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Japan: What power, what strategies?

Japan, the “forgotten player”, is confronted today by the temptation of turning inward and withdrawing from the world.

This temptation arises in large part from the internal political uncertainties that Tokyo has not resolved. After Junichiro Koizumi, who had for more than five years presented a highly personalized image of the Japan power on the international scene, Tokyo is struggling again in clan conflicts within the PLD and is unable to define a clear policy line. Three prime ministers have succeeded each other in just one year and the institutional deadlock requires the organization of early legislative elections. In contrast, despite the lack of popularity of the PLD, a massive victory of the new Democratic Party appears unlikely because of the inconsistency of its composition and of the uncertainty of its programming choices.

But beyond the political uncertainties, Japan is facing a necessary redefinition of its identity. The “iron triangle” linking government, bureaucracy and business, which created the fortune of Japan Inc. was, in part, smashed by the crisis of the 1990s.

New social expectations are emerging, those of women for example, of a part of youth, of a now hyper-urbanized world to which seems to match more closely the speech the DPJ. At the same time, Japan is concerned about the integration of migrants, and especially those of the third generation Japanese from Brazil or South America, whose attitudes and social codes have nothing Japanese, and about the elderly whose weight has increased considerably.

At the same time, Japan continues to occupy a prominent economic position, being the world’s second largest economy. This position is all the more essential in a period of global financial crisis, since Japanese financial institutions, painfully purged during the “lost decade”, are today the only ones to have cash available¹.

But the world in which Tokyo is evolving is also very uncertain, paradoxically analyzed as much more worrisome than during the Cold War. Tokyo sees itself as a post-modern power, yet surrounded by essentially “modern” states, for which the nationalist temptation remains strong and potentially dangerous.

This almost ideal vision seems to be partly shared by Moscow, which sees in Japan a counterweight to a Chinese power that causes fear. Japan is described as a unique model: a non-aggressive economic superpower whose power of attraction, based on soft power through technological innovation, design, seduction and mangas, influences Russian youth, and Moscow supports a greater commitment of Japan on the international scene, including through the granting of permanent membership at the Security Council.

One of the priorities of the foreign strategy of Japan remains the maintenance of stability in Asia while China greatly causes worry. Faced with the ambitions of the Chinese regime, Tokyo has complex and sometimes troublesome feelings, varying between fear, a certain “historic” contempt, admiration for the latest achievements and the will to take advantage of opportunities. But despite of these opportunities for cooperation in the fields of high technology, of environment, of financial expertise for example, the conclusion remains that Japan can only flourish in keeping a certain distance.

The relationship with China is today undoubtedly the most structuring one for the Japanese foreign strategy in its entirety. It justifies in particular Japan’s prioritisation of Japanese-American security agreements above all others,

¹ See, for example the share purchases (21 %) of Morgan Stanley and of the Europe and Pacific Asia branches of Lehman Brothers.



which are always defined as a priority, as well as the military engagement of the United States in Asia, beyond the “simple” North Korea issue.

The preservation of the security commitment of the United States with Japan, especially in the form of the sometimes disputed nuclear umbrella since the end of the Cold War, is seen in Tokyo as the only way to avoid the much more difficult choice of the acquisition of an autonomous capacity for deterrence.

If the debate on the normalization of military action capabilities of Japan has considerably evolved through gradual changes in the interpretation of the constitution, easier to implement than an overall revision, the issue of nuclear deterrence, which would surely arise if Japan was faced with the double condition of the withdrawal of the United States and the emergence of a more powerful and more aggressive China, would question too radically the very identity of the Post War Japan in order to be resolved positively.

Such a development would besides have very negative consequences on the strategic situation in Asia, beyond the People's Republic of China.

In contrast, the possibility of a strategic emancipation of Japan from U.S. tutelage is seen in a very positive manner by Russia which fears, on the contrary an extension of NATO towards Asia. But while in Moscow, the Japanese-American relationship is read only through the prism of the Russian-American relationship, in Tokyo this privileged relationship with the United States remains determined by the uncertainty of the Japan-China relationship.

While Moscow considers that beyond the still unresolved issue of Kouriles islands, the Japanese-Russian relations have already been strengthened in a framework of more global cooperation around common interests, and that economic cooperation, especially in eastern Siberia, should be strengthened, Russia supports the establishment of a regional collective security organization in Asia, bringing together the major players: Russia, Japan, Korea and China ; this being a model that is close to the Russian proposal of President Medvedev for Europe².

But for Tokyo, beyond the vital importance granted to the American defender, and it is a position of foreign policy of which Japan wants to make its mark, multilateral structures, including a reformed UNO in which Japan, with others, would find its full place, must remain a priority. It is there that Japan wants to see the future of a strengthened security, rather than through the temptations of the establishment of counter-alliances against Chinese power, which can be expressed sometimes.

² Russia chairs the workgroup on collective security in Asia set up within the framework of the North Korea six-party talks.