

Fifty Years After Pearl Harbor: The Future of U.S.-Japan Relations

By Richard V. Allen

Judging from the avalanche of information, analysis, and retrospective about Japan's unprincipled and wanton attack against the fleet at Pearl Harbor fifty years ago, it might be best if we could pass quietly by December 7th, the day that truly has lived in infamy.

This is not to suggest that we ignore the enormous sacrifice, human and material, that this country made to respond to Japan's aggression and to restore peace and stability to the Pacific region. Nor is it to suggest that we should lose the opportunity to remind Japan that these memories have very deep roots in our national consciousness, and that the United States, fortunately, would never again permit itself to be in such a vulnerable military position vis-a-vis a potential aggressor.

To be sure, especially for those of us who can actually remember that day, as I can, there is an enormous sense of nostalgic remembrance about December 7th, for it was a turning point in our lives, an historical determinant of our future.

Three weeks short of my sixth birthday in December 1941, I can vividly recall the news of the attack pouring out of the Philco radio in the living room of our New Jersey home. I asked my father what "war" meant, and cannot recall his answer. The next day he bought a rifle and a short-wave radio; our neighbors became air raid wardens, policing the local gentry and making sure our lights were off when the sirens took us into alerts.

Forty-eight months later, in August 1945, while at summer camp in the New Jersey pinelands, I saw a huge headline, which I'll never forget, in the *Philadelphia Daily News* that said, simply, "A-Bomb May Win War." Within days it was all over; Japan's military power had been crushed, and the nation lay in ruins.

Little did I realize that my initial, distant, but clearly hostile encounter with Japan during those years of World War would be tempered by the extraordinary opportunity I have had to examine that country, its people, its culture, and its values from the perspective of scholar, government official, and businessman.

Effective Psychological Warfare. Like all children in their formative years during the War, I was deeply influenced by the masterful and massive psychological domestic warfare campaign against Japan—extraordinarily racist in content and tone—designed to engender hatred and loathing of the enemy. It was everywhere—in the comic strips, on the radio, in the movies—and it was intensive. No one in America could withstand the effectiveness of this no-holds-barred campaign against Japan—and, indeed, it provided the nation with the gritty determination to visit massive destruction and grief against the nation that had conducted a cowardly sneak attack against our country.

Thus, when I first visited Japan in late 1967, I was prepared for virtually anything. To my surprise and amazement, no one wanted to talk about the past. Only the future mattered to my interlocutors, some of them of great political stature, and they offered no signs of resentment toward

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the United States. By and large, over more than twenty years, and thousands of contacts at all levels, the attitude of Japanese I have known has remained constant, in the sense that respect for this country has been a permanent factor. I believe that most Japanese today continue to respect this country, and they hope for American leadership in the world as well as for American prosperity at home.

“Communications Gap.” But, as we turn to the theme of this brief discourse, the future of U.S.-Japan relations, we do so in a highly charged atmosphere, laden with emotion and even outright hostility. The atmosphere in this country is thick with suspicion and rancor, and the future of our relationship with Japan even promises to become an issue in the 1992 Presidential campaign.

From where I sit at the moment, I conclude that this drift, dangerous as it is, is becoming steadily worse. The so-called “communications gap” that I discovered in the late 1960s is today deeper and wider than it was then, despite all that has occurred in the intervening years.

If I were an airline pilot, I'd be warning my passengers to buckle in tight as we approach a zone of substantial, if not extreme, turbulence. Turbulence of this type can weaken the structure of an aircraft, or even destroy it. Of course, there is very little chance that we will witness an epochal event in Japanese-American relations, or that there will be a single, dramatic moment of catastrophe. But it is entirely possible that the zone of turbulence will be prolonged, and that to exit it safely, we may have to, or may be forced to, change course. And if we change course, we will henceforth be on a different footing entirely with Japan.

In the more than two decades I have been observing the process of U.S.-Japan relations, there have been many tense moments. Typically driven by sectoral trade disputes, disagreements between the two countries were usually resolved by negotiations accompanied by pressures and, sometimes, threats. Almost always a solution, or at least a stop-gap remedy, has been found. Whether it was textiles, specialty steel, television sets, consumer electronics, or automobiles, negotiators on both sides ultimately worked their way to a form of resolution. It has been interesting to watch, and sometimes participate in, this never-ending cycle of sectoral disputes: Each time, the Japanese concluded with satisfaction that relations had returned to normal, only to be disappointed by the emergence of another trade dispute that threatened to disrupt the harmony they prefer in their brand of diplomacy. For our part, while we have not distinguished ourselves by arguing about barriers to U.S. beef, citrus, and now rice exports to Japan, we have become increasingly willing to protect U.S. trade interests in sectors that really do matter, such as machine tools, construction, and services.

Masking Fundamental Causes. But this kind of wrangling, important as it is, tends to mask what are surely more fundamental underlying causes of discord, and it leads to the question of whether, when all is said and done, the respective national interests of Japan and the United States are essentially similar or essentially dissimilar. Depending on your answer, you can arrive at vastly different conclusions.

Diplomats on both sides will insist that the two countries are bound tightly in a natural alliance of interests, and that the constant bickering reflects only the normal behavioral patterns of a marriage. Legislators on both sides are not at all convinced of the commonality of interests, and in particular U.S. Members of Congress are increasingly skeptical about, if not downright hostile to, Japan's long-range intentions, which are perceived to diverge from ours. Scholars and specialists on both sides continue to press for patience and understanding by policy makers, arguing that the situation needs time to right itself, to adapt to the demands of fast-paced global change. Economists, who may also from time to time be classified as scholars, exhibit mixed reactions about the identity of interests, but are clearly concerned about the profound economic imbalances in the relationship. There was once a time in American political life that a national politician would argue for

understanding and restraint in putting the wood to the Japanese, but in recent years even these fel-
lows have disappeared.

Vocal Japan Critics. In place of the earlier, more congenial mood of toleration in this country, there is a rapidly growing, vocal, and very effective group of Japan critics, ranging from instinctive Japan-bashers to thoughtful experts whose analysis leads them to the most baleful conclusions. If you've watched this trend develop, you've felt the ground shift and have probably concluded that something major is under way in how we view our future with Japan.

Recalling that consistent U.S. foreign policy has been predicated on the need for a vigorous and strong Japan, and that U.S. defense policy for decades has encouraged Japan to devote a larger share of its annual budget to expanding its defensive capabilities and assuming wider responsibilities, what are we to do now that the principal threat to U.S. interests in the region, the Soviet Union, has collapsed and is no longer a true challenge? After all, Japan steadily resisted the drum-beat of U.S. pressure to assume greater defense burdens, and only with enormous reluctance penetrated the self-imposed threshold of 1 percent of GNP devoted to defense.

Now, by virtue of its industrial policy, Japan has in place the infrastructure and the technology to develop a substantial military machine—if it wishes. Although there are no indications at the moment that Japan intends to harness its industrial capability for a military build-up, the mere existence of the capability makes its neighbors increasingly uneasy; they have painful, vivid memories of Japanese military prowess in the 1930s and 1940s.

For our part, we are actively searching for ways to cut our overseas commitments. That such cuts are terribly premature is an argument few are willing to hear, and the pressures to reallocate scarce resources are heavily focused on the high cost of maintaining the U.S. presence abroad. Why, it is argued, should the U.S. pay the freight for defending the Pacific Basin area, principally Japan, when it is awash in prosperity and enjoying persistent huge trade surpluses with the U.S.—in Japan's case more than \$100 billion?

Uneasy Asian Neighbors. Complicating the picture is that Japan's neighbors, in whom Japan is investing massively and on a scale we will not and cannot match, (a) have the uneasy feeling that the United States is in the frame of mind to withdraw from the region; and (b) are convinced that the United States does not have an articulated, well-thought-out, updated policy for the Pacific Basin. They feel that the attentions of Washington have been drawn to Europe, Eastern Europe, and what was once the Soviet Union, and that the U.S. is essentially incapable of conducting a dynamic policy on more than one front at a time.

If the United States disengages, or is seen to be disengaging, albeit slowly, from Asia, and if Japan continues its present dynamic regional expansion, the effect may be either that of a vacuum to be filled or a simple lateral placement of one influence by another. I cannot see how this will benefit U.S. interests, or that of our non-Japanese allies and friends in the region. In fact, once displaced for any reason, U.S. influence on the region will not easily, if ever, be restored.

Some Japanese obviously see this as a great opportunity; others, untroubled by the geographical consequences of economic success, contribute to the opportunity without sensing the disturbance it causes; still others, very few, do understand what's happening, don't like it, but are incapable of doing anything about it.

At the extreme, let us consider the prospect of Japan inviting the U.S. to withdraw from the three air bases, the naval base at Yokosuka, and the marine base on Okinawa, perhaps as a result of severely strained relations. What signal would that send to the region? To Japan itself? For those who subscribe to the "cork in the bottle" theory, as I do, the prospect of U.S. forces being ejected from Japan is almost too unpleasant to consider, and the consequences of not doing so under conditions of potential duress are equally unpalatable.

In the era we have recently entered since November 1989 and the collapse of the Soviet Union, an era in which stupendous events are severely compressed in time, decisions with long-lasting consequences must be made quickly. There are also long-term penalties for making the wrong decisions. The narrower, sectoral issues in U.S.-Japan relations have diminished, only to reveal the large, structural, systemic differences so large and complex that they seem nearly insoluble.

Is it to be our objective to dissuade Japan from continuing its economic expansion, its pattern of heavy long-term investment in Asia (or even in the United States?), its increasing share of the defense burden, its exports to the United States? What is it, exactly, what we'd like to see Japan do or not do?

And once we've decided on these matters, how will we communicate them to Japan? How will Japanese react? Will they listen and heed us?

Structural Defect. One very large and important problem is the Japanese system of governance. While some insist it's a democracy, I'm not at all sure that it is, but I am convinced that Karl van Wolferen is right when he says that we make a fundamental mistake by thinking that we can communicate effectively with Japanese leaders; as he puts it so succinctly, "No one individual and no one interest group has the actual power to initiate a shift in priorities." Van Wolferen agrees that the "structural defect" in Japan's body politic actually prevents power groups from uniting for "a political change essential to Japan's national interest." If he is correct, then we are indeed on a true collision course with Japan, a course that will make inevitable what George Friedman and Meredith LeBard argue will be "The Coming War With Japan."

In the early years of serious sectoral trade disputes, even until recently, Japan's leaders expressed the constant concern that such quarrels would affect the basic "security relationship" between the two countries, and went to great lengths to shield the military link. Now, with the central threat removed and the prospects for military action in the Pacific (except for the Korean flashpoint) at an historic low point, there is one less reason for Japan to come to terms with the United States.

Vulnerable Economy. The Japanese perception of the national interest will, under these conditions, emerge as one substantially different from our notion of what is good for Japan. Added to the mix that includes what they call the "Japanese way of thinking," which we have been told we do not, and possibly cannot, understand, a meaningful dialogue with Japan, one leading to concrete, productive results, seems increasingly difficult to achieve.

Indeed, much of Japan's motivation to achieve what it defines as adequate security derives from weakness, not strength, and fear of the consequences of that weakness informs the policy makers who fashion the nation's dynamic expansion. While Japan does indeed have the world's second largest economy, it is at once a huge and vulnerable structure, completely dependent on outside and frequently distant sources of energy and natural resources, imposed upon a group of islands that cannot naturally support itself.

With the disappearance of the Soviet military threat, a key element of the U.S.-Japan interdependence, it is now very clear that, all along, Japan's notion of "security" has always been rooted in the context of economic security alone. The disappearance of the Cold War, seen by many in the United States as a golden opportunity to lay down arms, withdraw expensive military forces from distant places, and begin a new era of international cooperation on many fronts, will almost certainly be viewed differently in Japan. It is also unlikely that in these changed circumstances, Japan can long remain a second-class partner of the United States.

Apart from a need to consolidate its resource base, Japan must also begin to look elsewhere for markets. The United States has been the destination for one-third of Japan's exports, and Japan has

skillfully exploited the opportunity this open market has offered. There is handwriting on the wall in Europe, too, which has traditionally treated Japanese imports with a degree of severity.

Racing for Markets. Whether we like it or not, we are now in an era of racing to secure markets. It could not come at a worse time from our perspective, but if the United States is to sustain its influence and presence in Asia, we will have to work very hard, economically and politically. Japan recognizes that Asia presents an extraordinary opportunity, and is investing there at an unprecedented rate.

Elsewhere in the world, the Japanese economic pressure is expanding, especially in resource-rich underdeveloped nations.

An external complicating factor in the U.S.-Japan relationship will be the further consolidation of the European Community. The U.S. is not an active player at the forthcoming European summit meeting at Maastricht, where important changes in foreign, economic, and defense policies of the twelve European states will be made. While the U.S. is busily engaged in creating, with Mexico and Canada, a North American Free Trade Area, itself a huge and impressive market, our basic security interests are in the process of being reorganized without our influence—or, as Jeane Kirkpatrick has put it, “a new world order is precisely what is emerging on the continent of Europe today, and with minimal American participation.” This fact cannot be lost on Japan’s part.

It seems as though Americans are exceptionally well disposed to react to threats to our own security as long as the danger is stark and imminent. Our latest experience in the Gulf War is ample proof of our rapid response to an overt menace.

I am not ready to declare either European unity or Japan’s pursuit of its own interests an actual threat to the U.S.; there is adequate time and there are many opportunities for us to shape whatever form of world order is emerging. Simply enjoying the status of “sole surviving superpower,” however, will not be enough.

High Priority Task. How we organize our relationship with Japan, how we communicate our goals, and how we seek to realize those goals in the bilateral relationship with Japan will be a task of very high priority for the 1990s.

We need a new formulation of our long-range objectives in the Pacific Basin. Our relations with Japan are, to be sure, a central factor, but I truly believe Japan should not be the centerpiece of our Pacific diplomacy. It will not do to attempt to work out with Japan the future of our own policy toward the region; if this occurs, or if the impression that it will occur is given to other Asian nations, our long-range interests will be severely damaged. No Asian leader wants the protective mantle of U.S.-Japanese condominium; Asians recognize the importance of their independent links to the United States, and want no local filter for those relationships.

Thus, the United States must concentrate on the bilateral relationship with Japan, and the focus of President Bush’s forthcoming trip to Japan must be on our basic relationship with Japan, not the “shared responsibility” of Japan and the United States for Asia. We must avoid errors of the type recently committed in the matter of the future security of the Korean peninsula, when our Secretary of State unveiled a formula of “two plus four” talks on Korea not in Korea, but in Japan! We should not have been surprised by Korea’s flat rejection of the proposal.

Deteriorating Atmosphere. To warn Japan, to criticize Japan, is not “Japan-bashing.” This all-purpose term has lost its utility, having become a semantic and psychological refuge for people on both sides who do not want to confront the real, underlying issues in the relationship.

If we just look around us here in the United States, we can see a seriously deteriorating political atmosphere: the protectionist liberals are now being joined by the protectionist nationalists and conservatives. Unlikely, unexpected cooperation from the political flanks will inevitably have an

impact on the mainstream, and no army of lawyers, lobbyists, or public relations specialists will be able to dampen the growing demand for specific, targeted action against Japan.

Who wants this? Who needs it? There is, in my view, ample reason for the United States and Japan to work together. Why are we constantly up in arms about Japan, and why should we, in December 1991, feel outrage against Japan for its wartime aggression against the United States and not against the Fascist and Nazi brigands or wartime Italy and Germany?

The problem lies in our difficulty of forming a national consensus on goals in the U.S.-Japan relationship. This is clearly a task for Presidential leadership, based on the recognition that "success" in our efforts with Japan is not measured in press communiques, broad smiles, and declarations of friendship, but in achieving specific objectives such as market opening and observing the ground rules of international trade.

Working Toward Accommodation. Japan does have time to alter its determined pursuit of its own security interests to the disregard of the legitimate security concerns of others, including its neighbors and the other developed countries, particularly the United States. If it does, if it takes into account the requirements of the United States, it can avoid a series of jarring collisions in the years ahead. Adjusting the national interest to provide leeway for the interests of others has been a characteristic of U.S. policy in the postwar period; it has worked to produce the era which began with the fall of the Berlin Wall. Some will argue that it is unrealistic in these times to expect that, since the arguments in the world can be reduced to money and markets instead of merely avoiding military aggression and escaping a nuclear holocaust, nations will change their behavior.

It is certainly worth trying to work toward a status of accommodation with Japan, to achieve equilibrium in a relationship that is of crucial importance to us, to them, and to the world. Together, Japan and the United States can achieve great prosperity and mutual benefit; divided in anger and misunderstandings, both will lose much, and may be led to an eventual confrontation that neither had dreamed possible.

That would be a tragedy.

