In Larger Security: Why shouldn’t Japan be allowed to enter the UNSC?

by Thomas Heger

“I respectfully suggest to you, Excellencies, that in the eyes of your peoples the difficulty of reaching agreement does not excuse your failure to do so. If you want the Council’s decisions to command greater respect, particularly in the developing world, you need to address the issue of its composition with greater urgency”.


Japan has contributed significantly to the work of the United Nations these last fifty years in search of both unifying peace and international prestige and recognition. It wants nothing more than to be “[r]ecognized as a first-class country (ittō koku)” (Hook 2001:311). And “the three issues of UNSC representation, funding and peacekeeping have demonstrated most clearly the ambition ‘to occupy an honored place in international society striving for the preservation of peace’” (Ibid:328). But if you consider the Security Council of the United Nations to be an already ideal organization with an ideal structure within the UN, then adding an element like Japan could have serious ramifications. There are reasons internal and external for Japan that dictates why it perhaps shouldn’t acquire a permanent seat on the UNSC. Being just a very rich nation isn’t enough: the transformation from an international economic power to an international political power is the breakthrough point. What disqualifies Japan?

1. The first internal barrier is article 9 in the 1947 constitution – the pacifist article. This article dictates in short that Japan should never go to war or build up a military attack force for war purposes.3 In the instances when the UNSC needs to work effectively (like they should have been the cases in Rwanda in 1994 and Srebrenica in 1995), adding another permanent discussing partner (or veto power for that matter) – especially one that utter pacifist solutions to possibly un pacifist problems – would perhaps implicate unnecessarily halts in situations where lives are at stakes. Even now (and especially during the Cold War), getting a unanimous decision takes a lot of time. It might not be responsible to arrest the needed efficiency by adding more members to the

1 Cited in Von Freiesleben 2008:5.
2 Well, not anymore. Actually, Germany and Japan might have stood a better chance getting the seats a decade ago: “Many commentators believe that the two countries had a better chance of getting permanent seats in the 1990s when the main arguments were based on the size of payments to the UN” (Von Freiesleben 2008:18).
3 “(1) Aspiring sincerely to an international peace based on justice and order, the Japanese people forever renounce war as a sovereign right of the nation and the threat or use of force as means of settling international disputes. (2) In order to accomplish the aim of the preceding paragraph, land, sea, and air forces, as well as other war potential, will never be maintained. The right of belligerency of the state will not be recognized”.


UNSC. Even if a reform for the removal of article 9 is approved, it might create reactions verging on rioting among the Japanese populace, and even worse responses from its closest neighbors, the Korean peninsula and China, who both fears and remembers Japan’s militarism.

2. The second internal barrier is Japan’s redundancy in facing objectively up to its wartime past. In a Japan where prime ministers and high political officials visit the infamous war-criminal shrine that is Yasukuni Jinja; preaching and advocating false historical outlooks among the right extremist wing; combined with Japanese history text books that glance over the monstrosities done to Japan’s enemies during the Second World War; even a Japan that rather wants to distance itself from the militarism of the war without facing up to the shame that follows it – when all this is put in one bag and digested as a whole, it’s no wonder that the countries that best felt the Japanese war machine during the Second World War are not inclined to support Japan’s application to the UNSC. Among them, the veto power China. The other country in this special situation, Germany, has been much more successful in dealing with its wartime history through self examination – even to that amount that the shame of the atrocities are arguably much more part of today’s German youths’ mentality than their Japanese counterparts.

3. The third internal barrier is the question of the Japanese public opinion. Does the Japanese public want it? “A permanent seat is widely supported by the Japanese public although there is a concern that Japan will then have to openly declare its position on all issues reaching the UNSC which would result in very much disliked confrontations with other countries” (Drifte 1996:132). According to a poll from 1994, 56 % responded positively for Japan gaining a permanency in the UNSC, while those disagreeing “explained their opposition by saying Japan would have to take an active part in UN military activities if it became a permanent UNSC member” (ibid: 133). This following argument is also noteworthy: “even though Japan pays the second largest amount in the UN budget, it has no more ability to make its voice heard than a country with a population of 40.000-50.000, (...) that imbalance needs to be resolved” (Hook 2001:313). From 1994 to 1997, the public opinion polls in Japan supported this assertion in discussing Japan’s entry to the UNSC, together with the view that “Japan can contribute to world peace as a non-nuclear power” and “Japan is an economic great power” (ibid). Bear in mind that these views originate before the second Iraqi war. Since a permanency in the UNSC would unquestionably lead to more Japanese interaction in international military affairs (as noted above), it is important to note that the Japanese public is not happy with the current Japanese military participation on the world stage: “In particular, offensive military power is not believed to have much utility for destroying terrorist networks or suppressing WMD proliferation, or for «offensive liberal» objectives such as promoting democracy or human rights. Japanese public opinion tends to view nonmilitary means as more effective in promoting these goals” (Midford 2006:49). Also: “The Iraq deployment has
become a negative example that the Japanese public, and by extensions decision-makers, will seek to avoid repeating in the future” (ibid: 51). The public wants more representation but seek to avoid military confrontations. That might not be possible with a permanent seat in the UNSC.

4. The first external barrier rears its head when you consider the possible outcome of a permanent UNSC seat. In the history of the UN, the chance of Japan voting the same way as the US in the General assembly has since 1975 rarely dipped under 25 % – landing on an average of little less than about 40 % when you see the period as a whole (Hook 2001:312). Since Japan entered the UNSC on a rotating shift already in 1958, the percentage of same-way voting as the US in the UNSC is even higher, with numbers rarely dipping under 70 % during its eight terms of appointment – with an average of a whopping 90 % (ibid: 311). Diplomacy is not doing everything to the tune of the Americans. As long as Japan is seen as a country with only international semi-independence, no other state would support its permanency in the UNSC. They would, rather, consider the procedure as giving the US two votes instead of only one. Since its allegiance to the US goes hand in hand with its current security agreements, trying to rid itself of American patronage might lose the Japanese the support from the US in gaining its permanency. And the circle is closed. Also, the agenda of “the eventual elimination of nuclear weapons (...) has the potentiality to contradict Japan’s alliance with the US” (Hoshino 2007:225).

5. The second external barrier comes in the fierce international competition for UNSC permanency. Japan is today unambiguously supported by the US for permanency (following the efforts and operations during the Iraq war, and the special laws that were passed to bypass article 9) as a lone country, but not in the package deal of the G4 + 1 (Japan, Germany, India and Brazil plus one African nation). If Japan tries to run for permanency alone, it loses the other countries’ support. Even if you think Japan is heavily supported throughout Asia for a permanent seat on the UNSC, you should consider if these states don’t feel themselves pressured to do so because of the possibility of losing Japanese aid in case of nonsupport.4 Not to speak of, as mentioned, those countries not supporting Japan: “both South and North Korea, and China, (...) all regard any increase in Japan’s peacekeeping role as silent or creeping remilitarization” (Hook 2001:314). This is also a question of regional representation: As of today, Africa and South America (and the Middle East) are the only continents not represented in the UNSC. Asia already has China. Europe has both England and France. It is hard for the other members of the UN to agree upon who their regional ‘super power’ are: “Throughout all regions, it seemed that large or powerful countries

---

4 Are ‘threats’ being made? “If Japan fails, or rather if the international community fails Japan, it will be a grand disappointment for Japan. The growing sense of frustration in Japan for its contribution being taken for granted would increase if its aspiration would finally be rejected, pushing Japan towards nationalistic, introvert and unilateral inclination, possibly with reduced commitment in supporting the multilateral institution” (Speech by Japanese ambassador 2008:2).
favoured the inclusion of new permanent members – mainly themselves – while their regional rivals preferred adding more non-permanent seats. As a result, the debate quickly created three main blocs” (Von Freiesleben 2008:3). Nobody really knows what Russia thinks. And even if one should consider adding just one more permanent seat to the UNSC, Japan might not be the best candidate: “In recent years Germany's contribution to the UN causes and international peacekeeping activities is growing stronger. It is the third biggest country in terms of financial contribution to the UN. It is the country which has stationed the most troops in Afghanistan and the Balkan region. Furthermore Germany's unequivocal stand in opposing the war in Iraq won it high commendation of the international opinion” (URL: Four barriers on Japan's way to “permanent seat”).

6. The third external barrier is the complicated procedure in making changes to the UN structure. Among the two packages that Cofi Annan produced for the 2005 summit ("In Larger Freedom"), Plan A calls for creating six new permanent members (but no veto power), plus three new nonpermanent members for a total of 24 seats in the council, while Plan B calls for creating eight new seats in a new class of members, who would serve for four years, subject to renewal, plus one nonpermanent seat, also for a total of 24. Even though member nations of the UN agree upon a reform of the UNSC, there is no consensus for what plan to support. Even within own countries, opinions vary. Still, if Japan was to be considered a serious applicant for another UNSC permanency, reforming the Council is extremely complicated: “According to the UN Charter it must pass the vote of two third of the UN members and the vote of any nine countries in the Security Council before it can enter official amendment procedure. After that it must pass a vote on the amendment content by two third of the attending countries and domestic approval by two third of the member countries. It takes a long time to complete all these complicated procedures” (ibid: URL). Japan, in the mean time, grows impatient.

But bear in mind this. Can’t Japan actually make a bigger difference towards world peace outside of the UNSC and inside its own recent international strategies? “The four areas of policies, the SDF’s overseas missions, disarmament-related efforts and expertise, human security-focus and the dynamic use of ODA [official development assistance] for peace consolidation, can be combined in a variety of creative ways. While its long aspiration of becoming a permanent member of the UNSC has met an unfortunate deadlock, Japan can make a difference” (Hoshino 2007:229).
Other questions:

In recent times, the application for a Japanese permanent seat on the UNSC is halted. During the last years, Japan has even advocated that they would want a seat even if they did not get the power of veto, or they would (with the other G4 states) sustain from that right at least for 15 years (Von Freiesleben 2008:6). If, then, they would acquire a permanent seat on the UNSC, what real power do they have without the right to veto?

Answer? “the benefits of being permanent members, such as their right to sit on the various boards of the UN system and appoint nationals to senior Secretariat positions, while at the same time questioning whether this “asphyxiating grasp” on the Organization should be extended to new permanent members” (Von Freiesleben 2008:3).

Sources


Background Material


Possible Other Unlisted Sources

Speech held by the Japanese ambassador in Norway, at the University of Oslo. March 13th, 2008.
