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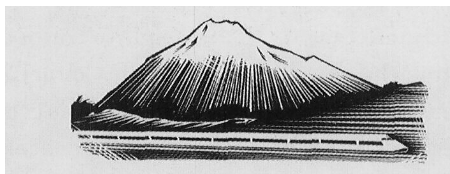

Tokyo's Quixotic Quest for Acceptance

by Edward C. Luck

JAPAN'S QUIXOTIC QUEST for a permanent seat on the U.N. Security Council has been pursued with more vigor than success for close to four decades. Undeterred, Tokyo is pressing harder than ever this year. It has formed a tactical alliance with three other aspirants for permanent seats—Brazil, Germany and India—in the hopes of getting a General Assembly vote in June on expanding both permanent and nonpermanent seats. But the closer Japan gets to its cherished goal, the higher the obstacles become and the more distant it begins to appear. Recent Chinese street demonstrations and official statements opposing this step suggest that Japan is nearer to, and farther from, its goal than ever. Once again, the smart money says that this will not be Tokyo's year.

Why have so many Japanese diplomats, foreign ministers and even prime ministers been willing to lose so much face—year after year—pursuing an uphill task that even Sisyphus would find daunting? Why does the prize mean so much to Japanese leaders? What factors—political and procedural—account for the difficulty of the task? And what are the consequences for Japan, its neighbors and the world body if this campaign once again falls short?

Why the Quest?

IT DOES NOT appear as if Japanese policy makers seek a permanent seat to advance or prevent a particular course of action. While they would, of course, prefer for the sake of equity to have the same veto power accorded to the original five permanent members, they appear reconciled to the fact that this essentially negative instrument is unlikely to be accorded to any of

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those admitted to the permanent club. It is hard to see Japan wielding the veto in any case, given its preference for consensus and its inoffensive foreign policy agenda. Perhaps a permanent seat would lessen dependence on Washington for political favors, but the two allies' strategic interests continue to coincide on most issues.

The Council spends relatively little time on the security problems of Northeast Asia. On a matter that does count, North Korea's nuclear ambitions, neither Japan nor China have been eager—so far—to bring the matter to the Council, where sanctions might be considered. Japan occupied a nonpermanent seat in 1993, when the Council first took up Pyongyang's threat to leave the nonproliferation regime. Given how critical this matter is to Japan's security, however, its views undoubtedly would be taken into account whether or not it happens to be sitting on the Council at the time.

Though the U.N. Charter does not allow an elected member of the Council to succeed itself when its two-year term is completed, Japan has managed to get elected to the Council nine times in the past 50 years. It has proven to be a prodigal vote getter, no doubt offering some inducements to some of the smaller or less affluent member states along the way. It ran uncontested for its current seat, and swamped India in 1996 and 1986 by significant margins. If the clause on succession were to be amended, Japan could probably remain on the Council on a semipermanent basis.

Once on the Council, however, Japan generally leaves few footprints. It is a responsible and reliable member, but not one that tends to trumpet a particular agenda. Most of the Council's time is taken up with Africa's multiple crises and the mandating or renewal of peacekeeping missions. Neither of these top Tokyo's priorities. True, the Council addresses questions of counterterrorism, Afghanistan and Iraq that affect Japanese security more directly. But these are hardly matters on which Tokyo wants to show much daylight between its stance and Washington's.

Recent Japanese opinion polls suggest that the public is largely supportive of the drive for a permanent seat, but there is little evidence that officials are responding to public pressure in this regard. Indeed, this appears to have been more of a top-down than bottom-up phenomenon. There has been, historically, much ambivalence among the Japanese people about the responsibilities a permanent seat would imply and whether their self-defense forces would be expected to participate in far-flung and risky U.N. peacekeeping operations. Over the years, it has been the Foreign Ministry that has been in the vanguard of this effort, including making the case to the people that such a step would be good for Japan and for the cause of world peace. Officials are influencing public opinion, not vice versa.

If neither specific policy aims nor domestic pressures can account for the persistence of the campaign for a permanent seat, then one must look to more amorphous—and more compelling—explanations. According to Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi, in making the case to the U.N. General Assembly in September 2004, Japan is simply "seeking an honored

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> *Japan can't count on a lame duck secretary-general to carry the reform process much further.*

place in an international community striving for peace and prosperity." Echoing his words six months later in Tokyo, U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice asserted that "Japan has earned its honorable place among the nations of the world." What matters most is being there. The original permanent members, allies during World War II, named themselves for this elevated status (as well as naming the organization for their wartime alliance against Japanese and German fascism). For Japan then and, to a lesser extent, for Germany, being among the first elected permanent members would indeed be special, a very visible and durable testament to the fact that they have at last arrived as accepted and respected world leaders.

Japanese officials never tire of reciting a quartet of attributes justifying their case. One, Japan has long practiced a U.N.-centric foreign policy. Two, it is a nonnuclear country and would be the first permanent member with that distinction. Three, its financial contributions to the world body are greater than those of four of the current five permanent members combined. And four, it has begun to contribute forces to selected U.N. peacekeeping operations and to provide substantial assistance to various postconflict peace-building efforts. The message is unambiguous: Japan deserves a permanent seat and is now fully prepared to carry out the responsibilities such a privileged position implies. It is a strong case, arguably the most persuasive of the four aspirants.

Why the Difficulties?

SO WHY HAS this proven to be such an impossible sales job? Is Japan the issue or are the hurdles to amending the Charter to enlarge the Council and its cast of permanent members simply too high for any candidate to clear?

The answer is both. The U.N.'s founders were not eager to see the initial U.N. architecture tampered with. So they placed a high bar to Charter amendment: a two-thirds vote in the General Assembly followed by the ratification in capitals of the changes by two-thirds of the membership, including all five permanent members. The Council was enlarged in 1965, when four nonpermanent seats were added to the original six. But since 1993 what has become known as the "never-ending" working group in the General Assembly has been weighing further steps, including possibly an expansion of permanent members, without measurable progress.

From one perspective, it is fair to say that Japan is not the problem, because the larger issue—designing a global architecture for the Council that would be perceived by all regions as equitable and yet would not compromise the Council's effectiveness in carrying out its important work—has never been resolved. In an organization of 191 disparate and sovereign member states, this is no simple task. Razali Ismail of Malaysia, president of the General Assembly in 1996-97, came closest. When every regional group declared that

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it would be underrepresented in the new arrangement, it was evident that he had the balance about right. Japan, Germany, and a developing country each from Africa, Asia, and Latin America/Caribbean would have received a permanent seat without veto power. In Washington, the Clinton administration seemed reasonably sanguine about the proposed overhaul, though it had serious reservations about whether a Council as large as 24 or 25 members could efficiently discharge its duties.

When Mr. Razali's plan failed to generate enough support to be put to a vote, Japan (and Germany, which had come rather late to the game) evidently decided to adopt fresh tactics for the next round. Tokyo had learned not to rely too heavily on U.S. support as a key pillar in its campaign. Washington has consistently favored a permanent seat for its Asian ally, but neither is it prepared to expend much political capital on such a long shot, nor does it have a magic formula for resolving the effectiveness/equity dilemma.

As of this writing, the U.S. position calls for the addition of Japan's seat but nothing more—clearly not a serious option. After the jousting with Berlin over Iraq in 2003-04, when Germany was an elected member, the Bush administration, unlike its Democratic predecessor, has little taste for giving Berlin a permanent seat. Though U.S. policy makers surely understand that any expansion would need to accommodate more developing country seats, so far they have not seen the need to articulate or favor any particular plan. A large expansion of the Council to 24 or 25 members, and especially an enlargement of permanent members, would be seen by Washington as an effort to dilute U.S. influence following the Council's divisions over Iraq and the subsequent unauthorized invasion and occupation of that beleaguered country.

Instead of depending on American influence, Tokyo opted for an alliance with the other three aspirants and for a push from Secretary-General Kofi Annan. This tack has brought its own set of pluses and minuses. The linkage to Brazil and India responds to the need to court developing country support. Going forward as a quartet provides wider opportunities for getting other capitals on board. The tactical alliance provides a reassuring, multilateral sheen, replete with talk of democratizing the Council, for an initiative intended to advance the national interests of four major powers. The circle of potential friends for Japan's campaign has been expanded.

On the other hand, the circle of possible opponents has also grown, as Washington's unenthusiastic reaction to the package demonstrates. As in 1997, the biggest obstacle has been the so-called coffee club (now dubbed "uniting for consensus"), a group of middle powers, cutting across all regional groups, that are concerned about the implications of anointing another group of permanent members, especially if it includes their regional rivals.

There seems to be an action-reaction phenomenon at work. As the aspirants become more active, so do those seeking to block them. If the G-4 is not supplemented by two African aspirants, becoming a G-6, their prospects look bleak. Unlike the self-appointed candidates from other regions,

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the Africans are actually trying to select regional representatives, so far without success. To date, at least six African aspirants have emerged. So Japan's chances are tied to an uncomfortable extent to intra-African politics well beyond its control.

One of the more unusual aspects of the current expansion drive has been the leading role played by Secretary-General Kofi Annan. Traditionally, secretaries-general have had little to say about the size, shape, or composition of the Security Council. Few questions are as sensitive or divisive for the member states. It is territory littered with political minefields and, prudence suggests, best left to the member states to sort out on their own.

In the summer of 2003, however, in the wake of the controversies over the use of force in Iraq, Secretary-General Annan apparently decided that he needed to do something dramatic to shake up the divided organization and set it on a new path of greater effectiveness and sense of unity. The Security Council, he proclaimed, was in need of "radical reform." According to his assessment, there were new geopolitical realities—never identified—that demanded a substantial enlargement of the Council. And he commissioned a High-Level Panel on Threats, Challenges, and Change to map the evolving security environment and the institutional reforms it dictated.

For Japan and the other aspirants, opportunity beckoned. For the first time, a secretary-general would champion their cause, raising it from the level of national interest to that of the future of the world body itself. There were, however, more than a few flies in this ointment. Secretary-General Annan arguably had misdiagnosed what ailed the Council and the organization as a whole. Its malaise was political, not institutional. Without first addressing the political fissures among the member states, attempts to remodel the Council would prove to be both premature and polarizing, making a bad situation worse (witness the Chinese and American reactions).

Given the trend toward unipolarity in military capacity, claims that enlarging the Council was needed to reflect the new realities looked to many like a thinly veiled effort to deny those realities instead. Adding six new permanent members appeared to be a way of counterbalancing American hard power advantages in the world outside with larger voting majorities inside the Council chamber and of raising the political costs of American unilateralism.

According to Mr. Annan's scenario, an ambitious package of reforms, with Council expansion as its centerpiece, is to be adopted by the 191 member states at a historic summit meeting on the sidelines of the General Assembly in September. While he has often emphasized that "reform is a process, not an event," this year he hopes the member states will ignore that adage and embrace a wide-ranging reform package at a single grand event. He should have listened to his earlier advice, for the member states are culling through the package, looking for those few pieces on which there is a sufficient convergence of views to warrant moving forward.

Mr. Annan's innovative call for a Peacebuilding Commission to address failing

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states is catching on, but other big ticket items, like a smaller Human Rights Council, an endorsement of a doctrine of responsibility to protect those threatened by massive abuse and genocide, and, yes, an expansion of the Security Council, will take more time. Japan and the other aspirants cannot count on a lame duck secretary-general, now wounded by the oil-for-food scandal as well, to carry the reform process much further.

The G-4 understands that they will have to bear most of the lobbying burden on their own, and the Japanese campaign appears to be particularly energetic, well organized, and well funded. But the four need to provide much better answers to some key questions:

What U.N. body has become stronger and more effective as it has expanded? The general rule has been that U.N. organs expand until they become unworkable and irrelevant. On what issues would a Council of 25 have acted differently than one of 15: Iraq, Kosovo, Haiti or Darfur? Would a larger Council heal the rift between the U.S. and others on the use of force? Does the Council become more representative by adding countries from regions they do not represent? China, South Korea, Pakistan, Italy, Argentina, Mexico, and many others have their doubts. Would the working methods of the Council be changed to make it any more accountable, transparent, or representative than at present? Or would it just be a larger unaccountable body? If Japan and the others are already doing so much for the U.N., and hence deserve the seat for the sake of equity, then what new resources are they going to provide once they become permanent members? Is the Diet going to forsake its concerns about U.N. efficiency or the Japanese people their six decades of caution on self-defense deployments?

For Japan, the barriers to its quest do not relate only to arcane U.N. procedures and gross global power balances. Even if all of those obstacles could be overcome, the unresolved questions of its history and relations with its neighbors would remain. Tokyo's path to the Security Council must run through Beijing and Seoul, as much as through Washington, New York or Berlin. China has a veto, South Korea is an active participant in "uniting for consensus," and others in the region have been hesitant to endorse the Japanese bid.

As the quotes from Prime Minister Koizumi and Secretary of State Rice highlight, this is a quest for honor as much as for a seat at the table. That goal cannot be achieved without the support of Japan's neighbors, the one piece of the puzzle Tokyo—and only Tokyo—can define through its words and deeds. Japan is winning its global campaign for acceptance, but all those efforts will mean little if it fails to confront its past and heal its historic wounds with its neighbors. Japan has more at stake than the other aspirants. Its neighbors realize this and are placing a high, but not unreasonable, premium on its quest. Now Tokyo must decide whether it is prepared to pay the domestic political price not just for the seat, but for the larger goal of reconciliation, healing, and the honor that will come with them. ■

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