

WEBINAR SUMMARY:

Japan's response to the Israel-Palestine conflict

With Professor Hitoshi Tanaka & Professor Sir Lawrence Freedman

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Professor Hitoshi Tanaka:

I don't claim to be a great expert on the subject of the Middle East, but I would like to talk about general perspectives on the situation: how this Israel-Palestine situation affects Japan and affects the region of East Asia as a whole. Let me start with Japan's response with regard to both the fears of the terrorist action of Hamas in Israel, and Israel's very aggressive entry into Gaza. While Japan does not have a duty in the Middle East, as we are not involved in the war, there are three basic considerations.

The first consideration is that Japan is an ally of the United States. As you know, Japan is heavily dependent on American security. Therefore, we have to be very careful about the political sensitivities of the United States in relation to Israel, particularly as we are approaching the presidential election next year. I spent six years altogether in Washington, and observed how strong the Jewish influence is, as well as Evangelical Christian influences. Therefore, the US administration is not free of duty and has to consider very carefully about how strongly they will support Israel. Our second consideration is the fact that Japan is also very heavily dependent on oil from the Middle East. More than 90% of our total oil requirement comes from the Middle East. Therefore, we should like to maintain a good relationship with Arab nations as well as Iran. The third consideration, obviously, is that we would like to avoid this type of humanitarian crisis. I do think that Israel has violated many humanitarian regulations, and we would like to have it stopped as soon as possible. Those are the three basic considerations we have. Japan's attitude is not clear, as there are many conflicting ideas and interests.

Now, let me talk about the implications of the Israel-Hamas conflict for the region and also for the world as a whole. We all are worried about the possibilities as a result of the conflict - the possibility of the expansion of the war. We already see action from armed organisations, like Hezbollah for example, taking advantage of the situation, and trying to expand the war. They try to target the United States as well. However, I don't think Iran has interest in joining in direct combat with Israel. I think we expected that for the meantime, after the American withdrawal from the Middle East, after this Arab peace initiative and the Abraham agreement, that there would be some kind of peace in the Middle East, a peace between Israel and Saudi Arabia, Saudi Arabia and Iran etc. I think, to be very honest, that Hamas was successful in bringing back the situation to the original, quite conflicting, unstable situation in the Middle East. It's a pity. But yet, it can't be helped.

We were, in a sense, more worried about the division which may come about in the international community as a whole. We all know that Russia has interests in siding with Palestine, while China has got certain agendas in the Middle East. If things become more uncontrollable, we may see some type of division between China, Russia, Iran, the United States, Europe and Japan. This is very likely if things are not settled in Ukraine, or in the US-China confrontation. My worries are somewhat soothed knowing that the San Francisco US-China summit managed to reach a certain agreement. This agreement means they will maintain dialogue amongst themselves and not make confrontation into collision, two very clear agreements. Even so, depending on the situation in the Middle East and the situation in Ukraine, there may be a chance that we see quite a divide. This divide may be called the Second Cold War. We all need to avoid it because I think we stand to lose a lot by this type of division. Nations like Japan and the UK are particularly interested in maintaining globalisation and also avoiding severe division.

Finally, one of my strongest concerns, in regards to the Israel-Hamas conflict, as well as the Ukraine situation, is that America has lost its authority as a world leader, as they are more concerned with domestic interests. And again, this coming year is a presidential year, and if Trump is re-elected as the President of the United States, this 'America First' propaganda will mean that America will become more domestically-oriented than ever. This is clearly a sign of America losing its authority as a world leader. This is not good news for countries like Japan. I would hope that the United States would be able to stop the current conflict in the Middle East so that America can act as a leader of the world. I think two countries, Japan and the UK, have special interest in preserving the United States as a leader of the international community.

However, we don't want a kind of unilateral American authority. Everything in the future would be more of the partnership type, with more collective responsibility and deterrence. The United States is quite dependent on Japan as a comprehensive and collective deterrence against the Chinese, North Koreans and Russia in East Asia. Japan is raising its defence budget. It's amazing that Japan has changed its stance regarding national security, as well as the UK, which has recently joined the CPTPP. I think it's time for us, Japan and the UK, to strengthen our partnership so that we can make straightforward recommendations to the United States. We need the United States to be a responsible world leader.

Professor Sir Lawrence Freedman:

Thank you, Professor Tanaka, for those remarks. I would like to pick up where you finished with the United States, and the importance of its leadership. I was interested to hear what you said about the potential joint role of the UK and Japan. It's quite an interesting feature of UK foreign policy over the last few years, this interest in forging these sorts of links with powers from your region, Japan, the South Korean leaders, and so on. I think it's very important. I think that it also represents a sense that it's artificial to separate the world into an Atlantic sphere and an Indo-Pacific sphere. They have lots of shared interests, of which the Middle East is one.

You raised the question of American authority, and obviously, it's very hard not to think a year ahead to whether or not we're faced with the prospect of a second Trump presidency. I mean, it's still an unbalanced question, quite speculative. But you could also argue that, in some ways, the Biden administration has not done a bad job. First, in holding together Western unity: they've done a good job of holding together the international community on Ukraine and sustaining quite a difficult 18 or 20 months now of that war. And in the Middle East, its rather prompt action probably helped deter Iran from getting more involved and encouraging Hezbollah to get more involved. I think you pointed out the risks of escalation and, of course, obviously, the risks of the humanitarian crisis, which is already severe, getting much worse, especially if Israel resumes its offensive operations. You also expressed the hope that the US can somehow find a way of bringing this to a close, and that's what I'd quite like to spend a bit of time talking about, because this is a very difficult issue to bring to a close.

In the past, when we've had these fights over Gaza before between Israel and Hamas, they've ended with a ceasefire and with Hamas staying in place receiving funds from Qatar, which it then uses to rebuild its military capacity, as well as infrastructure and residences in Gaza till we get round to the next bout. That's not going to happen this time. So, the first question we're then faced with is there's no obvious way to bring this to a close. We can see the possibility of an extension of the current truce, so long as hostages can be found to keep it going, and there are quite a few hostages still left. But then you've got the question of what sort of deal would conclude it. And there can't be an Israel-Hamas deal, because what Hamas did on the 7th of October precludes that.

So then you say, well, you need a wider political process. But the problem is there is no wider political process. It's not available either. All the protagonists are in some way under a cloud. The Palestinian Authority is seen as weak and ineffectual, and doesn't particularly have the support of the Palestinian people. The Israeli government is divided, unpopular at home and widely castigated abroad for the way that it's prosecuted this war.

Discussion between Professor Tanaka and Professor Freedman:

Professor Freedman: The first question I have is, can you imagine a wider political process that, in a way, takes the issue away from both Hamas and the Israeli government? As a way both to address the humanitarian crisis, which I would assume is beyond Hamas now to cope with, should it even remain in control of southern Gaza. Can you imagine some sort of internationalisation or some way forward that provides a political process? Solutions seem a bit optimistic, but something political that could at least draw this fighting to a close and provide some optimism that a way can be found to address the long-term underlying conflict that keeps on causing these sorts of crises.

Professor Tanaka: Let me say this in relation to the Israel-Gaza conflict: it is bound to be an international process, because what we have in mind is not just a truce between Israel and Hamas, but even when Israel is successful in destroying Hamas, then you have the question of

who is going to run this place called Gaza. It is impossible for Israel to maintain the soldiers there and the governance of them. Therefore, the exit plan for the Gaza conflict would have to be helped by nations like Egypt, Lebanon, Jordan, America, the UK, Europe, and Japan. This would have to be international. And again, if we think that the exit solution needs to be supported by an international format, then we should start earlier rather than later. This should involve the process in which this truce will come about.

The other point you said was that in relation to Ukraine, America succeeded in getting a strong partnership with NATO. But starting with the original source of conflict, I think that the United States could have played a much more active role in providing a political settlement there. Instead of trying to pursue a political settlement, Biden stated that America has no plans to send troops to the region. Again, we are dependent upon American deterrence. If the United States were to declare that they have no plans to send troops, then we would have no US deterrence. Yes, indeed, America was successful in sort of building a strong partnership with European countries and G7 as well. But how long will it last? Now we are at a crossroads. If you look at the domestic situation in the United States, there is strong opposition building up between the Republican and Democratic parties. This has become a partisan issue. And I'm not entirely sure if the Biden administration will be successful in securing the needed budget for military support to Ukraine. And there is a similar situation in Europe as well. There are strong opposition voices to the continuation of the huge military support.

Therefore, it's time for us to think about a plan of action of some sort, which no doubt will be very difficult. But yet there is a strong need for the international community to come together to think about a possible exit plan for both Ukraine and Gaza. This is not just about a stoppage of the war. This is to do with the aftermath of the war. This won't involve just the United States and Europe. This will have to involve all the major nations in the world. Even China and others, by including them, you can avoid division.

Professor Freedman: I'm slightly more optimistic than you are on the support for Ukraine in the short term. I think the new speaker in the House of Representatives has been more positive than people expected on getting the aid for Ukraine through. While the EU's got some issues with Hungarians, recent announcements, particularly from Germany, have been pretty encouraging for Ukraine. So I'm less bothered in the short term, but I think there are the obvious issues over the longer term. But they are also quite different conflicts in that in the end, the problem we have in bringing peace to Ukraine is that Russia and Ukraine have to agree. Russia is after Ukraine's territory. Ukraine wants its territory back. It's a zero-sum game. That's why it's very difficult to see a resolution. So you have to think about the long term.

I think it's probably fair to say that Europeans are starting to think about the implications of the Trump presidency, leaving these issues to Europeans to resolve, and whether they'll be able to cope is another matter. With the Middle East, it's different because it's not going to be a Hamas-Israel agreement. That just isn't possible any more. We know that Hamas and Israel, the Netanyahu government, found a sort of common cause in undermining the idea of a two-state solution. Israel believed that Hamas could be left in control of Gaza while it was much more interested in what was going on in the West Bank and making things more difficult there. But

that has all been blown apart now. So, the challenge, it seems to me, with the Middle East is that others have got to play a role.

I just want to push you a bit as to whether when you're talking about the need for the international community, including Japan, to do this, are you talking more in terms of how to put pressure on the United States or how to encourage the United States in certain policies, or are you assuming that maybe we're in a period where Japan and other European countries, other Asian countries, have got to come together and do stuff themselves. Put it more starkly, can you see a role for Japan in a post-conflict set of activities in Gaza? Can you see a much more direct Japanese engagement? Or is it largely to be one of encouraging the United States to adopt more sensible or effective policies?

Professor Tanaka: Well, this is not black and white, I suppose. One thing is very important. We talk about political settlement and political process, both in Ukraine and in Gaza. Someone has to take a lead. And it would have to be the United States. Why? Because the United States is the most important player in NATO and a key backer of Israel. Therefore, without the United States' leadership, we cannot see any political process, nor political settlement. But yet, America is losing its authority as the world political leader, and as the world military leader as well. Now, America has to act as a sort of bilateral alliance relationship with Japan, Korea, with Australia, China etc. Therefore, it would have to be collective, a joint leadership. I cannot identify Japan's role in relation to Ukraine. It cannot be a military role. It would have to be a softer power role, meaning what would be the reasonable political settlement after all this loss of human lives and resources.

I don't believe that Russia will withdraw their troops from where they are. Putin will be most likely elected and then re-elected. He may wish to continue his presidency up until 2036. He has got a long time ahead of him. Therefore, there is a need for some type of give and take. And I'm sure Europe has a responsibility for securing Ukraine's security. I'm not considering it likely that Ukraine will join NATO, but at least it's possible for Ukraine to join the European Union. But yet, this is just a part of the whole political settlement. I don't accept the argument that Japan should come later and pay. No way. In relation to Gaza, again, we need American leadership to create an exit plan. Japan obviously can help as a G7 chair nation. I mean, all sorts of settlements are difficult, no doubt. But yet, we need to try.

Professor Freedman:

I'll just make one sort of final observation before we start taking questions. I think the Russia-Ukraine thing will go on for a long time, I don't see an obvious way to conclude it. I think neither side is satisfied with the state, with where things are. Ukraine isn't going to accept the loss of its territories. As long as it can keep going, it'll keep going. So we're looking for a political decision some way down the line, but there's no quick or easy solution there. Gaza just seems to be more urgent in a way, because the humanitarian crisis demands early action and while the UN agencies and others can get relief in, the reconstruction is beyond Hamas and I think beyond the UN institutions. You need some form of governance. Israel can't provide it and I don't think

Hamas can provide it. So who does? It's not a happy situation, but I think there's an urgency there.