The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus
In-depth critical analysis of the forces shaping the Asia-Pacific...and the world.

Japan's Stumbling Revolution

Karel van Wolferen

Seven months after the Democratic Party of Japan's triumph in the national elections of 30 August 2009, Hatoyama Yukio's government is meeting with so much trouble that rumours have begun to circulate that it is doomed.

For two decades, since he wrote his classic (and best-selling) The Enigma of Japanese Power *(1989), seasoned political commentator, Karel van Wolferen, has been thinking and writing about the problem of political power, the Japanese state's absent "centre." Here he offers his reflections on the current crisis, the controversial Democratic Party (Minshuto) Secretary-General, Ozawa Ichiro, and the role of the Prosecutor's Office. Van Wolferen's outspoken defense of Ozawa ("one of the most formidable political figures in the world today", superior to President Obama in his "political skills and understanding of the dynamics of power"), his critical attention to what he sees as the failure of the Japanese media, and his warnings of the possible consequences of a failure and/or collapse of the Hatoyama government, merit careful reading.*

This analysis was written for the monthly Chuo Koron*, where it appears in Japanese in the March 2010 issue. The Asia-Pacific Journal is grateful to the author for his permission to publish it here in English. (GMcC)*

The next couple of years will be crucial for the realization of genuine Japanese democracy. More than that. If the Minshuto leaders succeed in carrying out their aim of creating a cabinet-centered government this will be a grand example for others – one of the very few positive turns of fate in the political life of our planet. But the obstacles to achieving this are formidable. Not only domestic forces but also Washington will seek to torpedo the plans for a truly independent Japan that can stand on its own feet in the world. Understanding those obstacles well could help Japanese citizens contribute to the chances for a good outcome.

If a few years ago we had heard that in a world of more war, increasing economic misery and political dysfunction in many places, it would be Japan, of all countries, serving up a shining example of political improvement, most people, including me, would not have believed it. Then something very big happened. For the first time a credible opposition party took over the reins of the official government and said we want to be a true government; a political steering wheel. What happened was bigger, I think, than is yet realized today by most Japanese.

Put it in the context of recent history. After a brilliant three decades of economic achievement following World War II, Japan seemed to have lost a clear purpose, was stagnating, and had stopped giving its people a sense that their lives were improving. Something important was lacking in the political system, something that would allow it to plot an alternative, more promising, course. In 1993 reformist-minded politicians who understood the difference between administrative and political decision-making were given a short time to create a political center to the Japanese system, but they were too few and had almost no administrative backing. On the positive side, however, they discovered each other and could eventually form the credible opposition party that has now taken over.

A new consciousness had spread through the public in 1993. Drastic changes were not only desirable but also possible. It became common for prominent political figures, commentators and businessmen, to reiterate in their speeches and writing the desirability of fundamental political reform. Such a promise seemed to come close to fulfillment with the surprise election of Koizumi as president of the *Jiminto* (LDP). But he, the first celebrity and TV star prime minister of Japan, turned out to be only a fake reformer, thus proving the point that the *Jiminto* with all its encrusted relationships and habits would have to be shoved aside for attempting a truly new beginning in Japanese politics.

That opportunity finally arrived with the great majority that *Minshuto* managed to gain in the elections of last August. And the top *Minshuto* figures, who – proof that they are serious – had stuck together since 1993, lost no time in making clear that they intended to inaugurate a new era.

What *Minshuto*'s intentions to establish a genuine government entail is not easily understood by people who are not fully aware of the way in which Japanese political institutions developed in the Meiji Period. The question of what policies its politicians espouse is less relevant than the fact that they wish to create a policy making center; which means a center of political accountability. Special measures for crippling elected politicians had purposely been built into the system. What *Minshuto* must try to do is nothing less than to break with the tradition of governance established by the founder of Japan's bureaucracy (as well as the military), Yamagata Aritomo. Yamagata did not want the purity of a supposedly harmonious Japanese nation, grouped around an innately benevolent emperor, to be spoiled by contentious politicians. A political system run by them could not be harmonious because they had to fight each other to get elected. Yamagata introduced arrangements to make sure that they never could have the power they were officially supposed to exercise. He should, along with Bismarck, Lenin and Theodore Roosevelt, be ranked among the greatest figures who shaped the geopolitics of our planet just over a century ago. His measures allowed a political system to evolve in which military bureaucrats would eventually hijack the country in the 1930s for ill-considered purposes. His legacy endured in the odd Japanese relationship between career officials (bureaucrats) and elected officials (Diet members).

To call the task that *Minshuto* has taken upon itself a heavy one is very, very, understated. It has simply not been tried before. There are no models from Japanese experience to follow. Almost everywhere *Minshuto* ministers will turn to re-examine policies, they will meet with partial, and sometimes heavy, opposition; not from the public that elected them, but from entrenched interests embedded in the old non-democratic establishment that they want to overcome. While the basic institutions for democracy, like parliament, the cabinet, and so on, were established in the Meiji Period, they were not used in line with their original purpose, and the many lesser institutions that allow politician-directed governance to function must now be built almost from scratch, giving many impatient observers the impression that *Minshuto* coalition ministers cannot make it work. Bureaucrats in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs as well as Defense, for example, are doing their best to beguile the new politicians to stick to the conventional ways of their ministries, which has already resulted in a tragically missed opportunity for a major move forward in relations with Moscow. Bureaucrats and politicians in this case missed the significance of remarks by President Dmitry Medvedev made in Singapore in November, indicating willingness to re-open the stagnated diplomacy concerning Japanese claims to the Northern Islands. The Prime Minister's Office is not functioning at all as it should for propagating *Minshuto*'s main messages for the same reason of bureaucratic conventionalism and, worse, policy subversion. What is expected from *Minshuto* would be daunting under the best circumstances. But

current circumstances resulting from ingrained habits are dismal.

DPJ assault on the Yamagata Edifice

Siegfried Woldhek 2009

(other Woldhek cartoons)

A political system that has survived for a long time is not something one can easily change, as it has developed strong defense mechanisms. When after a year's absence from Japan (the longest time away since 1962), I returned a year ago, Japanese friends were enthusiastic about how after the summer elections things would change dramatically, with Ozawa becoming prime minister. I asked them: "what about the scandal that will aim to bring Ozawa down?" It was entirely predictable.

Minshuto Secretary-General Ozawa

Why? Because the Japanese bureaucratic system does not only have ancient built-in defenses, it has something akin to an immune system. We need to take a step back to see this in perspective. All countries have a concrete power system that is different from their theoretical one. All countries live with political *honne* and *tatemae*. The substantial system of power exists, as it were, inside the official political system that is described and regulated by such things as the constitution. The informal, unofficial, substantial system of power relations may change and drift farther away from what it should be in principle. The past decade of American political history provides a perfect example of that: power arrangements centered on the military-industrial complex and huge financial and insurance firms are stronger than the causes the American electorate has voted for. There is nothing in the American constitution that guarantees them such a position. The Japanese case is, by comparison, particularly interesting. The outlines of its informal structure have remained virtually unchanged over the post-World-War-II decades, as they have survived changes in the law or appeals to the constitution. While in the United States new laws, like those pertaining to health insurance and earlier ones regulating banking practices promote the development of informal American corporatism, an important aspect of the unofficial Japanese system is that its crucial political transactions and relationships are simply beyond the purview of the law. The Japanese unofficial political system is blatantly extralegal.

All unofficial systems of political (and of course economic) power must have ways to protect them against forces that could bend them out of shape. And the law helps with that in most cases. But not in Japan, unless it concerns heavy criminal conduct. This means that the informal but substantial Japanese System is vulnerable to excess. It has been quite all-right for Japanese business to pay for the election of Japanese politicians (as in numerous other countries), but if one politician gets so much that he achieves a kind of power that threatens the balance inside the system, action must be taken. Hence the Tanaka Kakuei scandals. Entrepreneurism is fine, but if one entrepreneur becomes so successful that he threatens unofficial social and labor arrangements, like Ezoe Hiromasa who with Recruit was actually helping to create a labor market for *sarariman*, he must be stopped [1]. If another entrepreneur is breaking unwritten rules of the unofficial system with financial dealings, and pokes fun at the established figures to boot, we get a Horiemon case [2]. After making a study of famous Japanese scandals, I wrote an article for *Chuo Koron* nineteen years ago, in which I concluded that the Japanese System had an immune system against excesses of otherwise permissible conduct, and that this immune system consists of the Japanese public prosecutor working in tandem with the Japanese media. At that time the headlines were taken up for months by a huge security brokerage scandal, involving compensation for stock market loss. This was an exquisite example of what I was analyzing because the supposedly guilty financial firms had actually been operating under the informal instructions of Ministry of Finance bureaucrats. But the result had been a threat to the Japanese financial system as a whole. What followed were the ritualistic apologies demanded from a political culture that assumes those rituals help restore harmony.

Reformist politicians constitute an open invitation for the prosecutor-media team to develop hawk eyes and find a minor case, or an imagined case, of wrongdoing. Remember when Kan Naoto was Japan's most popular politician because he had demanded that the officials in his ministry told the truth in connection with HIV infected blood products? Within a couple of years an invented scandal to undermine his prestige had to follow. Because, make no mistake, democratic procedure may have placed them where they are, but the official representatives of the Japanese voter are a potential threat against the smooth operation of the informal system. Now, the *Minshuto* government is about the biggest threat to the unofficial power system it has experienced in living memory. A greater threat than a program to bring the actual power system closer to what it is supposed to be, is hard to imagine. So, right after Hatoyama became prime minister, the prosecutor-media team got into action to whip up a scandal designed to undermine his position.

Let us think some positive thoughts concerning the Japanese public prosecutor. Japan's crime rate is relatively low, and the authorities are not filling Japanese prisons to the brim, as is the case in some other countries. The public prosecutors deserve praise for the way in which they keep the penal system geared more to repentance, reform, and return to society, than to punishment. There is also little doubt that the Japanese public prosecutor is genuinely concerned with maintaining social order, and that prosecutors think of themselves as entirely responsible, even as heroically brave, when they go after what they conceive of as

Change of Government = Change of Japan

Minshuto

the disturbers of the right order in society and politics. But at the moment that makes them a threat to Japanese democracy; *Minshuto* politicians will therefore continue to be a target for the disruptive energies of the prosecutors.

In the same way that the Japanese extralegal political system is a legacy of Yamagata Aritomo, the self-image and the concrete role played by the public prosecutor go back to another major historical figure: Hiranuma Kiichiro. He was a fanatical believer in the moral superiority of the officials supposedly carrying out 'the Will of the Emperor'. Like Yamagata he saw himself as a guardian of the mystical, morally pure, nation depicted in *kokutai* ideology, which had to be preserved from the onslaught of modern political ways, like Marxism, or liberalism, or simply democratic elections. The influence of his followers after 1945 helped to prevent reforms of the Japanese judiciary, which in many respects considers itself to be placed above the law. We can interpret the activities of the public prosecutor today as hearkening back to these higher spiritual values that rise far above what politicians can make of government. The foremost Dutch Japanologist, Wim Boot, compares them to the Censorial System of ancient China.

Foreign legal specialists have long been astonished by the discretionary powers of the Japanese prosecutor. Much of their power derives from the extraordinary leeway they have in making decisions about who to target for prosecution. In lighter criminal cases they can decide whether or not to go after a culprit, and can be extremely lenient, especially if the person they have been questioning is remorseful and makes a show of repentance. This works well for ordinary people who have broken the law but do not deserve to be punished with more than a case of fright, and approaches to law enforcement in some other countries could benefit from taking these Japanese ways as an example.

If they decide on harsh treatment and want to break down suspects, however, they will use tricks and psychological pressure and lengthy pre-trial incarceration to force confessions. But for the purpose of counteracting ambitious reformist politicians the public prosecutor uses grey areas of the law, as practically applied. There exists a broad area of vagueness between what is normally admissible in actual practice and what is definitely illegal. In many countries there exists no clear line between what is permissible tax avoidance and unlawful tax evasion. In Japan, on top of interpretable tax rules, there exists a rich vague area relating to political funding rules, which is a favorite weapon for the public prosecutor. Many Japanese know how arbitrary the investigations of the public prosecutor are. But still, there is a widespread sense also among sympathizers that, for example, Ozawa should at least show 'sincerity' and apologize. This is in keeping with the demands of ritual that belong to the unofficial power system. In Ozawa's case, the arena for the ritual is now the Diet itself, even among *Minshuto* members, and the public at large, where it is taking on grotesque proportions as the newspapers whip up what they falsely present as 'public demands'. The rituals of apology and 'voluntary' resignation constitute bowing one's head to the informal system.

Without cooperation of the media the immune system does not work, as it is not the alleged wrong-doing that floors politicians, but the public scandal that the media can get going. Prosecutors are continually leaking information to the newspapers about the cases they intend to tackle, and give journalists and editors enough warning to be present when they raid anyone's offices. These leaks about ongoing investigations are, of course, not in keeping with a system that sticks to lawful procedures, but we have already seen that the public prosecutor operates as if above the law.

Because of the fairly homogeneous interpretation of what is happening, the strong similarity of their commentary, and the relatively great impact they have on the reading public, Japanese newspapers, more than newspapers elsewhere that I know of, create political reality as it exists in people's minds. In that way they tend to be more a participant in, rather than monitor of, domestic power dynamics. The big newspapers can fairly easily bring an end to a sitting government. Quite a few senior editors have mindsets like senior Japanese bureaucrats, for whom the preservation of the existing order in their world must always remain an almost sacred priority.

In one of the saddest developments of our time, newspapers almost everywhere in the industrialized world are experiencing great difficulties, and because of their growing dependence on commercial interests they have ceased to be reliable monitors of political developments. While the Japanese media situation is a bit better than that, it must be considered very regrettable that at this time of momentous change in Japan's political life the newspapers appear to be unable to rise to the occasion and become reliable chroniclers. Until now most reporting about the new government has consisted of a huge distraction of attention from what matters for the future of all Japanese, settling instead for the routine scandal mongering that serves no one.

We may blame this on ingrained habits. The reporters and editors do what they are good at doing. Japanese political reporters cut their teeth on getting the details right about the infighting among the *habatsu* (factions) of the *Jiminto*, and later the ups and downs of government coalitions. When I covered political news in Thailand after its fairly regular military coups, I used to look up my Japanese colleagues in Bangkok because they were the world's top experts on the factionalism inside the Thai army. No surprise therefore that right after the formation of the Hatoyama government a lot of attention went to real and imagined signs of strains among the coalition partners. No surprise that the newspapers get excited about small disagreements among *Minshuto* ministers that drift up to the surface. Now, it was perfectly understandable that the internal bickering and open wars within the *Jiminto* produced prime copy (as a journalist I also followed the fine and juicy details of the *Kaku-Fuku* factional war), [3] because the politicians of the then so-called ruling party were, as we have seen, not producing anything that could be called policy.

Koizumi, who profited much from the national mood wanting political reform, indulged in fake reformist moves at the behest of Ministry of Finance officials, which were not properly analysed by a media apparently mesmerized by celebrity glamour. Commentators could apparently not distinguish neoliberal economic fashion from the political repair the public was waiting for. After him we had one *Jiminto* cabinet after another also structurally incapable of developing policy to cope with much-changed circumstances, inside Japan as well as in the world. They did not construct a political steering wheel. They could only fall back on the administrative decisions of various ministry officials. Administrative decisions, which make necessary adjustments for maintaining a course that was designed in the past, must clearly be distinguished from political decisions, which establish a new course, a fresh departure, an essential structural change. In those post-Koizumi years, the newspapers enjoyed their role in bringing down cabinets, and we had a new prime minister every year.

That development appears to have been habit-forming as well, considering the continuous speculation about whether the Hatoyama government will last or whether it should resign. Much is made of the declining popularity of the new government from 70% to somewhere around 30% according to the newspaper polls. Such figures are notoriously unreliable, as the big papers always tell the public what public opinion ought to be. And since the newspapers ask those polled what they think of a new cabinet's policies before a cabinet has had a chance to lay them out, all Japanese administrations – except for the PR-driven one of Koizumi – experience

such steep decline.

Quite a few things about the *Minshuto* situation seem forgotten by the press. We read indignant comments about a 'power grab' by Ozawa, or about Hatoyama relying on Ozawa. Of course he is. He cannot do it alone. It is because of Ozawa that Japan is getting this chance to break through the Yamagata Aritomo tradition and create a genuine government with a political steering wheel. Without Ozawa there would not have been the party political upheaval of 1993; he started it. Without him there almost certainly would not have been a credible *Minshuto* opposition party. Without Ozawa *Minshuto* would certainly not have gained its landslide victory last August, perhaps not even a majority. Ozawa is one of the most formidable political figures in the world today. No head of government in Europe can be compared to him. And Washington's Obama does not come close in the way of political skills and an understanding of the dynamics of power. Ozawa is continually criticized for a number of things, including his autocratic manners, but few widely read columnists appear to be interested in the question as to why he is what he is. Could *Minshuto* become a success without him? His *Minshuto* colleagues, who of course are also partially influenced by the media-created political reality, must think very hard before asking such an extraordinary leader to retire. Ozawa simply has no equal among prominent politicians with regard to a combination of determination and an over-all understanding of Japan's informal power system.

If *Minshuto* were to lose its cohesion caused by a loss of determination through the manner in which the informal power system captures it, we will probably witness a very undesirable development. The emergence of a two party system, as existed before World War II, appears to have become less likely. The *Jiminto* is breaking up. Many splinter parties are likely to compete in future elections and, without a firm *Minshuto* presence, form temporary and frequently changing coalitions. Bureaucratic power will increase, and create a newly stagnant situation of administrative rule, probably worse than what existed under official *Jiminto* governance.

Another crucial subject, a potential hindrance on the path to *Minshuto*'s success, does not receive the close media attention it deserves. The U.S.-Japan relationship was something that practically everyone took for granted. The problem has been that Washington has not treated Japan as a fully independent country. This situation has already been fundamentally changed by the Hatoyama cabinet. Merely by having opened the subject of inequality for discussion means that things can never be the same again. But the Obama administration is apparently not ready for a non-*Jiminto* government, which was made poignantly clear by the stern messages of Hillary Clinton just before the election and those of Robert Gates soon after it. The matter of moving an American Marine base in Okinawa is apparently being turned into a test case to see whether the new government understands who is boss.

Many governments, including Washington, have long wished for Japan to take a more active role on the world stage. Its economic might changed the fate of industries in the United States and Europe, but from a geopolitical point of view, and in diplomacy, it was barely visible. The rest of the world got used to what was early on labeled as an 'economic giant but political dwarf'. And now, when the new government says that this undesirable imbalance must change, Americans can only whine about military base arrangements different from what they want.

The two cases of the public prosecutor relentlessly pursuing supposed lawbreaking by Ozawa and American insistence on Japan implementing what Washington had earlier forced the *Jiminto* to agree to in 2006 have something in common. They share the lack of a general sense of proportion. A stranger to Japan, just reading big newspaper headlines between December and February on a visit, would get the impression that Ozawa was trying to evade something like a murder conviction. Any financial misreporting by Ozawa's assistants, a misdemeanor that in other democracies would be quietly investigated, does not remotely have the weight warranting the pillory of Ozawa we have just witnessed. And considering that the public prosecutor had so little to go on that he was forced to dismiss the case against Ozawa himself, we can only conclude that things have been crazily out of proportion. That such a relatively small thing could be the source of speculation about an end to the first *Minshuto* cabinet, and be the basis of daily front page reporting of mainly invented public opinion about the need for Ozawa to resign, like the fever chart of a hospital patient, would make strangers unacquainted with Japanese ways wonder about the sanity of political life here. I just read an editorial in one of the major newspapers that makes the point that while no evidence could be found, this does not mean that Ozawa is innocent. It is a statement that indicates a state of hysteria among some editors, giving the impression that it has become a personal vendetta for them.

In the Futenma base case we see a new American presidency entirely missing the significance of what is happening in Japan. Obama and his advisers risk undermining new possibilities for creating a stable new cooperative relationship. Over what? Over something that ought to be minuscule in their global strategic vision. We learn from this that the Obama administration does not have its act together with respect to the revamped diplomatic attitude toward the world it announced when taking over from George W. Bush. It also proves that the American military has taken over far more American foreign policy than the details that relate to the countries it occupies. But considering that almost all of the top American officials dealing with Japan are 'alumni' of the Pentagon, this lack of a sense of proportion, this tunnel vision, should not surprise us.

When you can upset something very big with something that in neutral eyes can only be judged to be pretty small you have extraordinary power. We need to contemplate the vagaries of power when we contemplate the story of today's Japan. It has undergone the biggest power-shift since the 1950s, and *Minshuto* has already changed some things beyond a point where they can go back to what they were. But that does not mean that its power has been consolidated. Its strength will be tested again and again. An untimely departure of the Hatoyama cabinet would be very unfortunate. With the *Jiminto* in charge, an annual change of prime minister hardly mattered. But a return to the 'musical chairs' method of change would be disastrous for Japan's political future. The consolidation of *Minshuto* power will, of course, require dealing with the problem of the misplaced priorities of the public prosecutor, and of journalists who feed on leaks from the prosecutor's office like mad dogs. When Ozawa first became the target of investigations last spring, which forced him to resign as *Minshuto* president, foregoing the chance to become prime minister, several Diet members were quoted as saying that if the prosecutor's office "would apply the same standards to all of us", the Diet would be as good as empty. To be sure, the public prosecutor theoretically would have had the power in *Jiminto* days of emptying, say, half the Diet. But you can imagine that this power would not last beyond the first move of such idiotic action, because everyone in Japan, including the newspapers would conclude that the public prosecutor had gone mad.

This thought experiment demonstrates an important quality of power: it is not absolute. Power is a rather elusive thing; hard to catch conceptually in a concrete way. It has no substance that relates in any way to the laws of Newtonian physics. You cannot measure it, count it, or express it in numbers. The attempts of some specialists in political science to quantify power fail miserably. Power is in essence different from influence, which can be measured. It derives its nature to a large extent through what it is in the eyes of the recipient, the person or group to which it is directed (and is in this way somewhat comparable to love). Take an example from recent history. You will remember what happened to the power of the Soviet Union just before the end of the Cold War. A huge power system existed, which was believed to be unshakeable. It had defined the nature of our post-World-War-II geopolitics. Then something relatively small triggered events that led to the collapse of the Berlin Wall. In no time in 1989 the great power emanating from Moscow that kept populations in Eastern Europe in thrall was gone. It vanished in less than a week. Why? Because it rested on the psychology of fear. Fear of Soviet tanks. And that disappeared suddenly because Gorbachev demonstrated that he had meant what he said about not using violence to stop developments.

What we have just witnessed in Japan, and will probably witness again, is a power struggle. On one side, reformist politicians eager to implement true reform of the structure of the Japanese power system, and on the other venerable career officials who believe

that the established order is something sacred. But the power of these career officials will melt like ice and snow when editorial writers and television commentators warm up to the exciting political possibilities that have opened up for Japan. Being human beings interested in public affairs, as well as Japanese with at least a residual sense of patriotism, such a switch of focus ought not be too difficult for them.

With the U.S.-Japan relationship we have another very curious power relationship, whose problems could be solved in favor of Japan. The world's two greatest industrial powers relate to each other in unique fashion; there is nothing comparable to it. Hatoyama's critics who blame him for mishandling diplomacy vis-à-vis Washington overlook the fact that normal diplomacy is not possible in this case, because the United States does not truly recognize Japanese sovereignty – an indispensable condition for diplomacy. It has been taken as a matter of course that Japan would in the end always do what the United States wanted. The Hatoyama government must deal with unfinished post-World War II business that its *Jiminto* predecessors have never looked straight in the eye.

People speak automatically about the United States and Japan as allies. But, again, we have a conceptual problem here. An alliance is a relationship entered into voluntarily by two or more independent states. When this supposed alliance began Japan had no choice in the matter. During the Occupation following World War II, Washington turned Japan into a protectorate, and has since continued to treat to Japan as such – while, more recently, urging Japan to participate in American military ventures in other countries. Virtual protectorate status has certainly had some great advantages. Japan's very rapid growth as a trading power was much facilitated by its sheltering in the American strategic and diplomatic shadow. But, most importantly for Japan's place in the world until recently was that the main things by which a state is recognized internationally were carried out by American proxy. In other words, Japan did not need to present itself to other countries with a strong government, capable of making fundamental political decisions.

We only need to think this through to see the connection between Japan's lack of a political steering wheel until now and its pathological dependence on the United States. I think that the foremost *Minshuto* politicians, and certainly Ozawa, are aware of the mutual dependence of these two factors. As long as the United States appeared to supply a substitute for genuine large-scale Japanese diplomacy and strategic arrangements, there was no urgent need for a Japanese government capable of supplying those. And as long as no formal government in Tokyo balked at Japan being treated as a protectorate Washington could afford to meet Japanese sensibilities with disdain, as it is doing now with respect to the Marines on Okinawa. It is therefore natural that by establishing a true political center the conditions that have kept this dependency relationship going are radically altered.

The problem goes deeper nowadays. A big complication is that the United States has slipped into the grip of a militant nationalism. It is hardly a secret that its designs to deal with the emerging world reality include building military encirclement for containing China. It counts on Japan to be part of that plan. Hence the importance Washington attaches to its bases on Okinawa. But why should Japan give so much space and money to help maintain an American military empire? Fear that the United States will withdraw protection from Japan comes from ingrained habits of thought that under the changed geopolitical order since 1989 can only be called naive. I am surprised that so few Japanese are apparently aware of the fact that the United States needs Japan much more than Japan needs the United States, especially considering how important Japanese support for the dollar has been. Besides, as is the case for Europe, American protection guarantees have become highly questionable.

When a completely out-of-proportion small thing upsets something quite big, this happens through its power of intimidation. The United States has power over Japan because many Japanese, including some of its publications, are intimidated. Scared that Japan will be naked; left vulnerable to hostile powers in the future. The public prosecutor has the power to help wreck the course to a better democracy because of the media connivance with its intimidation of ambitious politicians. The two have come together in a very unfortunate confluence of circumstances. At this time when all responsible members of all political parties need to pull together to ensure that Japan becomes a fully sovereign state – of, by, and for the people, and not the bureaucracy or other usurpers of legitimate power – the prosecutor's office is having one of its egocentric moments, fulfilling its need rigidly to preserve the order it has always known without ever taking a step back to consider the political health of the nation. And Japan's mass media is unwittingly (or is it deliberately?) collaborating with the American government's hope of having its own way in Okinawa in the event the present government fails, by contributing to the building frenzy of demand for Ozawa and even Hatoyama to resign (for acts or non-acts that amount to, if anything, misdemeanors). This would be a great setback for popular sovereignty in Japan.

The unofficial Japanese political system, which Japan's new government wants to curb, has been kept going through a lot of built-in and almost automatic intimidation, which is the exercise of extralegal powers. Because of that history elected officials in Japan can easily be intimidated because they are used to it. The manner and tone and the substance of what Clinton and Gates said clearly aimed to intimidate the Japanese public. It is crucially important for the future of the Hatoyama cabinet that it not give in to such intimidation. Solving the conflict to Japan's advantage can be accomplished by doing nothing for a while, and reiterating that fundamental discussions about the future of the relationship must come first. Nothing bad will happen to Japan if, in the absence of an important American compromise, the deadline set for May is postponed until after such serious mutual rethinking.

Coping with domestic intimidation is more difficult for the Hatoyama cabinet. Normally, the way to counter intimidation is to fight straight back – by exposing the intimidator's motives, strategy, and tactics. Politicians of a mind to criticize the Public Prosecutors Office cannot easily do so, as they risk being accused of interference. Political committees to look into 'alleged abuse' of public prosecutor powers are unlikely to abolish a tradition rooted in pre-World War II days. Only an independent and vigilant media can counter the office's abuse of its delegated and assumed powers. Japan's media is free. But if it is to help foster a healthier democracy in a truly sovereign state, then it must switch from its present obsession with chasing and even creating scandals, to being a responsible monitor of domestic and global politics – and otherwise learn to use its potential power more wisely. Japan's citizens, who voted for political reform, should take a step back, take in what is happening at the moment, and urge their media to do precisely that.

Notes

[1] Ezoe Hiromasa – Founder of Recruit Co. specializing in job placement publications. A victim of mainstream press hysteria, he was forced by prosecutors to make a confession in 1988. The scandal brought down the Takeshita cabinet.

[2] Horiemon – Takafumi Horie, the very successful entrepreneur who broke unwritten rules of the business world, challenged its practices, was arrested, and in 2007 found guilty of securities fraud.

[3] Kaku-Fuku war – The grand battle between the *habatsu* (clique) of Tanaka Kakuei and that of Fukuda Takeo, and their respective loyalists, which virtually split the LDP during the 70s, 80s and early 90s.

Karel van Wolferen is a Dutch journalist, writer and Emeritus University Professor of Comparative Political and Economic Institutions at the University of Amsterdam.

He is the author of The Enigma of Japanese Power *and of* George W. Bush and the Destruction of World Order*, as well as numerous books in Japanese to be found here.*

His website in English is karelvanwolferen.com

See also his 2009 essay, written on the eve of the Democratic Party's election victory, "Lifting Japan's Curse of Muddling Through," and his "Japan-U.S. Relations Prosper on Isolation."

Recommended citation: Karel van Wolferen, "Japan's Stumbling Revolution," The Asia-Pacific Journal, 15-2-10, April 12, 2010.

Created by Datamomentum