

Japan and Its Future Role at the UN: An Interview with the Ambassador of Japan

By Richard Ponzio

Japan's higher status as an international economic leader in recent years has led to a growing political debate within Japan addressing the country's future political role in the world. Although Japan raised 13 billion dollars (20 percent of total contributions) to cover the costs of the Gulf War, the western media still criticized the Japanese government for not supplying troops. Because of its constitution, Japan was unable to send troops into combat in the Middle East. Presently, however, a proposal to permit Japanese citizens to serve in the UN Peace-keeping Forces is receiving support in the lower chamber of the Japanese Diet. The proposal is expected to gain acceptance by the less important upper chamber this spring. For now, the world anxiously waits to see if Japan will increase its role as a political leader.

Japan attaches great importance to the upcoming UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) and its preparatory process. Japan is particularly concerned about the ongoing negotiations on the Framework Convention on Climate Change, the Convention on Biological Diversity, and the forest agreement, which it hopes will be completed in time for the UNCED. Contrary to industrial giants, like the United States who have failed to set limits for emissions of gases that contribute to global warming, Japan has been committed to making the sacrifices necessary to foster environmentally sound and sustainable development. The delegation representing Japan is also a key contributor to the development of the Global Environment Facility (GEF) which provides grants to be used to explore ways of assisting developing countries to protect the global environment and to transfer environmentally benign technologies. Japan is again taking a leadership role in addressing global environmental issues while countries such as the United States refuse to contribute to the core fund of the GEF. In the past three years, Japan has committed itself to providing 300 billion yen (\$2.2 billion) in bilateral and multilateral assistance to protect the environment. As the concern for environmental balance grows in the world, Japan, with its technical expertise and financial resources, is at the cutting edge in formulating solutions.

The following interview with the Ambassador and Permanent Representative to the United Nations, Mr. Yoshio Hatano, was held on 20 February 1991, two weeks prior to the fourth and final preparatory committee meeting for the UNCED.

Helvidius: For the past twenty years, there has been talk about Japan assuming permanent representative status on the Security Council. With the end of the Cold War and the 50th Anniversary of the UN only three years away, can we expect to see the creation of a permanent seat for Japan in the near future?

Ambassador Hatano: It is not for me to say. It is for the member countries of the United Nations to decide if Japan is suited to be a permanent member of the Security Council. Japan must be granted this position with the blessing of all member nations, not through back-door dealings.

Helvidius: Suppose, hypothetically, that Japan received the status of a permanent member on the Security Council. How would you feel about Japan assuming veto power, or do you feel the veto should be eliminated for all permanent members since it retards the process of selective security?

Hatano: We have not formulated any strong views in regards to the elimination of the veto power on the Security Council.

Helvidius: As a current two year member of the Security Council, what role will Japan play: the role of an average rotating member or a more influential force which attempts to increase the UN's capacity to maintain international peace and security?

Hatano: We intend to play a useful and closely involved role. The Security Council must be prepared to pay the bill for a decision. We must be able to explain to our taxpayers that they have been well represented. During the Gulf War, Japan raised \$ 13 billion for the allied forces by levying a corporation and gasoline tax. Let me also note that Prime Minister Kaifu was stunned last year when Japan's role in the Gulf War was criticized by the western press, even after making enormous [economic] contributions.

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Helvidius: For the past year, there has been much debate within Japan about participating in UN peace-keeping operations. Although Prime Minister Miyazawa's proposal suffered a setback last November, do you feel it is only a matter of time before the Diet passes the legislation which allow Japanese citizens to play an active role in UN peace keeping operations?

Hatano: Presently, a UN Cooperation Bill is being considered which would enable Japan's self-defense forces to participate

in peace keeping activities abroad. It is constitutionally difficult to change our past way of thinking. I am not quite sure what is going to be the fate of the bill, but I would like to see it pass.

Helvidius: With the end of the Cold War and reemergence of the UN as a player in international politics, the opportunity exists to strengthen and restructure particular organs of the UN such as the Secretariat. What reforms will Japan pursue over the next few years?

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Hatano: We have promoted the need to streamline the Secretariat. I would like to note here that Secretary-General Ghali has implemented drastic reductions in the number of Under Secretary-Generals, and we applaud his initiative. There are many other suggestions floating around, but the time is not appropriate for me to officially state [sic] them.

Helvidius: A major focus of everyone's attention this year will be the UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED). Concerning cross-sectoral issues, Japan has placed a high priority on effectively addressing questions pertaining to financial resources and the transfer of clean technologies. As a country with the ability to provide expert technical assistance and other types of aid, what initiatives has Japan undertaken?

Hatano: The most important initiative my country is undertaking is the "Wise Man's Meeting" which will convene in Tokyo this April. At this meeting, a small, high-level group of financial and policy leaders will discuss financial issues relating to the UNCED. In addition, a very important conference on climatic change where Japan has introduced a number of bold initiatives is currently taking place in New York. A member of the Japanese delegation is, in fact, co-chairing the meeting. To address global environmental issues such as climate change, pollution of international waters, and depletion of the ozone layer, Japan would like to see a steady growth in the role of the Global Environment Facility. Japan would also like to see the Convention on Biological Diversity and the forest agreement completed in time for the UNCED.

Helvidius: In a speech addressed to the General Assembly this past November, you stated that the government of Japan stands ready to utilize its knowledge and experience to foster cordial relations among all nations of the Middle East. Would

you please elaborate on this statement?

Hatano: At this time we are participating very actively in different aspects of the situation in the Middle East, especially in the areas of economic and financial cooperation. In the search for a political solution, we render our services to all sides, and we have established good relations with both Israel and the PLO.

Helvidius: The United States' relationship with Japan is presently experiencing some turbulence. Do you foresee the present trade tensions between the United States and Japan as having a negative impact on the American-Japanese working relationship at the UN? Could a power struggle within the UN system occur between the United States and Japan?

Hatano: I don't think so. My relationship with the US delegation is one of cooperation. Ambassador Pickering and I have worked closely and effectively together. The trade friction between the United States and Japan is a bilateral matter and should have no impact on the multilateral negotiations at the UN.

Helvidius: Do you have any final remarks for students at Columbia who are interested in pursuing a career in diplomacy?

Hatano: The foreign service has been exciting. The world is a lot smaller now, and the relationship between countries needs closer attention now than it did fifty years ago. One can't separate international problems from domestic problems today. The top graduates from Japan's top universities are

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entering the Japanese Foreign Service. Likewise, the standards of the US Foreign Service force their recruits to be highly qualified. If you have an interest in public affairs and have the ability to empathize with other cultures, give a serious look to a career in diplomacy. I look forward to working with Columbia graduates who become members of the American Foreign Service in the future.

Ambassador Hatano graduated from Princeton University in 1956.

Richard Ponzio is a Columbia College sophomore.