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## **Asia-Europe Conference; Iraq and North Korea steal meeting spotlight**

Asean headlined the event but reporters and government officials in Japan last week had more pressing matters on their minds.

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Iraq and North Korea dominated proceedings here last week at a conference of Asian and European journalists. The subject of the keynote address, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, was pushed well into the background.

Japanese policy on Iraq received a lot of attention in discussions even before the abduction on April 8 of three Japanese civilians by militants in Iraq.

Yoichi Masuzoe, of the House of Councillors of Japan, cited the battle against terrorism and Japan's security alliance with the United States as the main reasons for the despatch of some 600 ground troops from the Self Defence Force, or SDF, to Iraq in January.

"In a sense, the Third World War has begun in the form of the fight against terrorism," he said. There is "no such thing as neutrality", as countries are either "for or against" the drive.

Japan chose to cooperate with the Bush administration because the security alliance with the US provides for it to lend support to Japan in time of attack, whereas the United Nations had no such basis for timely assistance, he said.

A Japanese government official who requested anonymity said North Korea's firing of intermediate missiles over Japan in 1998 was a "wake-up call" to the threat in this part of the world, as was Pyongyang's later despatch of spy ships.

A special law approved by parliament enabled Japan to despatch the SDF to southern Iraq even though Japan's peace constitution renounces war as a means to resolve conflict, the official said.

Prof Hirotaka Watanabe, of Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, criticised his government for giving the security alliance with the US a higher priority than relations with Asia. Most East Asian countries were "strongly opposed" to the US-led war in Iraq, he said, citing Malaysia in particular, while noting that China had kept quiet on its position.

If Japan had consulted other East Asian countries before supporting the US, the position of the regional states would have been "more important in the world", he said. Japan should open its "diplomatic window" to East Asia, and cease being so focussed on the alliance with the US.

But the Japanese government official stressed that Japan did not follow US policy "blindfoldedly". The US was "not pleased" with Tokyo's decision to develop the Azerbaijan oilfield with Iran, he noted.

But this link could be useful to the US, which suspects Iran has nuclear capability, argued Mr Masuzoe, also a member of the ruling Liberal Democratic party. Japan could "try to convince" Iran to accept inspection by the International Atomic Energy Authority.

The capture of the Japanese civilians in Iraq returned attention to the divisions in Japan over the despatch of the SDF. Those for sending the troops argued it was time Japan did more than just contribute financial support, as it did during the 1990-91 Gulf war.

In a "big economic sacrifice", Japan raised \$13 billion (509 billion baht at today's rate) for that war by a special tax, said the Japanese official. But Kuwait made no mention of the Japanese contribution when it thanked countries around the world in a media advertisement, and that was "a big humiliation" for Japan", he said.

Japan subsequently "found its own way to contribute" by sending non-combat missions to Cambodia and East Timor, he said. After the Sept 11, 2001 terrorist attacks in New York and Washington, Japan sent naval vessels to the Indian Ocean to supply oil, he added.

Japan's bilateral problems with North Korea, rather than the international concern with Pyongyang's nuclear capability, preoccupied discussions here on the Korean peninsula.

Japan is "with the international community" in its concern over North Korea's nuclear development programme, the Japanese official said. But for Japanese society, the question of Japanese abducted by North Korea, was "emotional, sensitive and political" and the two issues should "go in parallel".

The abduction of Japanese in the 1970s was resurrected 18 months ago when Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi visited North Korea, and was told that five of them were still alive, while eight were dead and two were missing.

The five abductees returned to Japan and their continued stay in the country is denounced by North Korea as a breach of promise. But the Japanese official said: "The five wanted to stay in Japan and are victims of crime. If there are victims of kidnapping, we don't hand them back to kidnapers."

Japan also wants North Korea to repatriate the children of the abductees unconditionally and immediately, and to provide more information on those people it has pronounced dead and missing

Japan wants the children to "re-unite with their parents, and to have a full discussion in a free, uninterrupted and undisturbed atmosphere", the official said. "If they then decide to go back to Pyongyang, that would be perfectly all right."

Japan could not consider humanitarian assistance to North Korea while the abduction issue remain so "heated", the official said.

Japan in December last year hosted a commemorative summit with Asean during which it advocated the establishment of an East Asian Community embracing the countries of Northeast and Southeast Asia, as well as New Zealand and Australia.

"The East Asian Community is a good vision," said Rodolfo Severino, a former secretary-general of Asean. But it "will not happen until China and Japan sort out the relationship between them." The Japanese government official stressed the objective was open regionalism, not Fortress Asia or Fortress East Asia.

Though many analysts saw China's rise as an economic power as a direct challenge to Japan, Japanese officials emphasised the opportunities it offered. Mr Masuzoe said Japan enjoyed a trade surplus in two way trade amounting to \$130 billion (5.09 trillion baht) this year, largely due to the vast market in China for Japan's raw materials. Wataru Aso, governor of Fukuoka prefecture, expressed confidence that there was room for division of labour in manufacturing, where China is seen as a threat.

Mr Severino gave the keynote address on Asean during which he explained the historical context of the "Asean way", notably preference for an informal approach and non-binding agreements, the "tight embrace" of the non-interference principle, and an insistence on the equality of members.

Now a professor at the Asian Institute of Management in the Philippines, Mr Severino urged member states to apply the non-interference principle "more narrowly and absolutely" -- in other words, interfere more in the internal affairs of other member states.

But the member states lacked the common values and shared norms that would make this possible, and should work towards them as part of the Asean community they are committed to creating by the year 2020, he said.. The Bali declaration of Oct 7, 2003 provides for the community to be based on security, economic and socio-cultural pillars.

In forging shared norms, Asean member states should consider setting standards on the behaviour of states towards their own citizens, Mr Severino said. He cited the case of Burma, which was deemed, even by some European states, to have made some progress until the arrests on May 30 last year of opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi and some of her supporters.

``My quarrel with Asean is they tend to back away when it is time to take difficult steps," he said, citing the stagnation in the Asean Free Trade Area because necessary political decisions had not been made.

But the summit in Bali six months ago provided potential for advancing integration as members agreed on the ``two-plus-x" principle that allows for two or more countries to go forward without waiting for the rest.

The conference here evolved from the annual meeting of European and Japanese journalists, and was the first to involve media representatives from other Asian countries.

Bernhard Zepter, head of the delegation of the European Commission in Japan -- which hosted the conference in conjunction with the Singapore-based **Asia Europe Foundation** \_ highlighted the grassroots approach of the European Union. Mr Severino saw this as a virtue worth adapting by Asean, whose processes he said largely had been conducted by elites in government and academia.