



Nationalism isn't an issue in Japan by Robert Dujarric

*Robert Dujarric (robertdujarric@gmail.com) is director of the Institute of Contemporary Japanese Studies at Temple University Japan in Tokyo. An earlier version of this article appeared in *The Japan Times* on July 30, 2008.*

As Japan commemorated the anniversary of the end of the Great East Asia War Aug. 15 and renewed, in a mild manner, its claim on Takeshima (Dokdo to Koreans) we can expect more Asians — and some Americans — to warn against the dangers of rising Japanese nationalism. What is striking, however, is the absence of nationalism in Japan compared to its Chinese and Korean neighbors and its U.S. ally.

Nationalism is a term that can have different meanings. Here, I define it as an ideology that mobilizes the entire citizenry to foster an ambitious and often aggressive foreign policy while justifying the use of military force as a first rather than last resort. Japan in the early Showa era was a nationalistic polity, but today, regardless of the metric used, it scores very low on nationalism.

One telling indicator is Japan's small investment in its armed forces as a percentage of national income despite its proximity to two potential war zones (Korea and Taiwan). The offensive capabilities of North Korea against Japan, namely its ballistic missiles and nuclear program, have grown significantly, as have those of China. Yet Japan continues to keep its military budget at around 1 percent of national income (a little more if other expenses are included). Additionally, the phenomenal waste in Japanese procurement programs shows that the Ministry of Defense is as much a funding mechanism for Japanese businesses as a tool to build a strong military.

Moreover, when it comes to dealing with the outside world, Japanese diplomats are as unlikely as those of the Holy See to resort to threats of force. There are no John Boltons in the Japanese Foreign Ministry. This peaceful, low profile reflects a basic fact often ignored by outsiders: Japanese voters favor candidates who care about bread-and-butter issues over those whose concern is Japan's greatness and military might.

This phenomenon reflects the fact that Japan, unlike other players in the region, tests negative on risk factors for aggressive nationalism. Nationalism often arises out of a sense of national victimization. A major cause of Chinese and Korean nationalism is a belief that foreigners preyed upon and humiliated their countries. As a result, many Chinese and Koreans want no insult to their national dignity to go unpunished, however insignificant. A case in point is South Korea's quixotic campaign to rename the Sea of Japan the East Sea.

In Japan's case, there is no sense of victimhood. Yes, Japanese either experienced or know about U.S. terror

bombings during the war. But, with a few exceptions, this pushes them toward pacifism. It fuels their contempt for the Japanese militarists who led the nation on a war that destroyed the country. It may make them dislike the alliance with the U.S., but it does not produce a longing for a new Imperial Japan ready to conquer lost territories.

Another foundation of nationalism is a belief that one's country has a destiny to lead the world, or at least its region. This helps explain the support of Americans for military intervention and the conquests of Revolutionary and Napoleonic France. Though Chinese nationalism lacks the universalistic ambitions of the U.S., many Chinese think that history gave China a right to regional primacy.

In contemporary Japan, however, there is none of the messianic urge found in Western cultures. Nor do Japanese have the same sense of civilizational and historical greatness that is common in China.

Domestic factors also energize nationalism. One is fear for the country's territorial integrity and/or a belief that there are still unredeemed provinces. In the Chinese case, anxiety about Tibet, Xinjiang (Chinese Turkestan), and Inner Mongolia fuel Han nationalism. Moreover, for most Chinese, Taiwan is a Chinese island that must be brought back into the motherland.

In the Korean case, national division encourages nationalism, even though South Koreans are lukewarm about actual unification. Memories of Japanese aggression in both nations fan the flames of nationalism in China and Korea. In Japan, however, there is no domestic separatism to be afraid of. And, despite pro forma Japanese claims to the Northern Territories and Takeshima, few Japanese care about them.

A second domestic issue is nationalism as a tool to confront the government. In autocratic China, nationalism is an indirect way to oppose the ruling party. When demonstrators throw rocks at the U.S. embassy or attack Japanese diplomats, they are also criticizing their rulers for being weak-kneed. Moreover, simply by marching through the streets, or gathering virtually on the Internet, they demonstrate to the leadership that the people can mobilize on their own.

Though South Korea is now a liberal democracy, many of its leftwing nationalists came of age when anti-American (or anti-Japanese) nationalism was fused with the fight against the military regime. Japan, however, has been a free society for well half a century, if its citizens are unhappy they simply go to a voting booth rather than seek alternative forms of mobilization.

Japanese may be proud of their culture and, like other people, express xenophobia, but they are not nationalistic in the sense that Chinese, Koreans, and Americans are.