Masyoshi Ohira

Japan

Lobbyists for Carter in Luxembourg

by Richard Katz

The nation of Japan surrendered to Washington's threat of Persian Gulf military action: it stopped all oil imports from Iran, embargoed all future export contracts to that country and dispatched Foreign Minister Saburo Okita, executive member of Trilateral Commission, to Luxemburg to act as a chief lobbyist for the U.S. position. In stark contrast to the traditional Japanese practice of quietly delaying until others have made a decision and then following, Okita shocked the assembled European ministers by taking the initiative. He exhorted Europe to support Carter by breaking trade ties with Iran, and he urged Europe to respond to the Afghan situation by firming up defense cooperation with the U.S. This, said Okita, was the only way to prevent U.S. military action in the Gulf, simply transmitting a threat issued from the State Department.

Prime Minister Masayoshi Ohira himself announced Japan's backdown from its previous reluctance to go along with Washington in an April 18 speech in which he declared that the meaning of Iran and Afghanistan is that "now is the time when it is necessary to strengthen our unity with the U.S." Contrary to previous prime ministers who premised Japan's security on its "peace diplomacy" as well as the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty, Ohira announced a new priority: a steady increase in Japan's defense capability—a demand Carter intends to press during Ohira's April 30 visit to the U.S.; effective and smooth cooperation with Washington on defense issues; and then Japan's contribution to peace.

Although Japan's breaking of oil trade with Iran ostensibly resulted from a price dispute, no one doubts that pressure from Washington lay behind Japan's stance. In fact, the Japanese action earned it the first editorial praise for Japan from the *New York Times* in countless years, and State Department spokesman Hodding Carter stated that Japan was in the "forefront of U.S. allies" on the Iran issue.

Japan's lineup behind Carter followed weeks of hesitation and attempts at compromise in which most Washington observers thought it unlikely that Japan would follow Carter unless Europe also did. Many Japanese business and political leaders had urged that Japan try to avoid an open break with the U.S. while at the same time holding on to Iranian oil. Then, in the words of one political adviser, "the administration decided to play hardball." As an administration official put it: "We told them there was really very little choice. If the Iranians cut them off, they didn't have to worry because there was a glut of oil and we might help them out a bit. But if Japan and Europe didn't go along with us, then we were going to take military action and that would cut off Iranian oil. It would be better for them if they supported us and didn't get the oil than if they didn't support us and still didn't get the oil." The official then added that whatever Japan may believe about U.S. promises to replace lost Iranian oil, the Carter administration has made absolutely no guarantees about that.

As soon as the U.S. put on serious pressure, those who had opposed Ohira's policy of supporting Carter backed down. A consensus developed to give Ohira a free rein on Iran and defense issues, including increased defense spending. Japan has made such backdowns before. What shocked the Europeans this time was that Japan acted so forthrightly in pressuring *them* to back down.

Japan to "conserve" oil?

"Conservation, not finding alternate sources, will be the foremost response to the loss of Iranian oil," said a Japanese government official. Considering the stiff conservation already undertaken by Japan—oil imports have still not recovered peak 1973 levels—the loss of 12 percent of its supply is a sharp blow.

Japan cannot expect the U.S. government to instruct American oil firms to make up the deficit—U.S. administration officials labelled "wishful thinking." The government emphasis on further conservation indicates that Japan is seriously considering applying for the oil-sharing provisions of the International Energy Agency, which requires the recipient to absorb the first 7 percent loss.