



TERRORISM IN JAPAN – A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

Japan is not among the primary targets of international terrorist groups. Of course, this does not mean that terrorist attacks cannot occur in Japan. For this reason, it is worth reviewing Japan's vulnerability to terrorism. The analysis focuses primarily on the religious sect known as Aum Shinrikyo, which transformed from a religious community into a terrorist organization. Aum Shinrikyo occupies a special place among global terrorist communities. The terrorist group has carried out biological and chemical attacks. Thousands of people have been injured in its attacks. Its most significant attack was the Tokyo sarin gas attack on March 20, 1995.

1. Terror situation in Japan

Japan underwent a complete transformation after World War II. The political system, which was reformed under the influence of the United States, led to rapid development, as a result of which the country not only became a major player in global economics, but also set an example for developing countries. [1] In Japan, experts currently consider the demographic problem caused by the aging population to be the number one enemy and the source of all further problems. The demographic crisis is a major threat to the entire nation and can be considered the most significant national security issue. Most forecasts predict a continuous decline in population, which could become a source of further conflict. Japan has one of the fastest aging populations in the world and also has one of the highest mortality rates. The number of births per 1,000 people is only 7.3, which means that only Andorra, Saint Pierre and Miquelon, and Monaco have lower birth rates.

This means that the proportion of elderly people in the population, in this case those of retirement age, i.e. over 65, exceeds 29%. Based on the available data, this ratio is steadily deteriorating, meaning that we are seeing a declining and aging population, which means that fewer people have to support more people, resulting not only in enormous economic difficulties, as the decline in the working-age population calls into question the foundations of the welfare society, but also in a series of serious social problems. Young people form an increasingly alienated community in which most traditional human relationships are less functional and are becoming anonymous. Starting a family and intimate relationships are becoming less attractive to young people, while in developed Asian economies, the proportion of women in the labor market is typically increasing. [2] However, the increase in women's willingness to work is causing a further decline in the birth rate and, due to the specific nature of Japan work culture, is not only resulting in further economic transformation but also increasing social alienation. Alienation, however, can be a breeding ground for the emergence of extreme ideologies. The expected economic downturn caused by a declining and aging population, combined with an atomized society, could also lead to the emergence of radical tendencies in the long term, which could prove fatal. Meanwhile, Japan's rapid economic development between the 1970s and 1980s attracted millions of migrant workers to the country, primarily immigrants from the Philippines and Thailand. [3]

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At the same time, the leaders of the island nation are increasingly keen to regain Japan's former leading position in global politics, particularly in economic policy. In an unprecedented move since World War II, Japan's military potential has begun to transform in recent years, and Tokyo's defense policy has followed suit. The country is no longer just an active participant in UN peacekeeping missions, but also plays an active role in international counterterrorism efforts. In addition, however, the Japan Self-Defense Forces have not only developed in terms of technical capabilities, but have also been granted legal powers that allow the army to act autonomously, independently of the United States, even beyond its borders. [4] Thus, having shed its historical burdens, the Japanese leadership is striving for greater independence in security matters, while carefully maintaining close, friendly relations with Washington so that, if necessary, it can act as an ally of the US in a possible conflict. At the same time, there are many who are suspicious of Japan's military reactivation. Not only do the conquests of World War II and the atrocities associated with them remain vivid in the minds of Asian peoples to this day, but the activities of the famous and infamous Japanese pirates several centuries ago still fill the populations of many countries with a sense of unease to this day – Korea suffered most from the Japanese pirates, primarily due to its geographical location. At the same time, visceral resistance to the Japanese could become a source of numerous security risks in the future, including terrorism at the sub-state and supra-state levels.

Since the end of World War II, there have been surprisingly few violent attacks in Japan that could be linked to the activities of any radical or terrorist organization. The reasons for this can be found, on the one hand, in the strong framework provided by the Japanese cultural system and, on the other hand, in the conscious foreign policy efforts made over several decades following the shock of World War II to keep the country out of various international conflicts. A third reason is the virtually homogeneous ethnic composition of the population. It can thus be concluded that the security threat posed by both domestic and international terrorism is low in Japan. Nevertheless, due to historical traditions and the new, more active foreign policy, as mentioned above, significant changes may occur, making a higher level of terrorist threat a realistic possibility.

Domestic left-wing and right-wing radical groups are poorly organized and lack the capacity to carry out violent acts. However, this has not always been the case, as the Japanese Red Army (Nihon Sekigun, JRA), an anti-state communist organization active between 1971 and 2001, was not only active domestically but also internationally. As internationally recognized intelligence expert Mark Lowenthal put it, "the Japanese Red Army worked together with the Palestinian Liberation Front." [5]

Today, however, the capabilities of the Japanese radical left have changed significantly. The danger posed by far-left communities may be increased by the fact that in many cases they have links to organized crime circles. The financing of extremist political groups, especially those on the far right, is extremely weak, with organizations primarily relying on membership fees to support themselves. However, membership is mostly made up of less affluent members of society, so the financial situation of activists does not allow for more serious funding. In addition, Japanese law enforcement agencies traditionally keep a close watch on politically extreme groups and try to nip their activities in the bud. As a result of their successful actions, the propaganda activities of radical political groups have been reduced to a minimum, making it very difficult to reach and convince potential financiers.

However, sectarian religious groups operating in an extreme manner pose a more realistic threat than political extremists. The most striking example of this is Aum Shinrikyo, which is on a par with active terrorist groups in terms of organization, capability, and "dedication." Their sympathizers often come from the upper classes and have studied at elite universities, so it is easy to understand that their financial resources also enable them to carry out attacks. The functioning of Japanese extremist communities follows the general patterns established for similar groups:

- "1. 'Cults' are anti-family, tearing young people away from their families and turning them against their parents.
2. 'Cults' are materialistic, swindling their members out of their money and committing financial abuses (tax fraud, etc.).
3. They brainwash and "deprogram" young people who come into their sphere of influence, teaching them to behave in ways that are anti-social and anti-national." [6]

A more significant problem than radical political and religious organizations is the extensive activities of notorious organized crime groups, the Japanese mafia, known as the yakuza, which have a noticeable impact on economic life.

The likelihood of a terrorist attack from abroad is low. Islamic terrorism is not typical in the country, and international experts unanimously agree that the likelihood of such an attack is low due to the religious homogeneity of the population.

Nevertheless, Japan was the first country in the world to suffer a terrorist attack targeting the civilian population with chemical weapons in 1994.

2. Aum Shinrikyo

„Aum Shinrikyo is a Japanese religious organization, better known for its terror-ist activity, mainly the for sarin attack in the Tokyo subway on March 1995. This act of terrorism came as a surprise to the whole world (for the first time in human history weapons of mass destruction were used by non-combatants, and it happened in Japan, which is known as one of the safest countries), but it was a much greater shock for Japan itself.” [7] The religious extremist Aum Shinrikyo (currently known as Aleph, meaning "Supreme Truth"), a sect awaiting the end of the world, was founded in 1984 by Shoko Asahara as a yoga and meditation group, and only officially became a religious organization in 1989. The community grew rapidly and soon included a large number of young intellectuals who had graduated from the country's elite universities. Based on various branches of Buddhism and Hinduism, this syncretic religion quickly became known as the religion of the Japanese elite. In the early 1990s, Shoko Asahara—who by then considered himself the incarnation of Jesus Christ—and his followers underwent rapid radicalization, and the community became increasingly hostile toward Japanese society. It was then that the idea emerged that the end of the world, as expected by the followers, would come with World War III, which would have to start with an attack on the United States. „The case of "Aum Shinrikyo" was a big shock for the Japan society. The main question was, why young and talented graduates from the best Japanese universities were attracted by a strange religious cult and why were they able to commit violent and terrorist actions against their own state. The answer to these questions lies in the sphere of the Japanese mentality.” [7]

Since Asahara's teachings became popular primarily among highly educated and wealthy Japanese, it was not difficult to secure financial support for the cult's activities. In addition to membership fees, the cult soon began operating its own businesses, which it continues to do to this day.

The terrorist group carried out its first attack using biological agents. The use of biological weapons for terrorist purposes in the 21st century is a source of particular fear for the international community. In the last decade of the 20th century, terrorist acts committed with biological agents were shocking, even though there were no fatalities. [8]

„In June 1993, the Aum Shinrikyo cult sprayed a liquid suspension of B. anthracis from their headquarters building in Kameido, near Tokyo, Japan. While this aerosolization went largely unnoticed, the cult's later (1995) sarin gas attack of a Tokyo subway attracted worldwide attention. It was only with testimony of cult members and a retrospective investigation that the 1993 incident was recognized as an anthrax release. The cult had developed and constructed a delivery system that involved the pumping of a liquid bacterial suspension up eight floors of their headquarters building to an aerosol dispersal device on the roof. During the aerosol dispersal, health authorities received numerous public complaints concerning odors emanating from the building. [9] The attack is not well known. Those affected by the infection reported nausea and vomiting, but no serious injuries occurred. Following the attack, local residents also reported that their pets and birds had fallen ill. [10]

Aum Shinrikyo experts first began experimenting with the production of chemical weapons in 1993, resulting in the organization's members carrying out the first terrorist attack in history using chemical agents in the city of Matsumoto in 1994, which was also the organization's first successful terrorist action. Eight people lost their lives in the attack, while the number of injured – those who suffered health damage as a result of the gas attack – reached five hundred. The group did not claim responsibility for the attack, and the police investigation did not link Aum Shinrikyo to the attack.

The terrorist group's most significant series of attacks, which attracted widespread international attention and established its reputation, took place on March 20, 1995, during the morning rush hour on the Tokyo subway. Members of Aum Shinrikyo carried out a coordinated sarin gas attack at five locations, killing twelve people and injuring more than six thousand. Most of the injured suffered permanent health damage. The masked attackers brought the toxic substance onto the subway in advance in the form of liquid sealed in airtight bags, and when the train arrived at the target station, they pierced the bags, which had been placed on the floor, with a long umbrella. As revealed during the investigation, the mastermind behind the terrorist attack, Shoko Asahara, believed that the Americans would be blamed for the attack, thus triggering World War III, which, according to the sect's teachings, would bring about the end of the world.

As a result of a large-scale police operation following the terrorist attack in Tokyo, Asahara, who was already in hiding, and several of his senior associates were arrested in May 1995 and sentenced to death by hanging following court proceedings that lasted until 2004. The Japanese government immediately revoked Aum Shinrikyo's status as a religious organization. During his detention, Asahara repeatedly threatened to carry out a large-scale terrorist attack affecting the whole of Japan, which ultimately did not take place, although the police discovered several devices capable of releasing hydrogen cyanide in facilities linked to the organization, but these were never activated. The execution was postponed in 2012 because new leaders of the terrorist group were taken into custody. The death sentences imposed on Asahara and six of his associates were finally carried out in 2018.

Asahara's followers established the Aleph Group as the successor organization to Aum Shinrikyo, with Japanese authorities estimating the number of active members at 1,300-1,500. Aleph continues to operate today under extremely close police surveillance. The two factions that make up Aleph are actively engaged in proselytizing and recruitment, while also operating profitable businesses, primarily in commerce and real estate. The group has also established itself in Russia, where several of Asahara's followers were arrested in July 2000 for planning bomb attacks in Japan to secure his release. In August 2012, a Japan Airlines flight bound for the United States was forced to turn back after those demanding Asahara's release threatened to detonate a bomb on the plane. In March 2016, Montenegro expelled a total of 58 members of the Aum Shinrikyo/Aleph community who wanted to hold a conference promoting an extremist ideology. In the same year, Russian authorities seized 25 properties linked to the organization, while in 2017, police raided the radical group's interests in Japan.

The leaders of Aleph have repeatedly emphasized that they do not want to use violence to achieve their goals, which, like Asahara's, are aimed at bringing about the end of the world. Nevertheless, they follow the basic principles of Asahara's violent and apocalyptic teachings, but their activities pose a low security risk due to heightened official control.

Based on its activities, many analysts do not consider Aum Shinrikyo/Aleph to be one of the world's most significant and influential terrorist organizations. However, if we narrow our investigation to the East Asian region, we can see that of the 779 terrorist acts committed in the region between 1950 and 1970, the three most significant were committed in Japan. The first two places are occupied by terrorist attacks carried out by Aum Shinrikyo/Aleph. During the two attacks by the terrorist group, at least 6,000 people were injured and 20 lost their lives. [11]

3. Conclusion

The threat of terrorism in Japan cannot be considered significant in the 21st century. The low level of terrorist threat that has characterized the country since World War II continues to prevail. Japan is not among the direct targets of international terrorist organizations. However, this does not mean that a terrorist attack could not occur in Japan at any time. Japan is, however, among the indirect targets. „Existing terrorist organizations such as ISIS can create an atmosphere of fear and attract the public's attention, even in countries that do not have a direct target, such as Japan, with their soft terrorism strategies.” [12] We must not forget that the primary goal of terrorist organizations is to instill fear. The generally accepted approach in the literature considers violence and intimidation to be key elements of terrorism. [13] If the terrorist community succeeds in making people afraid, then they have successfully created social disruption. Social unrest is a central goal in the ideology

of terrorist organizations, so fear, as a means of creating unrest, can be considered a success. It does not matter to the terrorist community what means they use to achieve success. In other words, even if fear is not directly caused by physical violence, the activity can still be considered successful. The effectiveness of these soft tools is unquestionable. The events of recent years prove that Japanese society is also a target of terrorist fearmongering carried out with soft tools.

However, the impact of global terrorism cannot be avoided in Japan, and it would be irresponsible to claim that international terrorist organizations pose no threat to the country.

History has also shown that Japan is capable of producing its own domestic terrorist organizations. Current social processes are reinforcing social alienation. Those who find themselves on the margins of society are much more susceptible to radicalization and extreme ideologies. Based on a comparison of current social, economic, and security trends in Japan with global security trends, it is safe to say that there is a greater chance of a terrorist threat emerging from within Japan than from outside the country.

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