

Japan's Persian Gulf Policies in the Koizumi Era

By Michael Penn | June 30, 2006

Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi has managed to create one of the warmest eras in U.S.-Japan relations by standing in solidarity with Washington through the Sept. 11 attacks and the Iraq War. But how have these decisions impacted Japan's crucial energy strategies in the Persian Gulf and its long history of friendly relations with the Islamic world? As Prime Minister Koizumi makes what is likely to be his last visit to Washington as the leader of Japan, the time has come for reflection on the achievements and the failings of the surprisingly long and important Koizumi Era in Japanese postwar history.

When Koizumi unexpectedly catapulted into office in April 2001, he had already formed clear notions about some issues and was flexible or uncertain about others. Even before he formally assumed office, he declared his intentions to push through major structural reforms in the Japanese economy, eliminate the power of Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) factions, visit Yasukuni Shrine, and revise the pacifist Article Nine of the Japanese Constitution. In regard to the last item, he was even quoted as saying, "An article whereby the existence of the nation's Self-Defense Forces can be interpreted as running counter to the constitution is absurd." Regarding the Persian Gulf and the Islamic world more broadly, however, it is unlikely that Koizumi had any specific agenda when he took office.

In the first period of Koizumi's premiership, the direction of his foreign policy was difficult to perceive. He was immensely popular with the public—which guaranteed his leadership position—but was largely feared and hated by many members of his own party, who were horrified by his talk of bringing down the ruling party if they opposed his economic and political reforms. Moreover, Japan's foreign policy was in the hands of the explosive and unpredictable Makiko Tanaka, whose general views seemed to be liberal and skeptical of U.S. power.

In the Persian Gulf, Japanese policies had been rather ambiguous for many decades before Koizumi came to power. On the one hand, Tokyo was bound through the U.S.-Japan Security Alliance to generally support American policies in the region, and the U.S. Navy acted as the main guarantor of safe passage for shipping and trade. On the other hand, Japan was more dependent on Persian Gulf oil than any other major industrial power and could thus not afford to neglect its relationship with the Arab Gulf States and Iran. The United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, and Iran were, respectively, Japan's top three suppliers of oil in 2001.

As a result, Tokyo had begun to expand its political and cultural dialogue with the Gulf States in the 1990s. Ever since 1973 and the well-known "Nikaido Statement," Japan had put some distance between its foreign policies in Islamic West Asia and those of the United States. Washington was unpopular in the region due both to its bias in favor of Israel and to a series of covert and overt interventions against the interests of the local peoples.

At the time of Koizumi's ascendance to office, Japan's relations with the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia seemed to be in decline, but relations with Iran were on the upswing. On the negative side, in February 2000, Japan's Arabian Oil Company had lost the concession that it had held since 1957 for the



Khafji oil field in the Saudi-Kuwaiti Neutral Zone. This put a serious dent in Japan-Saudi relations. However, Japan was courting Tehran over rights to the massive Azadegan oil field, and matters on that front were progressing rather nicely.

Broadly speaking, what Prime Minister Koizumi inherited in April 2001 was a policy of quiet balance between Washington's political sensitivities and Japan's local economic interests. Tokyo simply wanted to buy oil, develop a modest and cordial relationship with the Arabs and Iran, and—above all—not rock the boat.

The Impact of the Invasion of Iraq

Like most of the world, Tokyo was shocked and horrified by the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks in the United States. Japan itself had suffered direct damage as 24 Japanese citizens had died in the World Trade Center attack. There was a great deal of sympathy for America in those early days after the attacks, and the Bush administration enjoyed enormous maneuvering room. However, Washington, in the springtime of neoconservative influence, opted to declare a wide-ranging and poorly defined “war on global terrorism,” which included references to an “axis of evil,” and a new doctrine of preemptive war, and brandished a threatening “with us or against us” rhetoric.

Prime Minister Koizumi and most of the Japanese political establishment received these messages loud and clear. Public statements fully backing U.S. military action against al-Qaida members and their Taliban hosts in Afghanistan were quickly issued. When Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage made it clear that diplomatic and financial support would not be adequate (the famous “show the flag” comments of September 2001) and warned Tokyo not to repeat its “mistake” of the 1990-91 Persian Gulf crisis and do “too little, too late,” the Japanese government responded with an Maritime Self-Defense Forces (MSDF) naval deployment to the Indian Ocean in support of U.S. and coalition military operations. Later, when Washington abruptly shifted its attention

from Afghanistan to Iraq, Tokyo stayed in lock step with U.S. actions, even as the Japanese general public grew increasingly suspicious of U.S. motives and behavior. Japan lacked any serious and independent intelligence-gathering services of its own, and the conservative leaders in Tokyo were inclined to accept U.S. intelligence estimates regarding Iraqi weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) and possible connections between Baghdad and international terrorism.

In any case, Prime Minister Koizumi was clearly moving toward a more conservative, even right-wing, foreign policy by this time. Popular, left-leaning Foreign Minister Makiko Tanaka was fired from the Cabinet in January 2002 after a series of conflicts with elite Foreign Ministry bureaucrats who openly detested her. Her immediate replacement was the centrist Yoriko Kawaguchi, and later Koizumi appointments to this office strayed farther to the political right culminating in the current rightist ideologue, Taro Aso. Likewise, the moderate Defense Agency chief, Gen Nakatani, was replaced in September 2002 with the hard right militarist, Shigeru Ishiba.

Broadly speaking, it could be perceived by 2002 that Prime Minister Koizumi—out of some combination of conviction and convenience—had decided to ally himself with conservative and rightist elements within his party. This seems to have been a reactive process rather than part of any grand design. Koizumi had developed strong personal relations with key members of the Bush administration by this time, and he was annoyed by liberal criticisms of his visits to Yasukuni Shrine (where 2.5 million Japanese war dead are enshrined including over 1,000 convicted war criminals) and his support for the Iraq War. The considerable advantage that this shift to the right gained him was to provide a real constituency within his own party, which was largely lacking during his first year in office. However, Koizumi stabilized his premiership at the cost of driving his administration deep into the arms of the Bush administration and far from the preferences of the Japanese public.

In 2002 and in the early stages of the Iraq War, the intellectual influence of Yukio Okamoto also became significant. Okamoto was a former bureaucrat from the Foreign Ministry who had formed his own consulting company modeled after that of his friend, Richard Armitage. In September 2001, Okamoto was appointed special foreign policy adviser to the Cabinet, and in April 2003, he became Koizumi's special adviser on Iraq.

This new adviser had definite views on Japanese foreign policy that probably influenced Koizumi at this decisive stage. Okamoto preached the importance of building strong, personal relations with U.S. leaders and considered the U.S.-Japan Security Alliance the "essential alliance" for Japan and Asia.

In mid-2002, Okamoto fiercely criticized traditional Japanese policies, saying: "Japan's usual line, 'our hands are clean, so we are the best suited to act as peace mediator,' does not win sympathy in the international community. If our hands are clean, that is because we have not lifted a finger to help in concrete ways. The person who watches from the bench and then sides with the winning team does not make many friends. This time, Japan has manifestly placed itself in the camp that uses military power for the defense of freedom and justice. That is why Japan now has the right to make demands of the international community, in particular, the United States. This is a position of strength that Japan should exploit for its own vision of international aid."

Prime Minister Koizumi has never been as intellectual or outspoken as Okamoto, but a broad similarity was apparent in Koizumi's public comments during the invasion of Iraq in March 2003: "If the United States, with Britain and other countries, launches a military attack, the Japanese government supports that decision... Now that it has become clear that the extremely dangerous Hussein regime has no intention of disarming, I believe it is reasonable to support a U.S. military attack ... Japan has enjoyed peace for more than 50 years since the war thanks to the Japan-

U.S. alliance. It is not in our national interests to hurt the credibility of the alliance ... The United States says that they consider any attack on Japan as an attack on America. That is working as a major deterrent against any country that may try to attack Japan. You must not forget this point."

Comments such as these demonstrate that the Koizumi administration had effectively abandoned the balanced approach to the Persian Gulf that had characterized Japanese policy since at least 1973. In that earlier period, Tokyo had never lost sight of the U.S.-Japan Security Alliance, but neither had Japan allowed this alliance to so completely shape its Persian Gulf policies as did Okamoto and Koizumi in recent years. Indeed, Okamoto clearly reveled in the notion that Japan had "taken sides" and seemed to accept the U.S. view that Washington's interests represent the global good.

Tokyo's politicians had little doubt in the first stages of the Iraq War that the United States would win the military battle and then successfully carry out a political transformation of the region as a whole. Their only fear was that a sullen and suspicious Japanese public might slow them down in the race to get a front-seat ticket at the postwar table.

Rebuilding Japan-Arab Ties

As Washington's plan in Iraq began to disintegrate during the course of 2003 and beyond, Koizumi's policies also began to unravel. The outspoken Yukio Okamoto was an early casualty. His position was much too prominent and glamorous for the likings of the average Japanese bureaucrat, and throughout his tenure his colleagues in the Foreign Ministry seemed to be sniping at him jealously, and resisting his requests for information and support. One key exception was Counselor Katsuhiko Oku, Okamoto's indispensable ally on the scene in Iraq. However, when Oku and Third Secretary Masamori Inoue were gunned down by Iraqi insurgents in Tikrit in November 2003, the end came swiftly for Okamoto.

He formally resigned under considerable criticism in March 2004.

In October 2003, the Japanese people were alarmed to discover that Osama bin Laden had specifically named Japan as a target for terrorism due to Tokyo's strong support for the invasion of Iraq. The Koizumi administration probably expected that al-Qaida would be destroyed by then, and a new terrorist threat aimed directly at Japan was not part of Tokyo's initial calculations.

Despite the obvious signs that U.S. policy was not producing the expected results—even the expected Iraqi WMDs failed to materialize—the Koizumi administration stubbornly pushed on in Iraq, together with its U.S. ally, even going so far as to deploy the Ground Self-Defense Forces (GSDF) to Samawa in southern Iraq in March 2004. Why? In part it was because Okamoto's arguments about the significance of the U.S. alliance to Japanese security in East Asia were still valid. Meanwhile, Koizumi's insistence on making visits to Yasukuni Shrine had antagonized public opinion in China and Korea, leaving Japan diplomatically isolated in East Asia. Part of Koizumi's personal character is to stubbornly dig in his heels whenever he meets strong resistance, and both the Iraq quagmire and the Yasukuni issue were reflections of this tendency.

Another factor in Japan's continuing involvement in Iraq was the broader desire of many Japanese leaders to show that they could be tough and resolute. Too many times in the past, they felt, Japanese policies had meekly melted away under outside criticism, and Tokyo was determined to demonstrate that the new Japan was more assertive and proud.

Finally, from the vantage point of the conservative and right-wing Japanese who then formed Prime Minister Koizumi's main political base, the goal of revising Article Nine of the constitution and legitimizing the Japanese military services was gaining serious ground. If the GSDF mission suffered no casualties,

Japan's politicians could use that success to demonstrate that public fears were exaggerated. If the mission did incur casualties, they could make an appeal to nationalism and pride to ensure that the mission's participants would face down the dangers like real men. Either way, the political right could score its points. It became a win-win situation for certain Japanese leaders.

Immediately following the deployment, Tokyo faced its most serious test. On April 8, 2004, three young Japanese civilians were taken hostage near Falluja by a group calling itself "Saraya al-Mujahidin." A letter demanded the pullout of the GSDF and threatened to execute the young Japanese if the group's demands were not met. Japanese opposition parties tore into the government's policies—which they regarded as illegal under the constitution—and they demanded that the Cabinet immediately resign.

For his part, Prime Minister Koizumi vowed not to give in to any "dirty terrorist threats" and was determined to see his policy through, even if it meant the collapse of his premiership. Meanwhile, right-wing politicians began to attack the characters of the young Japanese hostages themselves, outraged that they should be in Iraq in the first place on unofficial missions. They were accused of being "irresponsible" or even "anti-government, anti-Japan elements." When two more Japanese hostages were taken in Iraq on April 14, the Koizumi Cabinet appeared to be in real trouble.

But just then, as the political pressure reached the crucial level, the original three hostages were released in Baghdad, apparently without conditions. The other two were released a couple of days later. From the midst of a deep crisis, the Koizumi administration suddenly soared to new heights of glory. The young Japanese were safe, and the government appeared tough and uncompromising. Most Japanese were willing to blame the hostages themselves for the crisis. It was one of Koizumi's proudest moments.

After the April 2004 hostage crisis, the GSDF mission in Samawa enjoyed a smoother ride. Most local residents were happy to have Japanese soldiers in their city because they imagined that major Japanese companies would come and invest in their area. The local forces of Muqtada al-Sadr were one exception to this welcoming attitude, expressing hostility to Japan's participation in the occupation force. Occasional mortar attacks on the GSDF base and other minor anti-Japanese disruptions in Samawa were probably attributable to this group.

Koizumi had weathered the hostage crisis and the GSDF deployment to Samawa in good form, but Tokyo was broadly aware that it had been lucky and that many people in the Arab world were tending toward seeing Japan as a new enemy rather than as an old friend. Koizumi's desire to tighten links with Washington bore a cost that was becoming more and more perceptible.

Although the Koizumi administration had no desire to put any substantive distance between its own policies and Washington's—as had been the former Japanese tendency—Tokyo also sought tighter economic links with Persian Gulf countries and began engaging in an enhanced official rhetoric of friendship and respect for Arab culture. Since 2005, there has been an acceleration of Japanese investment in the Persian Gulf, spurred in part by higher oil prices and competition with China. Economic relations with Qatar and Bahrain have made notable strides in the last year, but the most dramatic warming has been with Saudi Arabia.

In 2005, Saudi Arabia reemerged as Japan's number one oil supplier for the first time in 20 years. There were also several large business pacts, most prominently the Aramco-Sumitomo Chemical joint venture, part of the \$9.8 billion PetroRabigh project on the Red Sea coast. As a result of deals like this, Japan has surpassed the United States as the largest recent foreign investor in the Saudi kingdom.

Meanwhile, Tokyo has touted various diplomatic events with Arab states—including Prime Minister Koizumi fasting one day for Ramadan and hosting an *iftar* dinner for Muslim ambassadors. How far these measures can go toward healing the damage done in Iraq, however, remains an open question. Fortunately for Tokyo, most of the Islamic world still blames the United States and Britain much more than they blame Japan for the current morass in West Asia.

Tokyo's Dilemma over Iran

In this context, Tokyo's dilemma over the recent nuclear crisis in Iran can be appreciated. Indeed, Iran has long been something of a test case for an independent Japanese policy in the Persian Gulf. During the Iranian Revolution and the Iran hostage crisis of 1979-81, Tokyo maintained its diplomatic links with Tehran in the face of heavy pressure from the Carter administration. This was done in part to salvage the huge Iran-Japan Petrochemical Company (IJPC) project of Mitsui & Co. Now that chapter of history appears to be repeating itself in regard to Inpex's Azadegan oil field development.

The idea of a joint Japan-Iran project was suggested in November 2000 when moderate President Mohammed Khatami of Iran visited Tokyo. The Bush administration was hostile to the Azadegan project from the beginning, and Tokyo initially showed considerable fortitude in facing down these objections. However, following the Sept. 11 attacks and the conservative, pro-American turn in Koizumi administration foreign policy, Tokyo's resolve showed clear signs of waning. It took the efforts of LDP elders like Takeo Hiranuma and former Prime Minister Ryutaro Hashimoto to keep the oil project moving forward. In particular, Hashimoto complained, "Currently, Japan's ties with nations other than the U.S. are like dotted lines. We should at least try to make those dotted lines into solid ones as well ... It is very regrettable that the relationship with Iran that Japan had long worked so hard to build was completely damaged by the current

administration.” Stung by these internal criticisms and mindful of Tehran’s threat to take its business elsewhere, the Koizumi administration finally bit the bullet and signed the Azadegan agreement in February 2004.

However, the rise of hard-line President Mahmud Ahmadinejad in June 2005 sent shockwaves through Japanese plans. Ahmadinejad’s inflammatory rhetoric and determination to have Iran accepted as an equal with the great powers has dramatically raised tensions with the equally uncompromising Bush administration. For Tokyo, this new confrontation is a nightmare scenario.

Conclusion

The question of Iran remains unresolved as Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi makes his final lap and visits political friends in Washington. He has succeeded in creating one of the warmest eras ever in U.S.-Japan relations by standing firmly at Bush’s side after the Sept. 11 attacks and during the early stages of the Iraq War.

But has it really been worth it? Koizumi clearly believes so. Japan has received many signs of favor from Washington in the past several years. Bush administration officials and U.S. pundits have heaped

praise upon Tokyo for its alleged “responsibility” and proactive commitment to “freedom and democracy.” Some have even given Tokyo a relatively free ride on divisive issues like beef importation.

On the other hand, the Koizumi administration has been frittering away a century of Japan-Muslim friendship following the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-05. Many ordinary Muslims are willing to forgive one “mistake” by Tokyo, but if the 21st century is to be filled with Japanese military interventions in the Islamic world in close alliance with the United States, then the future of Japan’s important relationships in the Persian Gulf may be thrust into serious doubt.

Politicians like Junichiro Koizumi, Shinzo Abe, and Taro Aso may be willing to pay this price in order to erase pacifist Article Nine of the constitution and to remilitarize Japan as a “normal country.” But whether all of this is really in the larger interests of the Japanese nation as a whole is a question about which divergent opinions are certainly possible.

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