

# JAPAN AND THE MIDDLE EAST AFTER THE ARAB SPRING

ポスト・アラブの春と日本の中東政策

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本稿は、中東における問題や紛争に対する日本の政策を考察し、中長期的な視野に立った日本の国益追求のためにはどのような選択肢が考えられるかを論じる。そのために、イランの核開発問題とシリアの市民戦争をケースとしてとりあげる。戦後の日本は中東での問題や紛争に対して、地域内諸国およびアメリカとの関係を同時に維持するために、双方の均衡を図る政策を打ち出してきたが、冷戦後には米国寄りの傾向が多く見られた。現在中東では、アラブの春の展望は不透明な部分が多い。日本は中東との関係において、問題や紛争の性質によっては負の遺産を抱える欧米とは一線を画した独自の政策とアプローチを打ち出すことが、中東資源国との関係の強化と拡大や中東市場の発展と安定には望ましいと考える。また同時に、今後の米国の中東における国益の変化が考えられることも要因ととらえ、本稿は冷戦期にみられたような、より均衡のとれた立場を打ち出し、より広い概念をもとに基づいた効果的なソフトパワーの行使を提唱する。

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## **Introduction: Outline, Framework & Argument**

This paper examines Japanese policy in the Middle East conflicts and explores possible alternatives that might better serve Japan's interests in the Middle East. It will first discuss Japan's general foreign policy orientation, especially towards the Middle East. It will illustrate Japan's approach to regional conflicts by focusing on the Iranian nuclear issue and the Syrian civil war. Finally, it will assess the consequences of Japan's policy for its national interest: while current policy has served Japan's national interests to a significant degree in the periods of both the Cold War and the post-Cold War US hegemonic periods, Japan's foreign policy has increasingly adhered to the Western consensus almost without exception over conflicts in the Middle East, thereby limiting its range of options. It may therefore need to be adapted to the coming period, due to changes in both the Middle East such as democratization, and in international conditions, notably a less US-dominated, more pluralistic world order.

## **1. General Features of Japan's Foreign Policy in the Middle East**

### **Japan's Interests in the Middle East:**

Literature on Japan's policy in the Middle East has traditionally stressed Japan's dilemma--caught between its dependency on the US primarily for its security in East Asia, and on the Middle East for oil. Dependence on the US has often pulled Japan into involvement with US Middle East policy, which risked alienating Middle East opinion because of US support for Israel and US military interventions in Middle East conflicts. During the post-Cold War period, Japan's interests regarding the Middle East have grown: it saw its international status promoted by contributing to the international effort for Middle East peace, particularly as a large donor state, while in business, Japanese interests in the Gulf have diversified. Although Japan has been intermittently working towards the reduction of its oil dependency, it is still expected to remain substantially dependent on imported hydrocarbon energy sources. The earthquake in 2011 led to a new appreciation of the benefit of maintaining a share of global hydrocarbon suppliers' output for the country's energy consumption within a new notion of 'energy security'. While Japan has started to consider US shale gas as a new energy source, nevertheless the Gulf region is thought likely to provide the most substantial share of Japan's hydrocarbon imports for the coming period (Miyagi et al. 2013). Iran has long been a major oil supplier for Japan<sup>1</sup>, and has been recognized as host to vast untapped hydrocarbon energy resources. As for Syria, Japan has recognized that it is a very important key player in the Arab-Israeli conflict and located in a strategically

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<sup>1</sup> Iran was No.4 oil supplier for Japan until 2011 sharing 9.8% of Japan's total oil import in 2010 and 7.8% in 2011, and No.5 with a 5.2% share as of 2012. Agency for Natural Resources and Energy 2011, 2012; Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Iran Basic Data.

sensitive part of the region, which has a great significance for the stability of the Middle East as a whole, and therefore for Japan's energy supplies.

### **Japan's Capabilities: Hard and Soft Power in the Middle East:**

This section discusses Japan's power and capabilities as well as possible diplomatic approaches it can employ in the Middle East.

*Limited Hard Power:* In the terminology of realism, Japan's international behaviour has often been described as 'bandwagoning', allied with the US, the Cold War superpower and the post-Cold War hegemonic power (Tshuchiyama 2003; Matsumura 2008). Consequently, Japan has often lacked will to independently exercise its hard power capabilities, which have traditionally been seen as limited. Despite this, the Japanese government has pursued an expansion of hard power through increased defense spending, accompanied by an incremental increase also of the Self Defense Forces' (SDF) participation in international security cooperation overseas; this was seen in fuelling activities in the Indian Ocean in support of US-led allied forces operating against the Taliban between October 2001 and January 2010; post-war reconstruction of Iraq from the beginning of 2004 and 2006, in which logistic support was also given to the US-led coalition forces until the end of 2008; and in anti-piracy cooperation off the coast of Somalia and around the Gulf of Aden since 2009, which also led to the establishment of the first overseas base of Japan's SDF in Djibouti in June 2011. However, such activities are within the framework of the United Nations, as these activities were endorsed by UN Security Council resolutions, and, moreover, Japan has as yet refrained from involvement in direct combat operations. Therefore, Japan has essentially self-restrained its hard power projection in line with its image as a non-militarist state, and as a substitute for military power, it has projected itself as an aid great power, using economic means to contribute to US-led international interventions in the Middle East as well as to promote stability in the region. However, budgetary constraints have increasingly eroded this tool for Japan. The material limits of Japan's hard power and the structural constraints mean that Japan may have to refrain from getting involved in Middle East conflicts, if it does not have enough resources to ensure a positive outcome, and if greater costs than benefits for its interests are likely. This has made Japan dependent on US hard power, including in its approaches to Middle East conflicts. This has also made Japan's Middle East policy and approach increasingly self-limiting, restricting it to the framework shaped by the US policy in the region.

*Japan's Soft Power:* Japanese policy-making circles have been seeking to expand Japan's soft power as a tool of international influence, motivated by their keen awareness of the constraints on the country's hard power, due, primarily to constitutional limits on the use of military power. Soft power, taking Nye's idea, is a power which does not use coercion, or material incentives, but rather is based on the state's attractiveness to other states. People in the other states would like to emulate it; associate with it; or to align with it, as they are attracted by its ideas, morality etc. (Nye

2004). In recent years, the Japanese government has pursued strengthening of its soft power through Japanese culture, language, traditional sports, especially in the Gulf states, and also through promotion of Japanese business culture and management systems.

However, soft power does not stand alone and is influenced by people's image of Japanese policy and approaches in hard politics. Soft power is not limited to culture, language, sport, such as manga, haiku, judo, but covers political positions and principles, such as Japan's history of independent policy in world conflicts; its generally peaceful approach towards the Middle East; its support for comprehensive peace in the Middle East; and its pursuit of a nuclear-free international system. This has affected how Japan is perceived, how much other states will be willing to adhere to Japan's position, and to have deeper relations with Japan in various areas. It could be argued that this is particularly so in the Middle East, where people are very aware of, and sensitive to negative historical experiences with the West, which are kept alive by the unresolved Palestinian problem, a liability from which Japan does not suffer. Indeed, in the Middle East, Japan's cultural soft power is based on people's recognition of Japan's successful economic development after the defeat in the World War II, and their awareness that Japan had no history of negative relations with the Middle East. Therefore, over-identification with US and Western policy in the Middle East can damage Japan's image and soft power.

### **Japan's Past Policy Patterns: from reactive to proactive approaches?**

In studies of Japan's foreign policy, it has been often labeled as 'passive' and 'reactive' rather than 'proactive' (Drifte 1990; Inoguchi 1991; Blaker 1993; Curtis 1993; Pharr 1993; Yasutomo 1995). It has been argued that this results from Japan's consensus policy-making among top political circles as well as among the Iron Triangle of political-bureaucratic-business elites, which can be seen as bureaucracy-led policy-making, particularly in routine issues.

Foreign policy characterized as 'proactive' only started to be seen in the post-Cold War period as in response to the War on Terror in Afghanistan in 2001 and the Iraq War of 2003 (Green 2001; Hughes 2002; Lind 2004), and was viewed as being produced under strong political leadership via top-down policy-making (Shinoda 2004). However, it is yet to be seen which policy-making pattern will be predominant in Japan's foreign policy in the coming period, since it has recently been fluid. While the Democratic Party of Japan attempted unsuccessfully to reduce the bureaucracy's dominance in policy-making, the coming of strong political leadership under the second Abe Cabinet in December 2012 and its establishment of a National Security Council are expected to enhance the top political leadership's ability to make swift and decisive decisions on crucial security and foreign policy issues.

### **The Implication of International System Change:**

As a US ally, dependent on its deterrence for its security, Japan has aligned its foreign policy with the US agendas, and on major issues and at crucial moments, Japan has accommodated US policy (Schaller 1997; Hook et al. 2011), rather than following an independent proactive policy. Indeed, the Middle East was not, generally, an exception to this. Still, Japan's foreign policy has been far from identical to the US policy, if one looks closely at individual cases (Hook et al. 2011). This also applies to the Middle East cases (Miyagi 2011).

There is, arguably, a case for further differentiating Japan's policy in the Middle East from that of the US. The international system is moving from a unipolar US dominated one, with the West being the core, to a more pluralistic system in which power diffuses to the rising BRICS and shifts to Asia. At the international level, decreasing US energy interest in the Middle East (owing to development of shale gas), which is manifested in the shift of the US commitment under Obama from the Middle East to Pacific Asia, may result in less constraints on US support for Israel in the Middle East conflict. In such a case, Japan may, potentially, be more often forced to balance between the US and the Middle East, as well as between its interest in ties with the US for its defense and other interests such as Japanese business in the US market, with its long-term, geographically-wider interests, such as Japan's position as a long-term trusted partner for Middle East states on various issues. Indeed, it is possible that with the US scaling down of its involvement as a result of its costly campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq, Japan could regain room for balancing between the US and the Middle East, as in the Cold War period, and in this, the importance of its soft power will increase.

## **2. Case Studies: Patterns of Japan's Policy towards Middle East States in Conflict**

Yoshitsu (1984) described Japan's policy in the Middle East as one of balancing between the Middle East and the US, focusing on the case of the Iran-Iraq war. The author of this paper further identified variable patterns in Japan's balancing in the Middle East from studying the cases of security issues in the region between 2001 and 2006 (Miyagi 2011).

### **Past Patterns in Japan's Policy in the Middle East Conflicts:**

*1970-80s Patterns:* The Arab oil boycott in 1973 marked the beginning of Japan's political involvement in the Middle East. Primarily its need to secure energy resources from regional oil producers supportive to the Palestinians, and shared concerns over the stability of oil flows and the effect of oil prices on the world economy, which were

negatively impacted by the major conflicts in the region, led to a limited tilt toward political support for the Palestinians and Arab states in the conflict with Israel<sup>2</sup>. Japan urged a comprehensive peace and supported Palestinian rights; increased the provision of aid to the Middle East, such as development assistance for the Gulf and to Middle East states affected by the Arab-Israeli conflict; and increased contributions to United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine (UNRWA) for the Palestinians and to Lebanon through United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL). By the 1990s, Japan had shouldered roughly 10% of the whole international contribution to the region.

However, this was accompanied by balancing, by taking a middle ground, accommodating US policy and appeasing the Arab side simultaneously. This was seen, for example, in Japan's opening of a Palestinian diplomatic mission in Tokyo in 1977, while refraining from giving ambassadorial status to it; and inviting Palestinian Liberation Organizations (PLO) Chairman Arafat to Japan as a guest of the ruling party in 1981, while refraining from giving him a status of a state guest.

*1990-2000s Patterns:* In the post Cold War period, a shift in Japan's policy from pro-Arab to pro-US was seen. There were more episodes of Japan's bandwagoning with the US, beginning with the Gulf War of 1990-1. This began with a large financial contribution to the US-led coalition amounting to US\$13 billion, with Japan shouldering 16% of the whole cost of the war. Japan expressed its political support for US and British bombardments on Iraq in 1998. Its pro-US policy was manifest further in the SDF's participation in the "War on Terror" in Afghanistan in 2001 and in Japan's very proactive and early expression of political support for the US-led coalition war on Iraq in 2003, followed by the SDF's participation in post-war reconstruction between 2004 and 2006.

Japan's Iran policy since the country's Islamic revolution in 1979 has been described as constant balancing and zig-zags, reacting to various levels of international tension over Iran, US pressure on Japan for policy cooperation, and Iran's counterpressure. Japan tried to maintain ties with Iran and remain neutral throughout several conflicts involving it. Japan's political involvement in Iranian issues began in the Iran-Iraq war, when Japan's oil interest in Iran represented by Mitsui Co. Ltd.'s Iran-Japan Petrochemical Company (IJPC) was put at risk. The Japanese government tried to redress the international bias against Iran at the 1983 UN General Assembly, calling

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<sup>2</sup> The most immediate interest was oil, as stated in Diplomatic Bluebook 1982, Part I Basic Tasks of Japan's Foreign Policy, grounded in the fact that approximately 90% of Japan's oil demand was met by the Middle East supplies at the time of the Arab oil boycott (Diplomatic Bluebook 1973, Part I Basic tasks of Japan's Foreign Policy). However, it was by no means the only factor. The other major factors included Japan's growing economic interest in the region with the volume of trade with the Middle East soaring during the 1970s (Diplomatic Bluebook 1976 Chapter 3 Basic tasks of Japan's Foreign Policy); and also Japan's growing interest in expanding diplomatic engagement in various regions of the world along with the rise of its economic power (Diplomatic Bluebook) 1974, Chapter 2 Basic tasks of Japan's Foreign Policy).

for attention to Iran's grievances as much as Iraq's views. Between 1983 and 1988, Japan attempted to facilitate conciliation between the two by conveying messages between them in its diplomatic contacts with their leaders. During the time of US sanctions on Iran which followed the end of the Iran-Iraq war, Japan resumed its loans to Iran in 1993 by providing about 7.5 billion yen albeit only after pains-taking consultation with the US. When the US tightened sanction in 1995, Japan responded with a 'suspension', not 'cancellation' of its loan program in order to leave open the possibility of its resumption.

Japan's approach to the Iranian nuclear issue in the early 2000s generally reflected a continuation of this 'balancing' act between Japan's US tie and its oil interests similar to that observed since the Arab oil boycott: Japan swung between pro-US and pro-Iranian positions over the terms of international response to Iran's nuclear program and sanctions against it in the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) Board of Governors meetings. Japan also tried to maintain a major oil contract with Iran in the Azadegan oil field, which it had been negotiating since 2000, and which it signed in 2004. As US sanctions were put on Iran's oil exports, Japan's balancing was manifest in Japan's avoidance of sanctions by incrementally reducing its oil imports from Iran, while also refraining from suspending them altogether, unlike many EU member states and another US ally in East Asia, South Korea (Bloomberg.co.jp. 21 March 2012; Sankei News. 7 September 2013).

Japan's Syria policy has been characterized by support for US policy. This included providing economic incentives for Syrian participation in the US-led peace process after the 1991 Madrid peace conference. But, at the same time, when Syria faced pressure from the US and other Western states (especially France), Japan often refrained from involvement, as seen in the case of a UN resolution on Syrian military withdrawal from Lebanon in 2004; or else it accommodated US policy only at a superficial level, as in the case of US pressure on Syria for tightening control its border with Iraq following the Iraq war, and for closing Palestinian groups' offices in Syria. During the post-Cold War period prior to the Arab Spring, Japan pursued an independent policy fully detached from the US only on the issue of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMDs), the policy area in which Japan has been particularly active owing to its anti-nuclear national norm. Japan worked towards establishment of a WMD-free zone in the Middle East in international arenas as well as in bilateral diplomatic exchanges, despite the fact that such an initiative clearly countered the policy of Israel and such US governments as that of President G. W. Bush.

### **Japan's Recent Policies towards Iran (Nuclear Issue) and Syria (Civil War):**

*The Iranian Nuclear Issue:* Japan's approaches to the Iranian nuclear issue and the Syrian civil war exemplify its policy in the post-Cold War tilt towards the US and the West in regard to Middle East conflicts. This has been shaped by security dependency on

the US and concern for Japan's international status as a developed economy and a 'member of the West', which is manifested by being an inaugural G8 (formerly G7) state.

Japan's approach to the Iranian nuclear development program since the issue was sent to the UN Security Council was strict adherence to the Western demand for Iran's compliance in order to remove international suspicion of its intention to seek nuclear weapons, while still accepting Iran's right to peaceful possession of nuclear energy capability. The Japanese government at one point, took an unusually tough stance towards Iran at IAEA Board of Governors meetings in September and November 2003 when Japan encouraged EU states on the Board to agree to a resolution which implied referral of the issue to the UN Security Council in case of Iran's non-compliance. This was an attempt to resolve the issue so as to allow Japan to continue its Azadegan oil project in Iran, which was under serious pressure from the US. However, Japan scaled down its engagement with the nuclear issue during 2004, after a serious warning from Iran that it would lose its oil stake in the country simultaneous to pressure as well from the US side.

Japan's engagement with the Iran issue became more visible again in the shaping and passage of UN resolutions on sanctions since Japan was a UN Security Council member when UN resolutions 1737 and 1929 were adopted in December 2006 and June 2010 respectively, and particularly after Japan assumed chairmanship of the UN Security Council's committee for sanctions on Iran in 2009 and 2010. Viewing the nuclear issue as a major obstacle to its oil relationship with Iran, Japan aimed to remove the Iranian nuclear issue from the global agenda by pressing Iran for compliance with UN Security Council demands. Yet, in parallel, Japan also continued a considerable level of engagement with Iran to prevent a total severing of ties. This was seen in high-level talks on security issues and international affairs, business contacts, cultural exchanges, and human rights seminars with Iranian counterparts<sup>3</sup>.

Nevertheless, Japan's diplomatic exchanges with Iran slowed down during the second half of the Ahmadinejad administration, and the Japanese government therefore welcomed the new leadership under president Rouhani who was elected in June 2013 with the intention of resolving the nuclear issue and mending Iran's frayed international relationships in order to rescue the country from international sanctions. Japan's high level diplomacy was revived with the dispatch of Prime Minister Abe's envoy, former foreign minister and Chairman of Japan-Iran Parliamentarians Friendship League, Masahiko Komura, to Tehran in early September 2013 to meet the leaders of the new administration, followed by meetings between Prime Minister Abe and President Rouhani and between Foreign Minister Kishida and Foreign Minister Javad Zarif later in the same month on the occasion of UN General Assembly, and Foreign Minister Kishida's visit to Tehran in late November. An agreement was reached between the two governments to resume periodical consultations on disarmament and non-proliferation, which had been suspended after the seventh meeting in July 2007.

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<sup>3</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Japan-Iran relations.

In the aforementioned meetings Japanese leaders consistently reminded the Iranian leaders of the same points it had made in the previous period, namely that Iran must ratify and implement the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) and the Additional Protocol of IAEA, thereby enhancing transparency, in order to establish international confidence in the peaceful nature of Iran's nuclear activities. Japan urged flexibility in Iran's negotiations with the EU3+3 (or the P-5+1, UN Security Permanent members and Germany) and with the IAEA, and advocated that Iran take concrete steps to break the impasse on the issue<sup>4</sup>. Indeed, such flexibility was demonstrated by Iran, resulting in the interim deal reached with the West in November, 2013, in which Iran agreed to stop enrichment of uranium at 20% for six months in return for major sanctions relief.

The Japanese government's position on the Iranian nuclear issue has been consistent since it was first raised in that it supports Iran's right to peaceful nuclear activities based on complete transparency; in its urging that Iran comply with the demands of the international community led by the West; and in continuing to engage with Iran in joint projects and cooperation. Nevertheless, as described above, it has constantly shifted between harder and softer and containment and engagement approaches to Iran depending on the international conditions.

*The Syrian Civil War:* Japan's policy has aimed to mitigate the Syrian conflict and prevent its spill over to the rest of the region, especially to the Gulf. Japan's statements regarding the regime's repression of demonstrations were relatively mild for a while, which was in line with the general Japanese approach towards the country since Syria's participation in the 1990s peace process. The tone of condemnation of the Syrian regime rose in late April 2011, following its large-scale repression of the demonstrators. In August 2011, Japan took a position in line with the West that the Assad regime had lost its legitimacy to rule, demanding it stop the use of force and step down from power. Japan also actively implemented sanctions in coordination with major Western states from September 2011 and also in parallel with them declared the Syrian ambassador *persona non grata* on 5 June 2012. Japan also acted in concert with the West at the time the UN announced its support for the 6 Point Proposal by the Special Envoy of the Arab League and the United Nations Kofi Annan in May 2012. The Japanese government participated in the Friends of Syria meetings from the first ministerial meeting held in February 2012 onwards throughout 2012, accepting the stance of the meetings that the Assad regime should be replaced by the opposition leadership. The Japanese government co-chaired, together with Britain and Qatar a Friends of Syria working group on sanctions in June 2012, and hosted another meeting in Tokyo in November 2012. Japan

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<sup>4</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Japan-Iran Foreign Ministers' Meeting, 23 September 2013 [http://www.mofa.go.jp/region/page4e\\_000037.html](http://www.mofa.go.jp/region/page4e_000037.html); Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Kishida Gaimu Daijin no Iran Isuramu Kyouwakoku houmon (Kekka Gaiyo)* (The Visit of Foreign Minister Kishida to the Islamic Republic of Iran: Overview of the Result), 10 November 2013 [http://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/kaidan/page18\\_000103.html](http://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/kaidan/page18_000103.html).

also remained active in extending humanitarian support, providing aid to Syrian refugees and to Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs).

Japan was also engaged in diplomatic contacts with the opposition leadership, inviting the Syrian National Council's President to Japan in May 2012 for a meeting with Foreign Minister Gamba. However, as the Syrian opposition forces started to disintegrate and Friends of Syria became an arena for the West and anti-Assad Middle East states to provide military support for the opposition, Japan distanced itself to some extent from this more overtly interventionist and militarist approach. It refrained from playing a major part in subsequent Friends of Syria meetings and bilateral official exchanges with the opposition leadership supported by the West, and instead concentrated more on sanctions on the Syrian regime - co-sponsoring, for example, a UN sanction in May 2013 - and also on humanitarian support. In this way, it limited its approach to diplomacy, but also differentiated itself from Western intervention, particularly in the provision of arms. On the occasions of the G8 summit meeting in June 2013 and the G20 summit meeting in September 2013, Japan called for a consensus on convening the Geneva II conference, which would encompass both the Western states, Russia and China<sup>5</sup>. When the US government made clear its intention to launch a limited war on Syria in August 2013, the Japanese government initially intended to support it; however, Prime Minister Abe decided to refrain from doing so at the G20 summit meeting held in the beginning of September 2013, since he perceived a lack of international support for the attack, particularly among the US' key Western allies (Sankei News. 31 August 2013). This showed the very considerable extent to which Japan's position was influenced, less by its own assessment, than by the positions taken by the other major Western states.

### **Scenarios: Between Deepened Conflict and Democratic Peace:**

Both the Iran and Syria conflicts could deepen, especially in the short term, but in the longer term trends begun in the Arab Uprising toward greater democratization or political pluralization could be associated with peaceful resolution of Middle East conflicts; alternatively if hardliners and radicals prevail, notably the rise of al-Qaida in Syria, and hardening of the Iranian leadership and the public opinion in defense of Iran's right to nuclear, power, there is an enhanced potential for conflict.

*The Iranian Nuclear Issue:* It can be argued that in Iran the stalemate over nuclear issues and Western sanctions had contributed to justifying the regime hardliners' anti-Western ideology for a long time. The political polarization within Iran

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<sup>5</sup> The total amount of aid awarded by the Japanese government as of 29 January 2014 is US\$280 million. Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Emergency Grant Aid for Syrian IDPs and Refugees. 18 June 2013; Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Emergency Grant Aid for Syrian Refugees and IDPs. 27 September 2013.

had also been partially a result of the cost of sanctions for Iranian society. The current inclination among elites towards an alternative policy more dominated by liberal minded clergy might promote domestic political reform towards power sharing along with a shift in foreign policy towards moderation.

Indeed, the Obama administration had shown an unprecedented interest in reaching out to Iran to resolve the nuclear issue, resulting in a historical diplomatic breakthrough. A series of talks between the P-5+1 states since the moderate leader Hassan Rouhani took the presidency in June 2013 produced a positive interim outcome through mutual concessions, with Iran agreeing to halt its enrichment activities beyond 5% for the next 6 months from the point of agreement in November 2013, and to allow greater access to international inspections of its facilities, in return for sanctions relief of US\$7 billion. Indeed, the fact that the initiative for negotiations had been launched by the Obama administration and the Iranian leadership in strict secrecy before the Iranian presidential election shows the commitment of both leaderships to solving the issue (BBC News 24 November 2013). Nevertheless, the Obama administration came under domestic pressure from those concerned that an agreement would allow Iran to continue clandestine nuclear development, and pressure resulted in a temporary halts to talks due to the Iranian protest against the US enlargement of its existing sanction list. For its part, the Rouhani government feels that its right to the peaceful use of nuclear technology has been acknowledged; however, if the Western powers attempt to deny this right viewing Iran's compliance to be insufficient, all Iranian factions are likely to come together in skepticism regarding Western intentions toward Iran, leading Iran to seek security through self-reliance and maximization of its power.

*The Syrian Civil War:* In Syria, the settlement of the WMD issue was accomplished without military intervention owing to the Syrian regime's acceptance in September 2013 of handing over its chemical weapons for their destruction by the UN agency, the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW). Moreover, in December 2013, it was announced that talks between the regime and the opposition would take place on 22 January 2014. However, prospects for a diplomatic settlement do not seem bright, as political talks in the conference appeared to quickly stalemate due to apparently irresolvable disagreement over the main issue of Assad's role in the transitional government (The Independent 26 January 2014). Indeed, the trend of destabilization continues in Syria, as a result of conflict between sectarian militias and the presence of radical Islamists. The latter are being generously supplied with arms from the Gulf and are potentially capable of getting hold of non-conventional weapons. Such a condition, in which the opposition forces have unlimited access to arms, may further destabilize the country and spill over region-wide in increased regional involvement in a struggle for Syria.

### **3. Possible Alternative Approaches towards Conflicts in the Middle East for the New Era**

**Japan's long-term interest:**

When considering Japan's approach towards the region in the coming period, it is important to assess how it would best serve Japan's long-term interests. These are firstly to mitigate destabilization; promote enduring peace and encourage a system in which states do not seek security via arms races. Japan also has a long-term interest in expanding and consolidating relationships with the hydrocarbon producer countries in the Middle East and in developing markets for Japanese products.

*'Resolution' or 'Containment' of Conflict?* The literature in the field of *conflict resolution* sheds light on alternative approaches to conflict and what approaches are necessary for resolving conflict (Miall et al. 2000; Burton 1987). Whereas conflict can be 'managed' by containing the source of instability by using the power balance, it can be 'resolved' by addressing the core issues between the parties to the conflict, and promoting mutual compromise regardless of the power balance between them. In practice, conflict in the Middle East has been typically approached by containment rather than 'resolution'. An alternative for Japan would be to assume a more high-profile conflict resolution approach.

As Japan seeks to play a major role in the Middle East, the impact of Japan's approaches both in terms of Japan's image, international position, and soft power, and in terms of consequences and outcomes in the Middle East region and elsewhere, will become more significant, and so far, there are both positive and negative prospects. While Japan has sometimes opted to follow an independent policy, its more usual practice of uncritically falling in with Western terms for the resolution of both the Iran and Syria crises and its cooperation in mounting sanctions and conveying diplomatic messages on behalf of the West without sufficient consideration of the concerns of the Middle East counterparts have only contributed to the impasses. As a result, Japan's image as an anti-military state and its character as a non-partisan state in the Middle East have often been compromised.

*The Iranian Nuclear Issue:* On the Iranian nuclear issue, Japan's consistent position regarding Iran's right to peaceful nuclear activities in return for transparency has contributed to preserving the consistency in the applicability of the principle to all states. Japan has offered technical support towards Iran's compliance with the international nuclear regime; Japan has not, however, otherwise addressed the core problem, and has avoided initiatives that would address Iranian security concerns and the US and Israeli threats to Iran, essential to a resolution of the nuclear issue<sup>6</sup>. Such security concerns motivate Iran to seek nuclear deterrence and this is a main obstacle to

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<sup>6</sup> There is a possibility that such topics have been raised in periodical bilateral security talks in the past, however, it is not apparent that the Japanese diplomacy had channeled to its Western allies Iran's security concerns relevant to revolving the Iranian nuclear issue. Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Japan-Iran relations. [http://www.mofa.go.jp/region/middle\\_e/iran/](http://www.mofa.go.jp/region/middle_e/iran/).

its complying with the international demand to give up uranium enrichment. As noted above, at the moment, the Iranian leadership, President Rouhani in particular, has received a positive impression from the West regarding Iran's right to peaceful use of nuclear power. However, the US and the Western states' position could change depending on whether Iran's compliance will satisfy them. If Iran's compliance is still limited and leaves some opaqueness, it is very likely that this reflects underlying distrust of the West's intentions. Japanese policy-makers have perceived the arrival of the new administration in Iran to have opened up an opportunity to resolve the nuclear issue. However, the negotiations will bear fruit only if the international community acknowledges Iran's right of peaceful use of nuclear power, takes account of Iran's security concerns, notably its fear of external political intervention or even military interventions (in a long term, after the Obama administration), as well as its concern for the independence of its national economy, which needs permanent relief from sanctions. Foreign Minister Kishida stated in his press conference on 8 November 2013 that 'there is a role that we can play, as we have a long-term friendship'<sup>7</sup>. As a non-Western neutral power, Japan can extend its soft power by playing the role of a non-partisan power with a deeper understanding of Iran's needs, while still working in the framework of the Western initiative for re-integrating Iran into the international community. Indeed, the Japanese government had pursued such an approach during the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s, and received major international support for it. As an Iranian scholar has argued the West's soft power in Iran has been significantly eroded by the recent experience of sanctions<sup>8</sup>. This leaves an opportunity for Japan to develop its own soft power by reviving its former more sensitive approach to Iran.

*The Syrian Civil War:* In regard to the Syrian civil war, in spite of a few episodes of independence in its policy, Japan had generally followed the Western and Gulf approach of imposing the outcome which they think is right without addressing the concerns of both opposing parties in the conflict. However, the combination of the two trends has resulted in some inconsistency in Japan's approach. For example, on the one hand, the Japanese government and its officials have expressed on various occasions an understanding that the on-going conflict while partly due to the regime's repression was also fuelled by the opposition's military operations; also, the Japanese government has repeatedly echoed the UN's support for a 'Syrian-led' political process for resolving the conflict and repeated calls for convening the Geneva II conference, an approach which would bring in wide international support. Contrary to these positions, however, Japan has also echoed the Western powers' claims that the Assad regime had lost legitimacy and that 'the regime has to step down', repeated its condemnation of the regime, joined the Friends of Syria group, and invited the opposition to Tokyo for diplomatic exchanges,

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<sup>7</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Press Conference by Minister for Foreign Affairs Fumio Kishida. 8 November 2013 [http://www.mofa.go.jp/press/kaiken/kaiken4e\\_000019.html](http://www.mofa.go.jp/press/kaiken/kaiken4e_000019.html).

<sup>8</sup> Mohammad Ali Shabani. "Iranians Support Nuclear Program, Blame West for Sanctions". Al Monitor. 14 February 2013. <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/02/iranian-poll-support-nuclear-program-blame-sanctions.html>.

while failing to take a position on the violence of the opposition groups. Such approaches hardly contribute to Japan's soft power and indeed make Japan appear to be merely band-wagoning or free-riding with the West in its diplomacy.

Nevertheless, Japan has rightly avoided involvement in external powers' attempts to shift the military balance of power by arming their clients, which, in effect, would keep the conflict going. Also, importantly, Prime Minister Abe refrained from extending Japanese support to the US's proposed attack on Syria over alleged use of chemical weapons, on the grounds there was not clear evidence of Assad's involvement in their use at the point the Japanese government was expected to express its position in early September 2013, and also in view of the British parliament's vote against it. Japan has therefore played a role in establishing a norm which may tend to restrain future such interventions.

Japan could make a difference by taking a more principle-based position in support of political negotiations to end the conflict and by supporting UN officials in their calls for all states to stop arming all parties to the conflict. This would mean working towards imposing international sanctions not only on the Syrian regime but also on those on the opposition who would keep employing the use of violence. The fact that the US government has been increasingly aware of the potential threat of the armed rebels in Syria to its security, and also the recent recognition of the necessity of Iran's assistance in ending the conflict in Syria within the Geneva II framework, makes for a more favorable condition in which Japan could take an initiative. If collective defense is allowed for the SDF, as a result of the Abe government's proposals, there is a possibility that the Japanese government could consider SDF's participation in a future Peace Keeping Operation (PKO) for observing a ceasefire and reconstruction if a political agreement is reached in Syria (by revising Japan's Five Principles for PKO Participation). Further, Japan could use aid to facilitate stabilization of post-conflict Syria and the re-integration of displaced persons into society.

As for the issue of the WMDs, with the beginning of the mission of OPCW for the destruction of Syrian chemical weapons, the Japanese government has been keen to play a role, by announcing its decision to send three Ground SDF officers to it as well as a contribution of US\$18 million to the organization. Yet, while it is crucial to pay attention to Syrian WMDs, it is also important for Japan to work at the same time on establishing a region-wide WMD control regime; otherwise destabilization could result from the sudden removal of the Syrian deterrent capability in a very strategically sensitive and unstable area. Japan's diplomatic initiatives at both Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) review conferences in cooperation with like-minded states, and at bilateral exchanges with Middle East states, as well as with the US, can be given new momentum in response to the recent development surrounding Syria.

### **Implications of Domestic Changes in Middle East States:**

In a democratic Middle East, public opinion will carry more weight in foreign policy. The public is likely to demand a change in the Western bias toward Israel and adjustment in Western or IMF-driven economic policies that hurt the poor. Alternatively, if the influence of radical Islamists increases, opposition to the West could take a more radical form. Unlike in dealing with authoritarian states, relations based solely on material interests will not be sufficient in a democratized region. Japan's record in relations to human rights and ethics, and Japan's profile on issues of Middle East peoples' concerns will therefore matter more in future.

In Iran's case, even if political reforms increase the role of public opinion, this will not greatly change Iran's core stands regarding its national interest: the Iranian people will not tolerate being dictated to by the West regarding the terms of its oil exports and over nuclear policy, even after further political democratization and policy moderation. In the case of Syria and other deeply divided Middle East states, there is no single public opinion, with conflicts between moderates and radicals increasing. Japan can contribute to discouraging radicalism, division, and break-down of the country by refraining from playing one group over another, and by actively and strongly calling for the other states to refrain from such interference<sup>9</sup>, while continuing its aid to address problems of poverty and social inequalities. As for the issue of WMD proliferation in the Middle East, a new momentum was recently seen, with the convening of the Arab League over the initiative for establishing a WMD-free zone in the Middle East in November 2013, as well as mounting interest in Israel in this initiative. This is an area in which Japan can and should actively play a part, both as a non-partisan actor and possibly also by sending nuclear experts whenever desirable, to assist the progress of the initiative.

### **Conclusion: Recommendations on Japan's Relations with the New Middle East**

Whichever scenario prevails, either a conflict-ridden Middle East with radical Islamist dominance or a more democratic Middle East, Japan's long-term interests seem to lie in a more independent policy, based on a fair and balanced approach, as seen by the people in the Middle East.

Especially given the gradual decline of the West, and increased competition for Japan from other Asian energy importers from the Middle East, aligning with the

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<sup>9</sup> Foreign Minister Kishida sensibly but perhaps too mildly expressed this point in his speech at the Geneva II Conference on 22 January 2014, stating '[w]hat is needed to bring back a beautiful Syria is dialogue, not a scramble for power'. Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Speech by Fumio Kishida, Minister for Foreign Affairs of Japan, at Geneva II Peace Conference on Syria. 22 January 2014. [http://www.mofa.go.jp/me\\_a/me1/sy/page1e\\_000023.html](http://www.mofa.go.jp/me_a/me1/sy/page1e_000023.html).

Western containment and interventionist approaches will become increasingly harmful for Japan's long-term interests.

Japan's hard power is limited due to the international and domestic constraints. On the other hand, its soft power can be employed more effectively in political areas, via multi-lateral involvement, especially through the UN; yet such soft power can be damaged by over-alignment with the West.

Japan's interest in the maintenance of its international status as a leading democratic capitalist great power at a time when the hard power of new emerging states becomes increasingly salient, can be effectively defended in the coming period through a 'value-laden diplomacy' as Prime Minister Abe advocates (Official Website of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, Page on Diplomacy). Such a diplomacy must, to be effective, resonate with people's views in the target regions and should not be limited to promoting democracy, human rights and rule of law at the domestic level, but also should be evident at the international level. In this respect, Middle Eastern states have frequently asked for a more active Japanese political involvement in conflict resolution in the region, seeing Japan as a more even-handed less biased power than the Western great powers.

Japan's policy in the Iranian and Syrian cases has so far shown some differences from that of the West, particularly regarding military intervention in Syria without UN endorsement, and Tokyo's consistent support for Iran's right for peaceful nuclear activities. However, Japan's approaches have also often been affected by the positions taken by the West, specifically in its active collaboration in imposing sanctions and its support for military action in certain cases. This limits the effect of Japan's soft power, which derives from its image as anti-militarist, non-partisan state. To preserve its soft power, Japan should push for sanctions to be accompanied by a workable way out for the targeted regime, and support for military intervention should only be given if it is genuinely considered to be the only viable way of bringing about an end to violence. Soft power derivable from the attraction of Japanese culture can only be effective if Japan's image remains benign in the area of international politics and security.

As for the hydrocarbon states in the Gulf, where Japan's interests are concentrated, their incremental political pluralization, albeit limited so far, means that the way in which Japan's approaches are viewed by people in those states is likely to have increased implications for Japan's relations with them, in comparison to the time when only the views of elites mattered.

Shaping a new path toward a more independent policy for Japan that departs from the traditional practice of merely balancing between international powers will require effective top-down policy-making by strong political leadership. However, this should be based on sufficient and a wide range of input from relevant bureaucratic branches, not only from senior ranks but also from the level of divisions, which deal daily with counterparts in the Middle East. Furthermore, expert knowledge and different perspectives available outside the government should be also solicited in order

to arrive at a balanced approach. The establishment of a National Security Council could be a venue for facilitating such wider practices of policy-making coordination and consultation.

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