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The Vitality of Japan

Sources of National Strength and Weakness

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Acknowledgements

This volume is part of a long-term project which included a conference organised by the Luxembourg Institute for European and International Studies in Tokyo on 26-27 March 1992. The subject of this project, which is both multidisciplinary and multinational in scope, is 'the vitality of nations'. A wide-ranging array of scholars gathered for the conference in Tokyo, including specialists from Japan, other Asian countries, the United States, and Western Europe.

The conference was made possible by the financial assistance of the Luxembourg government, as well as the support of Luxembourg's Prime Minister at that time, Jacques Santer. In addition, the event would not have been a success without the partnership of the Japan Institute of International Affairs (JIIA), and in particular the efforts of its director, Itaru Umezu, as well as those of Haruhisa Takeuchi, director for research coordination, and Toshihiko Naito and Maki Arai, research assistants who proved to be invaluable in organising the logistical aspects of the conference.

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Unfortunately, a number of technical constraints have delayed the publication of this book. Nevertheless, I am confident that the contributions retain their original interest. Although Japanese society has undergone tremendous changes in recent years, the papers in the pages that follow will contribute to providing the reader with a deeper understanding of those aspects that have shaped, and continue to shape, the vitality of that nation.

A. Clesse

Introduction

This volume grew out of a conference held in Tokyo in 1992, generously sponsored by the Luxembourg Institute for European and International Studies in association with the Japan Institute of International Affairs (JIIA). All of the chapters included in this volume were written before the Liberal Democratic Party lost its 38-year hold on power in the summer of 1993. As a result, this book is not the place to look for updates on the current Japanese political and economic system. Rather, it is the place to find interesting forms of analysis on Japan just as it was embarking on potentially the most important changes in its political system since 1955, when the Liberal Democratic Party was created through a merger of Japan's two dominant conservative parties of that era.

Like the 1950s, the 1990s will be remembered as an era in which Japan once again had to redefine its party lines, but in a much more difficult domestic and international environment than it faced in the 1950s. With the old Cold War verities no longer in place, new challenges arose for the Japanese government and Japanese corporations. The challenges of the 1990s include a protracted domestic economic downturn, and the need to begin redefining Japan's international profile in the face of an increasingly powerful China, an ever more desperate North Korea, and shifts in the shared responsibilities built into the US-Japan security treaty.

There is no question that the political and economic changes which are occurring in Japan in the 1990s are immense. And many of these changes have become more striking since the chapters which appear in this book were first written. Normally, when such huge changes occur, the editors would demand a series of updates from the contributors. However, we decided against this for two reasons.

First, repeated revisions would have allowed the contributors to alter their original views and analyses of Japan, rather than face up to the test of subsequent historical evidence. Social scientists tend to become uncomfortable when they do not engage in *post-hoc* updating to maintain a reputation for accurate analysis. As a result, rewrites become an important device for the hedging of rhetorical bets by allowing authors to soften strongly held positions or alter previous predictions. Resort to this device may seem no more than reasonable, especially when the publication schedule allows it and when a nation is undergoing changes as varied as

Japan has been experiencing in the 1990s. But this was not done in the case of this book. Chapters written before momentous events occurred in Japan have largely been retained in their original form, leaving it to the reader to evaluate the subsequent accuracy and relevance of each writer's position.

Second, this volume demonstrates that what were deemed controversial views about Japan a few short years ago are today's commonly accepted facts. No one any longer doubts the policy and leadership weaknesses inherent in Japan's system of political parties. The power of the central state bureaucracy, especially the Ministry of Finance, is now so obvious to even occasional students of Japan that it is simply no longer seriously debated, except by a few intellectually isolated academics more committed to theory than reality. To call the Japanese bureaucracy powerful, however, is not to suggest it is efficient or even particularly good at what it does, or is supposed to do. This was tragically demonstrated in the aftermath of the Kobe earthquake of January 1995 when the central government's response was, on its own admission, both slow and inadequate. The emergence of a more independent Japanese foreign policy is also no longer in question. These topics, which were regarded as highly controversial in 1992, are now the normal repertory of Japan's own opinion leaders when discussing their nation's likely future course.

Also unusually for a conference volume, we have included a transcript of the proceedings. There were frank and confrontational exchanges. At other times discussion was not as free-wheeling or as incisive as it could or should have been. This is also part of the record and has not been excised or papered over.

Much of what appears in this book holds up relatively well to the passage of time. Yet, as we head into the last third of this decade, it is impossible for any serious student of Japan to feel satisfied with how we study and perceive this great nation. Both scholars and governments, intellectuals and policymakers, are aware that fundamental changes are underway in Japan - as they are everywhere at the close of the millennium - even if the true nature and extent of these changes remain opaque to the keenest observers.

It is true that records of the past, such as those contained in this book, are imperfect tools for building a better understanding of the future. But it is also true that, in the study of human affairs, there are few tools that have proven more consistently useful. It is as such an imperfect yet serviceable tool that we bring this volume to publication.