

# A contextual look at the Heisei Era

The articles in this series were compiled from contributions by members of the Political and Diplomatic Review project of the Tokyo Foundation for Policy Research to the forum on “Japan since the Meiji Restoration” held to reassess the 150 years since of the start of Japan’s modernization. In Part 3, Taizo Miyagi focuses on Japan’s political path during the three decades of the Heisei Era in the context of international trends.

## Japan since the Meiji Restoration

TAIZO MIYAGI

I would like to explore two topics as they pertain to the 150-year arc of modern Japanese history since the Meiji Restoration (1868) and to our current Heisei Era (Since 1989), now in its 30th year. The first is the impact of international affairs on domestic politics, and the second is Japan’s position within the East Asian region.

Ever since the mid-19th century, international affairs have exerted a decisive influence on political developments within Japan. The threat from the industrial West, symbolized by the arrival of Matthew Perry’s “black ships” in 1853, helped precipitate the fall of the Tokugawa shogunate and the rise of the Meiji government. The multilateral treaties and pacts concluded during the Washington Conference of the early 1920s

helped to stabilize the Asia-Pacific order and facilitated the rise of a stable two-party parliamentary system in Japan during the second half of that decade. In contrast, the global instability of the early 1930s fueled the rise of right-wing “reformist” elements within the military.

After World War II, Japanese party politics congealed into a static configuration loosely reflecting the global Cold War system. On one side, the conservative, pro-American, pro-business Liberal Democratic Party was founded in 1955, and controlled the government continuously until 1993. On the other side was the opposition Japan Socialist Party (later renamed the Social Democratic Party of Japan), which advocated a peaceful transition to socialism and a neutral foreign policy. This “1955 system,” as it is known, persisted until 1993, shortly after the end of the Cold War.

In contrast, the post-Cold War years, corresponding roughly to the Heisei Era, have been a period of political realignment and shifting coalitions. Looking closely, we can see that many of these shifts pivoted on security issues and the constitutional questions they raise. The left-centrist opposition alliance between the JSP, Komeito, and Democratic Socialist Party splintered over the 1992 International Peace Cooperation Law (permitting limited participation by the Self-Defense Forces in United Nations peacekeeping operations).

The North Korean nuclear crisis of 1993-1994 helped undermine the short-lived anti-

## Era will be Heisei, named for universal peace



CHIEF CABINET SECRETARY Keizo Obuchi announces the name of the new imperial era Saturday.

The Hesei Era began on Jan. 8, 1989, following the accession of Emperor Akihito. THE JAPAN TIMES

LDP coalition (led successively by Prime Minister Morihiro Hosokawa and Tsutomu Hata), which collapsed in June 1994. The LDP then cobbled together a coalition with the SDPJ (formerly the JSP) and New Party Sakigake, which likewise ran aground over security issues (specifically, the U.S. military presence in Okinawa). The impetus for the LDP-Komeito coalition forged in 1999 was a Diet standoff over a package of government-sponsored bills to expand the role of the SDF under revised Guidelines for Japan-U.S. Defense Cooperation.

From the late 1990s on, with the Social Democratic Party (formerly the SDPJ) in a tailspin, security issues emerged as a key focus of policy debate among opposition forces striving to position themselves as via-

ble alternatives to the LDP. Ichiro Ozawa’s Shinshinto staked out a “realistic” stance on issues of security and the Constitution, while the Democratic Party of Japan explored options for scaling back the Japan-U.S. alliance, such as by limiting the U.S. military’s use of Japanese bases to emergency situations. It seems safe to surmise that security issues will continue to play a pivotal role in the realignment of opposition forces henceforth.

The international situation today is fraught with uncertainty. Do the “America First” policies of U.S. President Donald Trump represent an anomaly or signal a long-term trend? How will those policies impact the U.S.-China relationship and the situation on the Korean Peninsula? Any

major shift in the security situation surrounding Japan could have a decisive impact on the domestic political climate.

In the wake of the Meiji Restoration, Japan set itself apart from and above the rest of Asia, modeling itself after the Western powers. Within a few decades, it had earned a position as the only non-Western country among the major powers and was building its own colonial empire to replace the Sino-centric tribute system that had dominated East Asia for centuries.

This fundamental orientation continued after World War II. Detached from the turmoil and stagnation that was holding back much of Asia, Japan worked single-mindedly to achieve economic parity with the industrial West. By the 1970s, it had emerged as the world’s second-largest economy and Asia’s only economic power. In fact, until fairly recently, this descriptor was central to Japan’s identity.

But Japan’s unchallenged regional preeminence is a thing of the past; over the last 20 or 30 years, China and other rapidly developing Asian countries have closed the gap. In this sense, the Heisei Era has marked a dramatic change in Japan’s regional status. After a century as East Asia’s unchallenged economic and industrial leader, Japan has become just one of several important regional powers.

To lament the “fall of Japan,” as some

To lament the ‘fall of Japan,’ as some pessimists do, misses the big picture.

pessimists are inclined to do, misses the big picture. Japan still has one of the largest economies in the world, and its living standards rank near the top. The reason the Japanese economy no longer looms so large in the region is simply that the region as a whole has made rapid progress in recent years. In fact, Asia’s overall growth and dynamism presents a tremendous economic opportunity for Japan.

Still, we should not be surprised if some elements of the public view the decline in Japan’s relative status with mixed emotions. Political leadership can play a critical role in keeping such feelings within bounds.

This is particularly important when it comes to historical and territorial disagreements with our neighbors. These hot-button issues have a tendency to fuel nationalistic sentiment on both sides and can easily escalate into damaging disputes. We should remember, also, that our American allies or others outside the region may not share our interest in these issues. Steady, level-headed leadership will be more critical than ever as Japan adjusts to its new role in the East Asian region.

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# U.S. drones and the Khashoggi murder

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In Washington, there is not much mystery about Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman’s (MBS) behavior. He is an egomaniac, somewhat unhinged. He is drunk with power and accustomed to torture and kill at whim.

His campaign of annihilation against the Houthis in Yemen indicates the depths of his depravity and the scope of his ambition. So, too, did his imprisoning of 400 wealthy Saudis in the Riyadh Ritz Carlton where they were physically abused until they coughed up their riches for his personal use (e.g., spending \$500 million for a mislabeled “Leonardo” painting). MBS thus presents a good imitation of Caligula and Nero. So, too, did his kidnapping and physical abuse of the prime minister of Lebanon (Saad Hariri) — who owed MBS money and, therefore, political fealty.

In these ruthless ventures, he has been encouraged by the American government. The Saudi bombing of Yemen to smithereens, literally, could not happen physically without the active participation of the Pentagon.

The U.S. military flies the refueling planes without which MBS’s air force could not reach their targets in Yemen on two-way missions. It also provides the detailed elec-

tronic Intelligence critical to the mission.

Never mind that U.S. military personnel sit in the very command rooms from which the operations are conducted. In addition, Washington provides unqualified diplomatic cover and justification.

This Yemen “policy” was inaugurated by U.S. President Barack Obama and was then continued by U.S. President Donald Trump. In legal terms, the United States is an accessory before, during and after the fact of MBS’s crimes in Yemen.

The U.S.’s main responsibility lies in helping instill MBS’s deep sense of impunity. In addition, the U.S. encouraged the Saudi alliance with Israel. This gave MBS further confidence that active lobbying in Washington and the media would insulate him from any retribution. Hence, feeling that he protected all his relevant flanks properly, he is now furious that some people in the West (not including the White House) are making such a fuss over the pedestrian act of whacking an annoying critic.

Furthermore, from the Saudi crown prince’s perspective, the U.S. has set the relevant precedent for the assassination of political enemies. Witness the U.S. program of drone killings in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Somalia, Libya, Mali, Chad and a number of other countries.

It is hard to deny that, via its drone strike “policy,” the U.S. government has gone a long way toward establishing the de facto legiti-

macy of extra-judicial murder as a standard combat tactic. In the U.S., this approach is accepted as such. Since targeted assassination involves no U.S. casualties, it makes the prosecution of war more palatable to the U.S. public. That is why it is now an integral part of the playbook.

The chain of “command” is as follows: The Israelis inaugurated it. The Americans refined it and extended it. MBS now emulates the U.S. Count on others to follow it.

Of course, the level of inhibition varies from leader and by target. America’s singular influence in setting global “fashions” means that the inhibition will weaken most everywhere and the range of individuals targeted will widen.

The tactic of knocking-off the enemy’s chief has deep historical roots. In the age of kings and emperors, it was tempting to think of decapitating the opposition. Normally, it was a vain hope, though. They were out of reach. Also, there was always some inhibition since the prospect of retaliation in kind was unappealing.

There was opportunity when a valiant leader took to the field at the head of his troops — as did Alexander the Great as well as several others. The annals are replete with tales of armies breaking and running when their champion was killed or incapacitated.

In contrast, in modern warfare, it is generally felt that no one leader is indispensable — certainly not generals. Think of Afghanistan,

where the parade of American commanders now numbers 17, not due to attrition but rather to an odd ritual of rotation.

Anyway, those personnel changes have been a totally irrelevant factor — like quarterback for the Cleveland Browns or managers of English football clubs. Robots would have done as well — or as badly. (In World War II, political leaders of extraordinary stature could make a difference: Hitler, Stalin, Roosevelt, Churchill).

Multiple assassinations as a method for thinning the enemies’ leadership ranks is something new. This novel notion has emerged from the endless cogitations on how to eliminate insurgent movements, especially jihadist ones of the Islamic persuasion.

Its net effectiveness is immeasurable to date. It is fair to say that never before in the annals of warfare has a fighting force been found to have so many (nominal) commanders and sub-commanders, treasurers and propaganda chiefs, as recorded on kill lists and successful executions, as among jihadists.

The public reaction in the U.S. to Jamal Khashoggi’s grisly murder reveals some singular features of the prevailing attitude toward morality in foreign policy:

1. The wide difference between the killing of one man in Istanbul and the decimation of thousands in Yemen by the same hand stands out.



2. Anonymous murder on a mass scale is somehow less repugnant than the murder of one readily identifiable person by identifiable individuals.

3. This common human trait is exaggerated by the decision of the mass media to ignore the human suffering in Yemen.

If their fate had been given the same graphic 24/7 publicity as deaths in Aleppo and East Ghouta, it would have registered. In the former case, you had a seemingly black-and-white story line pushed by the U.S. government — however confected — and colored by the CIA/MI6 agents: The White Helmets. There was neither the political nor commercial motivation to lend the Yemeni atrocities similar treatment.

Despite Trump’s rhetorical pullback, the U.S. has committed to a strategy of global

dominance — by means violent as well as peaceable. Americans remain wedded to the belief that we are a moral people following the course of righteousness in the world. “When conquer we must, for our cause it is just; let this be our motto: In God is our trust.”

This unthinking mental universe has permitted Americans so far to perpetuate many myths about our place in the world. But eventually, we must look at the dark truth: The America that so many people around the globe looked to for guidance in seeking enlightened political truth has become the model and inspiration for those who seek to evade it.

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# Midterm campaigns skirted the hard issues

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We’ll know soon who won the fiercely contested midterm elections, but we already know who lost: We all did. This election has been a referendum on U.S. President Donald Trump, which suits both Republicans and Democrats just fine. Democrats are betting that the public has increasingly tired of Trump’s lies and his vile style. Trump and his supporters believe that Democrats are again underestimating his popular appeal.

What’s been missing is any realistic engagement with the difficult issues facing America. In democracies, elections serve not only to select a country’s leadership. They also aim to gauge public opinion on the hard issues and to see whether any consensus is possible. The present campaign has featured very little of this constructive politics.

What are some of the hard issues? There’s no secret. Start with budget deficits. In fiscal 2018, the gap between federal spending and revenues was \$782 billion, nearly 4 percent of gross domestic product. That’s up \$116 billion from 2017. Based on current spending and taxes, the Congressional Budget Office expects large deficits forever.

With a 3.7 percent unemployment rate,

no one can attribute these deficits to a weak economy. Put simply, Americans want more government benefits and services than they’re willing to pay for in taxes.

Next, there’s immigration. The “wall” is a symbol for both sides. Opposition allows Trump to accuse Democrats of favoring “open borders,” raising the specter of a country overrun by foreigners. For pro-immigration groups, the wall symbolizes the simplicity and cruelty of Trump’s policies, highlighted by the separation of children from parents.

Finally, global warming. For many Americans, this is the great moral issue of our time. But their fervor is not a policy, and the target of preventing global warming from exceeding 1.5 degrees Celsius, measured from the pre-industrial era, is enormously difficult.

What these three issues have in common is this: They’re all politically explosive.

Take the budget. To eliminate the existing deficit would require tax receipts to increase by nearly 25 percent. Or we could reduce spending by a similar amount — that’s nearly \$800 billion. The cut would exceed all military spending. Of course, we could also do nothing and gamble that permanently large deficits won’t someday cause a huge financial crisis. All the choices are bad. We

should be debating the role of government and how it can be financed. Instead, our political leaders are making proposals that would worsen deficits. Trump backs more tax cuts; Democrats advance expensive new health benefits and guaranteed jobs for all.

Or consider immigration. As a society, the United States has a decent record in assimilating millions of newcomers. But — as today’s turmoil demonstrates — too much immigration can fracture society and radicalize politics. The magnitude of immigration is undeniable. One in four people living in the U.S. is either an immigrant (41 million, 13 percent of the population) or the U.S.-born child of immigrants (37 million, 12 percent), reports a study by the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine.

Against that backdrop, reasonable compromises should be possible. We ought to be debating the terms: a path to citizenship for most of today’s illegal immigrants; some sort of wall; strict penalties on employers for hiring illegals; a switch from family connections to skill-based immigration.

Similarly, any realistic effort to deal with global warming would be difficult and, quite probably, unpopular. Stabilizing the atmospheric concentration of carbon dioxide would require replacing virtually all fossil

fuels (oil, coal, natural gas), which now supply roughly four-fifths of the world’s energy. Prices would rise; and government regulations would become more intrusive.

Candor would have compelled our political leaders to warn us that sensible policies — on the budget, on immigration and even climate change — require patience and sacrifice. We no longer have the luxury of simply ignoring what we don’t like or what we find inconvenient or expensive.

This is, of course, among the hardest challenges facing democracies: to accept short-term costs for long-term gains. Under the best of circumstances, it would be difficult to achieve. Politicians want to win. By and large, they tell voters what voters want to hear, even if it is exaggerated, selective or dishonest.

But the fixation on Trump and his antics turned a long shot into an impossibility. It destroyed the prospects of anything resembling rational debate. Indeed, public opinion may be worse informed at the end of this campaign than at the beginning. In this sense, the campaign may have been wasted.

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