

Japan will decide on SDI role soon

by Sophie Tanapura

In the wake of Japanese Prime Minister Yasuhiro Nakasone's visit to the United States April 12-14, Japanese press have been saying that Japan will most likely decide to join the American Strategic Defense Initiative program. Most Japanese government and corporate cadres expect Japanese participation in the SDI research program to be similar to that of West Germany, i.e., no formal, bilateral government-to-government agreement will be signed, but participation will be left up to the initiative and interest of private corporations, institutes, laboratories, etc.

However, through systematic close consultations with these agencies, the Japanese government will be informed of every detail, and will most certainly act as an encouraging coordinator in the program.

In Japan, everyone will tell you that the SDI is a very delicate question. As in other countries, Japanese have many reservations about the program, some peculiarly Japanese, some not.

There are essentially three reasons for the Japanese hesitation:

1) The stigma of Japan's role in World War II is still there.

Today, Japan does not want to be misunderstood by her Asian neighbors. She does not want her Asian economic allies, on whom she depends for raw materials and not-insignificant markets, to think that by participating in the SDI program, Japan is enhancing her defense forces and could be suspected of harboring designs to overrun the Pacific once again.

The Soviets are already pointing their finger at Japan as one of today's formidable "imperialist" powers—the other two being Western Europe and the United States. We can expect that the "peace movement" in the Pacific area, such as the one growing in Thailand, represents an attempt to turn students and religious layers into an anti-Japanese movement, something which was mobilized quite effectively a little more than a decade ago. The mobilization issue could easily be Japan's involvement in the "Star Wars" program. In line with Soviet party chief Mikhail Gorbachov's announced determination to nullify the SDI program, such an attempt by Soviet channels (perhaps with Chinese collaboration) to punish Japan is not a far-fetched scenario.

2) The other factor which might explain Japanese caution or reservations concerning the SDI and their eventual participation in the program lies in the domain of mutual trust between Japan and the United States. Japan is wondering if this is not just another ploy by the United States to steal Japanese high technology. Would Japan benefit from the civilian spin-off technologies? Would Japan benefit by gaining a strategic defense useful to the island nation?

One must admit that U.S. foreign policy, to put it mildly, has been far from reassuring to U.S. allies. A Japanese commentator sarcastically told this author that one can note a "slight" improvement in American foreign policy in that the U.S. government did agree to shelter President Marcos on American soil, whereas the Shah of Iran was not welcome. Perhaps, this is the "big" difference between President Reagan and President Carter.

Not only has U.S. foreign policy been failing U.S. allies. U.S. economic policy is far from a redeeming feature. The U.S. Congress and State Department continue to threaten extreme protectionist measures against Japanese exports, and U.S. pressures and actions are already dampening the Japanese economy.

3) Finally, there is tremendous fear that should Japan place her high technology within the constraints of a joint defense program, this would hamper her dynamic rate of economic growth and technological improvements and innovations. Perhaps this is the main reason for Japan's hesitation to enter into any formal, binding agreement on the government-to-government level.

Should Japan decide upon participation in the beam defense research program, it will be because mutual strategic and economic interests in the Western Alliance definitely outweigh the above-stated fears.

Observers have noted that there is a difference of views between Prime Minister Nakasone and Foreign Minister Shintaro Abe over whether or not Japan should participate in the SDI. Abe is more hesitant, and suggested early in February that a third mission be sent to the United States to obtain more information. Nakasone, more favorable toward the SDI, had commented to media representatives, "Japan cannot indefinitely defer a decision." The prime minister has reportedly ordered the foreign ministry to speed up studies of "all aspects" of the problem in preparation for Japan's participation.

Abe will be accompanying Nakasone to Washington, D.C. this April. On the agenda for discussion with President Reagan, will be an explanation of Japan's medium-term economic policies, designed to tone down trade friction and, at the same time, ensure economic growth.

In the tête-a-tête, Nakasone will also seek Reagan's advice on the organization and the subjects to be discussed at the Tokyo economic summit scheduled for early May. While it is not formally on the agenda, it is expected that Nakasone will take this opportunity to broach the question of Japanese collaboration in the SDI.