

# Japanese Foreign Policy toward the Middle East 1973 to 1990: the Non-Commitment Policy

**Raquel Shaoul**

*[This is the third in a series of articles on Japanese policy toward the Middle East that debates the appropriate framework for unraveling issues of Japan-oil- and the United States in Middle East perspective. See earlier contributions by [Raquel Shaoul](#) and [John de Boer](#).]*

Dr. John de Boer in his article, "Gauging Japan's Role in the Middle East" (Japan Focus Sep. 6, 2005) portrays Japanese involvement in the Middle East, as characterized by a "multi-dimensional presence". In his article De Boer claims that "at various points in time, Japan has had a relatively high political profile in the region and its people/institutions have demonstrated an active commitment to a variety of important causes in the Middle East", illustrated by examples dated from 1904-5 to the present. He concludes, "Gauging Japan's overall involvement in the region makes clear that Japan and the Japanese did not simply become active in the Middle East with the Madrid Peace Process of 1991. Japan has contributed to the "peace process" on a variety of levels since the 1950s and its presence continues to be felt throughout the Middle East". A major difficulty emerges from this thesis: its failure to differentiate between Japan's political involvement and her political commitment in the Middle East over the years.

We claim that although Japan's political involvement has been increasing since the first oil shock in the early 1970s, and there has been incremental movement towards greater economic involvement in the region during the years following the oil crises, Japan's political commitment remained low till the early 1990s.

That is Japan's Middle Eastern policy remained at the margin of Middle East politics and did not significantly influence or impact regional events and political processes.

Japan's victory over Russia (1904-05) and Japan's modernization and post-war reconstruction experiences, in some ways, may have inspired several Middle Eastern nations to learn from and even to adopt Japan's model for development as an alternative to that of the West. Nevertheless, despite Japan's inspiring image, it was far from taking any concrete and actual policy measures vis-à-vis the region at that time. In Turner and Bedore's words, "Japan has had no historic ties with the Middle East region." [1] David Lang stated that the "pre-1973 Japan-Middle East relationship was a low-profile one because of geographic remoteness and the absence of significant ties." [2] While Shimizu Hiroshi argues that "there were significant commercial relations between Japan and the Middle East in the pre-oil period," [3] he states also that "such relations were not greatly strengthened by the Japanese government and business in the post-war period until the first oil crisis." [4] Frank Shulman joins Shimizu, arguing that "Japanese involvement in the Middle East was much more deep-rooted and long standing than most foreign observers realized," [5] but this involvement is characterized mostly if not exclusively by Japan's commercial ties with the nations in the region. Shulman adds, "By October 1973, Japan had still not developed any significant political interest in the middle East." [6]

Certainly, the first oil shock of 1973 caused a

change in Japanese perceptions of the region. Japan became much more aware of the Middle East's political weight in the international arena, including the economic implications for Japan's own welfare. Nevertheless, till the early 1990s, Japan perceived the Middle East region in a one-dimensional, functional and economically-oriented way. Japan's adoption of an apolitical attitude toward the Middle East, that is, staying out of the various complex regional political conflicts, was the preferred means to enhance her economic interests in the region. The oil-producing countries viewed Japan as a source of information, technology and money. She was considered an economic superpower, with the ability to contribute to the region's economic development, but one lacking any political aspirations in the Middle East. As Adeed Dawisha pointed out, "Japan will always be viewed in the Middle East as a platonic friend...the Japanese are not disliked, they are viewed neutrally, as a party in a business transaction." [7]

Analysis and evaluation of Japan's evolving Middle East policy in terms of political involvement and commitment should be conducted therefore on the basis of two major and distinguishable, periods: 1973-90, and 1991 to the present. The examples below demonstrate Japan's lack of political commitment in the region in the first period of 1973-1990.

### **Japan's Middle Eastern foreign policy 1973-1990: A policy of political Non-Commitment**

Ever since Japan began to establish diplomatic relations with the various Middle Eastern nations—Egypt and Israel in 1952, Saudi Arabia in 1954, Iraq in 1955, Iran in 1956, Kuwait in 1961 and the remaining Gulf states such as Bahrain, Oman, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates at the beginning of the 1970s—it has had some sort of diplomatic involvement in the region.

However, the first oil shock of 1973 can be seen as a watershed in Japan's perception of the Middle East. Hence, from the late 1970s, the Japanese presence in the Middle East became more tangible, in the form of official visits by prominent political figures and the signing of economic and technical cooperation treaties. Nevertheless, instead of strengthening bilateral relations, Japan's primary economic commitments appeared to cause tension and misunderstandings between the parties because of her reluctance to fulfill commitments. This was due mainly to Japanese discomfort over instability in the region, anxiety about managing big new projects without much previous regional experience, and a refusal to bow to Arab pressure to increase imports from the region and purchase other commodities in addition to oil. For example, Japan's pledging of credits to Iraq and aid to Egypt in 1974, and the dispatching of Japanese technicians to Saudi Arabia in 1975, appeared to be short-term policies.

By March 1976 the Foreign Ministry announced the ending of free technological aid to Middle East oil producers: "Once the oil crisis had subsided, it was discovered that many of the initial commitments [by Japan to the oil-producers] had not been fulfilled. Poorly coordinated to begin with, many of them were found by the Finance Ministry to be unjustifiable financially." [8]

Japan's decaying economic relationship with the Middle East during the late 1970s and the 1980s is considered to be chiefly the result of an almost total lack of direct investment in the region, a product above all of its perceived political and strategic instability. Furthermore, trade relationships with the oil-producing countries which flourished in the early 1970s stagnated thereafter, especially from the early 1980s, when declining oil prices sharply reduced the value of Japan's imports from the region.

On November 22, 1973 the first public and

formal Japanese adoption of a pro-Arab and pro-Palestinian stance was published; the 'Nikaido Statement' [9] formulated by chief cabinet secretary Nikaido. The 'Nikaido Statement' was meant to placate AOPEC's policy against Japan and put an end to the non-friendly nation label given to Japan during the first oil crisis. However, the 'Nikaido Statement' was not translated into any practical action. It remained at the level of rhetoric, and its commitment to "reconsider Japan's policy towards Israel" was not realized.

Until the late 1970s, no Japanese Prime minister had visited the Middle East. It was only in September 1978, after Foreign Minister Sunoda Sunao had visited Iran, Kuwait, the UAE and Saudi Arabia in January of that year, that a Japanese Prime Minister first visited the Middle East.

Although Prime Minister Fukuda Takeo's visit marked an additional step in upgrading Japanese-Middle East relations, it nevertheless upheld several aspects of Japan's previous policy in the region. Fukuda asserted that Japan would not take a direct role in the Middle East peace process. [10] This reluctance to play a central role in the peace process continued until the early 1990s, and was due to Japan's fears of alienating countries which disapproved of the peace process, as well as Japan's perception that it could play only a secondary role in the region.

Since the early 1980s there has been new activism in Japanese policy towards the Middle East. [11] However, this has created almost no substantial political commitments that might lead to cooperation over local and regional issues, especially in cases perceived as having potential to jeopardize Japan's economic interests in the region. Two central examples in this regard can be found: Japan's diplomatic attempts to contribute to a settlement in the Iran-Iraq War (1980-88)[12] and Japan's policy vis-à-vis the Palestinian cause and the PLO.

## **The Iran-Iraq War 1980-88: Japan as Mediator?**

During the Iran-Iraq war Japan "demonstrated a willingness to act in some U.N. supported initiatives—for example, to monitor limitations on bombing civilian targets, as proposed in June 1984. Speeches in the U.N. and willingness to suggest measures testify to a newfound concern of Japan, and a confidence in its own diplomacy to contribute to regional stability." [13] Nevertheless, Japan's policy during the war mainly involved verbal commitment, and in practice her low political profile continued throughout the war.

Japan's potential contribution as a mediator to end the war was not realized. The Japanese government did not take on this task, preferring to fulfill the marginal role of delivering messages to the parties involved. As Bernard Reich has pointed out: "Japan's conduct demonstrates its overriding concern with economic self-interest and reluctance to abandon its policy of neutrality in the Iran-Iraq war...Japan has not been willing to assume a greater role than of 'communicator' between the two warring nations." [14]

The Japanese government's statement of September 10, 1984, confirms this article's affirmation that, "Japan's role in the Iran-Iraq conflict has not been of mediation or arbitration, as the media have sometimes speculated. It is Japan's consistent policy not to mediate the conflict, and the Japanese Government has made this basic stance clear on many occasions. Rather, Japan has pursued a policy of helping create a climate conducive to peace and of preventing escalation of the conflict. Within this basic framework, the Japanese Government has taken a balanced approach to both Iran and Iraq with the greatest possible care. It is not only Japan's sincere desire for peace but also its neutrality that has enabled Japan to maintain its credibility with the two countries." [15]

Even Foreign Minister Abe Shintaro, who took a more activist approach than his predecessor, rejected the possibility of Japan becoming a mediator in the war. Indeed, Abe made it clear in a meeting with Iranian officers in Japan in August 1983 that 'the Japanese government had no intention of mediating between Iran and Iraq.' [16] Prime Minister Nakasone Yasuhiro confirmed Abe's position at a session of the House of Counselors on February 9, 1984, when he stated that: 'Japan has no qualifications to mediate [the war], though we will try to stop the war from expanding and to create a climate of peace.' [17]

Japan was reluctant to assume a key role in the conflict for several reasons: First, Japan lacked any real interest in bringing an end to the conflict. Although disunity among the oil producing countries was seen as a potential source of instability, which could endanger the oil supply to Japan, this disunity contributed to oil price reduction and stagnation during eight years of war. This served Japanese interests, as well as those of other oil-consuming countries—especially given the fact that Saudi Arabia increased oil production during the war, thereby precluding any shortage. The behavior of the superpowers during the war supports this assertion, as has been observed: "both the US and the Soviet Union have maintained a position of neutrality and non-intervention in the conflict, with their respective considerations for Iran and Iraq." [18]

The reduction in oil prices, due to the war, benefited Japan. Her oil purchases from Iran had already been reduced by almost 50 percent in 1979 due to the Revolution. During the Iran-Iraq War, excluding the year 1980, her oil purchases from Iran remained more or less stable, between approximately 6 and 10 percent of her total supply. As for Japan's imports of Iraqi oil, although there was a drastic reduction between 1981 and 1984, given Iraq's low share of total Middle East oil supply to Japan, no severe impact was felt.

The only issue that might have motivated Japan to directly contribute to ending the war was the need to protect her navigation lanes through the Straits of Hormuz, since 73 percent of imported oil was transported through the Straits. During the eight years of war, Iran's government claimed that if its oil exports were substantially reduced, it would seek to prevent any other country from exporting oil via the Persian Gulf by closing the Straits of Hormuz. This posed a serious problem for Japan, as it was not only Iranian oil that came through the Straits, but also the far more important supplies from Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar and the UAE.

Nevertheless, the Japanese response to the Iranian threats over Hormuz, by MITI's Minister Uno Sosuke, in November 1983, was to re-emphasize Japan's disengagement: "If the Straits were closed, Japan could make up any oil shortfall from other sources." [19] Moreover, the relatively healthy state of Japan's oil reserves made it possible for her to respond more calmly, in contrast to previous eras. And while some Japanese objections to Iran's threats regarding Hormuz can be found on record, her relative passivity regarding the possible blockade of the Straits was noted by the U.S., which demanded that Japan "step up its efforts to moderate the war." [20]

In short, Japan limited herself to political declarations on the Iran-Iraq War. One example is the statement made at the 39th session of the U.N. General Assembly in New York in September 1984, by Foreign Minister Abe, who declared that "prohibiting the use of chemical weapons and guaranteeing the safety of navigation in the Persian Gulf are essential for preventing an escalation of the Iran-Iraq conflict." [21] There was also Abe's foreign policy speech to the 104th Session of the National Diet on January 27, 1986, where he stated that: "Staying in consultation with the U.N. and the countries concerned, Japan will continue to work tenaciously with Iran and Iraq

to create a climate conducive to a prompt and peaceful settlement of their conflict." [22]

Second, Japan was also reluctant to assume a key role in the conflict due to the assumption that it could not achieve political results as a mediator. Being friendly with both sides was an obstacle to Japanese political mediation. Japan's long-term oil dependence did not permit her to gamble on a winner in the war. In this context, Japan was ready to pay a price, giving up the safety of navigation in the Persian Gulf in general and in the Straits of Hormuz in particular in the short term, rather than endanger her future oil supply. Japan's solution was to declare neutrality in the war.

Third, one essential condition for mediating in any conflict is that the parties involved recognize the mediator's ability to reach a settlement. Both Iran and Iraq rejected the idea of Japanese mediation, partly because of their awareness of Japan's lack of such capability and her unwillingness to pay a political price in order to achieve a comprehensive solution to the conflict. In several instances Iran refused to meet Japanese diplomats, and even impeded their entry into Iran because Japanese envoys had also traveled to Iraq. [23]

### Japan and the Palestinian Factor

Political statements and government documents contributed to an image of deep Japanese commitment to the Palestinian cause during the period under review. Statements by organizations such as the Japanese-Palestinian Friendship Organization called for members of parliament to join the organization, while promoting the PLO's importance in the region and the need to strengthen Japan's political links with the PLO.

Although declarative statements and political events—including Japan's invitations to Yasser Arafat in 1979, 1981 and 1989, and its invitation to PLO representative Abdul Hamid

in 1983, to meet with ambassadors from the Arab countries in Tokyo—contributed to the development of Palestinian-Japanese relations, Japanese political commitment to the PLO needs to be reassessed.

First, many of the political links between Japan and the PLO remained informal. This was due to Japanese reluctance to recognize the PLO formally without American approval. Prime Minister Miki, in a speech before the Diet on February 5, 1975, said that his government would be willing to consider a proposal from the PLO to establish a representative office in Tokyo. However, the Japanese government would not be able to recognize the PLO diplomatically as a state. [24] The Japanese government also recognized the PLO as "virtually the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinians," [25] while avoiding any clear commitment with further political implications. [26]

Only after extensive negotiations, in which Japan firmly resisted Palestinian pressure to extend formal diplomatic recognition, did the PLO office open in December, 1976.

The same holds true for the invitation to Arafat to visit Japan in 1980–81. This was extended by a group of Diet members headed by Kimura Toshio, a former foreign minister and the President of the Japan-Palestine Friendship League, rather than the government of Japan. The status of these invitations was the result of open as well as tacit American political pressure on Japan, and Japan sought to avoid American recrimination. Hence the PLO Chairman's visit to Japan in October 12, 1981 did not lead to formal recognition of the PLO, although Arafat did meet Prime Minister Suzuki Zenko and Foreign Minister Sunoda Sunao privately. Moreover, political pressure to establish formal diplomatic relations between the two came from the Palestinian side, which saw Japan as an effective bridge between the PLO and the U.S. Japanese Foreign Minister

Uno Sosuke held his first official meeting with a PLO representative only in December 1988, "less than eight hours after the United States had announced its decision to open dialogue with the PLO." [27]

Second, despite the Japanese government's apparent preference for the Arab side in the Israeli-Arab conflict, Japan did not operate any kind of distinctive, material policy vis-à-vis the Palestinians, but rather fully identified with U.N. principles and guidelines—this was called Japan's 'U.N. first policy': "Japan has promoted its U.N. diplomacy positively as a major pillar of its basic diplomatic policy." [28] All this is in spite of, or precisely due to, Japanese awareness of U.N. policy limitations, as pointed out in the Diplomatic Blue Book of 1973: "The U.N. mechanism of forcefully dealing with disputes has never been utilized because of disagreement among the five permanent members of the Security Council." [29]

### **Motives for Japan's Policy of Non-commitment**

First, Japan was able to afford a non-commitment policy because she had no problems with energy supply prior to the early 1980s. Despite the fact that the country was extremely dependent on oil imports, oil supplies came largely from the international oil companies, or the 'Seven Majors' as they were commonly known. And despite Japan's pronounced dependence on Middle Eastern oil supplies from 1982 to the present, internal and international circumstances related to oil production and marketing deprived producers of the ability to take advantage of Japan's situation—the oil shocks of the 1970s were replaced by the 'Arab shocks' [30] of the mid-1980s, as a result of the collapse of oil prices. Thus, by means of effective management of her oil and energy limitations, Japan, to a large extent, succeeded in neutralizing the political liabilities of her dependence on Middle Eastern oil-producers.

Second, Japan's non-commitment policy has been decisively influenced by bilateral relations with the U.S. Japan's position between Arab political demands and American interests in the region, which in many cases were contradictory, contributed to the policy of non-commitment. Japan's need to maneuver between her bilateral interests with the U.S. (which were, and still are, regarded as more vital to Japan's well-being than any other international interest) and her Middle Eastern interests, resulted in the adoption of a low political profile in order to prevent negative results from whatever policy was supposed to be implemented.

However, Japan's stance vis-à-vis American Middle East policy, more than anything else, has reflected her pragmatic attitude towards the region. Japan has opted to follow the American political line in the region in a selective manner, when it has served her own interests.

Moreover, no other major power gained as much in both economic and strategic terms as Japan from the political role played by the U.S. in the Middle East. As long as Middle East stability was mainly maintained and guaranteed by the U.S., Japan could afford to keep her low political profile while enhancing economic links with the oil-producing countries. This was true even in cases when the enhancement of Japanese economic interests contradicted U.S. policies in the region, as in Japan's continued political-economic relationship with Iran after the Revolution, known subsequently as 'critical dialogue'. Thus, overall, the U.S. presence in the Middle East has generally allowed Japan to achieve her economic goals in the region. The most outstanding example in this regard was the U.S. liberation of Kuwait in 1991, which restored the strategic, military and political status quo in the region.

Third, Japan's non-commitment policy seems also to have been influenced by her cultural

remoteness from the region. Japan's low political profile in the Middle East was in part the result of a failure to bridge cultural gaps existing between these nations.

We conclude that during 1973-90, Japan's declaratory policies vis-à-vis the Middle East rarely kept pace with actual policy implementation and that the Japan's policy during the period under review can best be summarized as a low political profile, namely a policy of non-commitment.

## Notes

[1] R.L. Turner and J.M. Bedore, *Middle East Industrialisation: A study of Saudi and Iranian Downstream Investments*, London, Royal Institute of International Affairs, 1979, p. 146.

[2] D.C.K. Lang, "Japan's Middle East Diplomacy", *Asian Profile*, 1985, Vol. 13, no. 4, p. 307.

[3] Hiroshi Shimizu, "The Japanese trade contact with the Middle East: Lessons from the pre-oil period", in Kaoru Sugihara and J.A. Allan (eds) *Japan in the Contemporary Middle East* (London and New York: SOAS Center of Near and Middle Eastern Studies) 1993, p. 27.

[4] Hiroshi Shimizu, *ibid*, p. 27.

[5] Frank Joseph Shulman, "Japanese-Middle Eastern Economic Relations Before the First Oil Shock", in Ronald A. Morse (ed.) *Japan and the Middle East in Alliance Politics* (Washington DC: The Wilson Center) 1986, p. 33.

[6] Frank Joseph Shulman, *ibid*, p. 39.

[7] Adeed Dawisha, "Middle Eastern Images of Japan: Admiration for an Inconsequential Giant", in Ronald A. Morse (ed.) *Japan and the Middle East in Alliance Politics*, p. 32.

[8] Roy Licklider, "Japan: the Perfect Target", *Targets of the Oil Weapon*, p. 39.

[9] The 'Nikaido Statement' claimed among other things that, "The Government of Japan will continue to observe the situation in the Middle East with grave concern and, depending on future developments, may have to reconsider its policy towards Israel...The

inadmissibility of occupying or taking territory by force, a plea to Israel to withdraw from all the territories occupied in the 1967 war, respect for the territorial integrity of all countries in the area, and recognition and respect for the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people". See, Sekiyu Renmei, Dai Yoji Chuto Senso to Sekiyu - Kensai Mondai ("The Fourth Middle East War and Oil Economics Problems") (Tokyo, February 1974) p. 87.

[10] Kyodo News Service, September 18, 1978, quoted by FBIS, September 19, 1978, p. c1.

[11] For example, in June 1979, Esaki Masumi, then MITI Minister, was sent to the Middle East in order to implement the 'Middle East Four-Point Plan' introduced by Prime Minister Ohira during the Tokyo economic summit of 1979. Ohira called for a four-point plan for the Middle East within Japan's Comprehensive National Security Policy, by which 'all nations [should work] towards implementation of UN Resolutions 242 and 338; respect for Palestinian rights to national self-determination and; all parties to pursue their own separate policies in order to assure movement towards a comprehensive peace agreement'.

[12] Among the major diplomatic initiatives undertaken by the Japanese government during the war was the dispatch of Deputy Foreign Minister and Vice Foreign Minister for Economic Affairs, Matsunaga, Nobou to Iran (October 1982). Parallel to Matsunaga's visit, MITI Vice Minister for International Affairs, Kunio Komatsu, went to Iraq. These visits were followed by an official visit by Foreign Minister Abe Shintaro to Iran, Turkey and Iraq during August 1983. Thereafter, Deputy Foreign Minister Nakajima was sent to Iran in January 1984. In the same year, Iran and Iraq's foreign ministers visited Japan in order to discuss the war.

[13] Shahram Chubin, "The Middle East Factor in Alliance Politics", in Ronald A. Morse (ed.) *Japan and the Middle East in Alliance Politics*, op. cit., pp. 22-23.

[14] Bernard Reich and Cheryl Cutler, "Japan"

in Bernard Reich Ed. *The Powers in the Middle East: The Ultimate Strategic Arena* (New York: Praeger, 1987) pp. 301-302.

[15] Japan, The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *The Information Bulletin*, September 10, 1984, p. 102.

[16] Kyodo News Service, February 9, 1984, quoted by FBIS, February 10, 1984, p. c5.

[17] Ibid.

[18] Japan, The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *The Diplomatic Blue Book 1981*, Tokyo, p. 12.

[19] Kyodo News Service, November 18, 1983; quoted by FBIS, November 18, 1983, p. c1.

[20] Kyodo News Service, May 18, 1984; quoted by FBIS, May 18, 1984, p. c1.

[21] Japan, The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *The Information Bulletin*, October 18, 1984, p. 131

[22] Japan, The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *The Diplomatic Blue Book 1986*, Tokyo, p. 137.

[23] See for example, Chiba Kazuo, "Japan and the Middle East in the 1970s and Early 1980s: A Japanese Diplomat's View" in Kaoru Sugihara and J.A. Allan (eds) *Japan in the Contemporary Middle East*, op.cit. pp. 144-154.

[24] Kyodo News Service, February 5, 1975, quoted by FBIS, February 5, 1975, p. c2.

[25] Kyodo News Service, February 7, 1975,

quoted by FBIS, February 7, 1975, p. c1.

[26] The Japanese attitude is even more surprising due to the fact that the UN Resolution 242 had massive international and Security Council support.

[27] Dowty Alan, "Japan and the Middle East: Signs of Change?" *MERIA Journal* 4 no. 4 (December 2000).

[http://www.ciaonet.org/olj/meria/meria00\\_doa01.html](http://www.ciaonet.org/olj/meria/meria00_doa01.html)

[28] Japan, The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *The Diplomatic Blue Book 1973*, Tokyo, p. 38.

[29] Ibid.

[30] This term was pointed out by Eliyahu Kanovsky, *Another Oil Shock in the 1990's? A Dissenting View*, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Policy Paper no. 6, Washington DC, 1987; *OPEC Ascendant? Another Case of Crying Wolf*, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Policy Paper no. 20, Washington DC, 1990.

*Raquel Shaoul, a Lecturer in East Asian Studies at Tel-Aviv University, is a specialist on Japanese-Middle East relations. She wrote this article for Japan Focus. Posted September 21, 2005.*