

Incisive Analysis

By Ian Rodger

One of the most striking characteristics of the Japanese policy formation process in the postwar period has been the high quality of the analysis of the circumstances affecting the country made prior to important decisions being taken.

By contrast with the way policy is made in many Western countries, analysis in Japan is almost always unfettered by wishful thinking or ideological bias. Perhaps Japanese officials have become good at being pragmatic and realistic because of the breathtakingly inferior analysis in the early part of the century that led to such catastrophic consequences for the country.

In any event, the value of good analysis as a foundation for policy formation can hardly be overstated. This seems particularly the case in considering MITI's "vision" for the 1990s. On the whole, the ideas being proposed in this vision are what one might call pious hopes or motherhood policies — that is, valued by all, objectionable to no one — and most are rather general and vague. For example, "In the future, it will be necessary to give greater consideration to the quality of human life in all policy areas." This is probably inevitable at a time when Japan's future course is going to be affected by so many unpredictable events and trends, both inside and outside the country.

However, even if some of these proposals turn out to be unnecessary or inappropriate or inadequate as time goes on, it will always be possible and useful to come back to the incisive analysis of the circumstances in which Japan finds itself at the beginning of the decade as a foundation for developing other policies.

Take, for example, the blunt assessment of Japan's position in the world community. "The international community's reaction to the rapid growth and increasing world influence of the Japanese economy has been growing anxiety, and even fear of Japan's economic might. With the nations of the world becoming more critical of Japan, the 1990s will be a crucial period in the management of its international relations, a period when extraordinary care, special efforts and caution must characterize Japan's conduct."

It matters not why the world's reaction to Japan is negative. It may be unwarranted, it may be based in some instances on plain nasty racism, but what matters is that it exists and, given Japan's importance in the world, has the potential to become a very serious problem unless handled carefully.

From that sort of clear observation, sensible suggestions usually follow, and this case is no exception. "Japan's domestic systems and practices should be harmonized with those of the outside world, and the country's intentions clarified. In other words, Japan should enable outsiders to easily comprehend all aspects of our country." Here is a recognition that nothing breeds fear and distrust as much as ignorance, so every effort should be made to get rid of the ignorance.

Among the specific policy recommendations, it was heartening to see such a heavy emphasis placed on the interests of people in their roles as consumers, workers and, perhaps especially, purchasers of land rather than in their roles as producers. Many a MITI official will probably have to stifle his laughter (or his anger) when he reads that in the past, "the fundamental concept forming Japan's international trade and industry policy has been the idea that, through the economic development of Japan, we could contribute to the improvement of the daily lives of the Japanese people." But there is no doubt that this is the thrust for the 1990s.

The focus on women's rights suggests that MITI feels the women's movement could soon become as aggressive in Japan as in other industrialized societies. It is a safe bet; the only question is how soon.

In Britain, and to some extent in the United States, it has become fashionable in some economic circles to be indifferent about the role of manufacturing industry. Value added is value added, and it does not matter what sector it comes from, these people say. MITI, with perhaps a natural bias toward manufacturing, has not fallen into this ridiculous trap. "The manufacturing industry continues to play a leadership role vis-à-vis the other industrial sectors, both in terms of tractive power and influence. It also plays the extremely essential role of supporting the

technological innovation that drives Japan's socioeconomic progress. Examples of other countries show that a deterioration of the manufacturing base results in unfavorable societal trends in terms of vitality and stability."

Amen.

Ian Rodger is the Tokyo bureau chief of The Financial Times.

A New Mission

MITI's image has long been that of a powerhouse that pulls the rest of Japan along in its wake. This is changing. At least that is the impression I get from reading this "vision."

All three of the policy objectives are related to the global community and everyday life. And the sum is to link attention to the details of our daily lives to the broader global perspective.

This does not, of course, mean that the state has a diminished role or has faded into insignificance. Rather, the state has a crucial role to play linking the individual with the global community. This is a far different role from that postulated in previous visions, but it is no less interesting.

Personally, I find the emphasis on human-oriented policies and friendly (including environmentally friendly) science most intriguing, but I also realize that there is a very real danger that these efforts could be misconstrued as dilettantish pursuits by a nouveau riche Japan. It will be impossible to formulate environmentally sound lifestyles and to develop the policies and technologies that the world needs unless each and every Japanese accepts personal responsibility for this commitment.

Finally, I should add that I found Council membership to be a very enlightening and rewarding experience, since all of the Council meetings featured frank exchanges of information and opinions.

Keiko Nakamura
Professor of Waseda University