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Did the Japan Institute of International Affairs buckle under right-wing pressure? No, says Ambassador Satoh Yukio. Yes, say his critics.

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Fred Varcoe interviews Amb. Satoh Yukio

As some members of the Foreign Correspondents Club of Japan know only too well, Japan can be a very uncomfortable place when the right starts sharpening its rhetorical spears. The Japan Institute of International Affairs (JIIA) discovered this to its cost last year when it wandered into the debate over prime ministerial visits to Yasukuni Shrine: a key issue for Japanese conservatives.

The spat began in May 2006 when the JIIA published Tamamoto Masaru's essay "How Japan Imagines China and Sees Itself" on its website, criticizing then-Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro for attempting to "revive the cult of Yasukuni." The Sankei Shimbun's special Washington correspondent, Komori Yoshihisa, responded with a furious op-ed, branding Tamamoto "a radical leftist scholar who has often attacked the policies of the Japanese government."



Komori Yoshihisa

As the wolves gathered outside the JIIA's door, president Satoh Yukio yanked the entire English-language commentary from the institute's website in August and, apart from a fulsome mea culpa, declined to comment on his decision to the media. Until now. In the ensuing vacuum, foreign academics and journalists churned up the media with accusations of right-wing intimidation and dark reminders of the

past.

One of the fiercest denunciations came from Steven Clemons, publisher of the popular political blog *The Washington Note* and vice president of the New America Foundation, who warned of “1930s style censorship” in an article called “Japan’s Right-Wingers Are Out of Control.” Writing in the *Japan Times*, Roger Pulvers said the decision to back down was a sign that “self-censorship through intimidation may once again become an ingrained feature of Japanese social and political life.” He added: “This is a scary turn of events.”

Given the impressive liberal credentials of its main architects, most commentators were baffled and disappointed that the JIIA had apparently pulled in its horns so easily. Satoh is a former U.N. ambassador and a prime mover behind the ASEAN Regional Forum; Tamamoto has worked his way through the cream of America’s premier academic institutions, including Harvard, Princeton and Johns Hopkins University. Clemons calls him “probably the smartest modern intellectual in Japan.”



Satoh Yukio

But the Institute’s claims of “academic independence” were weak. Despite billing itself as Japan’s “foremost center for producing and disseminating ideas on international relations,” the JIIA is affiliated with and largely funded by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA), and was always going to be on a short leash. MOFA and Satoh surely found it difficult to parry Komori’s sharpest question: What other country would tolerate such tax-funded criticism of its government’s actions?

The Sankei got its wish. The JIIA has scoured controversy, even critical discussion or debate, from its website (www.jiia.or.jp/en/index.php) and replaced it with anodyne commentary most of which is indistinguishable from official MOFA blurbs. Tamamoto left the institute earlier this year and Satoh blames the entire affair (in the interview below) on a failure of internal review mechanisms. “It is difficult to resist the conclusion that Komori scored a complete victory,” says Mark Selden, research associate of the East Asia Program at Cornell

University.

Komori has long shown himself to be a formidable proponent of the conservative cause. As the JIIA controversy raged, I interviewed him and posted – after much debate about its merits – his comments entirely unmolested at Japan Focus. He responded with a salty Sankei column that accused Japan Focus of setting him up and distorting what he said. The newspaper declined requests that I be given an opportunity to reply, while insisting on their own right to reply in the Number 1 Shimbun (editor Fred Varcoe was happy to comply and even invited Komori to pen something for this magazine; the offer was declined).

Komori has become one of the most vocal and articulate supporters of the movement to deny Japanese war crimes, again making news in June after conservatives posted a full-page ad in the June 14 edition of the Washington Post, “sharing the truth” about what happened to 200,000 Asian sex slaves.

Given the growing confidence of this movement, the vociferousness it brings to the fight against liberal views and the small but real possibility of violence from the ultra right-wing thugs who ride along in its shadow, many will feel sympathy for Satoh’s position, if not for his decision. Unlike Japanese intellectuals, few foreign journalists have experienced any danger of real harm from these forces, and if threatened, they can always leave the country.

Still, the consensus among those who follow what happens in Japan and care about what happens here is that Satoh was in a better position than most to put up a fight. Says Daniel Sturgeon, a Tokyo-based researcher who followed the dispute and put the deleted JIIA commentary online: “His caving into pressure from Komori and, by extension, conservative elements of Japanese society, doesn’t look good for open debate in Japan, and

thus his action was far worse than any controversial statements made.” Sturgeon believes that Satoh should have invited Komori to respond and “opened the floor to frank debate.” It may be too late to save the JIIA, but debate can take place at any time and in many venues.

(The pulled JIIA essays and much of the subsequent commentary have been collected by Sturgeon and posted at wdsturgeon.googlepages.com/. A record of the dust-up with Komori can be found in Japan Focus, “The Battle for Japan’s Soul” .)

Fred Varcoe interviews Ambassador Satoh Yukio

In August, 2006 Yukio Satoh, a highly regarded former ambassador to the U.N. and president of the Japan Institute of International Affairs (JIIA), a think tank funded in part by the Foreign Ministry, closed down the Commentary section of the JIIA website. The move came after an article by Washington-based Sankei Shimbun columnist Yoshihisa Komori attacking the JIIA for using taxpayers’ money to criticize Japanese government policy with “leftist” views. Satoh, however, denied closing down the site because of outside pressure. The Commentary section was recently restarted in conjunction with three other think tanks: the Institute for International Policy Studies, the Japan Forum on International Relations and the Research Institute for Peace and Security. The group calls itself the Association of Japanese Institutes of Strategic Studies (AJISS). Following the re-launch of the commentaries, Satoh agreed to talk to Fred Varcoe about the issues involved.

Please restate the original purpose of the JIIA and the JIIA’s website commentary.

JIIA was created about 48 years ago by retired

Prime Minister Yoshida (Shigeru). The idea, according to his paper, was to create something similar to the Council for Foreign Relations or Chatham House.

When I came here (JIIA) four years ago, my major concern was reform – from a financial basis to the orientation of studies and other activities. I took this job with a promise from the Foreign Office that they would give me *carte blanche* as I engaged in this reform process.

I started with improvements on our financial position. Although this institution is subsidized by the Foreign Office, we must raise many funds from the private sector. It is important for us to have private funds in order to show our independence, although the Foreign Office said it wouldn't interfere with what we do,

I started with the financial aspect and then restructured our arrangements, including the number of staff. We had so many administrative staff – too many – so I cut the number by 12 or 13 positions.

On the function side, I started to improve what is known as the JIIA International Forum. This forum started before I came here, asking Japanese speakers to speak. I changed the style and decided to use simultaneous translations and to ask visiting dignitaries to speak to the forum. Now we have around 40 forums a year. A number of visiting foreign ministers come to speak to us and I am glad many embassies here have noticed the merit of this forum for their own public relations, but also for us to provide different opinions from different countries to the members and the mass media. This was a priority issue.

In the meantime, we have restructured our study programs and also revitalized many institutional exchanges with other countries and similar institutions.

Thirdly, I wanted to send a Japanese view abroad.

As part of my financial review, I suspended the English quarterly magazine which this institution had published for some time because I found that it was not read. In order to prioritize our limited funds, I wanted to concentrate on improving a few areas.

I thought of a concept of sending commentary via e-mail, because I thought it would be easier to reach people this way. So last year, after about a year of preparation, I started a test run.

As you know, after we published the fourth installment, I suspended it because I accepted Mr. Komori's point. After his column, I found that the third commentary had not gone through the review process I had organized.

When I started this, I asked Tamamoto (Masaru)-san to ask many people to write and I created an internal review board. The important thing was to have many people write and to have different views expressed through this commentary. I was later told that Tamamoto-san asked many people to write but they weren't cooperating by providing material. Maybe he aimed too high. I used to say even (Yomiuri Giants star Shigeo) Nagashima hit .300, so if your average is good, you don't need to hit a home run.

In the third column, which I read after Komori-san raised certain issues, I noticed some wordings and expressions that I wasn't comfortable with, like using "cult" in reference to Yasukuni Shrine. If you read them in their full context, perhaps the usage might have been defensible, but I thought it could lead to misunderstanding.

So I suspended the commentary for review and then I also found out that the internal review board didn't function properly. As I wrote in response to the Sankei Shimbun, I was determined to revive it in a better form. I thought very carefully on what lessons we

could learn from this first experience. One of the things I noticed was that it is very difficult to get many people to write, especially in English. So I reached out to some of our similar institutions who are interested in foreign policies.

I made a proposal to them to create The Association of Japanese Institutions of Strategic Studies and we restarted this series of commentaries under the name of AJISS commentaries from April this year. At the moment, we plan to send out at least two commentaries of op-ed size a month. It's up and running now but it is still in the process of establishing itself. But the response from those who have read our commentaries has been quite positive; some wanted to use them in university classes, while others wanted to refer them to newspapers. The response varies according to each commentary. As I said, batting .300 is the aim; perhaps eventually we'll hit like Ichiro.

Apart from these commentaries, I would like to expand further for us to publish things in English. I also hope to improve our English home page. And the four institutions would like to expand our activities together. All of us are very small institutions.

When I got this job four years ago, one of the first things I did was to organize lunches among the heads of the four institutions to propose working together on an informal basis. When I restarted the commentaries, I immediately thought of this.

Did you have to close the commentaries down after Komori's article?

I did not close it down; I suspended it. Someone dropped the entire thing, so it gave the impression it was closed down. My instruction was to suspend it pending our review.

Mr. Komori's article in the Sankei Shimbun drew my attention to article No. 3. Then I read

it and noticed it shouldn't have been sent out. I learned that it had not been cleared by our internal mechanisms, which I found were not functioning well. There were lots of arguments as well as conjecture and speculation in blogs. I thought there was no point for me to be involved in that; I just thought about restarting this project of sending out commentaries.

Did you feel under pressure from anyone? Sankei? The government?

I never felt pressure from Sankei or from the government. It was on my own judgment. I thought it better to reorganize everything. In the first series, it was a test case and all the rules were not well established. I thought each piece was very long. I was thinking more of op-ed length pieces. This is not an academic journal.

Are your commentaries meant to reflect the views of the government?

To be in line with the government, although I cannot speak for the editorial board. We created a board of editors - there is one from each of the four institutions, with Professor Watanabe Akio as the chair. I am publishing the articles.

If you ask my personal view, I think we would accept views that differ from government policy, but if you are going to use this forum as a place to criticize government policy, I am rather reluctant, because this is a secondary objective. If we are going to criticize Japanese policy, we should start in Japanese. Our readers are foreigners and the main purpose of the commentary is to share Japanese views in international issues with foreign readers. Although I am comfortable with different views - views that are different from government positions as well as writers' views - I would rather avoid allowing Japanese writers to use this venue as a place to criticize the Japanese government, because that's not the major

purpose of this commentary. But to show there are plural views about certain policy issues is important.

We have a monthly meeting to decide on a subject and then we think about which writers to ask. We are still in the process of establishing the format, but eventually we will ask others to write on whatever they want to write on. For now, we have to show others what we are doing.

Was the decision to group together with other institutions a form of self-protection?

No, I don't think anybody has such a view about this. From my point of view, we wanted to expand the basis and get more writers and ideas, because we are small institutions.

Do you think the right-wing media is too strong in this country?

They might be vocal, but how do you measure this? I don't want to comment on this.

Do you think the Japanese public is badly

served by the media? For example, do you feel there is a lack of debate on issues, a lack of information or even a lack of truth? And is there too much self-censorship?

I think major issues are well debated. If you look at the constitution, there is quite a cautious approach on the part of the public towards this issue. If you follow the changes of public opinion towards the constitution issue, you can easily detect an increasingly cautious approach on the part of the public with regard to the substance. During the past year, you have already noticed a change in the depth of understanding on the part of the public regarding this issue. So, the issue is well discussed and gradually digested by the public. This is a slightly revised and abbreviated version of an article and interview that appeared at [No. 1 Shimbun](#), the official house magazine of the Foreign Correspondent's Club of Japan

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