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Waiting for the Dam to Break: WikiLeaks and Japan

David McNeill

Like a giant dose of salts to a bloated and constipated patient, Cable-gate has scoured its way through the post-9/11 United States empire, exposing its internal workings to merciless scrutiny: In Iraq, US forces and their Iraqi subordinates kill civilians and journalists while their commanders turn a blind eye to sickening acts of torture and murder; in Pakistan, US special forces patrol 'secretly' inside tribal areas as military leaders from both sides discuss the possibility of a coup (link); in Yemen and Pakistan US drones covertly bomb 'terrorist' targets; in the United Nations, American diplomats are ordered to spy on officials from China, Russia, France and the UK (link).

Perhaps, as Slavoj Zizek recently wrote, the only surprising thing about the revelations is that they contain no surprises. "Didn't we learn exactly what we expected to learn," writes the Slovenian philosopher, who compares WikiLeaks organizer Julian Assange to the Joker in Christopher Nolan's movie *The Dark Knight*, pulling at the mask of power in the belief that this will destroy the social order. In the end, says Zizek, Wiki's service is to publicize shame – "the shameless cynicism of a global order whose agents only imagine that they believe in their ideas of democracy, human rights and so on; and our shame for tolerating such power over us." And shame is a weapon, he reminds us (link)

What then are we to make of Wiki's odd silence on America's obedient ally Japan? A trawl through the media archives since Wiki's treasure trove of over 250,000 leaked US diplomatic cables detonated worldwide last November reveals little except a reference to Japan preferring a divided Korean peninsula to one reunified under Seoul, and a handful of whaling stories: In 2008/9, Japan pressed the US government to target the NPO status of the anti-whaling group Sea Shepherd Conservation Society as part of a secret deal that could have reduced its controversial annual cull. No surprise there.

Could it be that there is simply nothing substantial in the 5,697 US-Japan cables? Hardly. Under the largely benign gaze of Japan's establishment media, the realpolitik of Japan's 50-year security treaty (AMPO) with Washington has left a trail of muddy footprints. Might the cables shed light on Tokyo's decision to support US-led forces in Iraq, or add detail to last year's revelation that two-thirds of the 26,000 soldiers transported by the Air Self-Defense Forces between July 2006 and December 2008 wore U.S. uniforms? (Link)

Foreign Minister Maehara Seiji denounces the Wikileaks as "a monstrosity and a criminal act."

Was there a flurry of panicky transpacific diplomatic traffic after a senior Japanese Foreign Ministry bureaucrat revealed in 2009 the long-suspected existence of a four-decade secret pact - allowing nuclear-armed U.S. ships and aircraft to traffic anywhere through or over Japanese territory in violation of Japan's proclaimed three non-nuclear policies? What was Washington's reaction to the 2009 death throes of the Liberal Democrats' half-century grip on power? And what will the cables reveal of the intense American pressure on Tokyo to bring Okinawa to heel?

According to *The Yomiuri*, the U.S. Embassy in Tokyo and the State Department exchanged 5,697 diplomatic cables between 2006 and 2010 (226 of them secret), the third largest number from any diplomatic mission after Ankara and Baghdad: The cables include classified documents on Okinawa, diplomatic relations with North Korea and China, and joint ballistic missile defense. *The Yomiuri* frets that the two sides routinely discuss issues such as the selection of defense equipment and the relocation of Futenma airbase on Okinawa. "It would be very serious if information on such negotiations comes to light," a senior defense ministry official told the newspaper. (Link)

Ironically for an organization striving to bypass the clogged pipelines of media access, WikiLeaks finds itself a victim of editorial calculation. The five news organizations that were handed the cables have published only a fraction as they weigh the merits of more splashes against the possibility of reader 'fatigue.' The deputy editor of The Guardian, Ian Katz, summed up that newspaper's decision thus: "We didn't see much of international interest in them, which is why we haven't run anything - or anything much. Wiki-leaks is beginning to make regional packages of cables available to media partners in different countries now." Why doesn't the organization simply release the cables online? Because of the source protection issue, says Katz. "They are trying to ensure that all cables released have been redacted by reputable organizations...like us." But who and what require such careful protection from the light of a global readership?

On whose doorstep might Wiki land? Presumably hampered by the language barrier and the lack of local contacts, lawyers for the whistleblower have contacted at least one well-known foreign journalist in Japan asking him to be their local broker. *The Asahi* and *The Japan Times* claim not to have been approached. One unsubstantiated rumor circulating among Tokyo journalists is that the organization reached out to Japan's most popular newspaper *The Yomiuri*, perhaps unaware that its hierarchical editorial structure and conservative politics might not make it the best launching pad for an anarchist-inspired project to topple power. Given *The Yomiuri*'s close ties with the Liberal Democratic Party, journalists there may anyway have been privy for years to many of the 'secrets' buried inside the WikiLeaks cables. As one journalist for a rival newspaper speculates: "Because they've had information for so long about what the government was doing, perhaps they now have a conflict of interest."

A former *Yomiuri* staffer attributes the "indifference" of the Japanese press to a simple cause: "Regrettably, basically Japanese press laziness," says Tsutomu Yamaguchi, Professor of Journalism at Tokai University. But another *Yomiuri* veteran, speaking anonymously to Japan Focus has a different interpretation: the senior editors at big papers have been given instruction not to court or approach

Wiki "because they do not approve of what Assange did." That makes them no different, he says, from *The Washington Post*, *The Wall Street Journal* or other US publications. In the meantime, some journalists have been trying to get the cables via third parties. "Once cables are released or reported on the really big stuff (i.e. Okinawa) it will be front-page news in Japan," he says.

Perhaps so. In the meantime, as a taster we have Jimbo Taro's piece in the February issue of *Sekai* magazine. Jimbo sharply criticizes the tardy response to the leaks by Japan's media, which he partly blames on fear of upsetting the AMPO apple cart. He discusses one episode highlighted in the cables: In September 2009, State Department officials circulated various embassies saying the promotion of joint antimissile defense (the Raytheon RIM-161 Standard Missile 3, or SM-3) required a "strategic decision" on Japan's part to provide full technical cooperation in development and manufacture. Subsequently, US Defense Secretary Robert Gates took the matter up with his Japanese counterpart Kitazawa Toshimi on 1 December, after which Japan's defense ministry began a campaign to relax the no-weapons export principle to allow missile sales to third countries. In the end, however, fearful of exposure that this was to be done at US demand, the item was deleted from guidelines detailing Japan's general principles of defense policy for the decade ahead, as adopted by the cabinet last December (replacing the three previous versions).

Earlier this month during a Tokyo visit, Gates and Kitazawa again discussed missile defense. *The New York Times* reported the discussion thus:

> Washington wants to be able to sell the sophisticated system, known as the SM-3, to other nations, possibly including South Korea. However, that would require Japan to rewrite its current tight restrictions on weapons exports, which have been a pillar of the nation's post-World War II pacifism. While Mr. Gates said Washington hoped to defray development costs by exporting the system, he was aware that this was a sensitive matter in Japan. "It makes economic sense to make it available to others," Mr. Gates said of the new missile interceptor. "But we understand there are certain processes that have to be gone through here."

Gates and Kitazawa in Tokyo

Jimbo says a decision by state broadcaster NHK last December to screen a 4-program review of the AMPO treaty (Kakusareta Beigun) was prompted partly by the Wiki phenomenon. The programs discussed, among other things, how former US Ambassador to Japan Edwin Reischauer attempted to establish the practice of nuclear-powered submarines calling at Sasebo and Yokosuka ports in an effort to have Japanese overcome their nuclear "allergy." Jimbo dubs the policy kaku narashi - "getting them used to the nuclear."

But the media in Japan mostly shares with the government a sense of alarm over the leaks, adds Jimbo, as though they are a nuisance – rather than a potential source of light in the murkier corners of the alliance. "The hostility or fear against WikiLeaks that resides in these arguments [about whether to publish or not] comes from a philosophy that these things should be kept between the people in question and not revealed, so as not to disturb smooth diplomacy." The WikiLeaks shock has retaught us a basic principle of journalism, he adds. "That revealing injustice today is the way to take responsibility for the future." So how long till the dam breaks?

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