The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus
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When is a Terrorist not a Terrorist?

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Imagine this scenario. A bomb is found at the home of a prominent Foreign Ministry official currently engaged in delicate international negotiations. The bomb is linked to a series of recent threats and attempted attacks on public buildings, all believed to have been carried out by the same political group. In one case, explosives were found outside a bank in the middle of an urban area, forcing the evacuation of hundreds of people from their homes.

A prominent politician, speaking at a rally in the midst of a crucial battle for the Prime Ministership, chooses the attempted bombing of the official's home as a theme of his speech. His message is simple. The official's own actions had made the attempted bombing an entirely natural response. In short, he had it coming to him.

Which country am I describing? Not Palestine, not Iran, not Malaysia, but Japan – a country that prides itself on its maintenance of law and order, and on its quick response to the events of September 11, 2001. Extraordinary though it seems, these events took place in Japan on the eve of the second anniversary of the September 11 attacks.

The attempted bombing of the home of Tanaka Hitoshi, the senior Foreign Ministry official, highlights fundamental problems of the contemporary "war on terror." Since September 11 Japan, like other countries, has enacted a battery of new security measures. These include tough new penalties for those involved in the financing of organizations which carry out terrorist attacks, and new powers to deport any foreigner who belongs to "a political party or organization that encourages acts of violence or assaulting, killing, or injuring of officials of the Government," or who even "attempts to prepare, distribute, or display printed matters, motion pictures, or any other documents or drawings to attain the objectives" of any such organization.

Of course, the assumed targets of these measures are groups like Al Qaeda and Jemaah Islamiyah, or "rogue states" such as North Korea. North Korea, indeed, has been the focus of particular concern in Japan since its admission last year that it had kidnapped 13 Japanese citizens during the 1970s and 1980s (of whom 8 died in mysterious circumstances).

Happily, so far neither Al Qaeda nor Jemaah Islamiyah nor North Korea has carried out any terrorist bombings on Japanese soil. The series of attempted attacks culminating in the placing of a bomb at Tanaka Hitoshi's house appear to have been the work of a home-grown right-wing terrorist group, variously calling itself the "Brigade for Conquering North Korea" or "the Brigade for Conquering Traitors." Statements issued by the group show that it seeks revenge for the kidnappings by targeting North Korean affiliated organizations in Japan, and any prominent figures whom it considers overly sympathetic, or even conciliatory, to North Korea. Tanaka has become a target because of his willingness to enter into ongoing negotiations with North Korean counterparts.

Public hostility to North Korea, and the fact that no one has yet been killed in the attacks, has meant that they have received rather little media attention in Japan or abroad. Many major media outlets, including the Japanese national broadcaster NHK, seem assiduously to avoid using the "t-word" in relation to these events, preferring euphemisms like "explosive substance incidents."

However, prominent politician Ishihara Shintaro's expression of understanding for the "natural" actions of the "Brigade for Conquering Traitors" during his speech in support of Kamei Shizuka, one of four current contenders for the Japanese Prime Ministership, has catapulted the issue into the headlines. Ishihara, the highly popular Governor of Tokyo, and a man who has himself been touted as a future Japanese Prime Minister, is notorious for his controversial statements, and particularly for a series of racist comments about foreigners in Japan. Japan has no laws prohibiting hate speech, and these comments have done Mr. Ishihara's political career no damage at all.

But a statement that it is "natural" to try to kill or maim public officials with whose views you disagree takes the language of hate one step further still. The response of other leading Japanese politicians has been irresponsible in the extreme. Prime Ministerial contender Kamei promptly sprang to Ishihara's defense, denying (despite the clear evidence of Ishihara's own words) that his statement endorsed bombings, and then going on to reinforce the message that the attack's victim was really the guilty party. Meanwhile Ishihara himself proceeded to "clarify" his statement with the words "of course it is bad to bomb people, but the fact that this happened was a natural consequences of his [Tanaka's] actions." For anyone who remembers the tacit support given to terrorists by the right-wing Japanese politicians of the 1930s, Ishihara's words have a chilling ring.

As nations around the world strengthen their guard against terrorism, there is a real danger that double standards will allow certain home-grown terrorist groups to flourish even as overseas terrorists are hunted down.

Mr. Ishihara's supporters in Japan sometimes describe his brand of populist politics as "healthy nationalism." Unless the Japanese system is capable of responding seriously to the challenges posed by Ishihara's comments, there is a danger that he may instead come to represent the public acceptance of a sinister new concept in the political vocabulary of Asia: "healthy terrorism."

A Japan Focus special report. Posted October 10, 2003.

Tessa Morris-Suzuki is Professor of Japanese Studies, Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, Australian National University. She is author of Reinventing Japan: Time, Space, Nation; The Technological Transformation of Japan: From the Seventeenth to the Twenty-First Century; and other works.