

War or peace: the choice facing the Japanese

by Peter Ennis



“Which way will it be—for or against fascism?” The year was 1936. The Mitsui business cartel backed by the British was heatedly promoting a fascist, war policy for Japan. The Minseito Party, which stemmed from the founding “Meiji Restoration” fathers of modern Japan, took advantage of national elections that year and brought the issue of Japan’s future before the Japanese people. The above slogan was officially propagated by the party, and the Japanese people responded overwhelmingly: Minseito swept the national elections and registered a firm rejection of fascism.

Takeo Miki, then a 30-year-old Minseito activist and later to become premier, rode this tide of support for Minseito into office a year later. Today, as Japan prepares for the most significant election in the country since 1937, Miki again finds himself in the middle of the fight.

The issues in the scheduled June 22 national elections are similar to those of 1936: war or peace. However, the stakes are much bigger today. If Japan again comes under the grip of a war policy, a destruction of the country far worse than that suffered in World War II is ensured—the kind that does not allow for “post-war recovery.”

The current situation

An overwhelming defeat of current Prime Minister Masayoshi Ohira will mean that Japan can avoid a new war. It is Ohira’s policies that are embroiling Japan in a military buildup in Asia with communist China and the United States, threatening to provoke a confrontation with the Soviet Union. As in 1936, the Mitsui faction represented by Ohira must be defeated. This time it must be for good.

The current political crisis in Japan reached a head

last month. Miki, together with his factional ally, former premier Takeo Fukuda, took the unprecedented step of, in effect, siding with an opposition-party no-confidence motion against Ohira in the national parliament (Diet). With the Miki and Fukuda factions of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) abstaining, the motion passed easily, forcing national elections.

When the news of the Miki-Fukuda move against Ohira hit the press, the standard “analysis” spoke of deep “personality conflicts” within the LDP. “Absolutely no policy disputes” are at stake in this action, most Western papers read.

But close observers of Japan knew better. Indeed, while there are deep personality conflicts within the ruling party, there is a far deeper “reality” underlying the unprecedented actions taken by Miki and Fukuda.

A deep sense of pessimism now pervades Japanese business and political circles. The combination of world depression and growing tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union has created great fears of world war. In a speech timed to coincide with a Soviet naval squadron taking up positions close to Japan two weeks ago, the Soviet ambassador to Tokyo bluntly warned against the “China card.” While no Japanese official has repeated the recent statement of West German Chancellor Helmut Schmidt—that the world is now in a period like that before August, 1914—few in Tokyo would disagree with that assessment.

But what should Japan do?

Strike north?

Ohira has made very clear that his policy is to firmly ally with Carter administration efforts to form a military alliance in Asia with China. As a result, relations between the Soviet Union and Japan are extremely cold. While West Germany and France are expanding economic ties

with the Soviets, conducting independent diplomacy with the Kremlin leaders, and Ohira continues to echo Carter administration denunciations of Moscow. While the European nations prepare to take an independent initiative to bring about peace in the Middle East, Japan continues to support the discredited "Camp David" talks between Egypt and Israel.

And, most importantly, Ohira has led Japan toward rearmament—or as the Trilateral Commission puts it, "assuming a greater defense responsibility in Asia." Last week, Chinese Communist Party Chairman Hua Guofeng arrived in Tokyo on the anniversary of the British-sponsored Japanese victory in the 1905 Russo-Japanese War. The implied message did not go unnoticed in Moscow.

The effect of Ohira's political and military policies will also be strongly felt by the Japanese business community. The coolness in Japanese-Soviet relations cuts Japan off from many trading opportunities with the Soviet Union. Similarly, continued support of Camp David has harmed Japanese ties with the Arab countries, endangering Japan's oil supplies and restricting the chances for Japan to get lucrative development-project contracts in that region.

A last straw for Ohira's opponents, however, came with his sabotage of Japan's three-year effort to expand economic ties with Mexico. Rather than offer Mexico large-scale transfer of technology in exchange for oil, Ohira bowed to the U.S. State Department's insistence that Mexico is American territory; Ohira purposely limited economic proposals for cooperation, and was politely escorted out of Mexico with no agreement on the additional oil desperately needed in Japan.

The one area where Ohira has worked for expanded Japanese economic ties is China—for the military-strategic reasons that are otherwise threatening Japan's very survival.

Election prospects

There is widespread recognition in Tokyo that Ohira's policies not only harm Japan but directly contribute to the danger of world war. It was with good reason that Ohira's agreement with President Carter last month for Japan to increase defense spending was a prominent element in the successful no-confidence motion.

Many Japanese leaders would be prepared to ally with the ongoing efforts of the European nations to preserve detente in much the way Miki and Fukuda worked with the Europeans in the past.

Yet, despite this perception, neither Miki, Fukuda or powerful business circles opposed to Ohira have publicly linked Ohira with war. Instead they have chosen to attack him on the limited issue of corruption within the ruling

LDP. Moreover, business circles, such as recently retired Keidanren (business federation) chief Toshio Doko, are softly criticizing Ohira while appealing for "unity" within the LDP.

Thus, despite his political vulnerability, Ohira is clinging to the reins of the LDP, and it is by no means certain that any form of backroom "maneuvering" to replace him will be successful. If Miki and Fukuda don't attack Ohira on the issues, then it is very possible that the combination of Ohira's power within the LDP party apparatus, his access to money through his corrupt ally, former premier K. Tanaka, and his threats to form a coalition government with opposition parties, will be enough to keep him in power.

Ohira has only to stay on as president of the ruling LDP. Should the LDP win the elections, he will claim this as a personal victory, and insist the premiership is still rightfully his. Should the LDP lose—it has held an absolute majority in the Diet for 25 years—then Miki and Fukuda will be left in leadership positions, but with a very weakened party.

The question of a coalition government in Japan has been intensively studied by the Carter administration.

For several years now, top American policy makers have been studying the prospects of weakening the LDP as an institution through which business and pro-development politicians such as Miki and Fukuda rule the country. Ohira is undoubtedly the most popular of the LDP leaders among the opposition parties, and he is the only one who would not be significantly weakened by a loss of LDP power. It is very conceivable that even if the LDP loses the upcoming election, Ohira will move to form a coalition government with some of the "moderate" opposition parties, which could actually strengthen his own situation.

Recently several top American military strategists commented that a coalition government in Japan would not be a setback for the American "China card" policy. The Japanese Socialist Party is not really radical, but more in tune with the European social democracies. The JSP, they say, is very pro-China, which would actually aid the Carter policy.

Minseito-style campaign needed

Thus, the outcome of the June 22 elections depends largely on how Miki and Fukuda decide to conduct themselves. Attempts to dislodge Ohira through "backroom" maneuvering have failed in the past, and will fail again.

They would do well to revive the spirit of 1936-37, in which the issues of fascism and war or peace were taken directly to the Japanese people. There is little doubt the voters would respond in an overwhelmingly favorable fashion.