When one looks into the eerie eyes of photos of Shoko Asahara, Supreme Leader of Aum Shinrikyo, one realizes that Nakane Chie was right. Japan is an amoral society; Japan has no soul, no purpose to pursue, no moral mission. As long as America played the role of parent, Japan was provided with parameters for its behavior and social goals toward which the nation could direct its effort. Whether the leadership in Japan and the U.S. are fully aware of the fact or not, this fifty year adolescence for Japan has ended, social structures are unraveling, and Japan, now affluent and influential, is adrift in the world without a compass.

Henry Kissinger has often stated that the democratic experiment in Japan has had a very short run and that the truly amazing trait of Japanese society is its ability to swing from one extreme to another--from extreme militarism to extreme pacifism--and even to generate a form of extreme capitalism. This should give pause, he has stated, to those who believe that Japan is a “permanent democracy, or a permanent anything.” One need not necessarily believe that Japan is on the verge of swinging into the kind of ruthless authoritarianism that characterized the Japanese state in the 1930s, but certainly Japan’s future domestic and international circumstances are going to be much more difficult to predict as American dominance ebbs.

Many in the U.S. have elected to ignore the realities of Japan’s empowerment and American loss of influence. In fact, the costs of maintaining the American empire seem evident to everyone except those running the realm. Despite the flurry of attention over the recently released Pentagon report, “United States Security Strategy for the East-Pacific Region,” better known as the “Nye Initiative,” the report’s promise of a long-term, stable American military presence in Asia is not credible given unfolding realities. Despite
Japan’s significant contributions to the cost of stationing U.S. troops there, at 83 yen to the dollar, American servicemen can hardly afford a bowl of soba. America is going into debt to Japan to the tune of $60 billion a year and seems completely unable to balance its trade with Japan and Asia. Quite rapidly, the American military is becoming a de facto mercenary of the Japanese state; and even Japan knows that this is not sustainable. When Bob Dole’s Kansas farmers and Newt Gingrich’s working class middle Americans finally figure out that the issue is not giving Japan a free ride, but that American troops have become outright employees of the Japanese government, the U.S.-Japan security set-up will be quickly gutted.

While it is not desired by the Japanese, American disengagement in Asia is coming. Other nations in the Asia Pacific also eager to somehow maintain the American military presence sense that the impotence of U.S. forces has grown dramatically since the fall of the Soviet Union. Certainly, risks abound in Asia and there is no doubt that a quick withdrawal of American troops would create a power vacuum leading to instability. But Japan and other nations in the region--while carefully monitoring North Korean nuclear intentions and attempting to manage the consequences of a militarily and economically empowered China--are no longer counting on the American cavalry to ride to the rescue.

The Japanese leadership also knows that the “50-year social system” is unraveling, and it is preparing its public for eventual separation from the parent. “Look towards Asia!” has been the rallying cry in Japanese business circles that are making an uncomplicated choice between American decline on one hand and erupting Asian growth rates on the other. And the “Re-Asianization of Asia” has been the nouveau theme among intellectuals, media leaders, and social commentators committed to forging a new pan-Asian identity. Certainly Malaysia’s Prime Minister Mahathir, Asia’s own Malcolm X, has done the most to make Japanese nationalists and believers in Asian co-prosperity schemes bolder and unafraid of comparisons with pre-war Japan. Inter-Asian trade has surpassed that between the United States and Japan, and column inches in newspapers dedicated to covering the U.S.-Japan relationship have been edged out by increasing coverage of Vietnam, Indonesia, Thailand, Malaysia, and China--all of which hold greater economic promise than the United States.

The problem is that Japan is ill-prepared for this new world. Fifty years of sacrifice for company and country have psychologically crippled the Japanese public. Faith in their so-called post-war democracy has been undermined by the constancy of political corruption scandals and by revelations that the American CIA helped destroy Japan’s only viable political opposition to conservative rule. A great many Japanese are wealthy, but they are lost. Indeed, the recent gas attacks in Tokyo’s subway system reflect the most extreme corner of the psychological wasteland that Japan has become; Aum Shinrikyo and other proliferating cults attract the alienated rich, members of the younger generation who find themselves affluent but without purpose. The fact that the yakuza outperformed the Japanese state in providing relief to victims in the Kobe earthquake only heightens the sense of disconnect between a floundering public and a government without mandate. To make matters even more farcical, the public has rejected accomplished bureaucrats in important Tokyo and Osaka elections and has opted instead to give the governors’ offices in its two most powerful cities to off-the-wall television comedians.
Today, all of the political parties are melting down. The LDP and former LDPers are split not on policy but are driven solely by survival strategies; party platforms mean nothing and have been manipulated beyond recognition by politicians doing anything to remain in politics. Japan has a Socialist prime minister, presiding over a party that soon may cease to exist. Other parties are forming, dissolving, reorganizing, as they contend with the fact that the Japanese political system has lost its legitimacy with the public. They will flounder for some time, kicking and agonizing through a series of elections, until some kind of social contract is reestablished.

And yet the yen rate is 83 to the dollar. This strong currency belies the diffidence of an insecure and frustrated Japanese people who lack the sense of vision expected of one of the world’s strongest economies. Japan is clearly on automatic pilot. Bureaucrats watch over their turf, making no great changes in what they do tomorrow from what they did yesterday. On automatic pilot, the Japanese government and corporate structures can fly for a long time. But the world’s expectations—for instance, that Japan will correct its mounting current accounts surplus, or make monumental and needed market opening concessions, or move beyond tokenism in its participation in U.N. peacekeeping activities—require Japan to demonstrate leadership. And this will be undercut by a dysfunctional society struggling to develop a new identity. Perhaps the best use of the strong yen would be to import social psychologists and therapists to help Japan find its way. Until then, America needs to be bearish on Japan’s capabilities and should begin worrying less about what Japan should do and more about what America needs to do to protect its own interests in an uncertain world.

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Addressing Japan’s Cartels of the Minds
by Ambassador Walter F. Mondale

In a letter dated 25 April 1995, U.S. Ambassador to Japan Walter F. Mondale wrote to JPRI Board Member Ivan Hall expressing serious concern about the poor treatment by Japan’s Ministry of Education of long-term foreign lecturers, gaikokujin kyoshi, at Japan’s national universities. Intellectual exchange with Japan is largely a one-way street which Hall has already outlined in JPRI Working Paper No. 3, Academic Apartheid in Japan, and JPRI Working Paper No. 9, Academic Apartheid Revisited. This matter is of continuing concern and deserves the attention of those who wish to establish reciprocity in international exchange and challenge Japan’s cartels of the mind. Segments of Ambassador Mondale’s letter to Ivan Hall follow:
It was a pleasure to meet with you and the delegation of foreign lecturers. I only wish it had been under better circumstances. As I shared with the group, I am concerned about the recent and impending dismissals of long-term foreign lecturers at Japanese national universities. I am particularly sympathetic to the situation of those teachers so close to retirement.

...In addition to the press release which we produced immediately following our meeting, we sent a letter to the Director of the Ministry of Education’s Higher Education Bureau asking for clarification of Japanese government policy regarding the employment of foreign lecturers. We have also been in touch with the British Council, the German Embassy and the German Academic Exchange Service regarding this issue. As you know, I have spoken publicly about the subject as well, including in a presentation I gave at the Asahi Shimbun last Tuesday.

I am a strong proponent of the value and importance of academic exchange of faculty and students in maintaining a strong and sound relationship. Therefore I was very disappointed to hear that a number of these foreign lecturers will not be replaced. It is in both of our best interests to encourage and welcome foreign faculty and students to our campuses.

I remain interested and concerned.

Walter F. Mondale