

Japan

Tokyo emerges from the strategic shadow of the United States

by Daniel Sneider, Asia Editor

Since May 1981, the Suzuki administration of Japan has begun to shape a policy which is by no means "anti-American" but which seeks to define Japanese policy in terms of Japanese national interest and which is willing, usually quietly, to make it clear where the United States, not Japan, is going wrong. This change has been most evident in Japanese policy toward the developing countries, in the Japanese insistence, which was manifested at the Cancún North-South summit meeting, that tensions in the Third world (which can lead to war) must be fundamentally resolved not through East-West military confrontation but through stabilization by means of industrial and agricultural development.

The crucial turn of events in Japan's stepping out of the strategic shadow of the United States into a more independent role in world affairs can be traced to the aftermath of Prime Minister Suzuki's May visit to the United States. A furious political controversy developed in Japan over the use of the word "alliance" in the U.S.-Japan joint communiqué, with Suzuki publicly repudiating that formulation and the implication of Japan acceding to U.S. pressures for a NATO-style military alliance with the United States. Foreign Minister Ito, closely identified with the policies of Alexander Haig, was forced to resign for responsibility for the communiqué fiasco.

The basis of this Japanese view, and of tensions between the United States and Japan, is Japan's superior understanding of practical economics, which has been belatedly recognized in the past year's spate of American books and articles purporting to unveil the secrets of Japan's economic success. The problems do not lie between Suzuki and Reagan, who in fact got along well in their May meeting. They lie in Japanese refusal to accept the premises and consequences of the U.S. Federal Reserve's disastrous policy of depression-inducing austerity for both the advanced and underdeveloped countries. Japan instead has attacked Volcker and called for growth policies for the world economy. This question lies at the root of the U.S.-Japan tensions; and it is the necessity driving Japan to assert itself in world affairs.

The past 10 years of Japanese politics have been relatively tumultuous, witnessing changes in leadership

from the scandals which brought down Premier Kakuei Tanaka in 1974 to the surprising ousting of Premier Takeo Fukuda in 1978, the sudden death of Premier Ohira in the spring of 1980, and the succession of Prime Minister Zenko Suzuki, almost unknown outside Japan. Much of this has taken place within the byzantine world of the ruling conservative Liberal Democratic Party. But it has also mirrored at every point a fundamental debate within the Japanese elite.

Two strategic views

In the post-war period, Japan has shaped its outlook and its role solely in the context of its ties to the United States, assuming a world in which the United States remains the foremost world power. During this past decade of international monetary turmoil, the Japanese have debated how to deal with a world in which the United States is no longer supreme and the world economy is perilous. One side of the debate advocates that Japan unswervingly ride the rollercoaster of U.S. policy wherever it leads, and go down with the ship if necessary, as there is no alternative. The late Premier Ohira was an adherent of that view, as was Ito.

During the Ohira period Tokyo followed Washington, i.e. the Carter administration, to a degree unmatched in Western Europe. Japan adhered strictly to the post-Afghanistan economic boycott of the Soviet Union, foregoing billions in trade deals. Ohira also moved in response to U.S. demands for a greater military buildup and the integration of Japanese forces in NATO-type regional defense structures. This also implicitly placed Tokyo in support of the strategic concept of a Tokyo-Peking-Washington axis against the Soviet Union in Asia, an axis intended to replace the weakened U.S. strategic/military presence in the region.

On the other side of the debate, though more cloudy and differentiated, is the view that Japan must make its own way, though *not* in opposition to the United States. Some in this camp advocate independent rearmament of Japan, up to and including nuclear weapons; but most favor a more flexible, independent foreign policy

which allows Japan, when necessary, to assert its national interest even when it means a clash with current U.S. policies.

During its first year, the Suzuki administration had no apparent distinct policy and Suzuki, who succeeded as head of Ohira's faction in the LDP, seemed to follow the Ohira approach. The May controversy and the ouster of Ito and his replacement by Foreign Minister Sunao Sonoda soon showed a new approach in policy. In early June the Japanese bluntly rejected U.S. demands, made at a Hawaii meeting on defense-policy coordination, for further defense spending buildup. In mid-June Suzuki went to Western Europe, partly to prepare for the Ottawa summit meeting, a trip which was significant for the renewal of close cooperation between Japan and West Germany, a policy markedly pursued by Fukuda and dropped by Ohira. The cornerstone of that cooperation was a German-Japanese agreement on the need to vigorously and publicly oppose the U.S. high-interest-rate policy at Ottawa and elsewhere. Political speculation in Japan noted, not coincidentally, the rising role of Fukuda as the key adviser to Suzuki on foreign policy matters.

Foreign Minister Sonoda earned himself controversy for his blunt statements on U.S. policies—for which he was later sacrificed in a November cabinet reshuffle, although only on the issue of "style." At the June meeting of the Southeast Asian nations in Manila, Sonoda pointedly told Haig that U.S. demands were endangering the U.S.-Japan treaty structure, and also pointedly joined Southeast Asian nations in criticizing Haig's flamboyant statements in Peking, which the Secretary of State visited en route to Manila, on the sale of U.S. arms to the Chinese regime. At the September Shimoda conference of top American and Japanese policy-makers, U.S. participants were reportedly shocked by the willingness of the usually polite and often deferential Japanese participants to lambast the stupidity of U.S. economic policy, its China Card policy, and its overemphasis on the "Soviet threat."

In the fall, with the visit of PLO head Arafat to Japan, the Suzuki government put its weight behind efforts to reach a comprehensive Middle East settlement, including backing the Saudi Fahd plan.

Japan on North-South relations

Perhaps the most significant and long-term sign of an emergent *Japanese* policy in the world is the approach toward North-South relations. Japan, a nation totally dependent on world trade for its energy, raw materials resources, and much of its food, is naturally sensitive to the condition of developing nations. Japan's very survival depends on an expanding world market, which necessarily means the development of the Third World. During the past year the Japanese have vastly

expanded their own capital lending to the developing countries, a policy of a emergent Tokyo capital market which had started earlier in the mid-70s, but had been curbed during the Ohira administration. Large-scale Japanese delegations have visited countries like Mexico; specifically, billions of dollars have been committed in support of Mexico's grand industrialization plans, and not incidentally are helping to secure for Japan stable supplies of petroleum.

The most visible expression of this Japanese commitment came at Cancún, where Premier Suzuki offered to play the role of a bridge and mediator between North and South. In his opening speech, a speech which won the praise of Third World delegates, Suzuki stated that:

"The road ahead calls for each of us to abandon the false perception that the interests of North and South conflict with each other, and for both the developed and developing countries to extend the hand of cooperation to one another in order to revitalize the world economy and to attain the goal of world peace and prosperity."

These views, and the Japanese bid to play a mediating role, have great credibility precisely because Japan has the unique experience among the advanced industrial nations of having advanced in the last hundred years from a backward, underdeveloped status. Suzuki made this point himself:

"When Japan began to grapple with the task of modernizing the nation about 100 years ago, it was a poor country, small in area and poor in natural resources, inhabited by 30 million people. It had no advanced technology and very little capital. Its leaders were, however, filled with the ardent resolve to attain progress and growth, believing that education was the most essential prerequisite for nation-building, and worked with dedication and determination to lay the foundation for education of the people. . . ."

The U.S. response to this Japanese attempt to assert its role as a responsible leader, a cliché demand chronically made by the United States upon the allegedly passive Japanese, was the deliberate sabotage of Japanese mediating efforts by Secretary of State Haig, who went even to the length of blocking any personal meeting between Suzuki and Reagan. It thus appeared to many, even in Japan, that Japan had once again "failed" to play an important role in the world, deprived of the opportunity by the U.S.

In reality such an event reveals something quite different—that Japan can and must play a special leading role in ensuring world peace and stability through its superior grasp of the fundamental principles of economic growth, manifested in Japan as a model for the rapid development of the developing nations. Those who accuse Japan, the third greatest economic power in the world, of failing to match that economic power with political strength have missed the point.