



## A string of worrisome incidents....

by Sheila A. Smith and Brad Glosserman

Japan is debating its place in the region and the world. Or so it seems. There is no mistaking the attempt by some Japanese officials and intellectuals – from Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro on down – to redefine Tokyo’s international role. This process is behind the prime minister’s controversial visits to Yasukuni Shrine, the historic deployment of Self-Defense Forces to aid coalition forces in Afghanistan and Iraq, and the redefinition of the U.S.-Japan security alliance that has been laid out in various documents, most notably the “2+2 meetings” of the two allies’ leading foreign policy and defense officials.

Japan’s new debate on its postwar history (not to mention the more politically sensitive topic of its prewar history) and the broad range of questions about the institutions and the practices that have accompanied that notion of a postwar Japan, are, for many, well overdue. But they are also for many – inside and outside Japan – a topic fraught with social tension and contest. This debate shakes the core understandings of several generations within Japan, and of an international audience that is nervous about where and how its outcome might affect the rest of the world. Japan’s debate over its past and its prescriptions for a new foundation for its foreign policy are deeply intertwined. And this discussion will inevitably bare deep social scars and involve heated emotions.

We have great faith in Japanese democracy and believe this debate is for the good of the country. We believe that this discussion will strengthen the foundation of Japanese foreign policy and the U.S.-Japan alliance.

But we are also concerned by recent developments. Last week, the Japan Institute for International Affairs (JIIA), a foreign ministry managed think tank, suspended publication of a commentary series that focused on Japanese foreign policy. The suspension followed criticism of its contents by a prominent journalist. The journalist, Komori Yoshihisa, took offense with comments such as “Japan watchers (in foreign countries) increasingly blame the deterioration in Sino-Japanese relations on Japan, describing Japan’s China policies as mindless and provocative, self-righteous and gratuitous. But in the country itself, there is scant awareness that Japan is perceived (by some countries) as being nationalistic, militaristic, or hawkish,” and “Critics see in Prime Minister Koizumi’s stance on Yasukuni a lack of repentance for past imperial aggression in Asia, about which Japan has long been silent.”

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs has since the 1970s played a key role in providing English-language materials, written by Japanese that would otherwise be unavailable to an international audience. It publishes *Japan Echo*, which compiles and translates into English excerpts of articles in leading Japanese journals such as *Bungei Shunju*, *Chuokoron*,

and *Shokun*. It also publishes *Gaiko Forum*, a journal that focuses exclusively on Japan’s foreign policy. Thus, JIIA’s new initiative is part of a longstanding effort to bring the range of Japanese views and insights to a growing and increasingly interested international audience.

Behind this incident are old feuds, intellectual antagonisms that are reflected in labels such as “progressive left” and “conservative right.” These markers of the 1955-system are used today as accusations to denounce individuals rather than to look at the merits of their arguments. At precisely the time when the debate over ideas in Japan is so fluid, this lingering impulse to shut down the opposition must be resisted. Indeed, what was so encouraging about the JIIA commentary series is that it moved away from the “progressive left”-“conservative right” dichotomy, and brought a fresh analytical perspective to the conversation.

All three protagonists in this story have spent much of their careers abroad, and they have been active participants in shaping the debate on Japan’s foreign policy.

The president of JIIA, Satoh Yukio, Japan’s former ambassador to the United Nations, is one of Japan’s leading diplomats, and a policy intellectual who has published and actively participated in international relations debates in Japan, Europe, and the United States. The editor of the commentary series, Tamamoto Masaru, is an internationally read academic and essayist on Japan’s domestic debates over its national identity and its role in the world. The critic, Komori Yoshihisa, is an outspoken senior journalist for the *Sankei Shimbun*, who has served in Washington and Beijing, and who has in the past demonstrated sensitivity to international criticism of Japan’s new debate over its history. Yet, they have very different takes on Japan’s national identity debate.

This incident has provoked heated debate among Japan watchers and has occasioned provocative statements suggesting that it recalls earlier periods of Japanese history. Inside Japan, however, commentary on websites has taken Komori’s criticism to heart. Ambassador Sato has formally responded to his critic in the *Sankei*, and suspended publication until he revamps the editorial procedures for the JIIA series.

For now, criticism that JIIA should not be producing material that is perceived as critical of Japan seems to have held the day. But the sensitivities that prompted the suspension of JIIA’s online commentary deserve greater attention. Is this an isolated event prompted by longstanding intellectual antagonisms? Is it a difference of opinion over the legitimacy of a government-sponsored research institute hosting a forum for contending perspectives over Japan’s foreign policy? Or is this a sign of an increasingly intolerant political climate within Japan?

The suspension of the JIIA commentary is troubling because it provides fodder for those who suggest that unaccountable, behind-the-scenes forces are shaping Japan's current foreign policy debate. An editorial criticizing a think tank's commentary would not, in most democratic societies, be cause for shutting down the commentary and a public apology by its director. Rather, it would be cause for more debate – hopefully, backed by reasoned consideration of alternative viewpoints. The timing of this incident is important, however.

At precisely the time when open debate over questions such as Yasukuni Shrine visits, Constitutional revision, and Japan's foreign policy priorities would be most welcome, there seems to be a growing hesitancy in the public discourse. Sensitivities over the public mood in Japan, coupled with the demonstrated behavior of some rather murky and unaccountable self-proclaimed “right-wing” forces, are creating limitations for those whose participation in the public policy debate is vital – Japan's political leaders and foreign policy practitioners.

More disturbing than the criticism of JIIA are the “incidents” in recent years that imply threat and sanction – even violence – against those individuals with public responsibility for articulating Japan's future foreign policy goals. In September 2003, MOFA official Tanaka Hitoshi, then responsible for Japan's negotiations with North Korea, received death threats after Prime Minister Koizumi's visit to Pyongyang failed to bring home all of the Japanese citizens abducted by North Korea. Ishihara Shintaro, Tokyo's controversial governor, told reporters that this death threat was “only natural,” suggesting that the threat of violence against a public official was tolerable. Surprisingly, there was no rebuttal to Ishihara from Japan's political leadership.

Last week, the home and office of Kato Koichi were burned by a self-proclaimed “rightist,” following criticism by the politician, a long-time advocate of closer Japan-China relations, of the prime minister's visits to Yasukuni. Fortunately, his 90-year-old mother was not home. Yet again, Japan's top government leaders were silent. While the criminal investigation has already revealed that the aims and political intentions of the arson, the government has not condemned the act, again leaving the impression that political violence is somehow unavoidable. This silence does not befit a democracy and undermines Tokyo's moral authority. Worse, it feeds the exaggerated claims of critics who fear that the country has not learned lessons from its prewar experience.

Next month, the Liberal Democratic Party will hold its presidential election. Prime Minister Koizumi's successor will take on the challenge of crafting and leading Japan's future. Leadership carries with it the responsibility of participating in and shaping a public policy agenda. It will be incumbent upon the prime minister and, indeed upon all of Japan's political leaders, to draw the line between vigorous and open debate over the ideas and principles that will shape the future, and a debate that carries with it the threat of public rebuke – or worse yet, violence. They must stand up for the norms of acceptable behavior in a modern democracy.

Silence in the face of intolerance and intimidation will only erode confidence in Japan's democracy, most importantly within Japan – but also beyond its borders. Japan's government leaders must speak out against potential censorship and implicit threats against those who hold divergent viewpoints, and must condemn without reservation politically motivated violence.

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