

An ordinary power, Japanese-style

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Japan is learning a new geopolitics. Its sense of identity, capacity, and relation to the world is shifting amidst great economic, military and regional pressures. But what kind of foreign policy model will Japan choose? One of the country's foremost analysts explores the possible answers to a reopened question.

In February 2004, at long last, the Japanese government led by prime minister Junichiro Koizumi dispatched troops from its Self-Defense Forces (SDF) to Iraq. "At long last" in two senses: first, that the initiative comes after a lengthy and tortuous domestic debate on its rightness, practicality and possible costs; second, that it marks a shift from Japan's half-century of reluctance to involve itself in military activity beyond the country's shores.

In this article I will try to explain the immediate background to this momentous decision; and to assess its significance in the context of three foreign policy models available to Japan as the country seeks to develop a world profile appropriate to the challenges it will face in the 21st century.

[The road to Samawa](#)

How did Japan reach the point where its ceaseless media outlets are broadcasting hours of coverage every day from a place called Samawa, where its national soccer team is playing a friendly match with Iraq,

where many of its people are daily concerned about their sons and fellow-citizens now stationed in this distant country?

The road that leads from Tokyo to Samawa starts in March 2003, when on the eve of war Japan formally declared its support for the American enterprise. During the conflict itself, Japan assigned its Maritime Self-Defence Force (navy) vessels to the Indian Ocean to fuel the United States and the United Kingdom forces engaged in combat in Iraq.

Junichiro Koizumi met President George Bush in Crawford, Texas, soon after the latter's triumphant declaration of victory in May 2003, but at that stage Japan showed few signs of readiness to send personnel to assist in Iraq's post-war reconstruction.

Throughout summer 2003, the discussion about sending forces to Iraq gathered speed. In November 2003, the Diet (parliament) – where the governing Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and its coalition partner, the solidly pacifist Komeito, have a majority –

passed legislation making the sending of troops to Iraq permissible in principle under the constitution; legislation to enable this in practice was passed in February 2004.

At the centre of the Iraq discussion was the Japanese constitution which took effect in 1947, during the Allied occupation of the country but after an intense national debate involving many sectors of Japanese society. Among the most closely-studied sections was Article 9, which stipulates that the Japanese people “forever renounce war as a sovereign right of the nation and the threat or use of force as a means of settling international disputes”.

Before the general election on 9 November 2003, both the LDP and the opposition Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) raised the question of amendments to the 1947 constitution; the LDP pledged to present the draft of a revised constitution in 2005, including changes to Article 9.

Between November 2003 and February 2004, three investigative missions were sent to survey the place where the Self-Defense Forces troops would be based – Samawa, 270 kilometres south-west of Baghdad, the capital of Muthana province – and to ensure that it was a relatively peaceful environment. During this period, on 29 November, two Japanese diplomats were killed in an ambush near Tikrit, north of Baghdad – an event that reinforced the doubts of many Japanese people about their government’s course.

But on Sunday 8 February, a contingent of 60 Ground Self-Defence Force (army) troops arrived in a convoy of vehicles from Kuwait at their base six kilometres outside Samawa. They are the advance guard of a total of 600 ground troops, aided by 400 logistical support personnel from the Air Self-Defence Force (air force) and navy, who will arrive in Iraq by the end of March. Their mission is humanitarian aid and economic reconstruction, starting with the building of safe water supplies in the area.

The political controversy in Japan will not abate with the arrival of the troops; it may even intensify, especially if any of them suffer the fate of Katsuhiko Oku and Masamori Inoue, their diplomatic

compatriots. (On 12 February, a mortar exploded near a hotel where around 100 Japanese journalists covering the SDF deployment were staying). But the very fact of their arrival marks a break in a historical pattern that had lasted for over fifty years. After Iraq, whatever happens there, Japan will never be the same again.

An identity in transition

It is true that, during the 1990s, Japan cautiously expanded its overseas engagement by participating in United Nations peacekeeping operations in Cambodia, Rwanda, the Palestinian territories, Angola, Kosovo, and East Timor. But the presence of Japanese troops in

Iraq represents a departure from rather than continuity with this engagement, in two fundamental ways.

First, there is continuing insurgency in Iraq, as opposed to the post-conflict civil needs of (for example) Cambodia and East Timor; Japanese troops are being sent to help build peace, but in a country still wracked by war.

Second, Japan’s support for the 2003 war and the subsequent United States-led occupation deprives it of some of the legitimacy that in the previous cases had been conferred by United Nations Security Council resolutions, (although a UN resolution was secured in October 2003 sanctioning the protection of law and order by foreign troops in Iraq).

Japan is therefore almost, if not quite, “on its own” in Iraq in a way that was not true of the 1990s deployments. This fact both reflects and reinforces the country’s growing debate about its national security in the post-cold war and post-9/11 era. What role should Japan play in the world, and what alliances should it have? What kind of military forces should it possess, and what should they be allowed to do?

In other words, Japan’s decision over Iraq is also a symbol of a process of self-redefinition already underway in the country. If this process now seems to be intensifying pace, it is partly because of the way that Junichiro Koizumi has mobilised two powerful currents tangible in Japanese society: national fear and national pride.

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The fear has one main source: North Korea. This is not a new phenomenon. On the last day of August 1998, for example, North Korea fired a Taepo-dong 1 long-range ballistic missile which overflew Japan. Japan is also deeply concerned to reunite the families of its citizens, at least thirteen of whom were abducted by North Korean agents from the country's remote western coastline areas during the 1970s and 1980s.

But the Pyongyang regime's announcement of 21 February (as quoted in *Yomiuri Shimbun*, 22 February 2004) that it has completed "the possession of nuclear deterrence capability for self-defence" adds a higher level of insecurity to Japanese worries about its military intentions.

The pride has more complex sources, one of them being the recovery of the economy from its deflationary spiral. Japan's supply of international "public goods" may also contribute. It is revealing that at the Madrid conference on reconstruction of Iraq in October 2003, Japan was virtually alone (alongside the World Bank and the United Nations Development Program) in solidly supporting the United States-led Iraqi reconstruction of Iraq, whereas France and Germany opted out.

This combination of elements – Iraq, the constitution, and the currents of national feeling in Japan – produce the sense that Japan has entered a new phase in its history. What is taking place, I believe, is that Japan is undergoing a major transition to becoming an *ordinary power*.

Since Japan is a rare example of a country deprived of the legitimate use of force in the settlement of international disputes, any movement away from that category offers a number of foreign policy openings. The question then is: what *kind* of "ordinary power" Japan might become in the light of its revised constitution? The rest of this article tries to present three possible scenarios for Japan's foreign policy future.

In short, will Japan adopt Britain, Germany or France as a model? And in each case, what would the choice entail for Japan's vital political relationship with the United States?

The British model

The key idea here is the *special relationship*.

Just over a decade ago, the United States ambassador to Japan, Mike Mansfield, characterised the US relationship with Japan as its "most important

bilateral relationship – bar none". The special relationship – a phrase itself often deployed as the defining concept of Japan-United States relations during the 1990s mirrors the way that Britain conceives its own intimate link with the US.

Japan and Britain share three relevant commonalities:

- each conceives of itself as distinctive and somewhat distant from its respective continental neighbours ("Japan and Asia" seems here to echo "Britain and Europe")
- each has high levels of economic interdependence with the United States and is embedded in the American pattern of economic relations
- each has significant military alliance links with the US.

Although the United States has since 9/11 assembled a wide-ranging anti-terrorist coalition, it has regarded the United Kingdom and to a lesser extent Australia as particularly reliable allies. These countries can take military action without the constraints Japan faces; it sometimes seems as if they can act like America's mercenaries.

This has provoked senior Japanese diplomats to remark that Japan is not as small as the UK (whose population is half of Japan's), and that Japan does not feel it necessary to fall into line behind the US as unquestioningly as the UK seems to; as such, they suggest, the US-UK model might not be appropriate to the US-Japan partnership.

The German model

The key idea here is *regional embeddedness*.

Germany has long "concealed" itself within regional and international institutions such as the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (Nato), adroitly aligning its national interests to broader regional and international interests.

By using technocratic competence, rule-based steadiness and economic surplus to pursue its diplomatic objectives, Germany has been quite successful in rehabilitating itself within a context where it does not regenerate old security concerns. Yet the country has also been able to take initiatives within the broader context of European governance, such as the European Union's eastern expansion and the introduction of the single European currency.

Japan and Germany share three relevant commonalities:

- each was a “revisionist” state, progressing (in Hans-Peter Schwarz’s phrase, from *Machtbesessenheit* (self-aggrandisement, pre-1945) to *Machtvergessenheit* (an abstention from power politics, post-1945). This, combined with significant economic strength, has allowed each to become a global civilian power
- each has a strong alliance with the United States, sustained by a substantial American military presence
- each has strong economic ties with its respective regional hinterlands.

Despite its economic embrace of Asia, Japan’s traditional approach has been to conceive of itself as somehow external to the continent.

The rise of China means that an embedding of Japan with Asia would entail a much deeper alignment with China – something which Japan is not willing to make, given Japan’s difference of values and its strong alliance with the United States.

If Japan did become more regionally embedded, its foreign policy stance might in principle disturb America. Here, there is a comparison between Gerhard Schröder’s refusal to participate in the Iraq war and Junichiro Koizumi’s period of blitz summit diplomacy in Pyongyang in 2002; both were out of harmony with the evolving American campaign against the “axis of evil” (Iraq, North Korea, and Iran).

But there is a difference in the kind of choices Japan and Germany can make vis-à-vis the United States, one rooted in the variation in Europe’s and East Asia’s strategic importance to the US. Because the Middle East and East Asia each has the potential to destabilise the world, in a way Europe does not, Japan has less latitude to adopt an anti-US policy than Germany.

The French model

The key idea here is that of *autonomy*.

Japan is a close ally and partner of the United States. This alliance has its roots in a complex history: total war, complete disarmament, occupation, and regime

change. Japan’s economic performance since 1945 makes it natural that it should seek more autonomy.

This is what France did in the UN in the approach to the Iraq war. Japan is quietly envious of such self-assertion, but it is also apprehensive about a stance that helps divide Europe and the west, makes the United Nations less effective, and paradoxically enhances the influence of the United States.

Japan and France share three relevant commonalities:

- each is a close ally of the United States
- each has a strong interest in peaceful and prosperous regional relations
 - each seeks to cultivate a diverse range of diplomatic partners from outside its immediate spheres of activity.

Japan finds “Gaullism”, the assertion of national autonomy, attractive. Through its tight association with the United States,

Japan has placed all its diplomatic eggs in one basket. This excessive alignment has generated a significant body of dissenting argument suggesting that Japan should strive for greater autonomy.

The putative attraction of the French model is that (in the words of Jacques Chirac) France is a true friend, in the sense of giving advice that you do not want to hear, before ultimately offering you its support. He also notes that sycophants will not do this, alluding perhaps to Tony Blair’s United Kingdom.

But for Japan, a serious problem is that the Japanese leadership style is very far from the articulate, aggressive and adroit French. The consensus-oriented Japanese political system has tended either not to create, or not to reward, such a leadership style at the highest level; potential Japanese Gaullists have endured great frustration as a result. Here, the articulate and decisive figure of Junichiro Koizumi seems genuinely new in Japanese politics.

From the United States’s viewpoint, there is a vital difference between France and Japan in the roles they play in their respective regions. Britain is semi-detached from the continent, and institutional and historical constraints hamper Germany’s foreign policy initiatives; this makes France central to Europe’s unity

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and stability, and free to exert more leeway in its diplomatic affairs.

Japan's role in East Asia is very different. Apart from Japan, no country in the region can play the role of a key stabilising power for the United States. China does not share core values, South Korea is too small, the Asean bloc is fragmented and vulnerable. Hence the degree of autonomy the United States can afford to give to Japan is measurably smaller.

A century of four seasons

Which foreign policy model is right for Japan? It looks as if an ordinary power, Japanese-style, would be a creative mix of British, German and French models. The *special relationship* with the United States would be kept solid, yet naturally adapting to changing American priorities; the *regional embeddedness* with the Asia-Pacific would be enhanced in tandem with the rise of China and the Asean bloc; and the assertion of *autonomy* would become more effective, in accordance with the Japanese grand strategy of working from within to advance its diplomatic goals.

This Japanese-style "fusion" model would retain a strong component of pacifism and anti-militarism even after any constitutional revision to Article 9 was made. Moreover, it would retain or even champion its special relationship with the United States. It would nurture its regional influence, in response to the irreversible trends of integration fuelled by accelerating globalisation. As a result, Japan would make its tenacious but still largely unnoticed voice more audible and influential.

If Japan were forced to choose, its preferred scenario would undoubtedly be the British model, but in doing so it would try its best to add a German and French flavour. Its strategy for the 21st century would be to ensure that the country could survive all the four seasons: peace, war, neither war nor peace, both war and peace. The emergence of such an ordinary power, Japanese-style, in the very near future will affect not just East Asia, but the rest of the world.

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