

Japanese Diplomacy and the First Gulf War

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Introduction

Japan's role in the 1991 First Gulf War may be negligible to the historical account of the war itself. But when it comes to the historical account of Japan's foreign policy, Japan's role can never be neglected because the Gulf War experience represented a major setback for Japan, which was even comparable to its defeat in World War II. In objective terms, Japan did not participate in the United States-led multinational force and thus suffered no casualties nor material damages due to the war. Its roles were largely limited to financial contributions amounting to a whopping \$13 billion. It was derided as "checkbook diplomacy" without being appreciated. The Japanese government was unable to take effective actions; however, heated debates were unleashed at home as to how the country should respond to the war. The debates involved serious soul searching regarding the basic nature of its postwar foreign policy. As a result, the security discourse shifted considerably, and it triggered a reconsideration of the policy. Its security policy has since become more active, albeit gradually, prompting a series of developments that opponents have criticized as a "rightward turn."

Initial Conditions

To understand how the Gulf War paralyzed Japan's foreign policy, one must begin by examining the structural conditions that surrounded Japanese diplomacy at the time. It is well known that following Japan's complete defeat in World War II and the termination of the subsequent U.S. military occupation, Japanese diplomacy adopted a basic approach commonly referred to as the "Yoshida Doctrine." This concept aimed to accept the severe restrictions imposed by the Constitution enacted during the occupation and to minimize Japan's military force, while concentrating its efforts in economic development in order to restore its international status as an economic power. In practice, however, under the severe security environments resulting from the Cold War, this doctrine was feasible only by heavily relying on the alliance with the United States for Japan's security. Successive Japanese governments therefore continued to devote considerable political resources to managing the Japan-U.S. Alliance. The government "abstained" from high politics in international relations and sought to expand Japan's own diplomatic space by leveraging its economic power.

The 1980s was arguably the period when this basic line of thinking was most successful.¹ Japan made internationally notable economic gains, elevating in international standing despite

¹ Richard Rosecrance refers to post-World War II Japan and Germany, which pursued prosperity through open trade rather than territorial control, as "trading states," distinguishing them from "territorial states." Richard Rosecrance, *The Rise of the Trading State*, Basic Books, 1986.

its light armament. In fact, public opinion polls show that, during this period, only a very small minority was in favor of revising the Constitution for possessing a military force commensurate with its economic strength. Indeed, it is not surprising that many Japanese did not think to bother amending the Constitution when they had achieved prosperity and peace – values that were pursued in the postwar years.

There were, of course, opponents to the Yoshida Doctrine or to the conservatives' mainstream diplomatic approach. Leftists who advocated unarmed neutrality, in strict alignment with the unarmed principle of the postwar Constitution, constantly formed a powerful opposition force. They called for dramatically improved relations with the Soviet Union, China, and other communist camps in place of the Japan-U.S. Alliance. They also argued for seeking guarantees for Japan's security in a universal framework centered on the United Nations (UN). The largest opposition party, the Japan Socialist Party, led by Doi Takako, who consistently emphasized the protection of the Constitution, represented such forces in the political arena. The Socialist Party held no more than 30% of the seats in the House of Representatives, but it was enough to block the revision of the Constitution. Moreover, its idealistic doctrine preaching peace and international cooperation long remained the majority view of the fourth estate and intellectual community.

On the other hand, there was opposition from the right who sought to revise the Constitution to reestablish Japan's own military force and restore its strategic independence. They represented people who were dissatisfied with Japan's subservience to the United States despite already having enormous economic power. Although their political base was weaker compared to the left's, it is a fact that a certain proportion of the public consistently believed that Japan's prestige as an independent nation had been unjustly undermined by its defeat in World War II, along with restorationist forces who felt an affinity with the prewar regime. The ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), while shelving constitutional revision in reality, also called for constitutional reform, referring to the "withdrawal of foreign troops stationed in Japan" in its 1955 party platform.

Structural Changes of the International Environments

By the outbreak of the Gulf War in 1991, however, major changes were occurring in the post-World War II international environment to which Japan had successfully adapted following its defeat. Most notably, the Cold War had ended, raising questions about Japan-U.S. security ties, e.g., does the Japan-U.S. Alliance still have *raison d'être* if there is no longer a Soviet military threat? At the same time, the bilateral economic relationship took a nose-dive. While trade friction between the two countries had been chronic almost since the 1970s, the "revisionist view of Japan," which considered Japan not as a liberal democratic friend but as an economic threat with an alien politico-economic system, began to gain traction in the West in the late 1980s. One of the leading proponents of this view, American journalist James Fallows, even advocated "containing Japan."² "Containment," needless to say, was a term the Americans used for their Cold War policy toward the Soviet Union.

² James Fallows, "Containing Japan," *Atlantic Monthly*, May 1989.

While Japan-U.S. relations plunged, China with its small power – unimaginable today – posed no serious threat to Japan.³ China did possess nuclear weapons and had the capability to attack Japan. In addition, in 1989, the year the Berlin Wall fell, the Tiananmen Square Incident occurred, making it clear that China would not have the kind of democratization that took place in Eastern Europe. This led to a growing disillusionment in Japan, replacing the sense of redemption toward China that had been dominant up to that point. Nevertheless, expectations were strong that the developmental dictatorship would transition to liberalization and democratization as in South Korea and Taiwan. Tokyo even worked to refrain from isolating China while the West moved to condemn and sanction China in protest to the Tiananmen massacre. After all, Japan was at the height of its economic prosperity, and the possibility of China becoming a threat to Japan's security looked remote, if unforeseeable, possibility.⁴ Due to deteriorating Japan-U.S. relations, there was a strong expectation that Japan, by strengthening relations with neighboring Asian countries, could reduce its dependence on the United States and expand the diplomatic space in which it could act independently. These Asian countries, especially China and South Korea, however, were always highly suspicious of Japan's expanding security role.

The Gulf Crisis and Japan's Upset

When Iraq invaded and annexed Kuwait in 1990, the UN Security Council showed a unity unthinkable during the Cold War and adopted Resolution 678, authorizing member states to “use all necessary means.”⁵ In other words, collective security, which had been paralyzed during the Cold War, was functioning, and the international community agreed on joint use of military force to repel the aggressor.

As a member of the UN, Japan is naturally expected to share the responsibility for collective security. Moreover, Japan is heavily dependent on crude oil supplies from the Middle East, and its vital national interests were at stake in this issue, so it was only natural that the international community would expect Japan to fulfill its responsibility toward the resolution of the issue.

Prime Minister Kaifu Toshiki was leading the Japanese government at the time. Having assumed the position in 1989 as a result of a scandal involving the previous prime minister, Kaifu did not have a strong base of support within the LDP. Moreover, the LDP had lost its majority in the House of Councillors election that year. Therefore, the House of Councillors even nominated Doi Takako of the Socialist Party as prime minister. However, Kaifu, who had been nominated by the House of Representatives in accordance with constitutional provisions, became prime minister. Although Kaifu was considered a “dove” (*hato ha*) within the party

³ China's GDP at the time was around \$360 billion, not more than 10% of Japan's GDP of over \$3 trillion.

⁴ For example, diplomatic documents which have been made public show that Japan had fought alone against the West for easing the condemnation of China at the 1989 Summit of the Arch. “Nihon, G7 shuno kaigi ‘1 tai 6’: Tenanmon de chugoku to obei no itabasami (gaikobunsho kokai)” [Japan “one against six” at G7 Summit: Caught between China and West over Tiananmen Square (diplomatic documents released)], *Nikkei Shimbun*, December 23, 2020.

⁵ UN Security Council Resolution 678, November 29, 1990, <http://unsct.com/en/resolutions/doc/678>.

and was relatively acceptable to the opposition parties and the media, he was not ready to make major decisions on security issues.⁶ In other words, the leadership of the Japanese government was weak both within the party and in the Diet, and the prime minister himself did not have the strong personality to make major decisions on security matters.

When Iraq invaded Kuwait and international tensions rose, the Japanese government generally framed it as an issue of adjusting Japan-U.S. relations. In August 1990, immediately after the outbreak of the Gulf crisis, Okamoto Yukio, who was at the forefront of diplomacy with the United States as then director of the Foreign Ministry's First North America Division, perceived that the war was under the jurisdiction of the Middle East Bureau. Okamoto recalled that, when President George W. Bush requested the dispatch of minesweepers and replenishment vessels, however, he belatedly realized with apprehension that the war was an issue of how Japan can maintain relations with the United States.⁷ Within the ruling LDP, "hawks" (*taka ha*) such as Nakasone Yasuhiro, Hashimoto Ryutaro, and Ozawa Ichiro, advocated the deployment of the Self-Defense Forces (SDF), and some saw it as a "once in a lifetime opportunity."⁸ In the end, the position of the "doves," such as Gotoda Masaharu and Kono Yohei, who strongly opposed the deployment of the SDF arguing it could be "a dangerous small step on a slippery slope," became the dominant position. Prime Minister Kaifu himself was disinclined to send the SDF, saying that "public opinion is not ready."⁹

Japan's repeated approach to trade frictions with the United States had been to take time to find a domestically acceptable solution to the agenda set unilaterally by the United States. Due to the urgency of the situation, however, Japan could not afford to do so on this occasion. Moreover, unlike trade negotiations, the matter at hand was the most contentious issue in postwar Japanese politics that concerned security policy and the interpretation of the Constitution. Issues that had been kept ambiguous through delicate compromises were now exposed and had to be addressed in a limited timeframe. The government therefore hastily formulated the draft International Peace Cooperation Act and submitted it to the Diet. As mentioned above, as deployment of the SDF was considered out of the question in the context of domestic politics, the bill aimed to have SDF personnel join a separate organization and participate in non-combat missions, such as transport and medical support. This method was painstakingly created to enable Japan's involvement in the UN's collective security while at the same time avoiding resistance to the overseas deployment of the SDF. However, as expected, it failed to gain support not only from the opposition parties but also from the "doves" within

⁶ Regarding Kaifu Toshiki's thoughts on diplomacy, see Orita Masaki, "Kaifu Toshiki: Heiwa kokka no rinen no shita de no kokusai koken no mosaku" [Kaifu Toshiki: Exploring international contribution under the peaceful nation principle], Masuda Hiroshi, ed., *Sengo nihon shusho no gaiko shiso: Yoshida Shigeru kara Koizumi Junichiro made* [Postwar Japanese Prime Ministers' Thoughts on Diplomacy: From Yoshida Shigeru to Koizumi Junichiro], Minerva Shobo, 2016.

⁷ Iokibe Makoto, Ito Motoshige, and Yakushiji Katsuyuki, eds., *Okamoto Yukio: Genbashugi wo tsuranuita gaikokan* [Okamoto Yukio: The Persistently Hands-on Diplomat], The Asahi Shimbun Company, 2008, pp. 165-166.

⁸ Prime Minister Kaifu later said that, at the time, he "imagined the Manchurian Incident and felt a sense of foreboding." Kaifu Toshiki, *Seiji to kane* [Politics and Money], Shinchoshinsho, 2010, pp. 122-123.

⁹ Kakimi Hiroki, ed., *Kaifu Toshiki kosoroku: Jigasakko* [Compilation of Kaifu Toshiki's Concepts: Carving Out New Frontiers], Jurinsha, 2015, pp. 88-89.

the LDP, and the bill was scrapped in the Diet.

With Japan unable to take actions like other major U.S. allies by deploying the SDF, the Foreign Ministry scrambled to come up with a way for the SDF to cooperate in providing logistics support. However, the Cabinet Legislation Bureau contended that the SDF could not transport supplies under the Constitution because involvement in arms transport is integrated with the use of force. The Ministry of International Trade and Industry said that not even trucks could be sent because they are considered “arms exports.” The private sector and labor unions were reluctant to transport supplies to dangerous areas where even the SDF were not allowed to go. Faced with a series of domestic resistance, the Japanese government was prevented from taking any effective actions.¹⁰

As a result, Japan’s “contribution” was limited almost exclusively to a financial one. The Ministry of Finance was involved in the negotiations due to the large amount of fiscal expenditure involved. The ministry, together with other economic agencies within the government, were generally uncooperative with the contribution, having had repeated bitter experiences with pressure from the United States. Moreover, the negotiation channels were divided into two, resulting in some mismanagement.¹¹ Therefore, the large sum of financial support looked no more than a reluctant contribution in response to external pressure, leaving only the impression that it was “too little too late.”

The problems with this mainstream conservative approach were obvious. First, at a time when Japan’s remarkable economic growth was conspicuous, the country’s failure to take timely action on security issues in the Persian Gulf, on which it was critically dependent for oil imports, added fuel to the fire of criticism that Japan was simply free-riding on the security provided by the United States. But these were not only a matter of management of Japan’s foreign policy toward the United States. The conflict in the Persian Gulf acutely brought into question how Japan would be involved in the global security on which its own prosperity depended, a question that the Japanese have avoided until then.

The SDF’s involvement in UN peacekeeping operations had previously been raised as an issue. Nonetheless, the mission of the SDF, even whose constitutionality was not recognized by the Socialist Party, had been strictly limited to the defense of Japanese territory, and therefore, the SDF had never participated even in peacekeeping operations. Involvement in enforcement measures under Chapter VII of the UN Charter was entirely out of the question. Despite Japan’s global interests and economic power, the Japanese government was completely unprepared for assuming any international security risks. As a result, Japan seemed like a broken cash machine that gave out cash whenever it was beaten.

It was not only the government that lacked intellectual preparation in Japan. Leftist forces that had consistently preached “pacifism” and “international cooperation” were opposed to the Gulf War in the first place. In addition, a group of influential intellectuals released a statement, articulating that while Iraq’s actions should be criticized, military force

¹⁰ Iokibe, Ito, and Yakushiji, eds., *Okamoto Yukio*, Chapter 5.

¹¹ For an analysis that construes the defeat of Japanese diplomacy in the Gulf War as primarily a failure due to this dual diplomacy, see Teshima Ryuichi, *1991 nen nihon no haiboku* [Japan’s Defeat in 1991], Shinchosha, 1993.

should not be used to repel them.¹² In that sense, it was desirable as a matter of principle that the Japanese government does not involve itself in the war. Doi, the head of the Socialist Party, which was indisputably the leading opposition party at the time, stated, “The current multinational force is not a formal UN force as is sanctioned by the UN Charter, and it is no exaggeration to say the United States is behaving unilaterally.”¹³ In other words, the party also viewed the situation as a matter of Japan-U.S. relations. What then would Japan do if a UN force is formed in accordance with the provisions of the Charter? Doi’s statement that the SDF “cannot” participate on the basis of Japan’s Constitution may be consistent with the Socialist Party’s interpretation of the Constitution that the SDF is unconstitutional. However, to say that the function of the UN is “to settle disputes peacefully and politically” is simply a misunderstanding of Chapter VII of the UN Charter. Furthermore, to say “We are thinking of setting up something like a peacekeeping fund for the UN” is a stance not largely different from the government’s position, in the sense that Japan’s role is ultimately limited to the provision of money.

Leftist forces, too, faced a major dilemma. That is, it was revealed that their calls for “pacifism” and the “principle of international cooperation” were actually contradictory. Despite the fact that international consensus was clearly expressed by adopting a resolution of the UN Security Council, which includes China and the Soviet Union, and that a large number of countries sent troops and came together on an unprecedented scale, Japan turned its back on this – a move that was a far outcry from international cooperation. For starters, the UN does not embody “pacifism” as claimed by the left. The UN Charter anticipates coordinated military action by member states based on Security Council resolutions. The contradiction had not been exposed only because the functions of the UN Security Council were paralyzed during the Cold War. Now that the Cold War was over and the UN was functioning, the potential contradiction between the “principle of international cooperation” and “pacifism” had become exposed.

Then, what about the traditional nationalist camp (who may be called “rightists,” a term which in Japan, however, is associated more with violent than political groupings) that call for freeing Japan from the humiliating subordination to the United States due to the defeat in World War II and for defending Japan by the Japanese themselves as an independent state? Was participation in the Gulf War seen as a favorable opportunity to remove the restrictions on Japan’s military activities? In fact, in China and South Korea, the general discourse at the time was, and probably still is, that Japan has used a range of opportunities to steadily remove its postwar constitutional restrictions.

However, as far as I could see, traditional nationalists were also perplexed. They were strongly dissatisfied with the peculiar constitutional restrictions imposed on the Japanese people regarding the use of military force for the defense of Japan and its national interests. That said, the concept of collective security is not in harmony with their view of security and

¹² “Scholars’ Statement against the Gulf War,” Ko Hwajeong, “Wangan senso go no bungakusha” [Post-Gulf War scholars], *Gendai Shiso* [Revue de la pensée d’aujourd’hui], June 2003.

¹³ “Takokusekigun ni te wo kashite wa dame” [Helping multinational forces is not a good idea], *Bungeishunju*, October 1990, p. 99.

national interests. Eto Jun bitterly describes that Japan continues to be bound by the spell of the postwar Constitution and suggests that Japan should, for example, “send two or three destroyers on a ‘goodwill visit’ to the Gulf states.”¹⁴ Yet, in principle, Japan should maintain friendly relations with Iraq, an oil-producing country. Furthermore, a “multinational force” is merely a force dispatched by each country according to its own national interests. Since the Gulf War was, after all, nothing more than a U.S. war, Japanese people sharing the risks and costs in response to U.S. pressure is nothing more than a form of postwar Japanese obedience to the United States, which traditional nationalists had always felt bitterly about.

Moreover, their position was also contradictory. Even for traditional nationalists, it would be undesirable for Japan’s international standing and prestige if it were the only country that could not participate in the multinational force, at a time when the world’s countries were coming together on an unprecedented scale. Such Japanese posture would paradoxically reaffirm the very restrictions inherent in postwar Japan, which the Japanese pacifists as well as China and South Korea wished for. In fact, their “anti-Americanism” was analogous to the “pacifism” of the left.

Subsequent Developments

The Gulf War ended in an unexpectedly quick and overwhelming victory of the multinational force. The fact that Japan was not involved in any direct combat action and dealt with the issue with money may be considered as a continuation of its postwar diplomatic stance. If so, we can perhaps expect the Japanese to be relieved or satisfied. Judging from developments in public opinion, however, it is clear that the Japanese did not perceive it that way. Rather, at a time when the international community was filled with optimism that it had entered a new era in which aggression could be repelled through the collective security mechanism, a deep sense of defeat and humiliation swept over the people as Japan received only contempt for its economic contribution, which is a fruit of the greatest postwar achievement of Japan. Without this sense of frustration, Japan’s security policy would not have evolved as it later did.

In April 1991, after the ceasefire, a Maritime Self-Defense Force (MSDF) minesweeping unit headed for the Persian Gulf to conduct minesweeping. This was the first time the MSDF operated in waters far from Japanese territorial waters for purposes other than training cruises, and constituted an overseas deployment albeit not for combat purposes. The MSDF’s minesweeping unit, which was never designed for such a mission, sailed 6,000 nautical miles to the Persian Gulf at a speed comparable to a bicycle’s in a little over a month, and conducted operations for three months from June to September. As usual, some in Japan expressed opposition. Interestingly, however, the public, which always had strong misgivings about the

¹⁴ Eto Jun, “Dare no tame no koken ka” [For whom is this contribution?], *Nihon yo, doko e ikunoka* [Japan, Where Are You Going?], Bungeishunju, 1991, p. 66.

SDF, was generally supportive of the SDF's activities.¹⁵ Over 500 personnel completed their dangerous mission with the rather unusual support of the public opinion.

In the following year, 1992, a Ground Self-Defense Force (GSDF) engineering unit was dispatched to Cambodia to engage in a UN peacekeeping operation (PKO), the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC). There was strong opposition to the GSDF's overseas deployment. In the Diet, the Socialist Party resisted by fiercely obstructing proceedings, and the vote on the International Peace Cooperation Act lasted 66 hours. When two Japanese nationals, a UN volunteer and a civilian police officer, were killed in the line of duty, the SDF's withdrawal came under intense debate. In the end, Prime Minister Miyazawa Kiichi made the decision to have the SDF stay put in Cambodia. Thereafter, in the Diet, whenever Japan participated in PKOs, the possibility of the SDF becoming involved in combat was noted, and the issue of constitutional restrictions was repeatedly raised. But ultimately, the public gradually came to accept PKOs, and Japan continued to be engaged in PKO activities, albeit on a limited scale and with limited duties.

Perhaps the most important political change that occurred in Japan in the aftermath of the Gulf War was the more serious discussions on revising the Constitution. The postwar Constitution containing the well-known Article 9 had long been a major point of contention that divided Japan. But once the aforementioned Yoshida Doctrine took hold in the 1960s, the issue of constitutional revision was no longer debated head-on. After the Gulf War, however, constitutional reform, which had been almost a taboo subject until then, began to be discussed openly, and various organizations proposed and actively debated draft constitutional amendments. Public opinion polls clearly indicate that constitutional revision is now a sufficiently realistic political agenda.¹⁶

Conclusion

The Gulf War taught the Japanese a bitter lesson. They learned from the upset that economic success alone does not buy security and does not fulfill Japan's responsibility in the international community – a common sense in hindsight. The experience seriously called into question Japan's postwar belief that abstaining from military affairs and focusing solely on wealth building and civilian areas, such as development assistance, was the way to achieve not only peace and security but also prestige in the international community.

Yet, 30 years later, can it be said that Japan has learned enough from its experience? The people will probably be divided in their judgment. The answer will likely depend on whether they see the glass as half-full or half-empty. Okamoto Yukio, who resigned after being on

¹⁵ Regarding the trends in Japanese public opinion, see the analysis in: Oyama Takatoshi, "Jieitai haken wo meguru seiji tenkan 1990 nen 8 gatsu – 91 nen 4 gatsu: 'Kokusai koken' gainen no rufu wo itoguchi ni" [Political shifts over the deployment of the Self-Defense Forces, August 1990-April 1991: Drawing hints from the widespread concept of "international contribution"], *Tsukuba Hosei* [Tsukuba Review of Law and Political Science], No. 69, 2017.

¹⁶ For an analysis of the changes in Japanese public opinion regarding the Constitution, see Tadokoro Masayuki, "Nihonjin no taigai ishiki ni okeru renzoku to furenzoku" [Continuity and discontinuity in Japanese people's attitudes toward foreign nations], Soeya Yoshihide, David Welch, and Tadokoro Masayuki, eds., *"Futsu" no kuni nihon* [Japan as a "Normal Country"?], Chikura Shobo, March 2014.

the front lines of Japanese diplomacy and tasting hardships during the Gulf War as director of the Foreign Ministry's First North America Division, later reflected as follows: compared to the era until the war when consistency with the Constitution was the focus of discussion, "the substance of policy is being discussed in the current era. The Gulf War certainly had a significant impact on security issues."¹⁷ There is no doubt that Japan's security policy became more proactive in part because the Socialist Party, the leading opposition party which argued that the SDF was unconstitutional, lost steam and became virtually negligible.

Nevertheless, the Constitution remains intact, and Japanese discourse on security issues still overwhelmingly takes the form of ideological and legalistic discussion on constitutionality. Moreover, over the past 30 years, Japan's economy has stagnated, while China's explosive expansion of national strength has resulted in a dramatic shift in the balance of power. As a result, the security environment surrounding Japan has deteriorated significantly, and Japan, which is now constantly and directly exposed to Chinese military pressure, is forced to further rely on the Japan-U.S. Alliance for its own defense. The decision over the use of military force is the ultimate challenge for any political community. However, if one asks whether the Japanese people are prepared and ready to face severe security challenges based on free and democratic institutions while effectively using limited resources, one must say that there is much uncertainty even 30 years later.

¹⁷ Iokibe, Ito, and Yakushiji, eds., *Okamoto Yukio*, p. 154.