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“CONDITIONAL SUPPORT” FOR THE PALESTINIAN QUEST FOR STATEHOOD

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The Middle East peace process is about to enter a new phase. With an impasse in bilateral peace talks with Israel, Mahmoud Abbas, President of the Palestinian Authority (PA) and Chairman of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), is almost certain to request full membership to the United Nations in the UN General Assembly session scheduled for this month. If approved, UN membership will grant the Palestinians sovereign state status equal to Israel, which will cast a new light on the continued “illegal” occupation under international law by a UN member state of another UN member state’s territory.

The views expressed in this piece are the author’s own and should not be attributed to The Association of Japanese Institutes of Strategic Studies.

Concerned about further international isolation, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is trying hard to block the Palestinian move, insisting that the Palestinians' "unilateral" act constitutes a virtual retreat from bilateral negotiations that runs counter to the peace process. Dismayed by Netanyahu's inflexibility, though, US President Barack Obama, who is seeking reelection next year, is sending the Palestinians a warning not to jeopardize bilateral talks in consideration of the influence the pro-Israel lobbies retain in Congress.


In the current circumstances roughly summarized above, how should Japan behave in the event the Palestinian quest for UN membership becomes a reality? To cut to the conclusion, my opinion is that Japan should offer "conditional support" for reasons I will state below.

First, the request does not come out of the blue; it follows existing timelines. September is the target month set by PA Prime Minister Salam Fayyad in 2009 for the Palestinians to establish the state apparatus to achieve independence within two years. Furthermore, it will have been a year since Obama told the last session of the UN General Assembly that he believed there could be an agreement leading to an independent, sovereign state of Palestine by the next meeting of the General Assembly, which was applauded by the other member states. If the Palestinians satisfy the necessary conditions for independence and the international community is prepared to recognize this independence, there will be no reason for Japan to object.

Second, requesting UN membership is different from asking the world body to resolve the conflict. It simply means that the Palestinians want to join the UN as an independent, sovereign state based on the 1967 boundaries with East Jerusalem being its capital. UN membership should have no direct legal relevance on the substance of bilateral negotiations. Core issues such as the return of refugees and the status of holy sites in Jerusalem will be left to future negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians along with the demarcation of specific borders. If the Palestinians are granted sovereign state status, the asymmetrical structure that has accompanied Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, where one side is a sovereign state and the other a liberation movement, will be set straight to generate a more normal pattern of negotiations between

sovereign states, at least in principle. This will increase the chances of success in the negotiations by clearing out some of destabilizing factors.

Third, UN membership is premised on the member state unconditionally subscribing to the Charter's objectives and principles. In light of the UN's core mission of the maintenance of peace and security, the member state is required to refrain from becoming a threat to neighboring countries. While Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territories is no doubt questionable, we equally cannot overlook the fact that the Palestinian leadership subsumes political forces embracing Islamic fundamentalism (such as Hamas) and continues to deny Israel's right to exist. We should approve Palestinian accession to the UN on condition that the PA clearly declares and demonstrates by their actions that a future Palestinian state does not threaten the security of the neighboring state of Israel.

Referring an accession proposal to the General Assembly requires the backing of the Security Council. It has been reported that, anticipating a US veto, the PA is considering the option of upgrading its current observer status to non-member state status, which can be approved with a General Assembly resolution alone. In that case, too, Japan will have no reason to object for the same reasons stated above. 

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