The Japan that can say yes

By Kazuhiko Togo

Japan under Koizumi has become a more assertive country in world affairs; a certain intransigence can be observed in its foreign policy. Contemporary Japanese self-assertion is driven by an internal logic set in motion by Japan's defeat in World War Two, given new scope for expression by changes in the international environment.

Intransigence was evident in Koizumi's policy towards Russia. Particularly since the mid 1990s, Tokyo has sought to increase its status as a major trading partner. Russia's democratization, affirmation of national identity, and its recent improvements in the security field have enabled the two countries to move closer together. Russia's closer ties with Japan can be seen in the bilateral relations that have been established in recent years, including the advancement of economic cooperation.

The issue of Taiwan has only complicated matters. Following Japan's diplomatic recognition of the People's Republic of China in 1972, Japan severed relations with the Republic of China in 1979, though the island remained a major trading partner. Taiwan's democratisation, affirmation of national identity, and its recent improvements in the security field have enabled the two countries to move closer together.

Koizumi's security policy

Koizumi came to power in April 2001 and was immediately faced with the challenge of global terrorism. Declaring any terrorist attack to be an attack on Japan's security, Koizumi ordered the Maritime Self Defence Forces to the Indian Ocean to offer logistical support to US, UK and other coalition forces. In October 2002, the North Korean nuclear crisis erupted, further heightening Japan's sense of vulnerability. Tokyo reacted by enacting new laws to respond to armed attack; a missile defence program was introduced in the 2004 budget. Koizumi's decision to send troops to Iraq must be understood as part of Japan's readiness to bear greater responsibilities towards global security. While the government came under heavy criticism for following America's lead, its decision was based on a calculation of long-term Japanese strategic interests. Had its security policy been more mature, Japan, while still supporting the US, could have entered into dialogue with nations in the Middle East and Europe and pushed for a greater United Nations role.

Koizumi's foreign policy

Under Koizumi a new intransigence has appeared in important foreign policy arenas. As a result, Japan missed several opportunities to strengthen its foreign policy leverage. If the 1990s were a period of realistic victory over pacifist idealism, the turn of the century witnessed the beginning of a new rift between realists and nationalists pursuing narrowly – and emotionally – defined national interests.