

The Statesman

The first completely customisable news site on the web

129 years in print

(THE STATESMAN is a major English-language daily newspaper in India)

Kolkata, May 16, 2005

Editorial

ASIAN POWER Country Representing 'Global South' Should Get Permanent UN Seat

By KLAUS SCHLICHTMANN

The disagreements between Japan on one side and China and Korea on the other, which made headlines last month, concerning some island territories and historical issues could be an opportunity for Japan to rethink its position with respect to obtaining a permanent seat on the UN Security Council. Although Japan may well deserve such a position, and the Korean and Chinese claims and accusations are overstated, it would be a good tactical move on the part of Japan to reconsider.

Crumbling power

As far as history is concerned, both China and Korea were backward, repressive oligarchies at the end of the 19th century, who kicked out their own reformist elite to preserve their crumbling power. Names like So Chaep'il and Kang Youwei are still remembered. Kang Youwei finished writing his famous "One-World" book in Darjeeling in 1902, stressing the need for the world to unite politically. So Chaep'il fled to the United States in 1898. Many Koreans and Chinese who were forced to flee or preferred to leave their country were welcomed in Japan, where they conspired against their repressive governments. As some historians put it: The Chinese Revolution of 1911 "was largely made in Japan" (by the expatriates).

Concerning the events that followed at the beginning of the 20th century, the Germans in 1914 unleashed a "thirty years war struggle" (as many historians now call it), which had dire consequences all over the world. As a German, I am still waiting for my country to apologise for starting the first "total war" in world history in 1914. This war had a great impact on developments in Asia.

No one can deny that Japan was a positive force in the interwar period as a Council member in the League of Nations. At the same time, foreign minister Shidehara Kijuro's conciliatory policy toward China was not sufficiently reciprocated by the Chinese at the time — much to the regret of Shidehara who was unsuccessful in restraining the military, and whose civilian government was ousted in 1931.

Power politics

Now, when it comes to reforming the UN and especially the Security Council, Japan should take an attitude based on law and justice rather than power politics. The aim of Security Council reform is to transform the world executive from the present institution based almost exclusively on power, to one based on law. As John Foster Dulles wrote in his memoirs War or Peace (1950), "The Security Council is ... a law unto itself ... it can decide in accordance with what it thinks is expedient". Adding a few more powerful countries would not make it more democratic or effective. In fact, theoretically, even without the UN, the five permanent members and any "coalition of the willing" could act in the name of maintaining peace and security, but this is not what the founders of the UN had in mind. To achieve the purpose, the UN Charter envisages that Parliaments must delegate powers concerning defence and security, and give the Security Council a proper legal framework and authority.

With respect to making the Security Council more representative, it would for the time being suffice to give a permanent seat to a prominent country representing the "Global South", which is not represented at all so far. This country could be India. Given the task India might also be able and willing to initiate nuclear and general and complete disarmament under effective international control. While the NPT review conference is taking place in New York, and taking advantage of the new Bandung spirit, this may be an idea to consider seriously.

UN reforms

If Japan and China were to support India and if they could ensure India's commitment to nuclear disarmament — granting that the other nuclear powers go along — comprehensive UN reforms could be scheduled for a second stage in the reform process, say five years from now, when the resolution of some of those issues vital for preserving world peace, like disarmament and the pacific settlement of disputes, have been brought well under way. Such a selfless attitude from Japan would reap high dividends. The big "if" to also take into account is the possibility that a consensus on the proposals put forward in December last year by the High-level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change may not be forthcoming by September, the deadline set by UN Secretary General Kofi Annan.

Since China seems to somewhat favour India, this may also be a way to find common ground for Japan and its great neighbour. Eventually Japan would be given a prominent and permanent position in the World Council, not least because it has upheld the war-renouncing Article 9 of its 1947 Constitution for so long. At the same time, India might also consider "seconding" Article 9, the nearly 60-year old "motion" on the part of the Japanese to abolish the institution of war.

The author is a researcher and a peace activist in Japan