



The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus

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Violence, Legitimacy and the Future of Japanese and American Multilateralism

by Yoshikazu SAKAMOTO

It is often said that 9/11 has changed the world. Certainly, the world being swayed by the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq in the wake of that event appears to prove the saying correct.

But as far as the basic structure of today's international politics is concerned, the world underwent a drastic change when the Cold War ended. 9/11 served as a catalyst to make the structural change all the more manifest.

Then what kind of structure came to exist after the end of the Cold War? It goes without saying that a unipolar world order was born. However, a basic contradiction is inherent in this structure.

The contradiction exists between the two major components of this structure: first, a global hierarchy of power, particularly military power, which constitutes a pyramid of hegemony and disparity, with the U.S. at the top; second, a dynamic of universalizing the principle of equal rights of human beings, with the U.S. acting as the center for disseminating the message of global democratization.

The hierarchical pyramid couples U.S. hegemonic superiority with the conformity, concession and submission of other nations. As a whole, it forms a structure consisting of the chains of dominance and subordination.

For example, it is evident that even the European NATO allies are militarily inferior to the U.S. During the bombings of Yugoslavia in 1999 by NATO forces, the technological gap between the U.S. and Europe in the Revolution in Military Affairs was clearly exposed, thus making joint operation on an equal footing difficult. If this is the case with the NATO allies in Europe, the military disparity between the U.S. and other nations is obvious. The fact that brutal killing in civil wars in some African countries and in other parts of the world gained attention and led to an international move to restrict "small arms" points to the enormity of the gap between the top and the bottom of the pyramid of military technology.

In modern history, state-of-the-art, advanced weapons tended to be concentrated in increasingly fewer military big powers, which ended up in the two superpowers. After the end of the Cold War, this concentration became unipolar, with the U.S. monopolizing such superior technology.

Another process was underway, however, at lower layers of the pyramid, in which modern weapons proliferated to many countries. For modern technology, a simultaneous process of concentration and dispersion is inevitable. Today, this is illustrated by the proliferation of nuclear weapons and the danger of biological and chemical weapons finding their way to the hands of terrorists.

Because of the structural inequality in the world military order characterized by the concentration and monopoly of top-of-the-line arms in and by the U.S., there arises a growing possibility that some militant forces at a lower layer of the pyramid, keenly conscious of their being ruled and oppressed, will resort to terrorism as asymmetrical warfare. This is a technological possibility. The crucial question concerns whether this technological possibility turns into the political reality of sharp conflict.

What is behind this political conflict is the other dynamic of the post-Cold War unipolar structure, that is, the universalization of the demand for equal rights. This dynamic brought about democratization in many countries after the end of the Cold War. In fact, the collapse of the former Soviet Union itself was a cardinal example of democratization. Thus inside many countries, the principle of equality of human beings came to be officially recognized. But, at the same time, this has made many people more conscious of inequality and oppression between nations or racial and cultural groups, setting the stage for ethnic and religious conflicts in various parts of the world.

Among such people indignant about the status quo, Muslims, whose faith is based on belief in universal equality of "human beings" before Allah (though not necessarily the same as equal "human rights"), have become the core of the forces which put up unyielding resistance. Transnational Islamic resistant forces, whether armed or non-violent, have risen against what they deem oppression, as illustrated by Chechens, Uighurs, and Muslims in Afghanistan, Indonesia and elsewhere. As the result of the emergence of the American unipolar hegemony, the U.S. has become the arch enemy of Muslim extremists.

In response, the U.S. after 9/11 intensified efforts to disseminate American-type democracy by force of arms in counteracting transnational terrorism. Yet, in reality, the post-Cold War U.S. already possessed military power of global reach and had encompassed the world within its hegemonic strategy of global power projection.

Political unilateralism also had surfaced in the U.S. decision to shelve the Kyoto protocol to regulate global warming and the comprehensive nuclear test ban treaty. Although the Clinton administration had exercised a degree of restraint from actual use of its military power, the U.S. under the Bush administration, shocked by attacks on its homeland by a foreign enemy on 9/11, discarded this self-restraint. It adopted the strategy of preemptive attack pushed for by neoconservatives and started to act alone, eschewing multilateral cooperation. This unilateralist behavior can be considered a manifestation of a pattern of behavior which corresponded more explicitly to the unipolar structure that already existed prior to 9/11.

In this sense, what changed after 9/11 was not the structure of the world but U.S. behavior and the U.S. perception of the world. The structure of U.S. global hegemony had been exposed to transnational terrorist attacks abroad, such as Nairobi. The U.S. now came to view the world as the source of direct threats to its homeland security. What is important, then, is the gap between the image the U.S. as a hegemonic power holds of the world and the reality of the world.

For, although the primary foundation of U.S. hegemony is its military power, military power is essentially destructive and lacks the capacity to reconstruct or create. This is one of the reasons why the mighty U.S. is perceived by public opinion in many countries as the "biggest threat to peace" and loses influence based on friendly support. In a similar vein, if the U.S. imposes "democratization from above" in Iraq from the top of the pyramidal military order, it is natural that U.S. troops stationed there should be regarded by the local population not as a force for liberation but as an occupying power. Here, the aforementioned contradiction between military hegemony and the democratic principle of political equality is reproduced in its condensed form.

While the U.S. is trying to "democratize" the world, that is, to make the world safe for the U.S., it is imperative to remember that governing in a democracy, whether national or international, must derive legitimacy from the consent of the governed. It is natural, therefore, that in the post-Cold War world where the principle of democracy is being universalized, to ensure international legitimacy, not simply hard power, should become crucial as the criterion of diplomacy.

But the Bush administration has acted in a way that is in diametrical opposition to the principle of legitimacy by adopting the strategy of preventive attack in violation of international law and the United Nations Charter, and prosecuting a war on the basis of a dubious fiction that Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction and sponsored international terrorism. This has resulted in a dilemma created by power – toppling of Saddam Hussein's dictatorship leading to an

authoritarianism of the occupation force and response to indiscriminate terrorist violence leading to use of counter-terrorist violence responsible for indiscriminate killings of innocent citizens.

Therefore, the Bush administration, despite the significant achievement in capturing Saddam Hussein, is internationally isolated. Nevertheless, no nation or combination of nations can restrain the U.S. and resentment and the feeling of being oppressed are latent in the minds of the people of many countries, including Japan, that have no alternative but to go along with the military hyper-power despite this lack of legitimacy.

But what is necessary for the world is to isolate terrorists, not the U.S. To that end, it is imperative to establish a system for democratic, autonomous decision-making for the Iraqi people through fair elections under U.N. supervision and to bring the occupation to a close as soon as possible.

A recent Iraqi opinion poll found that while 79 percent of the respondents are opposed to or distrustful of the occupation force, 90 percent aspire to democracy. This testifies to the fact that "democratization from above" through the US occupation is not taken by Iraqi as true democratization, and points to the possibility that endogenous democracy in Iraq will take root only through autonomous opposition to the occupation. It must be remembered that postwar democracy took root in Japanese soil, not as a direct consequence of democratization from above but through spontaneous opposition to the policy of the occupation force that put priority on anticommunist strategy (a historical equivalence of today's antiterrorist policy) rather than on endogenous democratization. The administrations of the U.S. and Japan need to learn from this paradoxical lesson.

From this point of view, what Japan must do boils down to three points. First, the most effective measure to isolate terrorists and guerrilla forces from the Iraqi people is to support establishing an institutional framework for the political self-determination of the Iraqi people and help them improve employment, medical care and construction of social and economic infrastructure. This is the wise way to "fight terrorism." To dispatch military contingents under the slogan "Don't yield to terrorism" rather carries the danger of "playing into the hands" of terrorists.

Secondly, Japan must make diplomatic efforts to create an international environment in cooperation with European Union countries, Russia and China, that will help the U.S. get out of isolation in term of legitimacy and return to the framework of multilateral cooperation.

Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi, a close ally of President George W. Bush, is in a good position to promote this kind of change. What the Japanese government calls "international cooperation" is often synonymous with "cooperation with the U.S." The present moment, in which the U.S finds itself in a legitimacy crisis, offers a good chance for Japan to shift its emphasis from extreme bilateralism with the U.S. to a multilateral approach.

Thirdly, the confrontation with North Korea is behind the Koizumi administration's alignment with the U.S. While international concern about North Korea centers on its nuclear weapons program, there is a sentiment in Japan that prioritizes the issue of the abduction of Japanese nationals by North Korea. Since September 17, 2002, when North Korean leader Kim Jong Il admitted to the abduction, Japan has been engulfed with a feeling of having been unilaterally victimized, which matches the similar feeling among the U.S. citizens following 9/11. 9/17 is the Japanese counterpart to 9/11 in the U.S. in terms of unilateralist psychology.

Abduction of innocent citizens is a grave human rights violation. But is the denunciation of the abduction an expression of anger toward infringement on human rights of Japanese compatriots or protest against infringement of universal human rights? If it is the former, then it is nothing more than self-centered nationalism. If it is the latter, then the Japanese must pay due attention to the violation of human rights of Koreans in the past by imperial Japan and try to solve the abduction issue while showing readiness to tackle the question of compensation for Koreans who were forcibly taken for forced labor and the former "comfort women" who were enslaved by the imperial Japanese army.

If Japan discards its unilateralist response and adopts a policy of alleviating the confrontation with North Korea on the basis of universal principles, it can also play a positive role in pushing a multilateral settlement of the Iraq question in the United Nations without binding itself with the U.S.'s unilateralism, and also in seeking multilateral solutions in the area of regional security cooperation in East Asia, particularly focused on the Korean peninsula.

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