

Globalization and Japanese Identity

By Noda Nobuo

For the past two or three centuries, sovereign nation states have been viewed in many countries as the foundational unit of world order, especially in the developed nations of western Europe, and many people have been operating within that framework. The modern nation state has also been viewed during this period as a tool of class control, as suggested by Marxism, and some have developed ideas and movements aimed at abolishing the state. However, the end of the Cold War between East and West in the 20th century not only resulted once again in the victory of the Western powers, but is also seen as having brought a conclusive end to Marxist internationalism, and as having brought us much closer to the realization of a world order based on the unit of the Western-style democratic nation state.

Though many people in the West seemed almost intoxicated with victory when the Cold War finally ended, the euphoria was short lived. The collapse of the Communist bloc left the nation states that would now form the basic building blocks of the new world order with innumerable problems, all of which became more acute as the conditions that brought about the collapse of that framework progressively intensified. These are not limited to the frequent and successive outbreaks of racial and religious conflict that have arisen in regions such as the former Soviet Union, the Balkans, the Middle East, Africa, and Southeast Asia. In the 1990s, after the end of the Cold War, it became clear that the nation-state framework was not completely secure even in developed nations, including Japan, whose positions as nation states had thus far been viewed as stable.

After reflecting on our past, one might argue that the time when the modern sovereign nation state had

reached its most stable and mature form was in the 1970s. As appropriately reflected in the term "Keynesian welfare state," the developed nations of western Europe as well as Japan had maintained long-term economic growth by implementing financial and fiscal policies based on Keynesian economics, and believed that it was possible to continue to expand social welfare measures in accordance with those policies.

In reality, however, economic differences began to arise in the various developed nations of western Europe, and dramatic changes in the currency situation, known as the oil crisis or the Nixon shocks, required the governments and financial authorities of the developed nations to make some difficult choices. Nonetheless, there was still a solid belief in the 1970s that the sovereign nation state had a specific and appropriate role to play in people's everyday lives, including their economic affairs. It was believed that each state had to maintain social stability by intervening actively in the economy, planning the continuation of economic growth, and reallocating wealth through taxation and social welfare policies.

At that time, Japan, which like former West Germany had achieved economic growth, reached nearly full employment and became a so-called "fully middle-class society" with only a small gap between rich and poor. This period was thus dubbed the "honeymoon phase" of the state and economy. As the confidence of the majority of the Japanese people grew, a sense of national unity also increased, and there was little doubt regarding Japan's continuation as a nation state. With an outstanding bureaucratic system and an industrious work force, Japan secured its position as a major economic superpower, second only to the US, and the majority of Japanese fully believed in

the nation's permanence. The confidence of the Japanese in the nation's role as an economic superpower continued into the 1980s, but it was from this time that the world economy began to undergo some deep, significant changes.

In the 1980s, US President Ronald Reagan and British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher began to promote fundamental reforms regarding the relationship between the economy and the state in an effort to pursue "small government." This represented a shift

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John Maynard Keynes (1883-1946), developed the "Keynesian welfare state" theory

away from Keynesian economics toward the neo-classical economics espoused by Benjamin Milton Friedman. To put it simply, this new approach emphasized market principles and the need to limit the state's intervention in the economy. Accordingly, policies in favor of privatizing state-owned enterprises were promoted. The new approach taken by the US and British governments, known as "neo-conservatism," was compatible with the trend toward economic globalization and the rapid developments occurring in the field of information technology. It also resulted in the continuous prosperity that characterized the Anglo-

Saxon economies in much of the 1990s.

Under the Nakasone administration in the 1980s, Japan also followed, to some extent, the Anglo-Saxon-led “neo-conservative” approach, moving to implement such policies as the privatization of the state-owned railway. In Japan, however, reforms affecting the relationship between the state and the economy came short of their full potential, and after the so-called “bubble economy” collapsed in the early 1990s, the Japanese economy fell into a long-term recession. With this, confidence in Japan’s position as an economic superpower evaporated, and a sense of impasse and tendency toward demoralization appeared across a wide range of political and social arenas.

The modern sovereign nation state was originally conceived as an area of land defined by national boundaries. It used language and culture to integrate the people residing in that area as its citizens, intervened in their daily activities, including their economic affairs, and was responsible for making the nation as comfortable a place to live as possible. The prerequisite for this, of course, was that the state monopolized, in the name of sovereignty, the means of physical enforcement, judicial authority, and the right to collect taxes.

The effectiveness of the nation-state system was demonstrated by the strength gained by the UK and France in the 17th and 18th centuries, and by the growth of such countries as Germany, Italy, and Japan who followed in their footsteps in the 19th century to build their own nation states. As an island nation, Japan had a long history of unity, and under the *bakufu* (shogunate and domain) system of the Tokugawa period it enjoyed greater political and cultural unity than European nations such as Germany and Italy. As a result, the transition to a modern sovereign nation state that followed the Meiji Restoration occurred with relatively little loss, and in a shorter period of time than in either of those two nations.

In the 130 years since the Meiji Restoration, power in Japan has been concentrated at the level of the national



Will Japan's "middle-class society" be able to survive in the 21st century?

government which, through the bureaucracy, has extended centralized control over the entire nation from the capital in Tokyo, and which has created a highly integrated citizenry in terms of language and culture. This pattern was not changed even by the 1945 defeat in World War II, and as a result Japan became a rare example of one of the most cohesive and homogeneous nation states in the world. This worked to the nation’s advantage by enabling it to achieve the peak of rapid economic growth that it enjoyed in the 1970s and to realize a “fully middle-class society.”

However, as Arnold Toynbee stated, nations or states that have experienced outstanding successes in one chapter of their histories often idolize that success, end up clinging to outdated systems or technologies beyond their usefulness, and subsequently experience failure in future chapters. Japan in the last 10 to 20 years of the 20th century is a perfect example of such a state. Having too much faith in the economic successes and social stability that the country enjoyed up until the 1970s, Japan fell behind in adapting itself to the major historical transitions resulting from developments in information technologies and economic globalization.

As many have already pointed out, the economic globalization sweeping across the world today is reducing the significance of national borders. People, goods, and capital are moving freely from state to state, and mergers and alliances between multinational corporations and corporations that operate internationally are becoming increasingly commonplace. Under these conditions, the close relationship between the state and the economy is being lost, and it is rapidly becoming difficult to control the economy through financial and fiscal policies at the national level. Thus, not only is the “Keynesian welfare state” becoming an increasingly less feasible model for state governance, but the usefulness of the very sovereign nation state framework itself is also being threatened. For example, the right to collect taxes is an important element in sustaining the sovereignty of a state, but with corporations and capital moving freely across borders, even the process of collecting taxes is growing increasingly difficult. This one example alone shows that the sovereign nation state, the basic building block of modern international society, is becoming a less self-evident foundation for world order. It is extremely difficult for the

Photo: Kyodo News



US President Ronald Reagan (center), British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher (2nd from the right), Japanese Prime Minister Nakasone Yasuhiro (4th from the right) and other leaders of the G7 nations at the Tokyo Summit in 1986

Japanese, people who have poured a great deal of energy into unifying Japan as a nation state ever since the Meiji Restoration, to adapt to this new set of circumstances.

As developments in information technology and economic globalization continue to advance through the 21st century, what kind of order will of necessity develop to be compatible with such phenomena? One possibility might be for regional orders encompassing many states and nations to evolve as economic and financial affairs develop in regions that extend across traditional nation state borders. The European Union (EU) and North America Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) are viewed as leading examples of such regional alliances, but for these to function effectively as regional orders suitable for new technologies and stages of economic development, at least two conditions must be met.

First, if multiple nation states join together to form a regional order, there has to be a single strong nation state at the core. In other words, new regional orders cannot be created based on the

absolutely equal participation of multiple nations, but instead need to be formed as hierarchical orders with a strong nation at the center capable of playing a leading role in the alliance. In the EU and NAFTA, for example, Germany and the US play the leading roles in helping to solidify the integration of their respective regional orders.

Second, one of the most important roles of a regional order is the assurance of overall regional security, and it is consequently of the utmost importance that each order have its own collective security organization for ensuring the security of the regional bloc. Efforts to create a rapid-reaction corps in the EU reflect this need.

These two conditions alone raise many obstacles in the formation of a regional order in East Asia on a par with the EU that would be advantageous for Japan. With regard to the first condition, it would be very difficult to determine whether China or Japan will play the leading role in the future East Asian regional bloc. While Japan may be better positioned today than China in terms of economic

strength and level of technological advancement, it is highly likely that China will eventually overtake Japan as the central state in East Asia as the scale of the Chinese economy grows.

From both a geopolitical and historical perspective, China is better endowed than Japan in terms of its ability to play a leading role in a new multi-ethnic order. The Chinese Empire had a long history of experience in extending its influence throughout East Asia and other regions. Japan, by comparison, has no long-term experience in governing multi-ethnic peoples, and precisely because it has devoted itself to even further solidifying its unity as a sovereign nation state since the Meiji Restoration, it lacks both the desire and strategic ability to build a multi-ethnic regional order centered around itself.

With regard to the second condition, public opinion in Japan has been extremely hesitant toward participation in collective security regime since the US gave Japan its new Constitution, including the article renouncing war, after Japan's defeat in World War II. It seems it will take a good deal of time for the Japanese to rid themselves of their allergy against collective security regime. During that time, they cannot deny the possibility that efforts to create an East Asian collective security regime mainly based on China may move forward although the idea has been denounced by the US.

Even if Japan does not go so far as to completely isolate itself, there is concern that Japan could end up being cornered into an East Asian regional order and could face economic and cultural decline in the relatively early part of the 21st century. Even today political and general public opinion is focusing on domestic political and economic problems, and there is little interest in creating a regional order that extends beyond national borders, or even in discussing strategies for and moving toward the implementation of such an order.

It is important to recognize that the problems discussed above are deeply intertwined with issues of Japanese

identity and a sense of belonging in the 21st century.

After the Meiji Restoration, the Japanese state used education (especially compulsory education) to cultivate in its people a strong sense or awareness of themselves as being a part of the Japanese nation or citizens of the Japanese state. In the name of speaking “proper Japanese,” a standardized Japanese language was adopted and drilled into people nationwide, and communication between Japanese was perhaps even more smoothly facilitated than in any other developed nation. Beyond mere communication, the unification of Japanese lifestyles and men-



Japanese people visiting a shrine to mark the beginning of the New Year – but many of them may not regard themselves as followers of the Shinto religion

talities was also advanced through classes in ethics, language, and history, and this had a significant impact on the promotion of industrialization and militarization in Japan.

After the defeat in World War II, great changes were implemented in the Japanese educational system and some elements of nationalism were weakened, but the unity of the Japanese people in terms of their language, lifestyles, and mentalities was not easily undone. Instead, the degree of unity and homogeneity that had been cultivated in Japanese society prior to the war served as a major driving force behind the nation’s economic growth, and was further promoted by the suc-

cess of its rapid economic growth. As expressed by the cynical title “Japan, Inc.,” it appeared during the rapid economic growth period that even though Japanese people worked for different companies, the extent of their unity and homogeneity somehow enabled them to work together as a single entity in pursuing economic growth.

Up until the 1970s, the question “Who are you?” – especially if asked by a foreigner – would likely have been met by the majority of Japanese with the unhesitating reply, “I’m a Japanese.” Such was the extent to which the existence of Japan as a nation state was believed to be secure.

Further, as Japan was a prosperous nation with a safe situation and little difference in economic and social class, many Japanese took pride in being a part of it.

However, the advancement of economic globalization has begun to prove the framework of the Japanese state less unshakable than once expected, and if Japan does not open itself up to the possibility of a regional order in East Asia in which it takes a leading role, many

Japanese will wonder where they should look to for a sense of belonging and affiliation. In this sense, Japan’s tendency in the modern period to excessively promote a centralized state whose political, economic, and cultural focus has been on Tokyo may end up working against it in the 21st century. That is, when people find themselves lacking a sense of affiliation with the Japanese state at the national level, previous tendencies will make it difficult for them to find alternative loci of affiliation at the smaller units of their communities or ethnic groups.

In many western European countries today, units of social affiliation that are smaller than the nation, such as com-

munities and ethnic groups, have survived the modern nation-state period. While regional orders like the EU that are larger than individual states have accompanied the recent relaxation of the nation-state framework, the importance of units that are smaller than individual states, such as Scotland and Wales in Great Britain, is also growing. Also, although both the Catholic and Protestant churches in Europe have experienced declining rates of attendance in recent years, they remain, as always, loci to which many people feel a sense of affiliation.

The 21st century will likely be a time when the individual’s identification card will indicate multiple affiliations. For example, a single resident of Munich will be able to identify themselves concurrently as a person from Bayern, a German, a citizen of the EU, and a Catholic. If the new age is indeed one in which the identity of the individual is given through multiple affiliations, many Japanese will experience great difficulty and uncertainty in determining what affiliations they have outside of their role as Japanese citizens.

Take the issue of religion. Most Japanese casually apply Shinto or Buddhist customs in their everyday lives, but do not have a real sense of affiliation to either religion. The reason this has worked thus far is because people perceived the framework of Japan, the state that formed the basis for these various religions, to be secure. However, as the framework of the Japanese state continues to weaken and the trend toward globalization grows, there is great concern that many Japanese will find themselves drifting in a sea of spiritual emptiness, if they cannot find new ways to define their individual identities. **NTI**

Noda Nobuo is a Professor in the Faculty of Policy Studies at Nanzan University. He specializes in the Modern History of Germany.