5 The Cautious and Discreet Prime Minister: Satō Eisaku

When Ikeda Hayato had to step down as Japanese premier in November 1964 due to illness, the reins of power were taken over by Satō Eisaku, a former élite bureaucrat like his elder brother Kishi Nobusuke and a member of ‘the Yoshida school’ like Ikeda Hayato. Satō’s political style was that of a bureaucrat. Visions and bold thinking were not his cup of tea. He told an interviewer that he had ‘learnt the importance of and practiced safe driving’ as a bureaucrat in the railway administration (Hosokawa, 1978, pp. 332f). ‘Satō was an extraordinarily cautious and discreet man…he avoided making explicit commitments to one position or another, particularly on controversial issues, until a general consensus emerged among the influential groups concerned’ (Destler et al., 1979, pp. 39f). His ability to wait out his political foes was unsurpassed and his administration became the longest continuous one in Japan’s constitutional history (Kishimoto, 1988, p. 25).

When Satō vied with Ikeda for the LDP presidency in 1964, he emphasized the difference between his policies and Ikeda’s (Nakamura, 1993, p. 541). However, in order to gain Ikeda’s support in the race for prime minister when he resigned, Satō agreed to continue policies and was not eager as new prime minister to stress the differences between him and Ikeda (Rekishigaku kenkyūkai, 1990, pp. 116f). Outlining his policies in the parliament, the prime minister stressed that he would continue the policies of the previous government, and he retained the ministers of the previous government (only the chief cabinet secretary was removed) (Tomita, 1981, p. 63). In a candid self-characterization he said that he did ‘not aim at something particularly novel jeopardizing the stability of the national administration’ (709f, 21.11.1964). Sticking to current policies promoted Satō’s stay in power but was also the reason why he had to leave; his lack of bold actions, his cautiousness, and inability to revise policies, when change was long overdue, created too wide a gap between policies and public opinion and forced him to resign.¹

THE INTERNATIONAL SYSTEM

In some of Satō’s speeches in the parliament one can find passages in which his views of the international system and the forces governing international relations come to the fore. Basically, his view of the international system resembled Yoshida’s and Kishi’s, since he described it in terms of two
competing blocs led by the United States and the Soviet Union, but Sato discerned a waning of superpower domination. The prevailing international order reflected the immediate postwar international situation but new problems appeared which could not be coped with within the framework of the postwar system (837, 19.10.1971). International conflicts were found not only on the global level but also on lower levels as a result of antagonism based on race, ideology or religion and imbalances in regional interests and economic development (806, 14.2.1970). Thus, globalization and multipolarization were undermining the power positions of the two superpowers and world peace was no longer dependent on peaceful coexistence of the two blocs. In the premier's eyes the pre-eminence of military power was receding: 'Though world peace still basically depends on power relationships, the relative importance of non-military factors has grown in many fields of international politics, the self-reliance of countries has increased and a more pluralistic balance has come to be sought, instead of only military balance' (806, 14.2.1970), he said in February 1970, heralding later ideas of 'comprehensive security'.

Sato described the international situation as unstable and fluid, particularly in Asia (718, 25.1.1965), and found changes of historical dimensions pervading international affairs. In 1964 he foresaw that 'our domestic society, like international society, are about to enter a period of change and reversal [hendo to tenkai]' (713, 21.11.1964); in 1968 he saw the world standing at the threshold of 'a new turbulent 100-year period' (792, 11.12.1968); and in 1969 he announced nothing less than the advent of 'a new era' (824, 22.1.1969). He used the concept of interdependence to make it plain that the globalization of problems made their solution a joint concern for all countries. Since the world economy was borderless, the impact of interdependence was pervasive in economic fields (838, 19.10.1971). Another concept used by Sato to describe world trends and developments was kokusaika, 'internationalization':

Today, our country is facing structural changes in economy and society such as internationalization of the economy, changes in population structure and radical urbanization. These changes are both radical and widespread and will have immeasurable influence on national life.

(759, 14.3.1967)

The impact of kokusaika was so pervasive that the prime minister even described the world as amidst 'the era of internationalization', kokusaika (no) jidai (769, 28.7.1967; 810, 14.2.1970; 820, 25.11.1970). According to an authoritative dictionary, kokusaika means 'to become international, to spread over the world' (Shogakukan, 1981, p. 906). Thus, the process captured by the concept of kokusaika is directed both inwards and outwards, but Sato seems to have interpreted kokusaika as a process whereby Japan was affected