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The Meaning of Nationalism in Japan Today (1)

By ITO Kenichi

1. Overview of Contemporary Japan

There are some who argue that many things – such as the International Peace Cooperation Law, the New Guidelines for Defense Cooperation (the Law on [Emergency] Situations in Areas Surrounding Japan), the Law on the National Flag and National Anthem, the Wiretapping Law, the response to suspicious ships in Japanese waters, Japan-US cooperation on TMD (Theater Missile Defense) development, the Diet Investigation Committees on the Constitution, Kobayashi Yoshinori's "*Senso-ron*" ("On the Last War"), Nishio Kanji's "*Kokumin no Rekishi*" ("History of the Japanese Nation"), statements made by a former Parliamentary Vice Minister of the Defense Agency Nishimura Shingo, Prime Minister Mori Yoshiro's "divine nation" remark, and the election of Tokyo Governor Ishihara Shintaro – indicate that "Japan today is showing signs of a dangerous nationalism that has the hidden potential to promote the resurgence of the militarism witnessed before the war." The source of such statements is in Japan. But quick and violent reactions come from some quarters of China and the US. Since each of the above-listed phenomena has a distinct tale and background, I don't think much would come of a discussion that lumps them all together, but there may be some value in discussing whether together they should be seen as constituting "signs of a dangerous nationalism." I do not believe that they can in any way be construed as such, and think that those who suggest that they can are either promoting a misunderstanding out of ignorance, or have specific preconceived expectations or are developing such expectations due to the irresponsible commercialism of the media. Let me explain.

First, these phenomena constitute only a very small portion of the many phenomena that occur in Japan today. Reviewing the overall picture of contemporary Japan unmistakably reveals that there are sweeping trends that have the potential to paralyze or destroy the functions of the state and society, quite the opposite of what is seen under militarism. Continuing incidents of suicides by school boys and girls who are harassed at school or of brutal and malicious crimes perpetrated by young people echo the collapse of the family and the ruin of the educational system in Japanese society. There is a break-down of fundamental morals and values among adults as well, such as business managers who do not take responsibility for their mishandling, bureaucrats who accept bribes and indulge in extravagances, and politicians whose sole concern is getting re-elected and promoting their own

interests. The acceptance of individualism and the development of democracy, the guiding principles of reform after World War II, are highly regarded because prewar Japan neglected such social values. However, as the maxim says, “too much of a thing is as bad as too little” in postwar Japan, the concept of public responsibility, which must counterbalance the recognition of private rights, has been neglected. As for the relationship with international society, everything revolves around money, and mainstream thought in contemporary Japan is leaning toward “one-country pacifism” and “one-country prosperity-ism”, the belief that it is good enough for Japan to pursue peace and prosperity only within its own borders. Conditions in contemporary Japan can be viewed as the culmination of 50 years of postwar Japanese history, and for this reason much concern is being shown for the need to develop countermeasures to such thinking. The natural reaction is to look at this situation and think that Japan should be a more straightforwardly “normal” nation. Concluding these phenomena as though they were evidence of a movement to further nationalistically strengthen the “normal country,” even though Japan is already a “normal” country, without looking at the circumstances in which Japan finds itself today or how it got there, misses the mark.

2. My Position

Before you start wondering what kind of person I am, wondering whether I’m one of those nationalists who likes to sing the praises of prewar Japan, and start thinking it a waste of time to listen to what someone like me has to say, let me clarify my position. Rather than explaining my position from my perspective today, I will instead explain myself by repeating a self-introduction I gave publicly many years ago.

In 1992, I visited South Korea, where I had been invited to give a presentation at a dinner meeting hosted by the Korean International Trade Association. Because the representative of the association who gave an address just before my speech, Go Kwang Hun, had expressed some misgivings about the enactment of the International Peace Cooperation Law in Japan, I refuted his comments when it was my turn to give my presentation. The relevant portions of that speech were compiled and published in my book “*Chiheisen wo Koete: International Nationalist no Shiten Kara*” (“Beyond the Horizon: From an International Nationalist Perspective”, 1993). I will simply reprint excerpts below (in translation):

The people of South Korea harbor a strong mistrust and suspicion of the Japanese, well understood to be the result of the cruel and barbaric deeds of Japan’s colonial past. Japan’s past mistakes are inexcusable, and I would like to express my sincerest apologies for them. However, since it seems that there has been a significant misunderstanding among South Koreans regarding the current PKO Cooperation Law, I would like to explain two fundamental facts.

First, it seems that there are still quite a large number of Koreans who think that contemporary Japan and prewar militaristic Japan are the same thing, when in fact they are not. Prewar Japanese militarism was grounded in such institutions as military cliques

(*gunbatsu*), corporate conglomerates (*zaibatsu*), absentee landowners, and the peerage – institutions that were eradicated by postwar reforms. Japan today has neither the political, economic, social, nor cultural foundations for cultivating militarism or expansionism.

Second, it seems that some Koreans think that supporters of the PKO Cooperation Law are militarists, colonialists, and super-nationalists, and while it would be impossible to say that there are no such people among its supporters, the majority, including myself, are enlightened internationalists. As such, taking myself as an example, I have consistently advocated maintaining and strengthening the US-Japan alliance, granting accurate recognition to the reality of Japan's history in the neighboring countries, liberalizing the Japanese market, including the rice market, and continuing the maintenance of a small military force designed exclusively for self-defense.

I hope all these reasons eradicate concerns that the enactment of the PKO Cooperation Law could in any way lead to the reemergence of militarism in Japan.

This text in my book goes on;

The response I received at this event was completely the opposite of what I was expecting. Never before had I been so surprised. The previous fall, I had given a presentation in Europe before an audience of about 1,000 people in which I said, "Germany, which perpetrated the crime of the holocaust, and Japan, which did not, were not an accomplice in the same crime. The relationship between the victimizers and victims in the German-Soviet war and the Japanese-Soviet war was reversed. I cannot understand why these fundamental facts are ignored and Japan is criticized for not providing as much aid to the USSR as the Germans." Upon hearing this, the audience began booing and stomping their feet on the floor, a most unpleasant episode that still lingers in my memory.

Remembering this, I half-expected a similar reaction to my remarks following my presentation in South Korea, but, to my surprise, I was instead greeted with thunderous applause. The hall was filled with the cream of the South Korean society, representing academic, mass media, business and political circles, and they applauded for quite a long time. When I descended from the podium, several people who had been waiting for me approached, shook my hand, and complimented me on my talk. When I reached my seat, Go Kwang Hun, who was sitting next to me, said "I only touched on the PKO Cooperation Law to explain the fact, not for any other reason. I hope you understand." For a while I sat dumbfounded, wondering what had just happened.

This was the reaction of South Korean people to my speech.

The phrase "International Nationalist" used in the subtitle of that publication is still my way of describing myself, and is intended to convey that my perspective is neither that of a "national nationalist" who can think of nothing but his own country, nor that of an "international internationalist" whose identity is based nowhere.

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