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Guardians of the international order

Japan has been criticised for its cautious response to the war in the Middle East. But Tokyo is simply trying to preserve the rules-based world order

The final statement from the G7 foreign ministers in Tokyo included their first official declaration regarding the war in Gaza. In it, they strongly condemned the terror attacks by Hamas on 7 October, reiterated Israel's right to defend itself, including its stated goal of preventing future attacks, and demanded the immediate and unconditional release of the hostages. The statement generally reflects the positions of Germany, France, the United Kingdom, Italy and the United States, but is very different from the initial reactions by their host Japan, which holds the G7 Presidency for this year. On the day of the attack, the foreign ministry press spokesperson did not mention 'terror' or stress Israel's right to self-defence. Nor did Foreign Minister Yōko Kamikawa the day after. Instead, 'all the parties concerned' were called upon to exercise 'maximum restraint'.

The international press explained these cautious official statements with a simple formula: oil and America. That is, Japan is attempting to take as neutral a position as possible in order to balance two conflicting interests. On one hand, Japan is economically dependent on Middle East oil imports, so it seeks to maintain good relations with the Arab world. Japan is thus one of the biggest sponsors of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA). The country's dependency on oil has been further exacerbated by the yen's drastic devaluation since February 2022. On the other hand, Japan also relies on the United States, Israel's most important backer, for its security.

Outdated assumptions about Japan's Middle East policy

Were one to believe this interpretation, only pressure from Washington can explain Japan's support for the joint statement of 8 November. And, perhaps, the Japanese and Americans *did* discuss the terror attack of 7

October. But Japan's foreign policy cannot be reduced to oil and its alliance with the US alone. That interpretation is based on outdated assumptions about Japan's Middle East policy that ignore other important elements.

Since Benjamin Netanyahu visited Japan in 2014 and Shinzo Abe went to Israel the following year, Japanese-Israeli relations have deepened significantly. Japanese businesses have begun to invest heavily to benefit from Israel's innovative capacity. In the first half of 2023, Japanese investments represented 17 per cent of the country's total volume. At the national level, principally their security and military cooperation was strengthened, leading to a memorandum on defence cooperation in September 2022. The formula 'oil and America' is also not justified by the political changes in the Middle East, especially those related to the Abraham Accords. This was clear in the very explicit wording in the first statement by the United Arab Emirates on 8 October.

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In addition, the kidnapping of civilians, including children, was a shocking reminder to the Japanese of North Korea's abduction of its citizens in the 1970s and 1980s: exactly how many has not yet been established. Japan's foreign ministry actively seeks to help return other countries' hostages. Foreign Minister Kamikawa mentioned the kidnappings by Hamas in her first statement on 8 October, as did Prime Minister Fumio Kishida on X (formerly Twitter). The G7 foreign ministers' statement of 8 November demanded that Hamas release the hostages *and* North Korea resolve the 'abductions issue'.

It should also not be overlooked that attempting to be as neutral as possible is inconsistent with Japan's foreign policy strategy. As a middle-sized power surrounded by three potentially hostile neighbours, Japan views maintaining the international rules-based order as the cornerstone of its foreign policy. Japan fundamentally and strictly rejects unilateral changes to the status quo — as the country's foreign ministry clearly stated in 'Japan's Position on the Peace in the Middle East' of 2015. Hamas said its terrorist attack aimed to undermine normalisation between Israel and the Arab states and ultimately lead to Israel's destruction. That was an attack on the international order. Strict neutrality would thus contradict Japan's foreign policy principles.

In supporting the international order, Japan has also reaffirmed its

'unwavering' support for the two-state solution and increased its total humanitarian aid for Gaza to $ 75 million. Since the Israeli offensive began, Tokyo has consistently demanded that both sides respect international humanitarian law and humanitarian pauses in the fighting. It is therefore understandable that Japan, like Germany, abstained from voting on the resolution Jordan introduced to the UN General Assembly on 26 October. Although the resolution did not condemn the terror and called for a ceasefire without mentioning Israel's right to self-defence, it did demand compliance with international law and the 'immediate and unconditional release' of all hostages.

Bureaucratic inefficiency

It would thus be wrong to play up or misinterpret why Japan did not sign the 'Joint Statement on Israel' with Germany, the United Kingdom, France, Italy and the United States on 9 October. Japan could not back the phrase 'our countries will support Israel in its efforts to defend itself' because its law prohibits exporting weapons. Japan only sent unarmed drones and protective gear to Ukraine, too. In response to a question during the G7 foreign ministers' press conference on 24 October, Kamikawa replied that Japan did not support the previous day's six-country statement because it had been issued separately from the G7. That could well have been the case with respect to the first statement and because the second contains no statements that Japan had not already shared, her answer is credible. In a meeting with the Israeli ambassador on 11 October, Deputy Foreign Minister Masataka Okano had 'unequivocally' condemned the 'terror attacks' by Hamas, 'expressed solidarity with the Israeli people' and said that it is 'obvious' that Israel has a right to defend itself in accordance with international law. The following day, Kamikawa confirmed that as the Japanese government's position. In the next weeks, that wording became an integral part of Japanese statements, including, for example, in a telephone conversation with the foreign minister of the Palestinian Authority.

In the UN Security Council, Japan voted *against* Russia's draft resolution of 16 October that did not condemn Hamas and *for* those of Brazil and the US on 18 and 25 October. Like Germany, Japan voted on 26 October for Canada's proposed amendment to the Jordanian resolution that condemned Hamas's terrorism, but that did not pass.

Japan's first diplomatic reactions must also be interpreted in light of a certain bureaucratic

Undue attention to Japan's first statements also comes from not understanding how its bureaucracy works. The foreign ministry is part of the Japanese bureaucracy, which is known to be cumbersome and cautious regarding change.

inefficiency.

Japanese politicians have difficulty prevailing over bureaucratic inertia because they are often only in office for a short time. Kamikawa became foreign minister on 13 September 2023, and soon after set off for New York and her inaugural visit to the United Nations. From 8 to 13 October, she visited Southeast Asia for the first time, which must have made it more difficult to coordinate with her own ministry and the prime minister. This could be why her first statements sound so much like earlier ones: the 7 October press statement is very similar to one from 2019. But by 11 and 12 October, Japan's statements were in line with the other G7 countries.

It should be noted that in this crisis, Japan has again demonstrated that it shares the same values and that its main concern is maintaining the rules-based international order. Japan's first diplomatic reactions must also be interpreted in light of a certain bureaucratic inefficiency.



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