



# Japan's Politics of Cultural Shame

## By Masaru Tamamoto

**Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe wants to cast off the post-World War II order and transform Japan into “a beautiful country” filled with pride and confidence.**

**This is the slogan of his premiership.**

IT IS AS IF HE BELIEVES that Japan has sunk into a state of moral degradation since 1945, and is in need of salvation. It is almost as though he wants to turn back the clock to 1945 and start anew. He is concerned less about guilt over Japanese aggression during World War II than about the shame of not having dealt with the consequences of defeat.

Since coming to office last September, Abe has made it a priority to amend the basic education law, originally written under American tutelage following the war, and long left untouched. He has blamed a decline of discipline in schools and moral decay in society on an alien set of values. The new law speaks of reviving tradition, culture and patriotism.

Amending the constitution, the highest law of the land, is now Abe's big goal. Japan's constitution was authored by the American army of occupation and imposed upon the country in the name of democracy and demilitarization in 1947. Not a single word has been changed. The ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) has made amending the charter part of the party platform since its founding in 1955 yet, despite the party's almost continuous hold on power since then, there has been no serious effort to realize that goal. But now, Abe has declared his determination to amend the constitution during his premiership.

The original intent of the constitution, he has noted, was to prevent Japan from again becoming a great power. True national independence, he believes, cannot be had until the Japanese write their own constitution. Because the Japa-

nese have failed to articulate their own set of national values, the profit motive has become primary, and such immeasurable yet sacred moral values as family and attachment to community and country have been greatly weakened. In the proposal for a new constitution there is even a clause on patriotic obligation.

Many pundits around the world are inclined to find in Abe's words evidence of lurking Japanese nationalism. Nationalism, which is not qualitatively different from patriotism, is seemingly on the rise. But this is a misreading of the Japanese condition. Abe and his supporters are moved to alter these two fundamental laws – the basic education law and the constitution – precisely because they find the state of Japan's nationalism vacuous. They have, in a sense, declared a culture war.

On the whole, the Japanese have been satisfied with life under the American-authored constitution. The postwar order has delivered great prosperity, remarkable social stability, and peace. Whether Abe's vision can win the hearts and minds of the people is at the center of Japanese national identity politics today. Abe began his premiership with great popular support, but enthusiasm for him has been rapidly waning. Around 70% of those polled supported him when he came to power, a figure that has dropped to around 40% now.

#### CLASHING VISIONS OF NATIONALISM

Yasuhiro Nakasone, a self-proclaimed nationalist who was prime minister from 1982 to 1987, has castigated Abe's "beautiful country" vision as an unrealistic revival of tradition and culture. He has argued that "beauty" is an aesthetic concept and does not belong in the lexicon of politics, which is about concrete national strategy. It is noteworthy that as prime minister, Nakasone himself took issue with the postwar order, calling for a final accounting. Indeed, he remains a force for constitutional revision. Nakasone, however, has sought to separate the good from the bad in the postwar order, while Abe seemingly yearns to erase the period altogether as he denigrates

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reason and elevates emotion as the path to making Japan whole and authentic again.

Can such essentially nonpolitical cultural discontent garner enough popular support to drive the political agenda? Certainly, the Japanese today want to feel better. Following the collapse of the bubble economy in the early 1990s and the ensuing deflationary spiral, it is understood that the days of lifetime job security and ever-expanding wealth are over. Humbled and with greatly reduced expectations, people are looking to government for a new social compact.

But amorphous talk of respecting tradition and culture does not address real and immediate concerns about jobs, medical care and social security. Can the government, already deeply in debt, keep the national pension funds solvent? How will the cost of a rapidly ageing society and a shrinking population be covered? Is the call for patriotism – a sense of community that will bind together all Japanese – a prelude to the imposition of new material sacrifices, increased taxes and decreased welfare provisions? Is talk of family values a way of telling the Japanese to look to their family for support and not the government?

Parents are increasingly concerned about the quality of a public education system designed to socialize children for a society that hardly exists any more. Schooling was designed for a manufacturing economy in a heavily regulated, uncompetitive environment. Those days are over. Parents are understandably worried about their children's undefined future, and some people are even choosing to forgo parenthood, thus exacerbating the demographic squeeze. The new basic

education law says nothing about how to mould present and future generations. The details are yet to be hammered out, but the lawmakers have not been able to present any convincing vision of a desirable and feasible society.

The Japanese want to know and understand the new rules. They want predictability, so they can make rational decisions. They are looking to government for leadership and clarity. Since the collapse of the bubble economy, the government has been floundering and Japan has had a series of rather short-lived prime ministers. Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi was the exception. He enjoyed tremendous popular support and the longest tenure – five years – allowed by the LDP. He exuded a powerful sense of leadership and set about creating the necessary social and structural transformation, even vowing to destroy his own party if it got in his way.

Koizumi groomed Abe to succeed him, and the people initially lent their support, expecting more Koizumi-style leadership. But Abe has thus far failed to meet public expectations. His nationalistic and moralistic rhetoric seems disconnected from the substance of governance.

#### A SHIFT TO THE RIGHT

Nationalistic bombast is what we are getting from the political class. Rather than nationalism welling up from the people, we are witnessing the emergence of nationalistic politicians who are rather hawkish on foreign policy, especially on matters of security, notably towards Asia. This is a wave of resurgent nationalism from above.

Shigeru Ishiba, former director of the Defense Agency, thinks these hawks should have their heads examined. He finds them dangerously emotive and full of bravado, debating security issues in LDP committees with appeals to restore Japanese pride. Ishiba warns that the hawks are ignorant of Japan's actual military capability and strategy.

Taku Yamasaki, another former Defense Agency director, laments the fact that there are those who justify Japan's aims in World War II. He finds it incredible that some political figures

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talk about reviving a foreign policy backed by military power, an idea discarded after 1945. The new nationalists are vacuous, he believes, because they do not understand the simple fact that Japan cannot have security and stability without friendly relations with its neighbors.

Driving this nationalist resurgence is a nebulous fear that Japan's peace, security and prosperity are somehow under threat from the outside world. There is an air of helplessness, a lack of confidence in society. The new nationalists are flailing as they look abroad for blame. Nakasone believes the new nationalists are influenced by the concurrent rise of nationalism in China and South Korea.

Yamasaki estimates that 10% of LDP members are new nationalists; of the rest, 30% have common sense, and 60% are colorless. Also, the new nationalists are young, suggesting this is a generational phenomenon. With no memory of World War II, they do not know the horrors of war that deeply impressed postwar politicians and disciplined their thinking. They tend to identify with Abe's call to restore national pride through a revival of tradition and culture. (Curiously, though, Abe is least popular among the younger generation, who are most vulnerable to job insecurity.)

Interestingly, these critics of the new nationalism – the likes of Nakasone, Yamasaki, and Ishiba – had themselves been right wing foreign policy hawks and conservative nationalists until very recently. In a way, they opened the door to the new nationalism. Now, they are the voices of reason. The parameters of Japan's discourse on national identity have certainly shifted to the right.

Meanwhile, the voices of the traditional left – the liberal and pacifist critics of nationalism that dominated the intellectual class for most of the postwar era – can hardly be heard. This eerie silence raises questions about Japanese fidelity to ideas in general: Do ideas matter? Has society always operated in such a way that emotion trumps ideas?

Leftist politicians had given momentum to the first opposition Socialist Party. But, following the end of the Cold War, their strength has dissipated and their demise has eliminated the power of a veto against constitutional revision, because they had been in favor of preserving the current constitution in the face of the LDP's flirtation with changing the charter.

#### RETHINKING THE CONSTITUTION

The only obvious constitutional amendment the country needs concerns Article Nine, the pacifist clause that literally prohibits Japan from having a military arm. Of course Japan has the Self-Defense Force, which is not about to be dismantled, but the constitution puts the force in a legally awkward position.

The American occupiers, having abolished the imperial armed forces in 1945, initially wrote Article Nine to proscribe Japan from ever threatening international peace. But America almost immediately ordered the government of still-occupied Japan to reconstitute a military for the new fight against the Soviet Union and the threat of global communism. Thus the Japanese military was reborn, initially named the Special Police Force.

Yet, after the formal end of occupation in 1952, America was still suspicious of Japanese political leaders who were in favor of amending Article Nine. For a while, Washington saw

in them the shadow of Japan's militarist past. Later, America suspected that the constitutional revisionists were aiming to take Japan out of the American security orbit, to seek independence in the manner of Charles de Gaulle's France by reconstructing a credible military force. Constitutional revisionists of varying shades were seen to be plotting against American interests.

This reading of the situation was not altogether wrong. Japan's postwar order was a curious beast: the guardians of the American-authored pacifist constitution were themselves anti-American, calling for the dismantling of the Self-Defense Force, the abrogation of the U.S.-Japan security treaty, and Japan's neutrality in the Cold War. All the while, America did not see Japan as a normal military ally, but rather as real estate for forward military deployment. Under the terms of the U.S.-Japan security treaty, America committed itself to the defense of Japan, but Japan incurred no reciprocal obligations, not even for Japanese soldiers to fight alongside American GIs in defense of Japanese territory.

In the mid-1980s, during a period of heightened Cold War tension during Ronald Reagan's presidency, America began to see the possibility of a firmly pro-American Japan with a revised constitution acting more like a military ally. Then-Prime Minister Nakasone played a pivotal role in this thinking but it still took another couple of decades, about ten years after the end of the Cold War, for American officials to publicly endorse Japanese revision of Article Nine.

With the end of the Cold War, Japanese soldiers ventured abroad for the first time since 1945 – first, as United Nations peacekeepers for humanitarian aid and reconstruction, then as a national army, without U.N. cover, but for similarly restricted purposes as part of the “coalition of the willing” in Iraq and to provide naval support in the Indian Ocean for the war in Afghanistan. Meanwhile, military coordination and cooperation between America and Japan have been greatly enhanced. And there is now talk in Japan of exercising the right to collective self-defense, meaning Japanese soldiers fight-

ing alongside the Americans. All of this logically points toward revising Article Nine.

Michael Armacost, the former American ambassador to Japan, finds the new Japanese role as provider of offshore, non-combat logistics benign and helpful in making the U.S.-Japan alliance more balanced, global and operational. At the same time, he recognizes that Japan's immediate neighbors have misgivings – “mainly for having taken shape against the backdrop of rising Japanese (and Asian) nationalism and deteriorating Japanese relations with China and both Koreas.”

Indeed, Japan's emerging role has stirred up nationalistic antagonism in Northeast Asia, because it is not just about technical and legitimate security matters but also about certain romantic visions of Japanese statehood. In the name of forging a normal country, some nationalists of the political class envision restoring wholeness to a Japanese state crippled since 1945 by reacquiring the military as an instrument of foreign policy. While it is difficult to discern precisely their influence, they have created an undeniable mood that is influencing Japanese politics. What this “whole” Japan intends to do in the international arena is barely thought through, and anyhow is not their point.

These nationalist hawks seem to ignore the simple fact that international relations is exactly that, about relations. Theirs is an inward looking and self-referential view and they are struggling with the ghost of Japan's postwar order. When the deed is done, and the military becomes free of its constitutional constraint, it is hard to imagine how that will make Japan whole and authentic even by the emotional standards of the nationalists. Still, for now, their perception of the China threat serves as a major justification for their struggle for Japanese authenticity.

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### THE SPECTER OF YASUKUNI

Sino-Japanese diplomatic relations suffered badly during Koizumi's tenure because of his insistence on visiting the Yasukuni Shrine, where 2.5 million spirits of Japan's war dead are enshrined. Also enshrined are the spirits of 14 convicted class-A war criminals from World War II – and that is the problem. Many people around the world, especially in China and South Korea, saw the visits as an expression of virulent nationalism and proof of Japan's lack of contrition for past aggression.

But Koizumi simply wanted to take the history card out of China's diplomatic hand by demonstrating that he cannot be stopped. He was inclined neither to revise nor justify history. While Koizumi's visits to Yasukuni remained controversial among the Japanese public, the alarming deterioration in Sino-Japanese relations surely encouraged Japan's new nationalism. And it was Koizumi who dispatched Japanese soldiers to Iraq and naval vessels to the Indian Ocean in a calculation to solidify security relations with America. Again, this was great encouragement for those seekers after a whole and authentic Japanese state, and it heightened the mood for constitutional revision.

America became concerned about deteriorating Sino-Japanese relations, wondering whether the tightening American security connection was being used by Japan to pursue an irresponsible China policy. When Abe succeeded Koizumi, he was quick to mend relations with China and South Korea. He visited Beijing and Seoul, where Koizumi had not been welcome. Sino-Japanese diplomatic relations had become so unmanageable that any likely successor to Koizumi would have acted similarly. There was relief in Beijing, Seoul and Tokyo. And Abe has not visited the Yasukuni Shrine, although all previous utterances on the subject indicated that he would. Yasukuni, for Abe, represents an important element of culture, tradition and patriotism. He finds it abnormal that the prime minister cannot pay respect to the nation's war dead, but the practical demands of leadership

have tempered this urge for now. Meanwhile, he passed legislation elevating the status of the military from an agency in the prime minister's office to a full-fledged ministry, taking Japan another step closer to constitutional revision.

### PROMOTING UNIVERSAL VALUES

Abe vows to pursue an assertive foreign policy. His foreign minister, Taro Aso, speaks of value-oriented diplomacy, emphasizing democracy, freedom, human rights, the rule of law, and a market economy. These values, he posits, are universal, and they will serve as the new basis of Japan's foreign policy.

Some are prone to hear in such talk echoes of American neo-conservatism, coming as it does during the administration of George W. Bush. Still others hear a thinly veiled hardening of Japan's posture toward China. In Aso's statement, first articulated in a November 2006 speech, entitled, "Arc of Freedom and Prosperity; Japan's Expanding Diplomatic Horizons," he sounded circumspect not aggressive. It was as much a speech about Japanese national identity as it was about foreign policy.

Early in the speech, the foreign minister said, "there will be people saying, when exactly did this country that suffered such a heavy defeat in a war and caused so much great adversity both at home and abroad suddenly arrive at such a 'virtuous conscience' that it can now lecture to others?" He used the rest of the speech to argue that for Japan to bolster universal values is not arrogance, that Japan itself has been honoring these values and is qualified and deserves to be recognized as a trustworthy diplomatic player. What was meant to be a declaration of an assertive foreign policy sounded almost like a plea for understanding.

Aso spoke of the Japanese self-image. He urged Japanese to look squarely in the mirror and see the real Japan. He was talking, in part, to Asian countries that continue to harbor resentment and suspicion of Japan. More crucially, he was urging the Japanese nation to examine the world without preconceived notions:

“You can forget everything else you hear today. But Japan is already of age, and what we need is to let go of that way of thinking that makes us squirm when we see our reflection in the mirror. We need to be able to look at it without feeling ill at ease.”

Herein lies the crux of Japan’s conservative and nationalist impulse. Conservatism, writes Prime Minister Abe, is not an ideology but the ability to think about Japan and the Japanese. As the conservatives see it, the Japanese have not been able to think properly about Japan since 1945. A novel element in the politics of war in the age of nations and nationalism has been to humiliate as much as possible the vanquished enemy in his own eyes so that he henceforth lacks confidence. Japanese conservatives think that the American victors were so successful at humiliation that the Japanese, even today, are trapped by shame and in need of release.

Japanese diplomacy needs a sense of vision, says Aso: “A vision which each individual Japanese can respect and be proud of ... to bring enthusiasm and confidence to the Japanese people.” He admits there is nothing new in a foreign policy based on universal values, that Japan has been pursuing such a policy for nearly two decades. What is new is naming the values pursued by that policy – freedom and prosperity – because without a name, the people, Aso believes, will fail to recognize the deeper significance of what we ourselves are doing, and who we are.

In other places and times, the modern era has seen longing for an imaginary past. Dissatisfied with the present, conservative reaction combines cultural criticism and nationalism to maintain that the present is alien to the traditions of the people. But, almost always, the present is the real thing, and the conservative invocation of tradition hopelessly points to values that have largely been buried.

In Japan today, conservative politicians long to create a new community with ideas and insti-

tutions that would once again foster unity and command universal allegiance. Their disposition is wrongheaded. The entire constitution, for one, should be re-read. It is an extremely liberal document, fitting to serve as the blueprint for an increasingly pluralistic Japanese society. The Japanese have never really understood the constitution’s meaning, because their conservative political leaders have paid little attention to it, except narrowly to Article Nine. While Japanese foreign policy now proposes to help spread freedom around the world, the domestic debate on constitutional revision points toward reducing individual liberty in the name of tradition and morality.

Japan’s identity politics do not translate into intelligent foreign policy. In the end, the biggest contribution Japan can make to peace and world order is to establish solid, friendly relations with China. Japanese foreign policy should encourage the emergence of a prosperous and pluralistic China. A middle class China will be so integrated into global capitalism, and Sino-Japanese relations so interdependent, with borders so porous, that there will be little room for national identity politics.

Such is the long wave of history in the age of globalization. But politics has a way of derailing things. If national identity politics takes the lead in Asia, we will see a drift toward Sino-Japanese strategic rivalry that nobody really wants.

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