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The Outlier: Japan between Asia and the West

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Throughout its history Japan has been an outlier, a country “in” but in many ways not “of” Asia. In premodern times it was set off by its feudal order, its refusal to participate in the Chinese tributary system, and its withdrawal into national seclusion. Modern Japan has oscillated, at times violently, between Asia and the West. In the late nineteenth century, it “quit Asia” and joined the West, remaking itself into a Western-style industrial and military power and carving out an Asian empire, largely at the expense of China and Korea. In the 1930s, it rejected the West and embarked on a crusade to liberate Asia from Western dominance, which led it in 1945 to the unprecedented catastrophe of total defeat and foreign occupation. Postwar Japan again embraced the West, reinventing itself as a democratic “peace state” and economic superpower. Sheltered behind the American alliance, the Japanese retreated from international politics and focused on economic growth. They returned to Asia, this time as its economic model, mentor and—increasingly—leader. At the end of the Cold War, Japan seemed poised to once again reject the West and seek Asian leadership. Instead, post-Cold War Japan tilted toward the United States and moved tentatively to assume “normal” international political-military responsibilities. It is as yet unclear where the Japanese will find a balance among an Asian role, the American alliance, and a “normal” international political-military role. One can be sure, however, that Japan’s future will be conditioned by its past. It thus becomes of interest to examine more closely how Japan has interacted with Asia and the West over time.

The Premodern Setting

Premodern Japan, like Korea and Vietnam, looked upon Imperial China as the fountainhead of higher civilization and borrowed extensively from it. For the Koreans and Vietnamese, this entailed adopting the Chinese system of centralized bureaucratic monarchy, complete with its “Son of Heaven” and Confucian scholar-officials or mandarins. The Japanese set up a similar system but it gradually withered away, and effective power passed into the hands of samurai—military aristocrats who organized themselves on the basis of lord-vassal ties like those in medieval Europe. Japan, in other words, became a feudal society. Nothing like this occurred elsewhere in East Asia, raising the interesting question of why it did in Japan. The effects of Japan’s development of feudalism are important to explaining its relationship to Asia. Chief among these was to heighten the Japanese sense of uniqueness—of being a people apart from their continental neighbors despite their common Chinese cultural heritage.¹

This is not, of course, to suggest that the Japanese had a monopoly on such sentiments or that feudalism was their only source. Japan’s relative geographic isolation and ethnic and cultural homogeneity also promoted the Japanese consciousness of national distinctiveness. So, too, did Shinto, Japan’s indigenous religion. By depicting the archipelago and its inhabitants as being creations of the gods and as enjoying their protection, Shinto encouraged the Japanese to see themselves as a divinely favored people, different from and superior to all others. (Japanese are, in fact, related to the Koreans, being descended in part from prehistoric immigrants from the Korean Peninsula). Shinto also invested Japan’s emperor with a special sanctity. As the lineal descendant of the Sun Goddess, the principal Shinto deity, the emperor was viewed as a “living god” who mediated between the natural and supernatural realms and presided over the Japanese people as a kind of heavenly paterfamilias. His authority, combining as it did political, religious, and familial elements, was supreme and inviolable. It could not be usurped, transferred, or lost. In contrast to other East Asian monarchies, Japan had only one ruling line, which the Japanese supposed to be “unbroken for ages eternal.” Also unlike other East Asians, the Japanese balked at the notion that their emperor could subordinate himself to any other ruler. They therefore refused to participate in the Chinese tributary system, which required accepting the suzerainty of China’s emperor. This did not mean, however, that Japanese emperors exercised political power. From early

times, in fact, they were figureheads whose main function was to legitimize the position of those who actually ruled. Thus, Japan's feudal overlord, the shogun, claimed to be the emperor's military deputy and to govern the country on his behalf.²

The chief political problem facing shoguns was not controlling the emperor (whom they kept under virtual house arrest) but their own unruly vassals. Rebellion and civil war were endemic in feudal Japan. One solution was to divert samurai energies into foreign conquest, and China was chosen as a target. In the 1590s Japanese armies swept into Korea on the way to China. They were stopped but at great human and material cost to the Koreans and Chinese. The Tokugawa shoguns (1603–1867) devised a different approach to maintaining domestic order. This involved minimizing disruptive external influences such as Christianity by sealing off the country from the world. Japanese were forbidden to travel abroad and foreigners were excluded except for a handful of closely supervised merchants. National seclusion was complemented by the imposition of political controls on feudal lords to prevent them from fighting among themselves or challenging Tokugawa supremacy.

The Tokugawa system of “centralized feudalism” and national isolation was in some ways quite successful, and laid the groundwork for Japan's subsequent modernization.³ It gave the Japanese more than 250 years of peace and order during which agriculture, trade, and towns flourished. Despite feudal divisions, a national economy developed around the giant cities of Edo (modern Tokyo) and Osaka. Peasants became attuned to market incentives and some prospered. There were, of course, problems. Japan's feudal rulers never found a way to tap the country's growing wealth, with the result that many samurai fell into poverty. Not all peasants benefited from the commercialization of agriculture, and recurrent waves of rural rioting testified to their discontent. Still, social and political discipline never broke down. In contrast to other East Asian countries, Tokugawa Japan was extraordinarily orderly and stable. It was also highly nationalistic, at least as far as the samurai were concerned. No change during the Tokugawa period was more important than the transformation of the samurai from rustic swordsmen into educated bureaucrats. Although they never abandoned their warrior ethos, they modeled themselves on Chinese mandarins and idealized China from afar. Measured against the Chinese ideal, however, feudal Japan was a backward, “barbarian” society. In reaction to their sense of inferiority, samurai turned to intellectual movements that extolled Japan's uniqueness and superiority, often in Shinto terms. This focused attention on the emperor who, cloistered and powerless as he was, acquired increased importance as a symbol of the nation and native values. Reverence for the emperor became something of a cult among late Tokugawa samurai. Imperial loyalism did not necessarily pose a political threat to the Tokugawa, but it could do so under the right circumstances, and the coming of the West provided those circumstances.

Joining the West

The mid-nineteenth century advent of the West, with its overwhelming power and imperialist ambitions, posed a crisis for Japan and other East Asian states. Their first reaction was to try to drive off the Westerners by force, but it soon became obvious that this was futile. East Asia's military equipment and techniques, geared to seventeenth-century warfare, were no match against European steam warships, repeating rifles and modern artillery. Rather than go down fighting against this juggernaut, most East Asian rulers acceded to Western demands. These typically included the cession of territory and the signing of “unequal treaties”—non-reciprocal agreements that limited import duties on Western goods and established enclaves (“treaty ports”) where Westerners could reside and trade under the protection of their own laws, courts, and gunboats.

Many East Asian governments built up Western-style military forces in hopes of fending off further encroachments. These efforts, carried out under the slogan of “self-strengthening,” involved importing Western arms, training troops to use them, and setting up arsenals and shipyards. Some self-strengthening programs, notably that of Imperial China, produced impressive-looking results. Between the 1860s and 1880s, the Chinese developed a modern fleet and army equipped with the latest weapons, including German-made artillery. However, these forces performed poorly in the 1884–85 Sino-French war over Vietnam. Problems included poor leadership and morale, but behind these lay pervasive official corruption and indifference. China’s mandarins were hostile to even limited military Westernization—a mindset shared by most other East Asian elites. A few recognized that the only way to compete with the West was to become like it by adopting its science and technology, its industrial capitalism, and its nation-state mode of political organization. Such people were, however, voices crying in the wilderness. East Asians, both elites and non-elites, generally thought in terms of defending the traditional order, not remaking it in the image of the West.⁴

Japan followed a different course, transforming itself within a generation into a Western-style nation-state with a modern industrial base and East Asia’s most powerful military.⁵ Few predicted this. In the 1850s and 1860s, Japan was an isolated feudal backwater with an unusually xenophobic ruling class. American warships opened the country in 1853–54, forcing the Tokugawa to accept unequal treaties. Anti-foreign samurai zealots resisted this “pollution” of their divine country by assassinating Westerners and organizing a movement among feudal lords to overthrow the Tokugawa shogunate in the name of the emperor. By the late 1860s, however, most of these activists had converted to the view that Japan’s salvation lay in emulating the West. Demonstrations of Western power, such as the leveling of a Japanese city by British warships, assisted in this process. So, too, did closer familiarity with the Westerners and their ways, which convinced them of the necessity for drastic reform that went far beyond self-strengthening. In contrast to other East Asian elites, their military outlook enabled them to quickly grasp the political and economic prerequisites of military power. And as ambitious but low-ranking members of a feudal hierarchy in which status was fixed by birth, the activists had little attachment to the existing order.

The first priority of samurai reformers was seizing power. They accomplished this in the “Meiji Restoration” of 1868 in which the Tokugawa surrendered to the then fifteen-year-old emperor Meiji, thus reestablishing direct imperial rule after a thousand-year hiatus. Or so it seemed. Although the Meiji emperor (who died in 1912) proved to be more than a figurehead, he was no autocrat. His basic role was to legitimize decisions taken by his samurai advisors and serve as the focus of national loyalty in the Western-style nation-state they sought to build. They quickly decided that Japan’s feudal order was incompatible with this objective and had to be dismantled. Feudal lords were induced to hand over their domains in return for generous pensions. The samurai were too numerous to be pensioned off and were abolished as a class by fiat. Many found employment in the new order, but some rebelled and were put down by force. Peasants were bewildered by these changes. They initially felt no loyalty to the emperor and were unconcerned about the fate of the nation. Some resisted paying taxes to the new government and rioted against its innovations such as the building of railway lines. But most were accustomed to obeying political authority and acquiesced. The Meiji leadership attached great importance to turning “non-participant” peasants into patriotic citizens. It relied on indoctrination, instituting conscription and universal primary education largely for this purpose. Peasant conscripts and schoolchildren were encouraged to see themselves as successors of the vanishing samurai class, and to take over its warrior ethos and selfless loyalty to the emperor.

Most Japanese soon identified strongly with the new regime and its objectives of nation building and Westernization. As unsettling and disruptive as these changes were, they offered unprecedented opportunities for individual advancement or—in the popular Meiji phrase—“rising in the world.” This reflected another equally important side of Meiji modernization: economic development. Here agriculture was the key. It had to provide the taxes on which the government relied to finance its reforms; the exports the country needed to pay for its manufactured imports; and enough of a surplus to feed its growing population. Had Japan’s agrarian economy not been up to these tasks, the modernization program might have faltered. But agricultural production and productivity rose steadily in Meiji Japan, more than meeting its requirements. Although the government played an important role in stimulating growth, the impetus came chiefly from private entrepreneurs, particularly wealthy peasants, who seized commercial opportunities offered by the opening of the country to foreign trade and the elimination of feudal restrictions on the movement of people and goods. Such entrepreneurs also took the lead in Japan’s industrialization, which was based at first on silk reeling (essentially a peasant handicraft industry) and then on mechanized cotton spinning. Heavy industry and other large-scale economic enterprises—organized in “zaibatsu” or giant conglomerates—developed more slowly and depended on government subsidies and protection.

In short, through a combination of government and private initiative, Meiji Japan “joined the West,” becoming a Westernized Asian country and, in the process, distancing itself from most of the rest of East Asia, which fell under Western colonial or semi-colonial control.

“Quitting Asia”

The goals of Meiji modernization were summed up in two popular slogans of the era: “Civilization and Enlightenment,” and “Strong Military, Wealthy Country.” The psychological dynamic behind both was the stigma of weakness and inferiority, which Japanese felt in relation to the “advanced” countries of the West. The most galling symbols of this inferiority were the unequal treaties that the Tokugawa shogunate had been forced to conclude in the 1850s and 1860s and which the Meiji government inherited. Persuading the Western powers to relinquish their treaty privileges and deal with Japan on an equal basis was a top Meiji priority, and was assumed to require convincing Westerners that Japan was “civilized.” This preoccupation drove many aspects of Japan’s modernization, from the discouragement of mixed public bathing (which Westerners frowned upon) to the adoption in 1889 of a constitution modeled on Germany’s (which they applauded).

Another side of Japan’s drive for equality with the West was its pursuit of military power and empire.⁶ The Western-dominated world that Japan faced in the late nineteenth century was a dangerous place for weak non-Western states. The European “scramble for colonies” was in full swing in Africa, Asia, and the Pacific. The Japanese watched nervously as most of their Southeast Asian neighbors were taken over by Western imperialist powers—Burma and Malaya by the British; Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia by the French; the Indonesian archipelago by the Dutch; and the Spanish Philippines by the Americans. (Thailand, then known as Siam, survived as a buffer state between the French and British.) In Northeast Asia, China and Korea preserved their independence, but both were weak and vulnerable to the Europeans, particularly the Russians, whose construction of the trans-Siberian railway seemed to presage a new imperialist advance. Many Japanese felt surrounded and in mortal danger. It appeared to be only a matter of time before the Europeans, having completed their conquest of the rest of Asia, would turn their attention to Japan. National survival dictated that Japan preempt them by using its newfound military power to build a continental empire of its own as a defensive rampart.

There were other reasons why the Meiji Japanese were attracted to empire building. The possession of colonies conferred status and respect in the Western international system; indeed, it was an attribute of “advanced” countries. Colonies were also assumed to be profitable to their owners, and some such as the Dutch East Indies (Indonesia) clearly were. Furthermore, colonialism seemed to conform to the natural order of things as expounded by widely accepted Social Darwinist and racial doctrines. Some nations (it was held) were fitted by nature to govern “lesser breeds” and were, in fact, obligated to do so in the best interests of such inferior peoples. European imperialists saw themselves in this light and some Japanese, supposing themselves to be descended from the gods and ruled by a semi-divine monarch, were inclined to emulate them. The notion that Japan was destined by its racial and cultural superiority to displace the West as the “ruler of Asia” was championed by patriotic societies composed largely of disgruntled ex-samurai with ultra-nationalist leanings.

Such views did not pass unchallenged. Pan-Asianism—the idea that Japan was part of Asia and had a mission to help it resist the West—was also embraced by Japanese who felt a strong sense of kinship with their fellow Asians and regarded them as equals.⁷ “Liberal” pan-Asianists of this sort were genuinely distressed by Asia’s plight under Western domination. Hoping that the example of Japan’s modernization might stimulate Asia’s regeneration, they extended encouragement and aid to nationalist reformers in China, Korea, and other countries. But many soon despaired of this cause, including Fukuzawa Yukichi, Meiji Japan’s leading educator. In the mid-1880s, he counseled his countrymen to “quit Asia and join the West,” arguing that other Asians were incapable of reform and that Japan would only tar itself with the brush of Asian backwardness by identifying with them. Fukuzawa’s advice struck a chord. By the 1880s, most Japanese saw themselves as forming an enclave of progress and modernity that had little in common with the rest of Asia, including once-admired China. They felt no solidarity with other Asians and, indeed, looked down upon them as weak and “uncivilized.” Pan-Asianism continued to enjoy some appeal, but it was soon out of tune with public opinion and official policy.

The leaders of the Meiji government were arch-realists who had no interest in saving Asia from the West.⁸ Their objective was to gain control of enough territory to give Japan security, status, and economic gain within an international order that they assumed would be dominated indefinitely by stronger Western powers. They were cautious, having no illusions about Japan’s military capabilities relative to these powers. Their initial focus was on Korea, whose geographic proximity made it especially important to Japan’s security. In the 1870s, hotheads called for an invasion of the peninsula, but the top leadership ruled this out on the grounds that Japan was too weak to risk possible trouble with the Western powers or China, which claimed suzerainty over Korea. Until the early 1890s, Tokyo was content to accept Chinese predominance in hopes that the Korean monarchy would evolve into a stable, reformist regime friendly toward Japan. This, however, did not happen and as Korea slipped toward anarchy in 1894 the Japanese resolved to oust China by force to increase their influence on Korean affairs. The resulting Sino-Japanese war of 1894–95 was a Japanese rout. To the surprise of Western observers and the Japanese themselves, Chinese naval and land forces collapsed, and the Japanese could have taken Beijing had they chosen to do so. Elated by their success, the Meiji leaders imposed the same sort of peace terms that European imperialist powers routinely demanded of defeated non-Western states. China was required to withdraw from Korea, pay a large indemnity, cede Taiwan, grant Japan unequal treaty privileges, and lease it the strategic Liaotung Peninsula in southern Manchuria. Japan was, however, forced to “retrocede” Liaotung under pressure from the Russians who coveted it.

The war was immensely popular in Japan where it was celebrated as marking the triumph of Japanese modernity over Chinese backwardness and Japan’s entry into the Western imperialist “club.” But the Liaotung

retrocession showed that Japan was still a relatively weak player in imperialist power politics, and it soon faced a far more formidable adversary than China. Russia moved into Manchuria, persuading the Chinese to give it Liaotung, and intervened in Korean politics in ways that suggested that it viewed Korea as a possible protectorate. When St. Petersburg rejected Tokyo's offer of a settlement, Japan opted for war, this time having taken the precaution of concluding an alliance with Britain. The 1904–5 Russo-Japanese war proved costly in lives and treasure, but Japan ousted the Russians from southern Manchuria and gained a free hand in Korea, which it annexed in 1910. Perhaps more important, having defeated one of Europe's major powers, it achieved great power status, thus realizing the Meiji dream of equality with the West. In doing so, however, it withdrew psychologically from Asia. If many Asians looked upon Japan a beacon of hope in resisting the West, others, particularly Koreans and Chinese, saw it as an imperialist predator.

Japan's New Order: "Returning to Asia"

In the 1930s, Japan "returned to Asia." Rejecting the West, it proclaimed itself the liberator of Asia from Western dominance and the creator of a "New Order" of Asian nation-states that would cooperate and prosper under Japanese guidance. This was, of course, a complete reversal of the Meiji priorities of joining the West and "quitting Asia," and it led Japan into a disastrous war against the West in the early 1940s. Why the volte-face? Part of the answer lies in a resurgence of pan-Asianism. As noted above, pan-Asianism was a secondary facet of Japan's late nineteenth century response to the West, and there were several variants, including a "liberal" form that emphasized the equality of Asian peoples and Japan's role as a disinterested mentor of their advance toward freedom and modernity. Of greater relevance to Japan's behavior in the 1930s and early 1940s, however, was the second, illiberal form that was rooted in the nativist and ultra-nationalist preoccupations of the patriotic societies. Although it invoked the rhetoric of Asian brotherhood, it was fundamentally unconcerned with other Asians except as passive instruments of Japan's own revolt against the West.

Pan-Asianism was present from the early stages of Japan's late nineteenth century modernization. It had particular appeal to those who were alienated by the headlong Westernization of the 1870s and 1880s, which they felt was destroying Japan's cultural identity by turning Japanese into ersatz Westerners. None were more alienated than ex-samurai who failed to adapt to the new society rising around them and found themselves consigned to its margins as anachronistic outsiders. Some gravitated into patriotic societies, which offered them a new vocation as defenders of traditional values and agitators for overseas military expansion. These goals were linked in their ideology of "restorationism."⁹ The Meiji Restoration, they believed, had been hijacked by pro-Western enthusiasts who had led Japan into slavish adulation of the West. What was needed was a second or "true" restoration in which corrupting Western influences would be swept away and Japanese would unite in perfect harmony under the emperor. Thus purified, Japan would undertake a sacred mission to drive the West out of Asia and extend the blessings of imperial benevolence and the "Japanese Way" to its suffering peoples.

The patriotic societies' supposedly selfless loyalty to the emperor and exemplification of admired samurai virtues gave them an influence out of proportion to their relatively small numbers. However, their radicalism put them outside the mainstream of Japanese thought and politics. In the 1910s and 1920s, Japan seemed firmly set on the Meiji course of becoming part of the West. Industrialization proceeded apace, creating new urban and working classes attuned to Western fads, fashions, and ideologies. Japan moved toward Western-style parliamentary democracy as political power passed into the hands of party politicians who catered to a

mass electorate. It also joined the Western powers at the 1921–22 Washington Conference in creating a new international order in East Asia, in which old-fashioned imperialist power politics were replaced by naval disarmament, mutual forbearance, and multilateral consultation. But all was not well in “Jazz Age” Japan. Farmers, who constituted the bulk of the population, did not share in the general prosperity and experienced growing distress. Many Japanese were appalled at what they considered to be the corrosive effects of Westernization, such as the spread of communism and mounting labor strife. And the powerful military establishment was alienated by the Washington Treaty System, which it saw as compromising Japan’s security and tying its hands on the continent.

The restorationism espoused by the patriotic societies offered a solution to Japan’s ills that many found attractive, especially in the military. Its appeal was heightened by the sense of national crisis created by the catastrophic effects of the Great Depression on Japan and the threat to its Manchurian “lifeline” posed by rising Chinese nationalism. In the early 1930s, the military displaced pro-Western party leaders and proceeded to reorient Japan’s domestic and foreign policies in line with restorationist priorities. Liberal democracy was snuffed out; “emperor worship” was elevated to a fever pitch; the repression of dissidents was intensified; and symbols of Western cultural decadence were banned. Abandoning diplomatic cooperation with the West, the military also embarked on the “liberation” of Asia and the establishment of an anti-imperialist New Order. The first step was the 1931–32 takeover of Manchuria. When the Chinese resisted further encroachments, Japan launched an all-out invasion of China in 1937 to forcibly incorporate it into its New Order. As the “China Incident” became an unwinnable war of attrition—at horrific cost to the Chinese people—Japanese leaders shifted their attention to Southeast Asia where German victories in Europe in 1940 rendered European colonies vulnerable. This brought Tokyo into a confrontation with the United States which now drew the line, viewing Japanese expansion as part of a larger and more menacing Axis threat. Faced with a crippling American-led oil embargo in 1941, Japan opted for war and struck first with a surprise attack on the American Pacific Fleet in Hawaii.¹⁰

The Failed Crusade

Most Japanese saw the war against the West as akin to a religious crusade; indeed, they described it as a “holy war.” By the early 1940s, Japan had become a theocratic family-state in which loyalty to the emperor—the grandson of the Meiji emperor—assumed cult-like proportions far more intense and pervasive than earlier. Shinto mythology was accepted as holy writ and literal belief in the divine descent of the Japanese people became unchallenged orthodoxy. The emperor was viewed not only as the personification of the nation and its theoretically absolute ruler, but as a sacred father figure and the source of morality and truth. Anything less than total devotion to him was considered to be heresy and was dealt with as such by the “thought police” who sought, with some success, to induce ideological deviants like communists to recant and rejoin the national fold of true believers. There were, however, few identifiable dissidents. Social pressures for conformity and national unity saw to that. Elements of Japan’s Westernized elite had reservations about the emperor cult and the uses to which it was being put by the military, but they mostly kept their doubts to themselves rather than risk censure as being unpatriotic.

There was a jarring disconnect between the pan-Asian ideals of New Order Japan and its exaltation of Japanese uniqueness and superiority. Pan-Asianists tried to get around this difficulty by likening Asia to a family of peoples in which Japan played the role of a benevolent “elder brother” to its less advanced siblings. But Japanese behavior belied fraternal solicitude. Koreans, for example, were denied the status of a separate nation

and were subjected to rigorous “Japanization” intended to blot out their sense of national identity and convert them into second-class Japanese. Chinese were treated as a distinct people and key partners in Japan’s New Order. But while Japanese esteemed China in the abstract for its past greatness, they held Chinese in contempt for their present backwardness. This was abundantly demonstrated by the brutality and ruthlessness of Japanese troops. The 1937 “Rape of Nanking,” in which rampaging Japanese soldiers killed several hundred thousand Chinese civilians, is the most notable example of such behavior. The Japanese did find some Chinese collaborators and set up a puppet regime in 1940. However, they failed to “win the hearts and minds” of the Chinese, and succeeded only in inspiring mass resistance.

Japan encountered a more positive response in Southeast Asia. Its initial military superiority enabled it to easily overrun this area in early 1942, inflicting humiliating defeats on the British, Dutch and Americans. (The pro-Axis Vichy French colonial regime in Indochina was kept in place under Japanese supervision.) These defeats, particularly the February 1942 British surrender in Singapore, sounded the death knell of colonialism by shattering the myth of Western invincibility, which had sustained it since the mid-nineteenth century. Japan’s victories also brought it the support of many Southeast Asian nationalists, who were attracted by its call for “Asia for Asians” and its promises of national independence, albeit under Japanese guidance. Burmese nationalists accompanied invading Japanese troops and the military regime of Thailand allied itself with Japan and joined it in declaring war on the United States.

Japan integrated Southeast Asia into its East Asian New Order, which it renamed the “Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere.” (East Asia, as defined by the Japanese, comprised Japan, Korea, Manchuria, and north China.) In theory, Japan was to serve as the industrial hub of this area, absorbing its exports of primary products and providing its manufactured imports. In practice, the Japanese used Greater East Asia mainly as a source of raw materials for their overstretched war economy, and even this soon broke down owing to transport difficulties. In Southeast Asia, the result was unemployment, inflation, and growing discontent, which was exacerbated by Japan’s demands for forced labor and the arrogance of its troops. Japan nevertheless proceeded with the political side of its liberationist agenda; indeed, it became vital to do so as support for the Co-Prosperity Sphere waned. It granted nominal independence to Burma and the Philippines in 1943 and courted nationalists elsewhere. In the end, however, many of Japan’s erstwhile allies turned against it, including the Thai and Burmese.¹¹

Japan’s New Order collapsed not because of Asian resistance but because Japan was defeated in the Pacific by the United States. This was foreseen by some, including a few prescient Japanese, from the beginning. In the United States, Japan faced an adversary with an economy ten times larger than its own and with industrial and technological capabilities Japan could not match. Even with the resources of Greater East Asia behind it, Japan was doomed to a long war. Its only chance was to land an early blow severe enough to induce the Americans to make peace on terms advantageous to Japan. The Pearl Harbor attack failed to accomplish this, as did the June 1942 carrier battle of Midway, which resulted in a Japanese defeat. The Japanese-American war in the Pacific thereafter ground slowly but bloodily toward its inevitable conclusion. It took time for the United States to gear up its war economy, and it attached a higher priority to defeating Nazi Germany. By late 1944, however, Japanese naval and air power was largely destroyed; Japan’s economy was being strangled; and the home islands came under long-range aerial bombardment. Japan’s military leaders resolved to make a suicidal last stand, but the American use of atomic weapons and the Soviet Union’s attack induced the emperor to accept unconditional surrender in August 1945.

The unprecedented trauma of total defeat and foreign occupation resulted, almost overnight, in the collapse of the psychological and ideological underpinnings of Imperial Japan. The Japanese people turned away en masse from the claims and demands of their hitherto all-powerful state. Emperor worship melted away, leaving only a residue of respect and affection for the imperial institution as a benign symbol of the nation. Patriotism and militarism were discredited, as was the mission of liberating Asia from the West. Indeed, post-surrender Japan quit Asia and embraced the West more completely than ever before. Under the eager tutelage of their American occupiers, the Japanese remade themselves into a democratic “peace state.” The crowning achievement of this effort was the 1947 rewriting of their constitution to ban (in Article Nine) resort to war and the possession of a military. Even in defeat, the Japanese did not cease to see themselves as a chosen people, but their consciousness of having a unique national destiny was now redirected toward the pursuit of “peace and democracy.”¹²

Cold War Japan

The outbreak of the Cold War confronted Japanese with the dilemma of reconciling their newfound pacifism with the requirements of national security in a dangerous and divided world. Many on the Left favored “unarmed neutrality,” trusting in the goodwill of Japan’s neighbors and the cooperative ideals of the United Nations. Old-line conservatives considered this hopelessly naïve. They advocated reviving patriotism, rebuilding Japan’s military, and reentering the rough-and-tumble of international politics as an active ally of the United States in its global effort to contain communism. In the 1950s, the Japanese conducted a “great debate” on the merits of these opposing approaches, which generated much emotional heat and sometimes spilled over into violent demonstrations. Most Japanese were willing to accept alignment with the United States, but they strongly opposed any attempt to recreate the prewar state.

Moderate conservatives devised a compromise that eventually gained widespread acceptance.¹³ Under it, Japan allied itself with the United States, thereby gaining the shelter of the American nuclear umbrella. Beyond hosting U.S. forces and diplomatically supporting Washington’s Cold War policies, however, it assumed no reciprocal security obligations. Indeed, few Japanese were conscious of being “allies” of the United States and the term was rarely used until the 1980s. Japan did reestablish a small army, navy and air force, euphemistically called “Self-Defense Forces” (SDF), but they were configured strictly for homeland defense and denied offensive weaponry, and their constitutionality long remained in dispute. Tokyo firmly rebuffed Washington’s requests that it participate in NATO-style collective security arrangements, arguing that Japan’s “no-war” constitution forbade this and, indeed, any use of force except in self-defense. It invoked the same argument to justify its abstention from UN peacekeeping operations, despite its acceptance of the UN Charter that explicitly endorses collective security. With the approval of most Japanese, Tokyo adopted a “low profile” foreign policy that eschewed political risks and initiatives.

Japan’s avoidance of international political-military responsibilities was not only—or perhaps even primarily—inspired by pacifist idealism. The Japanese embrace of pacifism went hand in hand with their rejection of the state and what it stood for: self-sacrificing patriotism, involvement in international power politics, and entanglement in the quarrels and rivalries of other countries.¹⁴ In the 1960s, the Japanese turned inward toward family, home, and workplace, and old values were reprogrammed to serve new purposes. The samurai ethic of selfless loyalty shifted from the state to the company, producing the “salaryman,” the social archetype of postwar Japan. Habits of saving and hard work, previously rationalized in terms of service to the state, were redirected to the accumulation of consumer goods and the enjoyment of a middle-class lifestyle modeled on that of Americans. Pride in nation did not disappear, but it was redefined, as was the national purpose. The

Meiji era goal of becoming a powerful and “civilized” country was revived. However, this no longer meant building a strong military. Instead, postwar Japanese saw themselves as excelling in the arts of peace and industry. They championed world peace and disarmament, and celebrated Japan’s achievements in this area, such as its renunciation of nuclear weapons, its ban on arms exports, and its limitation of defense spending to 1 percent of GNP. They also took pride in Japan’s remarkable economic growth, which averaged 10 percent a year in the 1960s, making it the world’s third-largest economy after the United States and the Soviet Union, and “Asia’s new giant.”

Japan’s postwar return to Asia was not a happy homecoming. Despite positive Southeast Asian memories of Japan’s role in shattering colonialism, the wartime behavior of its troops and Japan’s earlier imperialist record in China and Korea fed suspicions of its intentions, which were not dispelled by its proclaimed conversion to pacifism and democracy. Part of the problem was beyond Japan’s control. Historical anti-Japanese struggles occupied a prominent place in the national mythologies of the Chinese and Koreans, with the result that patriotism was largely equated with being anti-Japanese. (This was less true among Southeast Asian nationalists, for whom Western imperialists were the chief historical villains.) It did not help, however, that few Japanese felt any remorse over Japan’s wartime conduct in Asia or, indeed, knew much about it. Most remembered only the Pacific War and the suffering it inflicted on Japan, especially the unique horror of the atomic bomb. They assumed, moreover, that accounts had been settled by the postwar punishment of Japanese war criminals and Japan’s payment of reparations. This posture did not sit well with many Asians, who saw in it the refusal of the Japanese to face up to their war guilt and, in the eyes of some, their revanchist tendencies. Such suspicions were fueled by provocative public statements by right-wing Japanese politicians, who denied that Japan had anything to apologize for and claimed that atrocities like the Rape of Nanking were “fabrications” designed to humiliate and blackmail Japan.¹⁵

Although “history issues” clouded Japan’s relations with its Asian neighbors, particularly China and Korea, they did not prevent the development of close economic ties and a degree of political cordiality. This was, in part, a logical outcome of American Cold War strategy, which assigned Japan the role of industrial “workshop” in non-communist Asia. During the 1970s and 1980s, however, Japan’s economic presence in East Asia expanded far beyond the modest dimensions earlier anticipated by American planners. Tokyo actively courted the region, which it saw as a natural arena for Japan to play an autonomous role in world affairs. The partial thawing of the Cold War in Asia, brought about by the 1971–72 Sino-American rapprochement, facilitated Japan’s advance. The opening of Communist China and the rise of ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) provided the Japanese with valued new partners. Japan’s attractiveness was enhanced by its deep aid pockets and by the success of its export-oriented industrialization and system of close government-business collaboration, which many East Asian countries sought to emulate. Japanese investment poured into the region, particularly after the sharp appreciation of the yen in 1985 made it more advantageous for Japanese firms to relocate their manufacturing operations offshore. As the Cold War wound down, Japan seemed to be emerging as Asia’s economic leader and, in the view of some, a possible challenger of American preeminence.

The notion of Japan as a potential rival of the United States in Asia was not entirely fanciful. The U.S.-Japan alliance appeared to be weakening. Although it was widely accepted in Japan, and bilateral military cooperation increased in the 1980s, there were growing American complaints about Japanese “free riding on defense” and “unfair trade practices.” On the Japanese side, this criticism stoked anti-American feeling, which was sharpened by pride in Japan’s economic accomplishments and prowess. A 1989 best-seller by a prominent Japanese nationalist—*A Japan That Can Say No*—expressed this defiant mood, suggesting that Japan use the leverage provided

by American dependence on Japanese high-tech industries to flatly reject unreasonable demands by Washington. At the same time, long dormant Japanese pan-Asianism revived. One source of this was a reaction against the early postwar “Americanization” of Japan, which was reflected in the popularity of writings that extolled Japanese racial and cultural uniqueness. In elite circles, there was talk about the superiority of Japanese over Western values and the desirability of making common cause with other Asians. Some predicted that Japan would seek to establish a “kinder, gentler” version of the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere.¹⁶

Post-Cold War Trends

The likelihood that Japan would again swing away from the West toward Asia was never very great and diminished in the post-Cold War era. In contrast to the 1930s, neither pan-Asianism nor its twin, anti-Westernism, had broad appeal. Most Japanese were quite satisfied with their affluent, Westernized lifestyle and saw no contradiction between it and being distinctively Japanese. Nor did they feel much solidarity with other Asians or manifest any great interest in Asian leadership. History issues continued to rankle, creating a barrier of mutual suspicion and resentment. Like their Meiji predecessors, moreover, “post-industrial” Japanese saw themselves as an island of modernity in a less advanced Asia sea. There was, to be sure, a national consensus on the need to maintain friendly and cooperative relations with the rest of Asia, and on Japan’s obligation to provide development assistance. But this consensus did not include a willingness to open Japan to “disruptive” Asian imports and immigrants, or to jeopardize vital economic and security ties with the West. Thus, a 1991 Malaysian proposal that Japan lead an East Asian bloc was rejected in favor of open, “Asia-Pacific” regionalism that would include the United States.

Efforts by pan-Asianists to push Japan closer to Asia encountered other obstacles, of which perhaps the most serious was the “rise of China.” Having assumed that Beijing’s developmental priorities would ensure cordial relations, Japanese were taken aback by its bellicosity and ill-concealed view of Japan as a rival and potential threat. The 1997–98 Asian financial crisis dealt a further blow to pan-Asianists by discrediting the Japanese economic model, revealing the weakness of ASEAN, and exposing the hollowness of Japan’s claim to be Asia’s leader. (Tokyo’s proposal for an Asian monetary fund was brushed aside by Washington, which insisted on IMF-prescribed reforms.) By the late 1990s, moreover, the Japanese were preoccupied with their own economic difficulties, which threatened Japan’s prosperity and, in the view of many, the viability of its sociopolitical system. Asia declined in the scale of national priorities and domestic support weakened for maintaining high levels of development assistance, hitherto Tokyo’s principal instrument for exercising influence in the region.¹⁷

As Asia became less inviting, Japan tilted toward the United States. The American alliance, the sheet anchor of Japan’s security for half a century, assumed increased importance to a nation no longer sure of its bearings and buffeted by novel and unsettling pressures from within and without. The chief political beneficiaries of this were the heirs of the conservative nationalists of the 1950s, who called for building a stronger and more equal alliance by making Japan a “normal country”—that is, casting off the constraints of its Peace Constitution, reviving patriotism, and assuming international political-military burdens commensurate with its Great Power status. Tentative moves in this direction began in the 1980s, but they accelerated in the late 1990s and early 2000s as “normalizers” capitalized on anger at North Korean provocations, fear of a possible China threat, and concern over American dissatisfaction with Japan’s passivity in military emergencies such as the 1994 North Korean nuclear crisis. The SDF was given power-projection capabilities and permitted to play a more active military role in the alliance, including providing logistical support to U.S. forces in regional contingencies and, in 2001, those engaged in Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) in Afghanistan.¹⁸

Conclusions

American observers saw in this trend an opportunity to bolster the U.S.-Japan alliance and perhaps even nudge Japan into becoming “the Britain of the Far East.”¹⁹ But there was a danger of exaggerating Japan’s willingness to embrace political-military “normalcy” and enter into a strategic partnership with the United States. Although conservative nationalists like Prime Minister Koizumi had the upper hand politically, they did not have a free hand. Pan-Asianists, backed by pacifists and multilateralists, warned that Japan was isolating itself from Asia and urged that priority be given to identifying with emerging Asian regionalism.²⁰ Moreover, while Japan’s newfound willingness to militarily support its American ally was groundbreaking, it was hedged in ways that suggested a still strong aversion to military force and collective security. (The SDF was, for example, kept out of harm’s way and prohibited from even indirectly supporting combat operations.) Japan’s postwar pacifist-isolationist consensus was, in other words, far from dead; nor was pan-Asianism a wholly spent force.

Where is Japan headed? In the short term, it seems reasonable to expect further incremental moves toward closer security cooperation with the United States. These moves are, however, likely to be tempered by a reluctance to foreclose Japan’s “Asia option” or jettison its pacifist-isolationist creed. This creed has, after all, served postwar Japan well, underpinning its prosperity and rise to eminence as an economic superpower, and post-Cold War Japan has as yet confronted no crisis which might justify its abandonment. Pacifism and isolationism are, moreover, reinforced by the calamitous failure of Imperial Japan’s Faustian drive for military power and political dominance between the 1890s and 1940s, which few Japanese want to risk repeating. Perhaps most important, pacifist isolationism comports with the historically ingrained “exceptionalism” of the Japanese—their sense of being a nation apart and following a different star than others.

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Notes

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