. Does simply correcting these problems put us on a “path toward dangerous militarism?” Critics who argue that the New Guidelines for Defense Cooperation constitute a “path toward dangerous militarism” say it does.

If you are one who believes that Japan should continue to be a pariah of the international community and that the domestic systems and international

rights that are recognized in “normal nations” should not be recognized in Japan, that is another story, but to the extent that you are not, phenomena like the International Peace Cooperation Law, the New Guidelines for Defense Cooperation (the Law on [Emergency] Situations in Areas Surrounding Japan), the Law on the National Flag and National Anthem, the Wiretapping Law, the response to suspicious ships in Japanese waters, Japan-US cooperation on TMD development, the Diet Investigation Committees on Constitution, Kobayashi Yoshinori’s *Senso-ron*, Nishio Kanji’s *Kokumin no Rekishi*, statements made by a former Parliamentary Vice Minister of the Defense Agency Nishimura Shingo, Prime Minister Mori’s “divine nation” remark, and the election of Tokyo Governor Ishihara pose no problems, and are “normal debates” and “normal phenomena” that occur in nations around the world. Why is it that, for some reason, it is only in Japan that these are falsely cited as indications that “Japan is experiencing a resurgence of dangerous militarism?”

(5) The Easiest Way to Get Votes and to Sell Paper

I have already discussed the realities of the International Peace Cooperation Law. Although very aware of the nature of that law, some Japanese politicians, beginning with Social Democratic Party Leader Doi Takako, repeatedly give speeches that ignore the real problems in favor of mere demagoguery, using slogans to undermine the International Peace Cooperation Law, such as “War? Or Peace?” “Don’t send our youth to the battlefield!” and “A path we’ve seen before! The path toward militarism!” And many commercial media, as typified by the *Asahi Shimbun*, join right in the chorus. During the Cold War period, some academics argued that if the Soviet Union were to attack, Japan should not fight, but instead raise up a white flag (of surrender) and a red flag (of communism) together. Not a few Japanese mass media actually took this up as a serious argument. If we consid-



The cover of the August 16, 1999 issue of *Time* magazine

er why such a thing would happen in Japan, we see that there exists a widespread, strongly held anti-war sentiment that says that “we’ve had enough of war” among the Japanese – a people that saw the two cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki destroyed by atomic bombs and watched their nation burned to the ground. One of the easiest ways to grab a vote and to get people to buy newspapers is to shout anti-war peace slogans. This is another reality of contemporary Japan. Also, if a foreign media organization tries to write a feature article about Japan, their first source for information is the Japanese mass media. Without realizing it, they end up getting only one side of the story. As a result, information and theories generated in Japan end up creating international misunderstanding.

The cover of *Time* magazine on August 16, 1999, had a bold headline that read, “Japan Returns to Nationalism” and showed a picture of a Japanese man wearing a *kabuto*-like (warrior’s helmet) headband, holding up a *sensu* (folding fan) with the Japanese flag on it, and shouting. As a “typical example of the right-wing sentiment arising in Japan,” this picture served to lend a sense of realism to the *Time* article. However, the man in the picture, Nakanishi Takashi, was actually doing no more than cheering on the Japanese team during a 1999 World Cup Soccer match. The article itself was a long six-page feature written by Tim Larimer, but was an unsophisticated piece that tied together quotes from

one-sided interviews and seemed to run out of steam with its stereotyped conclusions. The quality of Larimer’s treatment of the serious problem he called “Japan’s return to nationalism” made it quite clear that he was not concerned with gathering the required evidence and didn’t contemplate the issue thoughtfully enough. It stated, “A high-school principal in Hiroshima killed himself last February rather than enforce orders that the anthem be sung at graduation ceremonies.” In fact, this high school principal did want the students to sing the national anthem, but was cornered to death by the outrageous collective pressure placed on him not to do so by the Hiroshima Prefectural Teachers Union. If so, how can we accept the presentation of information that would lead all the readers of *Time* magazine to conclude that Japan is returning to a “dangerous nationalism” even though the truth was the complete opposite of what was written?

In conclusion, let me add one more thought. States and ethnic groups are born, grow, and eventually enter old age. Looking at the United Kingdom and France, we see that the former colonial empires have been dismantled and are now past the prime of their lives, calmly heading toward old age. The same is true even for Germany. Japan likewise seems to have passed its prime. With an aging society and a declining population of young people, Japan is in no position now to turn back toward the militarism of its youth. History does not repeat itself. Instead, it would seem that Chinese nationalism, which is now moving out of its youth and into adulthood, should be catching our attention, since it is now entering what arguably may be the most dangerous opportunity for that nationalism to tend toward expansionism and the pursuit of the status of a military superpower. JTI

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