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The End of the “Special” U.S.-Japan Relationship
by John W. Dower

For many years now Japanese have found comfort in the words of Mike Mansfield, the former U.S. ambassador to Tokyo, who described relations with Japan as by far the most important bilateral relationship of the United States. That comfort may be misplaced. No one doubts that the U.S.-Japan relationship is important to both sides, and will remain so in the future. As we approach the twenty-first century, however, it seems clear that Japan plays a rather peculiar role in American thinking.

To begin with, Japan is less important to most Americans than the United States is to Japanese. Agonizing over what Americans think about Japan has become a national obsession in the Japanese media and in certain political circles. Americans, on the other hand, have little interest in what Japanese think of them. In this regard, the bilateral relationship is conspicuously asymmetrical.

At the same time, Japan plays an important *symbolic* role in the American mind, and a considerable part of this symbolism is negative. Japan is an important ally, but not really a trusted one. Over the course of the twentieth century Japan came to exemplify a threat not merely to the United States alone, but to a world order dominated by the Western powers.

This more negative aspect of the American (and European) image of Japan should not be exaggerated. Neither, however, can it be ignored. Many aspects of contemporary Japanese society are greatly admired in the West--among them high-quality workmanship, high educational levels, low crime rates, and a comparatively equitable distribution of wealth. Such genuine respect for Japanese accomplishments, however, does not dispel the perception of a threatening or untrustworthy Japan. These seemingly contradictory attitudes simply coexist--and in all likelihood will continue to coexist into the foreseeable future.

The American perception of a “Japanese threat” comes from many sources. At a deep visceral level, it undoubtedly reflects racial, cultural, and religious biases. More transparently, it is rooted in three specific historical developments that, as it happens, span the full course of the twentieth century.

The first of these momentous developments was Japan’s victory in the Sino-Japanese War of 1894-1895--exactly one-hundred years ago--followed by victory over Russia in 1905. Victory over China astonished Western observers and immediately established Japan as the preeminent rising power in Asia. Japan’s victory in the Russo-Japanese War confirmed this

impression of a new world power to be reckoned with--a power, moreover, that was neither "white" nor Christian nor grounded in the so-called humanistic traditions of the West. With these two stunning victories, Japan thus acquired a bifurcated or "double" image that has persisted over the entire course of this century. On the one hand, Japan clearly has "modernized" and "Westernized" more rapidly than any other non-Western nation. At the same time, Japan is racially and culturally conspicuously *non*-Western. Indeed, beginning with the Meiji Restoration and emperor-centered Meiji Constitution, the country's leaders have taken pains to build a modern nationalism by emphasizing these fundamental differences from the West. As a consequence, even while applauding Japan's victories over China and Russia, Americans and Europeans simultaneously transferred to Japan the mantle of the "yellow peril" they had originally assigned to China.

For almost exactly a century, in other words, Japan has played a schizophrenic role in Western eyes. It has been a model of "Westernization" and capitalistic industrial development. Simultaneously, it has been the most obvious symbol of an Asian threat to the global hegemony of the Western powers that began with the age of European conquest at the time of Columbus.

This perceived Japanese threat has had two subsequent incarnations that are indelibly etched in American popular consciousness. One, of course, is Pearl Harbor and the Pacific War. The other is the apprehension of a Japanese quest for global economic domination that emerged in the 1970s and persisted until the Japanese economic bubble burst in 1989.

It is difficult to exaggerate the emotional hold that Pearl Harbor and the war with Japan still retain in the United States. Although historians may argue about the facts, in popular consciousness the surprise attack on Pearl Harbor remains an indelible example of Japanese treachery. Beyond this, American veterans of the Pacific War, together with the mass media in general, have kept alive the memory of a peculiarly fanatical and atrocious Japanese enemy.

These harsh recollections of the Pacific War predictably have been revived with particular vigor this year, in connection with the fiftieth anniversary of the end of the war. Even Japanese who have devoted themselves to exposing Japan's own war responsibility and atrocities may not appreciate how bitterly Americans (and Englishmen, Australians, and the Dutch) recall such Japanese war behavior as the brutalization of Caucasian prisoners.

While internal Japanese debates tend to focus on Japanese atrocities vis-ö-vis other Asians, the Western media devote attention to such things as the great discrepancy in fatalities among prisoners of the Germans and the Japanese. Grim accounts of the Bataan Death March and Burma-Siam "death railway" are recirculated, and it is emphasized that whereas roughly four per cent of Anglo-American prisoners of the Germans died, the fatality rate among prisoners of the Japanese was in the neighborhood of thirty per cent.

There is, of course, a bias in this manner of accounting. Such a simple comparison fails to take into account the German slaughter of Soviet prisoners, to say nothing of the genocide of the Jews. Be that as it may, both during World War II and still today the Japanese

emerge in popular American and British media treatments as a more atrocious enemy than the Germans.

At the same time, it is virtually a cliché in the English-language media that even today, fifty years after the war, the Japanese remain unrepentant and unapologetic about Imperial Japan's aggression and atrocities against China and the rest of Asia, as well as the Western powers. Here again, the unfavorable contrast is with Germany. Whereas Germany's political leaders have eloquently expressed remorse and repentance for Nazi depredations, Japan's Mombusho bureaucrats and conservative political leaders have by contrast been conspicuously reluctant to criticize Japan's war conduct.

In my own estimation, there is a considerable element of hypocrisy and double standards in Americans accusing the Japanese of "sanitizing" history or of suffering from "historical amnesia." This ignores the serious engagement with issues of war responsibility that has taken place in the Japanese media in recent years, especially since the death of the Showa emperor. It also ignores the great extent to which Americans, especially at the leadership level, sanitize their own violent history--whether it be the genocide of Native Americans, the enslavement of Africans, the easy resort to weapons of mass destruction including the atomic bombs, or the almost casual slaughter of civilians in the Korean and Indochinese conflicts.

The unfavorable comparison with Germany also tends to romanticize the situation in Germany while demonizing the Japanese. Unregenerate contemporary German developments such as illicit as well as open weapons sales are neglected when homage is paid to Germany's "repentance" for its past militarism. Neglected also is the alarming rise of right-wing neo-Nazi groups. By contrast, where Japan is concerned the Western media tend to ignore both genuine grass-roots expressions of repentance (such as popular support for the *fusen ketsugi*, or 'renunciation of war resolution'), while also ignoring the impressive degree to which the so-called "spirit of Article Nine" (the no-war clause) has permeated popular consciousness in postwar Japan.

Nonetheless, the English-language media (and Asian media as well) have been effective in publicizing the utter failure of Japan's postwar political leadership to deal sincerely and effectively with the issue of Japan's war responsibility. Politically, postwar Japan has seemed incapable of producing a single statesman who could speak about the war in a manner that would persuade the world that Japan has come to terms with its past. Until these war accounts are settled, it will be difficult for Japan to expect trust concerning its present-day policies and intentions.

These perceptions concerning Japan and World War II help explain the recent controversy over the Smithsonian Institution's proposed exhibition on the use of the atomic bombs. While many American academics and ordinary citizens do emphasize the horror of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the prevailing sentiment is that the atomic bombs were necessary to end a terrible war against a fanatical and atrocious Japanese enemy that still refuses to acknowledge its own deeds.

In some respects, it is possible to draw a comparison between the United States and Japan on these matters. In both countries military-related lobbies (such as the American Legion and the *Izokukai*) have banded together with conservative politicians and other public figures to emphasize national victimization, and to place “patriotism” above an honest acknowledgment of the horrors of each country’s war behavior.

The lingering mistrust from the long-ago war has overlapped, since the 1970s, with Japan’s emergence as an unexpectedly influential player in the global economy. As the martial language of the “trade wars” reveals, there has been a sense on both sides of the Pacific that this new competition is, in considerable part, an economic continuation of the earlier military conflict.

For many Americans, this newest area of apprehension and mistrust toward Japan has several dimensions, some more apparent than others. First and most obviously, Americans have become immensely weary of the politics of the trade war. In American eyes, an uphill struggle to open Japan has been going on for a quarter century now. Former ambassador Mansfield may have spoken of a “special” relationship between the United States and Japan, but to most Americans today this simply means that the relationship is especially frustrating and exasperating. Every Japanese concession opening the domestic market appears to have come grudgingly and only after the exertion of immense *gaiatsu*, or pressure, by the U.S. Japanese bureaucrats may still be admired in the U.S. for their technocratic competence, but they are largely despised for their intransigence.

This deep U.S. weariness with Japan’s seemingly obsessive economic nationalism extends to individuals who are critical of America’s own irresponsible fiscal and economic policies. It also now extends to many former supporters of Japan. The economic impasse has dragged on too long, and Japan has exhausted the patience and good will of even erstwhile friends.

This decline of good will in the U.S. has been exacerbated, I think, by the hubris that accompanied Japan’s emergence as an economic superpower in the 1970s and 1980s. Certainly the image of “Japan as Number One” was a gross exaggeration. Nonetheless, before the collapse of the economic bubble in 1989, many people--including many Japanese--sincerely believed that Japan was on a trajectory that would soon enable it to surpass the United States.

During these brief, heady years, many Japanese political and economic leaders displayed an arrogance that may have been psychologically understandable, but that certainly gained Japan few friends. Japanese spoke of acquiring economic control of Hawaii and the west coast of the United States. They purchased symbolically conspicuous American properties such as Rockefeller Center, famous golf courses, and the great Hollywood studios, often at inflated prices. They preached the superiority of the “Japanese way of management.” They boasted that Europe would soon become Japan’s boutique, and the United States its granary.

Some of this nationalistic rhetoric and behavior was reminiscent of the arrogance that accompanied Japan's vaunted "Greater East Asia Co-Prosperty Sphere" a half century earlier. (It also was reminiscent of the rhetoric of America's age of capitalistic expansion of the late nineteenth century.) Whatever the reason, the conspicuously nationalistic behavior of many Japanese during this brief moment in the sun helped create a situation in which little foreign sympathy could be expected when the bubble burst, or when the yen became overvalued.

There is a more subtle dimension, however, to the negative psychological impact of Japan's emergence as an economic superpower. In the broad sweep of history, Japan's solitary moment in the sun surely will be seen as a relatively brief one. Historically, what is of greatest interest in these developments is not the rise of Japan per se, but rather the economic emergence of Asia as a whole as a significant player in the capitalist game. One speaks already not of a "Japanese century," but rather of a "Pacific century" or an "Asian century." It is not the "Japanese model" that is touted, but the broader notion of an "Asian model" or an "Asian-style capitalism."

In short, it is already apparent that Japan's impressive postwar economic accomplishments do not represent a unique "Japanese miracle." Rather, they are the harbinger of the emergence of Asia as a whole as a major center of economic and financial activity in the twenty-first century.

To Americans and Europeans, who have taken Western global domination for granted for half a millennium since the time of Columbus, this is an unnerving prospect. It conjures up old fears of the Yellow Peril. Those fears are compounded, moreover, by the fact that Asia's dramatic and unanticipated economic emergence coincides with an unprecedented and unpredictable revolution in technology and the mechanisms of international finance.

In this situation, a significant and somewhat ironic transformation appears to be taking place in the American perception of Asia. Just as Japan replaced China as the dominant power in the Orient almost exactly a century ago, now China is--at least in the eyes of many Americans--about to replace Japan.

We have seen this dream of "the China market" before in American history. This time, however, it seems far more realistic. Demographic numbers alone make the China market vastly more enticing than the Japan market. In addition to this, however, the emerging attraction to China also reflects the impatience and mistrust many Americans now feel toward Japan.

All sorts of unforeseeable factors may impede China's reemergence. These include not only the corrupt and undemocratic nature of the Chinese regime, but also the political and ideological unpredictability of the United States itself. Certainly Japan will remain a major player in these global games. If it is to reinvigorate its declining "special relationship" with the United States, however, it is clear that three very difficult tasks must be accomplished at the elusive but exceedingly important symbolic and psychological levels. And they must be accomplished soon.

First, Japan's top leadership must put the issue of Japanese "war responsibility" to rest in a manner the rest of the world deems sincere and appropriate. Second, within the next few years the Japanese bureaucracy must promote dramatic advances in opening the Japanese market. And third, Japan's leaders must find an appropriate international role and articulate it. In my own view Japan has a strong postwar tradition of democracy and anti-militarism that is more deeply rooted in the general public than among the political elite. And, ultimately, if the elite cannot or will not play a responsible international role, then it behooves the electorate to change the leadership.

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