

The Gulf in Japanese Political Thought

By Takeshi Sasaki

Ever since Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in early August, Japanese politics has been dominated by the debate over what Japan can or should do, and the issue of possibly sending people to help in the Gulf has been at the center of this question. Prime Minister Toshiki Kaifu sent a United Nations Peace Cooperation Bill to the Diet providing for an expanded Japanese role, but this quickly got bogged down over the role that it assigned to the Self-Defense Forces (SDF). As a result, it did not even clear the House of Representatives, where the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) has a firm majority. In its place, the LDP, Komeito and the Japan Democratic Socialist Party have cobbled together an agreement calling for creation of a new organization that would be able to send people to world trouble spots.

Advocates of sending the SDF to the Middle East argued, among other things, that Japan has to contribute in human terms to upholding U.N. Security Council resolutions in the post-Cold War age, and that Japan is so dependent on Middle East oil and relations with the United States are so important that Japan cannot afford to just send money.

The antis weighed in with a number of counterarguments, among them that the Constitution has traditionally been interpreted to allow the SDF a role but only in defending Japan and that Asian countries with their memories of World War II would be disturbed at seeing Japanese forces abroad in the world again. As a result, the debate over Gulf policy has turned into a constitutional debate, and the LDP did not have the stomach to argue for a full-scale reinterpretation.

There were, however, a number of different positions even within the pro-deployment camp. There were, for example, some who held that the SDF could engage in military action overseas. Others contended that the SDF should be limited to strictly peacekeeping functions in light of the Constitution's strictures

against the use or threat of force.

Typical was former Prime Minister Yasuhiro Nakasone's "Reinterpreting the Constitution to Deal with Emergencies" in the October *Bungei Shunju*, and it was this camp that argued in the Diet debate that, in line with the constitutional constraints, any SDF personnel sent to the Gulf region would not engage in military action but would be in strictly support positions and that the SDF forces would not be sent on hazardous duty. As a result, these people were soon engaged in detailed discussions over what kinds of weapons the SDF personnel would or would not be allowed to carry.

Role of the SDF

Yet this nonmilitary approach quickly drew fire from the hawks, who argued that it was militarily unrealistic and that it was sending people into battle unarmed. One of the leading articles from this side was Sachio Genkawa's "Hard Questions for the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs" in the November *Bungei Shunju*. Then, when the idea of a standing U.N. force started making the rounds, there were a number of people who suggested that the SDF should be disbanded if they were not going to be good for anything. This position was represented by Hiroomi Kurisu's "So Why Not Disband the SDF?" in the January *Shokun*.

The LDP itself was split over SDF deployment. For instance, former Chief Cabinet Secretary Masaharu Gotoda was a steadfast opponent of deployment, arguing that the SDF is intended for the defense of Japan and that Japan should be very careful about wantonly deploying the SDF lest it appear that Japan is trying to translate its economic power into military power. This position was most eloquently stated in his "Clearing Away the Nonsense about Overseas Deployment" in the December *Monthly Asahi*.

The Japan Socialist Party (JSP), which on February 1 changed its English name

to the Social Democratic Party, was firmly opposed to the LDP's U.N. Peace Cooperation Bill, but there were many younger people in the party who recognized that Japan cannot just sit on its hands and hope for the benefits of peace. These people were in the forefront arguing that a special organization should be created separate and apart from the SDF to cooperate with U.N. peacekeeping operations, and this position was espoused in "Reforming the JSP from Inside" in the January *Bungei Shunju*. This was a significant new departure in JSP thinking.

The U.N. Peace Cooperation Bill was shot through with problems, and it was not the sort of bill that could reasonably be rammed through the Diet in time to have any impact on the situation in the Gulf. And even if it had passed the Diet, it would be half a year or more before the SDF would be ready to move. So why did Japan's political leadership propose this bill and spend so much time on pointless argument about irrelevant details? The widespread sense of astonishment is compounded by the fact that no heads have rolled over this fiasco, indicating that nobody was really committed to the bill in the first place.

The Gulf crisis seems to have thrown Japanese policy-making into confusion and rendered the entire leadership incapable of making rational decisions. It was a sad state of affairs, and one that would seem to support Karel van Wolferen's argument that there is no decision-making core where the buck stops. It was not the postwar peace Constitution that prevented a response to the Gulf crisis as much as the lack of functioning decision-making structures.

The situation within the Soviet Union and Japan-Soviet relations have been another major topic of discussion in the last few months—especially with President Mikhail Gorbachev expected to visit Japan in mid-April. There was, for example, a long article called "The Gorby-initiated New Era in Japan-Soviet Relations" in the

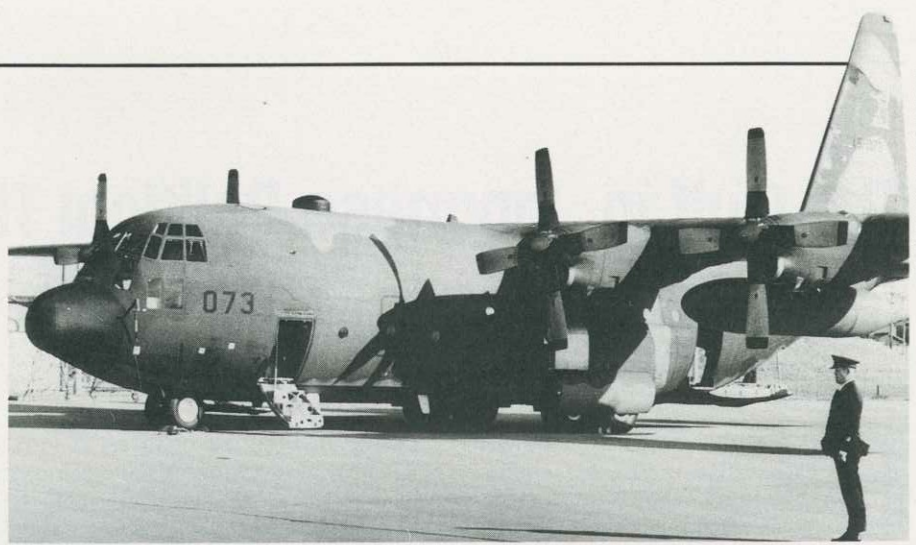
January *Monthly Asahi*. The situation on the Korean Peninsula was another diplomatic concern, particularly with the visit by a joint LDP-JSP mission to North Korea in late 1990, and South Korea's rapprochement with the Soviet Union and China.

One year after the end of the Cold War in Europe in the fall of 1989, people are looking for the Cold War to end in East Asia as well. Of course, Japanese are not so naive as to believe that Korean unification will be easy, but it is hoped that cooperative pressure from the United States, the Soviet Union, China and Japan can gradually defuse tensions on the peninsula and eventually create a "four-plus-two" framework similar to the one that worked so well for Germany. One of the more influential papers in this vein, appearing in the December *Ushio*, was Masao Okonogi's "How Much Difference Will This North-South Korean Summit Meeting Make?" Now that Japan and North Korea have begun negotiations on normalizing diplomatic relations, the international maneuvering on this peninsula is likely to be a major focus of attention for some time.

The Japan Sea economic zone

These negotiations between Japan and North Korea and between Japan and the Soviet Union are not only of bilateral interest. Instead, they are seen as part of a broader pattern of economic development centering on the Sea of Japan—the "Japan Sea economic zone" involving Japan, North and South Korea, northeastern China and the Soviet Far East in intercomplementary economic cooperation to transform this area from a web of Cold War tension to a font of dynamic economic development.

With the Soviet Union's natural resources, China's agricultural potential, South Korea's consumer goods, Chinese and North Korean labor, and Japanese and South Korean capital and technology, this area could be formidable indeed. Japanese attitudes will be crucial here. As Twu Jaw Yann has pointed out in "Proposal for a Japan Sea Economic Sphere" in the January *Sekai*, this region is distinc-



A C-130H transport aircraft of the Air Self-Defense Force

tive not only in that the East-West conflict, North-South division and rising NIEs are all present but also because the main drive for progress will be mounted not by states but by regions.

As a result, Twu argues, advances in creating this economic cooperation will have to rely not only on adherence to market principles but also on acceptance of such internationally accepted values as respect for human rights, democracy and peace. However, if this concept could get off the ground, it would breathe new life into the Japan Sea side of Japan, which has tended to be somewhat eclipsed in the preoccupation with relations with the United States, and give new momentum to a fundamental restructuring of the Japanese economy that would redress regional imbalances. No longer would the Japan Sea side be subservient to Pacific interests but would emerge as Japan's gateway to Asia, and the intriguing concept thus represents a total rethinking of postwar Japanese assumptions.

That this concept of a Japan Sea economy has been broached at all is a powerful indication of the hopes for an end to the Cold War in this part of the world, and the idea is attracting even more attention in other Asian countries than it is in Japan. As Japan negotiates with the Soviet Union and North Korea, it will be interesting to see whether or not Japanese foreign policy can ride this wave of interest and create the underpinnings for a new paradigm in the region. Reminding Japan anew of how important natural resources are, Saddam Hussein may have inadvertently given this concept a major push forward. Even aside from the economic advantages of such cooperation, better relations with the people of this region would open a new era for Japan.

Such is not to say that all of the vital issues are being taken into balanced consideration in Japan. For example, there has been very little debate on the GATT Uruguay Round with its crucial implications for world trade. The Uruguay Round has not been seen as a last chance to resurrect free trade but rather as a test of wills over whether or not Japan will open its rice market to imports—which many consider a closed question.

Likewise, even though there has been considerable unease overseas about the future of the Japanese economy and Japanese financing (as indicated in "Survey of Japanese Finance" in the December 6 issue of *The Economist*), Japanese attention has focused on the land and stock bubbles and the discussion itself has seemed somewhat insubstantial and effervescent at times.

In all of this, it is significant that there are very few articles lauding Japan's political astuteness or the Japanese political process. Rather, we have articles such as Takeshi Sasaki's "The Shallowness and Pettiness of Japanese Politics" in the January *Sekai* lambasting Japanese politics not only for being corrupted by money but being devoid of leadership or authority and being in a pervasive, structural crisis. Japan was once lauded for its unprecedented stability, but it is now increasingly clear that this "stability" is actually brain death and that Japan is unable to respond to world changes. It is inevitable that calls for political reform will be another focus of the media debate in the months ahead.

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