



Unrequited Responsibility: Japan, Iran and Israel

By Mindy Kotler

[We present three articles on Iran in the crosshairs, examining the conflict over Iran in light of moves by the US, UN, Japan, EU and Israel. The central issue concerns the US effort to bring Iran before the UN Security Council for its refusal to terminate the development of its civilian nuclear power program. It is a course that many see as the essential step toward US-directed regime change.

In the first article, Mindy Kotler, Director of Asia Policy Point, examines critically Japan's reluctance to join the US-led bandwagon on Iran, highlighting the failure to criticize the Iranian president's statements on Israel and the holocaust, and noting Japan's heavy dependence on Iranian oil. She also hints at another potent factor: like Iran, Japan is actively pursuing the development of nuclear power for civilian uses. Unlike Iran, however, Japan's effort is advancing with US and EU tacit support. Japan did in fact vote with the US to bring Iran before the UN Security Council, as well as privately pressing Iran to halt its nuclear development program. Kotler notes important Japanese interests in Iranian oil. But she attributes Japan's reluctance to play a forward role in condemning Iran to a failure of its diplomacy. Where some see Japan's diplomatic failure to center on its Prime Minister's provocative visits to Yasukuni Shrine and other acts antagonizing its neighbors, Kotler believes that a more forward role on such issues as Iran are the prerequisites if Japan's is to succeed in its quest for a permanent Security Council seat. In declining to discuss the legitimacy of Iran's claims to develop civilian nuclear power, the article implicitly reiterates the US position on the issues.

The [second](#) article, an interview with Abbas Edalat, Professor of Mathematics, Kings College, UK, locates the US-Iranian conflict in the perspective of the conflict since the 1979 Iranian revolution and US designs to remake the Middle East map from the Iraq-Iran War to the present Iraq War. It makes a vigorous case for Iran's right to develop civilian nuclear power as a signatory to the Non Proliferation Treaty, and for that nation's right to survival. Edalat sharply criticizes US policy and warns of the dangers of the road to war being mapped out by leaders in the Pentagon and Israel. Indeed, it is Israel, even more than Washington, that has since 9/11 beaten the drums for war in Iran. Edalat argues, possibly optimistically, that strong opposition to the US position by Russia and China will make it difficult for the US to secure a Security Council sanction of Iran.

The [third](#) article, from the Asahi Shimbun, sets Japan's oil dependence on Iran, and particularly the decision about whether to proceed with its investment in the Azadegan oil fields, against the US-led pressures to bring Iran before the Security Council. [Japan Focus](#)]

Uninvited was Japan to the January 16th meeting in London on what to do about a nuclear Iran. Just a day before, Japan had offered to mediate the crisis. As one of Iran's principal economic partners and a symbol of nonproliferation, Japan seemed well positioned to help. Nevertheless, Japan was excluded from this closed-door meeting that included Germany and China. This oversight highlights the difficulties Tokyo faces in its quest to become a permanent member of the UN Security Council.

Japan has not been alone in distancing itself from US policy toward Iran. Yet, Tokyo has reacted differently than China and the EU to the increasingly outspoken Iranian President Ahmadinejad's insistence on establishing his country's right to nuclear power. In December, the Iranian leader called for Israel to be moved to Europe and denied that the Holocaust had happened.

The December 9th evening's Nihon Keizai Shimbun (Japanese edition) quoted a Kyodo News report that these statements were likely to result in protests from "oubei" (Europe and the US). No mention was made of Japan, a country that says it is a staunch supporter of the UN and international law as the basis for global order. The article's implication was that Japan might not want to join ranks with the West on this issue.

At the UN that same day, Japan did join in making a unanimous Security Council resolution condemning the Iranian statement. The official UN statement especially "recalled that the General Assembly had recently adopted a resolution rejecting denial of the Holocaust as a historical event, either in full or in part, and urged all Member States to educate their populations about the Holocaust." Yet, one cannot find any official statement from the Japanese Foreign Ministry (Gaimusho) speaking out on the issue. Japan's Foreign Minister Taro Aso, did respond to a question about the Holocaust at a December 16th press conference that "it would be highly unlikely that the photos of Auschwitz were fabricated."

In contrast, a Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman did respond directly to a press question on December 15th about the Iranian President's claims that Nazi holocaust of Europe's Jewish population was a myth. He stated, "we disagree with any remarks detrimental to state-to-state relations and regional stability. Last month, the 60th UN General Assembly adopted a resolution stressing that the Nazi holocaust is an indisputable historical fact, which we endorse. Israel is a UN member state. Its state rights should be respected." Tepid, yet it still was a statement for the record.

The Japanese response to the Iranian President's October declaration to wipe Israel off the map, was a Gaimusho statement (in Japanese only and appears to have been only released privately to the Israeli Embassy) to the effect that Mr. Yoshikawa Motohide, in charge of Middle Eastern and African Affairs had summoned Mr. Tarai, the Iranian Ambassador, and expressed Japan's concern regarding Mr. Ahmadinejad's declaration. Mr. Yoshikawa is said to have pointed out that if the declaration were as quoted, it was unacceptable in any context. Every declaration calling for the erasure of the world's map a state which is a member of the UN and recognized by international law is in contradiction to the spirit of the UN Charter and Japan condemns such a declaration, the Japanese diplomat concluded. In contrast, in the US and Europe, as well as in other parts of the world, the condemnations were made, loud and clear, by the heads of governments.

One explanation of Japan's reluctance to comment on the issue is that it simply did not concern Japan. In a December interview in the *Oriental Economist*, MOFA parliamentary vice minister Yasuhisa Shiozaki responded to a question about the Iranian president's suggestions that Israel be moved to Europe. He said that the idea is "Obviously, very unrealistic. It seemed to be a rather honest, although very provocative comment. I cannot blame the Iranians for saying so, since we are outsiders from the long history and rather complicated relationship between Jewish society and Islamic society in the Middle East. But, simply put, his suggestion is unrealistic." The reporter followed by asking if Japan had responded forcefully enough about the denial of Holocaust as did the leaders of Europe. Shiozaki responded that "The president of Iran was talking about a Holocaust in Europe, right? Not one in Asia or Japan. The prime minister has not responded because the comments were not directed at Japan."

Another explanation is that Japan has serious economic interests in Iran; in particular, it hopes to get the access to the Azadegan oilfield, which is one of the largest in the world. Interestingly, on December 1st, the Multilateral Investment Guarantee Agency (MIGA) of the World Bank group approved \$122 million in guarantee coverage for a joint venture petrochemical project in Iran, its first coverage ever for a project in the country. The major beneficiary would be a Japanese trading company, Itochu Corp. At the end of December, Inpex, a Japanese oil firm, said that it would proceed shortly on its \$2 billion deal to develop the massive Azadegan oilfield to try to ensure stable oil supplies for Japan.

Others point to another, darker explanation for Japan's hesitancy to speak out against Iran. Japan, itself, is proceeding with similar nuclear fuel cycle research for energy production. The Japanese government's soon-to-be released energy strategy is expected to call for raising the percentage of nuclear power in the total national electricity supply from the current 30 percent to nearly 40 percent or more in 2030. In October, the Atomic Energy Commission of Japan adopted a long-term nuclear plan promoting the nation's nuclear fuel cycle program, which reprocesses all the spent nuclear fuel to extract plutonium for future use as nuclear fuel. Thus, Japan may be reluctant to spotlight the fact that it is the only member of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) permitted both to enrich uranium and reprocess spent nuclear fuel for peaceful civilian purposes.

Japan on Friday, January 13th, officially backed the referral of the issue of the Iranian nuclear program for consideration by the UN Security Council. Tokyo, however, said it did not believe that this step would immediately result in the introduction of sanctions against Iran. "Until Iran changes its current stance we do not see a way out of the problem toward a solution other than submission of it for consideration by the UN Security Council," Japanese Chief Cabinet Secretary Shinzo Abe said at a press conference in Tokyo. Japan's Foreign Minister Aso also urged the international community to continue diplomatic efforts with the aim of making Iran stop research on uranium enrichment. Aso said the referral of this issue to the UN Security Council "is one of the methods" and that "it does not mean that Iran will be an object for immediate sanctions."

Japan's hesitancy to condemn Iran as strongly as others on and off the UN Security Council can possibly be explained by its economic interests in Iran (current and anticipated), its strategy of engaging the Iranian government rather than antagonizing or containing it, and its own interests in nuclear power. Yet, one wonders if this is the appropriate stance for a country that wants to be an international leader. Recently, the Shukan Post (1/13/06) published an interview with Chief Cabinet Secretary Abe by Naoki Inose. In it, Abe was asked for his thoughts on foreign policy. The rumored successor to Koizumi answered that "in order for us to build a 'new country,' Japan needs to engage in creating some rules of its own, and then tackle the task of taking the lead in the world on its own initiative and accompanied by a willingness to take responsibility." Abe is right; Japan's acceptance internationally will rest with its willingness to take responsibility, internationally.

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