

[HOME](#)[RESEARCH](#)[EVENTS](#)[CENTERS](#)[EXPERTS](#)[ABOUT US](#)

[HOME](#) > [AJISS-Commentary](#) > Japan's Foreign and Security Policies in the Heisei Era

AJISS-Commentary

Japan's Foreign and Security Policies in the Heisei Era

03-30-2020

Shinichi Kitaoka (President ,the Japan International Cooperation Agency)



*Series: Trajectory of Heisei, way forward to Reiwa (Introduction)

Introduction

Japan entered the Heisei era on January 8, 1989, when Emperor Showa passed away, and his son Akihito became his successor. On May 1, 2019, the Reiwa era began with Emperor Akihito's abdication and Naruhito's accession to the throne.

The start of a new Japanese era--be it Showa or Heisei--does not necessarily signify a change in world history. The year 1989 happened to be an important year in world history--the fall of the Berlin Wall in November and the G7 summit in Malta in December brought about the end of the Cold War. Besides, in June of 1989, the Tiananmen Square incident occurred in China. This was a major turning point in China's development. In other words, the start of the Heisei coincided with significant events.

The Cold War was not only a confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union but also a confrontation of the international order. Both the West and the East rallied behind their respective major powers. In other words, although there were exceptions, such as the confrontation between China and the United States,

constituted the basic order of the world.

Therefore, the end of the Cold War meant the end of one system, which accompanied the collapse of the bipolar world. The examples include the reunification of Germany (October 1990) and the collapse of the Soviet Union (December 1991). Besides, regional conflicts, such as the Gulf Crisis (August 1990) and the civil war in Somalia (1991-2001), became frequent.

1. From the End of the Cold War to the Redefinition of the Japan-US Security Treaty

The Gulf War

The first major shock was the Iraq's annexation of Kuwait in August 1990. This was the first time since the establishment of the United Nations (UN), following which the UN Security Council passed a series of resolutions to form a multinational force. Although it was not one like the UN force in the Korean War, it had some resemblance.

Had this happened during the Cold War, it is highly likely that either the United States or the Soviet Union would have stopped Iraq from invading, and the formation of multinational forces would have been vetoed by another permanent member of UNSC. The Gulf crisis would not have happened without the end of the Cold War.

Japan's response to it was inadequate. Prime Minister Toshiki Kaifu said he would not send the Self-Defense Forces (SDF) into dangerous areas. Although Japan initially contributed \$3 billion and later \$13 billion in financial contributions. Some argued that the SDF should be allowed to participate in transportation, medical care, and minesweeping, even if it was unable to engage in combat operations. Nonetheless, the majority of the public was opposed to the minority.

The war began in January 1991 and ended in a short time. Kuwait did not include Japan in the coalition. Japan became painfully aware that it is its duty as a member of international society in addition to financing. Even today, the Japanese media sometimes calls this the trauma of the Gulf War. To be precise, it should be called the trauma of Japan. The Japanese media that reports international affairs, even now, probably still opposed to Japan's participation in multinational forces.

In fact, there had been concerns among some people that Article 9 of the Constitution could not allow Japan to participate in UN forces since the adoption of the Constitution (1946). In those times, Japan was not a member of the UN. They argued that once Japan would become a member of the UN, it would be obligated to participate in UN forces. Nonetheless, successive governments did not consider this seriously.

Shocked by the Gulf War, the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), led by the Secretary General, began studying the possibility of military cooperation with the UN. However, neither the opposition Democratic Party of Japan (SDPJ) nor the majority of LDP was keen on it. Germany, which was a member of the UN and cautious about sending troops outside its territory, revised its constitution to allow military participation in the wake of the Gulf War. Compared with that, the movement in Japan was slow. Although movements for amending the Constitution grew—such as Yomiuri Shimbun established the Research Commission on the Constitution—they did not develop into a major movement.

Initiation of PKOs

However, growing calls for Japan to at least participate in the UN peacekeeping operations emerged.

enactment of the International Peace Cooperation Law in 1992. In the autumn of the same year, Japan participated in the UN's PKO in Cambodia (UNTAC), which was the first experience for the country. Nevertheless, strict restrictions on the possession and use of weapons were placed on the law. Those flaws were repeatedly pointed out in subsequent PKOs, requiring its revision. The Japanese contingent suffered total of two deaths, one from the police and another from a former soldier who developed an inward-looking attitude. Nonetheless, it may be said as a big step in international cooperation.

Security Issues and Political Reforms

Even among the supporters of opposition parties, there was a growing belief that the government should work to reform the political system. The formation of the Japan New Party in 1992 in conjunction with the movement of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) to the formation of the Hosokawa Cabinet in July 1993, the first non-LDP coalition government. In this administration, the conventional election system, centered on the multiple-seat constituency system, was amended in January 1994. It was expected that, with emergence of realistic opposition parties, there would be more competition between the ruling and opposition parties. However, the Hosokawa Cabinet collapsed in June 1994, and the Tsutomu Hata Cabinet, which succeeded it, also collapsed in June, resulting in a coalition cabinet between the LDP and the SDPJ with Tomiichi Murayama as prime minister.

Murayama Cabinet and the History Issue

The Murayama Cabinet succeeded the LDP's diplomatic and security policies, including its commitment to the Japan-US Security Treaty and the Self Defence Forces. On the other hand, the cabinet released a Statement on the 50th anniversary of the end of World War II and the statement of Chief Cabinet Secretary Kono on the issue of so-called Korean comfort women, which showed the Japan's attitude on its war responsibilities. On the comfort women issue, the Asian Women's Fund was established. The SDPJ's strongly held view that Japan should show repentance on the war. The LDP accepted the coalition.

North Korea's Nuclear Issues

In 1993, another major security challenge emerged—namely, the suspicion of nuclear weapons development in North Korea. Although the United States once considered airstrikes, the crisis was averted by the President Carter's visit to Pyongyang in July 1994, and the Korean Peninsula Energy Development Agreement (KPAEDA) established to provide North Korea with energy. This was based on the assumption that the North Korean regime could not survive for a long time.

Nevertheless, it continued to develop nuclear weapons and strengthen missile capabilities, which worried the Japanese people.

Tiananmen Square Incident and Japan-China Relations

As mentioned above, the Tiananmen Square incident of 1989 coincided with the start of the reform and opening-up in China. Although there were hopes of liberalization like the Soviet Union's, they were buried by the incident. Deng Xiaoping, knowing that political liberalization had led to the collapse of the Soviet Union, emphasized economic development.

China was temporarily isolated. As there were persistent pro-China groups in Japan who

China should not be alienated, the Kaifu Cabinet lifted the sanctions against China, and the Cabinet decided to ask the Emperor and Empress to pay a state visit to the country. After international isolation and restarted strong development.

Redefining the Japan-US Security Treaty

At the end of the cold war, some people argued that the Japan-US security treaty was a threat from the Soviet Union disappeared. In reality, this argument did not prevail. On the growing calls for reducing the burden of Okinawa, where the presence of the US military base

In 1995, the Ryutaro Hashimoto Cabinet reaffirmed the importance of the treaty, known as the "Japan-US security treaty," and agreed to relocate US marines in Okinawa Prefecture.

Regarding Japan-US Security Treaty, the bipartisan Armitage-Nye Report on the post-cold war Japan was issued, and an increasing number of experts in the two countries expected that the treaty between them should be reviewed, with particular focus on the exercise of the right of col

2. 9/11 and the Search for an Independent Path: 2001-2006

The 9/11 terrorist attacks in 2001 shook the world. The United States declared war on al-Qaeda and sent its forces to Afghanistan. Major European countries also sent their troops, forming the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF). Japan enacted the Anti-Terrorism Special Measures Law and supported the UN-led coalition with other countries.

Around this time, the Koizumi Cabinet came up with a new policy toward North Korea. In 2002, Prime Minister Koizumi made a surprise visit to Pyongyang and met with Chairman Kim Jong-il of the Workers' Party of North Korea, the de facto head of the country, and issued the Pyongyang Declaration. Kim Jong-il admitted the abduction of Japanese nationals and promised denuclearization and pledged assistance after the normalization of diplomatic relations, and the two countries agreed to the normalization of the relations.

Soon after, however, it came to light that North Korea was secretly developing nuclear weapons. In 2002, there was a growing outcry of public opinion that North Korea's response to the abduction issue was insufficient. As a result, the negotiations failed to progress after Koizumi's second visit to North Korea in 2002.

In 2003, the United States launched an attack on Iraq for allegedly producing weapons of mass destruction. Although the United Nations Security Council found the US assertion lacking sufficient evidence, the US started the attack without the council's support. Since cooperation with the United States on the Iraq issue was vital, Japan supported the US on the Iraq issue and dispatched the SDF to Iraq for peaceful reconstruction.

During this period, Japan's diplomacy toward the UN was noteworthy. In the wake of the Iraq issue and regional conflicts, a series of UN peacekeeping operations (PKO) were established by the UN Security Council. As a permanent member of the UNSC, Japan sometimes had to bear the cost of decisions made by the council that Japan did not participate.

Under these circumstances, the opinion that Japan should become a permanent member of the Security Council was raised in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In the early 1990s, although Boutros Boutros-Ghali envisioned a Security Council with Germany and Japan permanent seats, Japan was not enthusiastic about the idea. Many people had a misperception that if Japan became a permanent member, it would have to assume an ex

were also people who said that they would not oppose the idea if other countries recommend a committee that was set up with the intention of considering this problem from cautious Koizumi.

In 2004, Japan launched a full-scale campaign to reform the UNSC. With the aim of marking its 50th anniversary in September 2005, the G4 (composed of Japan, Germany, India, and Brazil) resolution was submitted. However, it failed due to the opposition from the United States and the cooperation of African countries.

The biggest reason for this failure was the lack of a strategic approach. It would have been different if Prime Minister Koizumi had persuaded Bush and adopted a more flexible stance on the issue of the UNSC, which was a point of contention with China. However, Koizumi, once an opponent of the UNSC, placed more importance on the United States than on the UN. Nevertheless, the movement was a new attempt in Japan's diplomacy, which had always made relations with the United States a top priority.

Over the DPRK nuclear issue, a number of six-party talks (composed of North Korea, the United States, Russia, and Japan) were held since 2003. Nonetheless, North Korea has secretly continued long-range missiles development. In 2006, after North Korea conducted a nuclear test, the UNSC passed a resolution imposing sanctions against it.

3. China's Expansion and Japan's Strengthening of Security Policy: 2008-2015

While the United States was dragged into the quagmire of the Middle East, China gained momentum after the Lehman shock, it led the world economy by expanding domestic demand on a large scale. After the Olympic game were held in China, it overtook Japan in terms of economic scale. Its growth also became significant. Since those days, China stopped using such terms as future democracy.

In 2010 and 2012, China sent its government vessels into Japanese waters around the Senkaku Islands to challenge Japanese territorial rights. In the South China Sea, China claimed sovereignty over a so-called Nine-dash Line, which includes many high seas and territories of other countries. This led to a complaint with the Permanent Court of Arbitration, which found the Chinese claim ground has completely ignored this ruling.

Under the Abe Cabinet, Japan has promoted a number of reforms in its security policy. In 2013, it formulated the National Security Strategy, established the National Security Secretariat, and introduced a policy of defense equipment. In 2014, the government changed its interpretation of the Constitution to allow for the partial exercise of the right of collective self-defense, supported by a proposal of the Security Council. Based on this, a package of new legislations was enacted in 2015. Although there was a strong opposition to this, its content was moderate, below the international standard, and all South Korean governments welcomed it. Nevertheless, Japan's reinforcement of its security policy has been quite meaningful to keep up with significant changes in the real world.

On the other hand, one of the criticisms against Japan was on the so-called history issue. Japan was accused of being unrepentant about its past. In response to this, Japan-ROK joint studies were conducted for two terms from 2002, but no significant progress was made. In 2006, Japan-China joint studies were proposed, which made some progress.

In 2015, Prime Minister Abe released a statement commemorating 70 years since the end of World War II.

statement was appreciated by most countries, including those in Southeast Asia. With the with South Korea, the history issue has passed its critical stage.

4. Summary at the End of the Heisei Era

Japan's diplomatic environment at the end of the Heisei era is extremely bleak. Its relations with the United States, which were at their closest, have receded. The close personal ties between Prime Minister Abe and President Putin, have made little progress. At the beginning of the Reiwa era, the prospect of having Habomai and Shikotan, and the return of all four islands as a package, is not good.

Regarding the relations with North Korea, it has repeatedly conducted nuclear tests and development of long-range missiles in an attempt to gain recognition from the Trump administration.

In South Korea, President Moon Jae-in, who took office in 2016, has not showed the attitude of agreement on the comfort women issue and done nothing on its Supreme Court ruling over laborer issue. As a result, Japan-ROK relation is now at their worst since the end of World War II.

China is moving closer to Japan in response to the Trump administration's aggressive trade policies. China's oppression of Hong Kong and the Uighurs continue. Although Japan wants to avoid confrontation, it is impossible to accept China's policies in their entirety.

Relations with Southeast Asia and India are going well. The Free and Open Indo-Pacific strategy, which was originally called a strategy, has achieved a certain success in containing China's Belt and Road Initiative. The United States also supports this idea, and European countries such as France and UK are cooperating.

Japan's economic power in the world is second only to that of the United States and China. Its average growth rate is around 1%, even with the massive government stimulus.

However, Japan is moving in the right direction for now. While sustaining a good relationship with the United States administration, Japan has become a central force in maintaining multilateral cooperation, such as the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP). Today, Japan's foreign policy plays a crucial role not only for the country but also for the world. While supporting the world order, Japan will strengthen its own defense capability, to focus on economic reconstruction, and to become a leader in multilateralism.

[Back To Archive](#)

Official SNS

Twitter

Facebook

Youtube

Research Centers

CDAST

Japan Information Center (JIC)

PECC

[Contacts Us / Access](#)

© The Japan Institute of International Affairs

About JIIA Membership

JIIA has established a membership system for corporate and individual members to garner support for its activities and funding therefore from the broader public.

