

# Japan's foreign policy at the crossroads

by Daniel Sneider, Asia Editor

*EIR Asia Editor Daniel Sneider recently spent two weeks in Japan meeting with business and political leaders. This is the first of a two-part report on his trip. The second part will deal with economic policy.*

It has become almost faddish these days to speak of the "secret" of the "Japanese economic miracle." Japan's status in the world as a power is now a fact, but the content of Japan's role remains undefined.

To talk to Japanese themselves about Japan's role can be disappointing; clear answers are often hard to find. Nonetheless, certain themes emerged from the many conversations this writer had with leading Japanese in different walks of life.

On the one hand there is a feeling of tremendous accomplishment, in the Japanese economic and social system, and in the highly competent manner in which Japan has weathered the storm of economic depression and political instability of the past decade. Looking across the Pacific at the decaying state of their once-powerful ally and "protector," the Japanese openly express pride in their relative success and the recognition of that success in countless new books and articles abroad.

This confidence and a new sense of nationalism is paired with a deep sense of crisis, of uncertainty about Japan's ability to maintain the hard-won gains of the postwar reconstruction. The crux of Japanese fears lies in the knowledge that their own future progress depends on events *outside* Japan, events which they are not sure they can affect. Rising trade protectionism in the United States and Western Europe, the world economic crisis, and the prospects of strategic confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union all appear as potential cataclysmic typhoons heading for Japan.

The Japanese are therefore confronted by a troubled world and by the necessity that in order to ensure their survival, they must somehow act for themselves in the world arena. During most of the postwar era, Japanese prosperity had grown within the relatively stable environment of the Bretton Woods international monetary

system, and the strategic alliance backed by American strength.

This changed as the 1970s opened with the collapse of the international monetary system, and saw the decay of American power. Divergent assessments by Japan and the United States (as well as Europe and the United States) about the cause of this crisis and how to respond to it have now led to growing tension in Japan-U.S. relations.

On one level the Japanese express indecision over how to deal with this situation. As one Japanese businessman told this writer, "We Japanese are an internal-minded people. We are not used to thinking about what to do in the world." Publicly and privately, leading Japanese place reduction of tensions with the United States and maintenance of the postwar alliance as their number-one concern.

At the same time, the rising feelings of nationalism, of self-confidence, are more openly expressed today than at any time since the end of the Pacific War; trade problems with the Americans are viewed in large part as the result of Japanese economic success and American economic failure. The Japanese openly question why they should be penalized for their success. On the issue of U.S. demands for greater Japanese defense spending, there are those who question the wisdom of U.S. strategic thinking, and those of the younger generation who privately envision a Japanese defense buildup independent of the United States.

The issue on the table is indeed what Japan will do in the world. It is an issue which brings up profound questions of history, particularly the events leading up to and following World War II, of the future shape of the Japanese nation, and what it means today to "be Japanese." The Japanese are constantly obsessed with the question of "Japaneseness," of defining and preserving their national character. Ultimately the issue of the individual Japanese identity, though, is inseparable from the national identity and the role of Japan as a whole in the world. What it means to be Japanese may be defined as

the interaction between this island nation and the outside world.

## The legacy of World War II

The period of the 1930s-1940s constitutes the last time Japan attempted to assert itself as a world power and to challenge the power centers of the British Empire and the United States. Those events are explained differently by different Japanese, but all agree that the result was disastrous—near destruction of Japan in the war and its occupation for the first time in its entire history by a foreign power.

Certainly, American occupation was relatively benign and few Japanese of that generation will fail to praise General Douglas MacArthur and America's assistance in postwar reconstruction. But two legacies are left. One is the strong desire to avoid circumstances that could lead again to war; the second, is the desire to finally shed the stigma of defeat and occupation, to assert Japan's independence. Such sentiments are not intrinsically anti-American—they are the natural urges of nationalism, bolstered by the all-too-evident success of Japan's efforts to achieve equal status as a modern industrial nation.

Americans dealing with Japan, particularly those ignorant of its history and its culture, view the nation and its modern history through the prism of the Pacific War. Japanese history is divided into "prewar" and "postwar" periods, distinct in character. Such a viewpoint has the attraction of being self-congratulatory concerning America's defeat of the Japanese Empire and the democratization process under the Occupation.

Except for some left-of-center intellectuals, the Japanese of the older generation do not see their history in that way. The key turning point was not the War but the Meiji Restoration of 1868, the political and social revolution which threw off feudalism, and, inspired by the West and America in particular, unleashed a drive to rapidly industrialize and modernize Japan. As a tour brochure handed out at the Meiji Shrine built to commemorate the Emperor, proudly declared: "During the Meiji era (1868-1912) Japan flourished under the benign rule of the Emperor Meiji, who promulgated the Meiji Constitution, promoted friendship with overseas countries, and developed the nation in every cultural field. It was the most glorious of all periods of more than 2,000 years of Japanese history, a period during which the foundation of modern Japan was laid."

The history of modern Japan is, in that view, a continuum from Meiji to the present, a continuum in which the invasion of China and the other militarist adventures of the 1930s, leading to the Pacific War, were a mistaken and disastrous interregnum. Democracy and constitutional order in Japan are not the *de novo* gifts of General MacArthur, but the products first of all

of the Meiji revolution, however imperfect it was.

In this Japanese view, there spans a more than hundred year process of modernization, of shaping a Japanese identity, which is at once nationally unique, oriental, and Westernized. The problems that confront Japanese society today are in that sense not new.

## The crisis of leadership

The difference is that the world strategic environment has changed. The dangers that threaten Japan are heightened, and in some cases are new dangers. The Japanese national identity is being tested, and some Japanese themselves question the depth and security of their accomplishments. In almost every meeting this writer had, the question was posed of what Japan would *do* to respond to the global economic and strategic crisis. In every case the answer was one of doubt whether the Japanese were prepared to act independently.

Near the end of my visit, I spent one night talking with an old Japanese friend, a keen observer of the nation's political scene, and a man who spends his private moments worrying about the future of his beloved nation. Without hesitation, he told me that he believes a major crisis, a crisis of war or peace, was only a few years away at most. Does Japan have, he asked, speaking more to himself than me, the kind of leadership to face the crisis?

His answer, looking at the present political leadership, was an unqualified "No." The present Prime Minister, Zenko Suzuki, a product of the Liberal-Democratic Party machine—which has ruled Japan during virtually the entirety of the postwar period—is a man who constantly seeks to "harmonize" the various interests around him so as not to disturb the steady stability. My friend said, "Suzuki is a man of balance and a statesman in a time of crisis must sometimes act without consideration of balance." Thinking for a moment, he added, that it was his belief, his hope, that someone—a de Gaulle or a Napoleon perhaps—would emerge from the shadows to provide leadership to Japan.

This is a hope which many Americans perhaps share for our own country, though we may choose to define it differently. My friend is not wishing for a "strongman," for the "man on a white horse," but for a leader, or rather a leadership, which can embody, as did the leaders of the Meiji Revolution, the ideas of nationhood which will shape a new Japanese role and identity in the world.

Japan's capacity and power to do good in the world, to deploy its economic and technological capabilities for the development of other nations, for insuring the future in turn for Japan, is undeniable. What is not certain is whether the Japanese will live up to their potential.