

Japan as a Great Power

Davis B. Bobrow

Since the end of World War II, many U.S. and European officials and experts have criticized Japan's foreign and defense policies as too little and too late-reactive, penny-pinching, selfish, and militarily naive. At various times over this period, Washington has claimed that Japan, having seen the error of its ways, was becoming a normal great power. Tokyo's policies, Washington asserted, were gravitating toward greater activism in international affairs, and a capability and will to project military power abroad commensurate with its relative size in the world economy and advanced technology and industry. The Japanese were finally "getting it" about world role imperatives, which would ultimately make Japan more fully compliant with U.S. strategies to shape the international system.

During that half-century, some important factions in Japanese domestic politics have appealed to those U.S. desires and expectations that such changes were progressing. No longer would Japan in international power and status terms be "a man with one arm and one leg" or an "economic giant and a diplomatic and military dwarf." Such factions have tried to cultivate and then take advantage of *gaiatsu*, i.e., foreign pressure for change. Some of the internal advocates of great power normality contended that this was necessary if Japan was to get what it wanted, needed, and deserved from the rest of the world, and especially from the U.S. Others argued that this was necessary (and feasible) so that Japan could say "no" to foreign pressures adverse to its long-run well-being. Yet forecasted changes have largely not been realized, and Japanese politicians committed to either of the pro-change schools have failed to dominate inside Japan over status quo advocates.

Why is that? One common answer focuses on defects in Japanese elite and public understanding of international affairs, and institutional capacity to make appropriate decisions and carry through appropriate policies. In this case, Japanese need to be educated and their national institutions "reformed." Another explanation emphasizes the combination of excessive foreign, especially American, indulgence and excessive Japanese tendencies to exploit the willingness of others to take on the burdens of making the world work in ways good for Japan. Japan, therefore, needs to be faced with the credible threat of losing those benefits unless it steps up to the plate of international responsibility. These views are not completely wrong since Japan resembles most great powers in having less-than-perfect foresight among its elites and public, and institutional characteristics which work against coherent, timely, and efficient foreign and defense

policies. Nor is Japan at all unique in preferring that others bear costs while it receives benefits.

Yet these widespread Western interpretations obscure how the same general factors that shape foreign and defense policies in most countries provide a rational, and perhaps even wise, basis for what Japan does and does not do. They recognize only some of Japan's practices in international affairs. They belittle the successes and setbacks Japan has experienced which provide motives for basic continuity with only the most hedged, slow and incremental modifications. Japan's approach to international affairs may then be not so much immature, or especially tricky and selfish, as it is a smart program to cope with the world outside Japan and ensure domestic support for prudent policies and cautious politicians.

The hardly unique general sets of shaping factors are: widely accepted lessons from national experience; national strengths (assets) and vulnerabilities (weaknesses); assessments of important foreign players in international affairs; and what national public opinion and political institutions make easy (attractive) or hard (unappealing) for politicians. Where Japan differs from many other nations is in the specific content of those factors.

Interpreted History: Lessons Learned

For Japan, World War II, known as the "Pacific War," was a disaster with lessons that have continuous value. War does not pay, and almost always is a dumb policy choice. International policy centered on the military instrument can lead to domestic militarism which will victimize the Japanese people. Preventing unrewarding involvement in war and military control of society and government require creating and maintaining bulwarks to ensure that: (a) military organizations are subordinate to non-military ones and cannot be used without explicit, specific authorization by the national legislature after extended debate; (b) the business sector does not become so involved with military production or research and development as to make military matters its lifeblood; and (c) national military capabilities and the readiness and authority to use them do not make Japan an immediate and primary threat to other nations.

These "lessons learned" have led to a set of self-restraint commitments which have so far bent to the pressures of the other sets of factors, but have not been revoked. The most general is Article Nine of the postwar "Peace" Constitution which limits Japan to self-defense, and bars it from having a "war potential" or "right of belligerency." Those commitments were augmented throughout subsequent decades by policies of limiting military spending to 1% of GNP; abstaining from arms exports; forgoing nuclear

weapons and long-range weapons delivery systems; and denying crisis authority to the head of government to send the military into action.

Other lessons include avoiding a recurrence of the economic situation associated with the Great Depression of the 1930s, which was fertile ground for Japanese militarism and aggression. That situation featured economic miseries inside and outside of Japan, beggar-thy-neighbor trade protectionism against Japan, and eventual foreign interference with critical primary goods imports (most notably energy). These lessons recommend national activism well beyond self-restraint to further: (a) world and Asian economic openness and stability cooperation; (b) foreign economic interdependence with Japan which gives others a stake in its prosperity and security (what a Japanese strategic thinker has called "golden goose deterrence"); (c) economic development successes especially among Japan's Asian neighbors (China, South Korea, Southeast Asia), furthering the two previous objectives and restraining any tendencies to threaten Japan militarily; and (d) industrial and technological emphases which safeguard Japan's access to foreign export markets and investment, and ensure crucial imports. Activism motivated by these lessons has included support for open-economy international arrangements (the World Trade Organization, or WTO, and the Asia Pacific Economic Community, or APEC); large amounts of development aid focused on Asian recipients; and establishing patterns of foreign investment from and within Japan, and trade. International economic integration with Japan, international development financing from Japan, and domestic evolution of advanced industry and technology thus have become major elements of Japan's security strategy.

Yet there have been other lessons, with quite different implications than near-pacifism and economic liberalism and generosity. One is that Japan cannot depend upon the noted policy emphases meant to ensure reasonable treatment and respect for its welfare by others. The years leading up to the Great Depression, the nuclear bombing of Japanese cities (but not of German ones) in World War II, the oil shocks of the 1970s, the American-generated economic shocks of the Nixon administration, the obviously exaggerated American predictions of Japan as a rival superpower in the 1980s, continuing American pressures to drag Japan into Washington selected conflicts, and nuclear threats which China and North Korea could pose in the twenty-first century all provide examples of ill treatment toward Japan. There is the possibility that foreigners will victimize Japan even if it avoids militarism and economic nationalism.

Japan needs some sort of insurance policy or fallback position beyond relying on others to voluntarily treat Japan moderately well. Accordingly, mainstream policy elites have supported implicitly posing to others the possibility that if Japan is pushed too hard it will turn itself, albeit reluctantly, into a major, nuclear-armed, military and techno-industrial great power.

Japan can transform itself in ways which will both deny success to a military attacker and destabilize the economies of those who act badly toward it. In order to live on a tolerable basis as a pacific, trading state, Japan must in international perception and reality have credible options to act in non-pacific and economically nationalist ways while reassuring others that it would prefer not to use those options. Otherwise, Japan for the long run risks three bad outcomes: (a) international isolation by seeming unimportant or uncooperative with others; (b) international hostility by seeming either to pose an immediate danger or being so weak as to be a "patsy" susceptible to foreign blackmail; or (c) international subordination by having no choice other than automatic compliance with self-serving or misguided policies implemented by foreigners.

National Vulnerabilities and Strengths

At several times in the twentieth century, Japan has seemed to have achieved, or at least have approached, the top levels of world power—its defeat of Russia as the twentieth century dawned, its gains in the peace settlement after World War I, the imperial seizure of large parts of Asia, and the economic superpower posture of the 1980s. Whatever euphoria those accomplishments generated in Japanese strengths ultimately turned out to be unwarranted. Indeed, for many Japanese a tendency toward grandiose notions of national strength became an intangible vulnerability. Japan must therefore guard against any runaway momentum if it intends to shape the world rather than be shaped.

Fundamental vulnerabilities are inherent in the small and crowded space that most of Japan's population and wealth occupy. That concentration makes Japan far more vulnerable to attack than such large continental and near-continental nations as the U.S., Russia, and China. Japan would essentially be crushed by a handful of nuclear weapons and would not contain the possibility of defense. Nor does Japan have a realistic possibility of food or energy self-sufficiency. Needs in those areas must be satisfied by imports traversing the seas and thus vulnerable to foreign interference. Further, Japan has to cope with the suspicion of others toward it. Inhospitable major neighbors (China, both Koreas, and Russia) nurse historical grievances and are highly sensitive to signs that Japan may again attempt to dominate them. Tenuous Asian acceptance has its counterpart in American and European views of Japan as not a full member of their cultural community. More recently, Japan has become an aging society lacking the large supply of young people required for military and economic activity.

What does Japan have going for it that is largely within its own control? The answers emphasize human resources in terms of skills, and a cohesive society whose institutions and individuals work together for national benefits expecting them to be widely shared domestically. These have been supplemented in recent decades by

first-rate applied science and technology, efficient and flexible industrial production, and abundant capital for foreign investment. These advantages for foreign and defense policies feature acute awareness of foreign developments, a lack of ideological fixations, and nimbleness in seizing promising policy opportunities. The other side of the coin involves determined resistance to international commitments which engender risk to such strengths.

In sum, widely recognized national strengths and vulnerabilities make it inadvisable for Japan to try to overpower almost anyone or to risk the few advantages it has. What makes sense is to capitalize on understanding of what will encourage others to treat Japan well. Economic contributions seem to do that, and major military ones do not. Thus, Japan provided money but not soldiers for the first Gulf War, and backed off its pursuit of United Nations Security Council membership in large measure to avoid the military involvements associated with that status. An equally important strategic element is to position Japan so that foreigners make mutually offsetting or canceling-out demands on Tokyo, a positioning which in effect lets Japan duck out of the way, while foreigners do the work of holding each other's demands at bay.

Foreign Players

One of the most striking continuities in the last half-century of Japan's policies has been the centrality of a special relationship with the U.S.-a pillar to be kept firm not through automatic followership but through arrangements and manipulations largely compatible with the first two sets of shaping factors. A major piece of the relationship continues to be the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty of 1951 and its subsequent associated measures and practical interpretations in "Defense Guidelines." Unlike the major security relationship between the U.S. and Western Europe (the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, or NATO), the Security Treaty offers no clear reciprocal commitment for the ally to come to the defense of the U.S., or for U.S. command authority. The most recent Guidelines only authorize Japan to consider joint action in Asia, and retain the language and tangible features which commit the U.S. to defend Japan. Prohibitions have been relaxed, rather than commitments expanded. Along the lines advocated by Japan's leading politician shortly after World War II in the Yoshida Doctrine, Japan induces the U.S. to base its forces and devise its Asian and global security strategies in ways which make Japan a major asset (an "unsinkable aircraft carrier"), an asset which if lost would require agonizing revisions in U.S. security postures.

What does this gain for Japan? First, it puts Japan firmly under the U.S. military deterrence umbrella, be it attack from the Cold War era Soviet Union or post-Cold War China or North Korea. An attack on Japan would necessarily be an attack on U.S. military forces. The American shield reduces the need for Japan to acquire the military

capacity to project force against others, or to raise the military share of its national economic resources, or to empower its military institutions. Secondly, it gives the U.S. incentives for Japan's economic prosperity, Japan's inclusion in major international clubs (such as the United Nations and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, or OECD), and Japan's substantial influence in Asia. Third, it works to restrain U.S. pressures on Japan to change its economic or diplomatic practices lest Japan reduce its military ties. Like Japan's previous alliances with England (1902) and the Axis powers (1940), that with the U.S. goes beyond seeking protection against a military threat to placing Japan in the camp of a dominant or potentially dominant world power. It then becomes easier for Japan to follow the historical lessons described previously, and following them helps allay Asian fears of the resurgence of Japan as an independent, assertive military power.

Aligning with the U.S. yields those benefits only if the U.S. neither abandons Japan nor entangles it in conflicts Japan could otherwise avoid. Accordingly, the relationship brings with it great sensitivity to shifting emphases in U.S. international policy, and the need for continuous efforts to manage relations with the U.S. Japanese management methods have ranged from (a) promises to do more in terms of military contributions beyond homeland defense; (b) toleration of U.S. violation of and exceptions from Tokyo's self-restraint principles (e.g., the presence of American nuclear weapons; export to the U.S. of weapons-related technologies); (c) extensions or retractions of promises in the face of predictable domestic or Asian protests against concessions to U.S. demands, both military and economic. Others involve Japanese acquisition of military capabilities and industrial and technological capacity at the cutting edge of military modernization which make Japan unilateral action a credible possibility. Those steps lessen the chances that the U.S. will view any other Asian state as a more promising primary regional security partner.

The second and equally important pillar is Japanese links with Asia. Economic instruments (foreign aid, direct investment, trade, technology transfer) have been especially prominent in creating a Japan partnership with most Asian states. To a large extent, those ties have involved moving Asia in directions the U.S. and Europe also appreciated (economic growth, international economic openness, military restraint, political stability and democratization). In turn, those consequences work to improve U.S. and European treatment of Japan. There are more incentives to secure Japanese cooperation and fewer to pressure Japan to adopt military policies that would antagonize Asian nations. Those payoffs would grow as Japan's deep and broad engagement with Asian states involved forming clubs of Asians more likely to bargain as a bloc with the U.S. and the European Union (e.g., the Asia-10 economic group). Such clubs preferably would include the U.S. (e.g., the Asia Pacific Economic Community, or APEC). Asia-only clubs and ones including the U.S. have value as they

lessen the chances that an Asian collective will form against Japan, or that Japan will have to bargain on its own with the U.S. (or the E.U.), or that the U.S. (or the E.U.) will be able to play Japan and other Asians against each other, or that the U.S. (or the E.U.) will conclude that it can ignore a fragmented and unorganized Asia.

Yet as in the case of the U.S., Asian goodwill cannot be assumed but must be supplemented by the credible possibility of loss from threatening Japan. Those possibilities might be economic-the diversion of Japanese economic inputs and purchases to other developing regions, for example. They might be military-turning military power potential into actuality. Relevant signals include Japan's vigorous pursuit of dual-use (civil and military) technologies such as space-based intelligence systems and advanced missile and aircraft production capacity, and maintaining the ability to quickly produce nuclear weapons.

As the Cold War waned and the European Union developed, Japan has worked to add a third pillar of direct ties with Western Europe. Special attention has gone to the United Kingdom and Germany. Beyond the resulting access to commercial opportunities, these ties would help to have a joint front with the EU in bargaining with the U.S. while avoiding a joint front of the other two against Japan. The former recently has become more prominent as a way of persuading the U.S. away from extreme unilateral policies of military assertion, economic imposition, or environmental neglect.

As for the rest of the world, Japan has pursued "omni-directional" diplomacy and economic relations rather than proclaiming a long roster of enemies and pariah states. It has generally refrained from threatening or isolating other nations in order to replace their ruling regimes and preferred to offer economic incentives showing them that Japan is not an enemy and that conformity with normal rules of international conduct has acceptable payoffs. That amounts to international affairs activism, especially with current or potential sources of energy and likely members of economic blocs that might otherwise exclude Japan. Such activism stops short of Japan accepting primary responsibility as the "underwriter" of non-Asian development or stability. When threats and sanctions seem necessary, the strong preference has been to have them imposed by the United Nations, i.e., the international collective, rather than by one or more great powers. Again, Japan would avoid assuming primary responsibility for situations abroad while definitely being "at the table" for efforts to shape them.

That stand of selective and limited involvement has been reinforced by instances in which others have objected to stronger Japanese policy leadership. Asians have left no doubt that they do not want Japan to be their intermediary and representative with the rest of the world, especially the U.S. and the E.U. nor do they want Japan to be the major regional "policeman." The U.S. and the E.U. have harshly rejected Japanese

initiatives to shape treatment of world problems, most obviously debt relief for the developing countries, as Tokyo proposed during the Asian financial crisis of 1997-1998 or as long ago as the 1988 Toronto summit of industrialized democracies. Japanese officials and experts have tended to conclude that what much of the world wants from Japan amounts to either a "blank check" or signature authority on its "national bank account." They have tried to block such surrenders of national independence while avoiding a blanket "no contribution" posture which might trigger international isolation or punishment.

Domestic Politics

Japan's politicians resemble most others in wanting to gain and hold office. Japan's government bureaucracies resemble most others in seeking to maintain or grow their budgets and influence while minimizing interference and critical scrutiny by outsiders. Japan's international policies, as with most other democracies, tend to stay within the bounds of public opinion and reflect established shares of institutional power within and between the public and private sectors.

Japanese do not have high regard for their politicians and want them kept on a short leash (as conveyed by the saying, "Japan: first-rate people, second-rate country, third-rate politicians"). With rare exceptions, Japan has not had seriously competitive political parties for national governance since World War II. The ruling party (the Liberal Democratic Party) is divided among factions with similar international policy preferences and similar dependence for money on business interests. The head of government, the prime minister, has little power compared to the American president or British prime minister, usually holds the position for a much shorter time, and has less influence over elections to the national legislature. The members of the legislature often have tight ties with major government departments or are children of former legislators. These factors do not favor bold departures from established policies. On the other hand, they tend to result in a senior cadre of politicians and potential prime ministers who have wide-ranging government experience and involvement with the domestic and international policies of Japan. They are knowledgeable about why present policies are as they are, and often have dealt with foreign governments and have networks or international connections with interests in sustaining established Japanese policies. The odds then favor the systematic pursuit of continuity rather than commitments to a new world role.

Japanese public opinion has long accepted the basic lines of policy sketched earlier as the best available (survey responses include "unavoidable," "cannot be helped," "necessary"). For example, U.S. military bases on Japanese territory have little appeal but are tolerable as long as they are mostly in the distant island of Okinawa. Even

during the period of greatest national optimism and economic power (the 1980s), citizens have doubted that it would be desirable or practical for Japan to become economically dominant, militarily assertive, or politically leading in world affairs. They have valued Japan's pacifist character, and shown little appetite for bringing the military to either the budget levels or standing in policy formation it holds in other great powers. They also, however, have acknowledged the existence of foreign threats to Japan and a lack of foreign respect for Japan. The overall consequence is public rejection either of Japan acting to impose its preferences on others or automatically conforming to the demands that others make on Japan. Japan is imperfect and has obligations, but others are also responsible for its problems and prone to shirk appropriate effort to lessen them. After all, compared to the rich nations of North America and Europe, Japan has many inadequately met needs at home in social welfare and quality of life. The public then accepts the need for international engagement in diplomatic and economic ways but not for unconditional foreign commitments which place Japanese citizens or economic well-being at risk, or would make it harder to hew to the historical lessons discussed previously. Public opinion becomes more permissive of policy departures in reaction to events and foreign pressures, but even then prefers tightly limited changes.

Such public opinion tendencies are of course useful for Japan's elected politicians in persuading foreigners that they cannot do more without triggering a domestic storm. A storm would raise the risks of Japan more departing from foreign and security policies which offer at least some attractions to foreigners. Public opinion, as confirmed by Japan's mass media, helps Tokyo argue that too much in the way of foreign demands for change would endanger current Japanese policies and incremental improvements. What might come next could be worse from an external perspective.

The weakness of the prime minister and the limits of party competition give special weight to government departments, their career bureaucrats and interest group constituencies, and their alliances with politicians. Some are advantaged over others, most obviously domestic ministries whose turf makes them crucial players in the flow of benefits to particular organized economic interests. Those ministries get involved in foreign affairs on a range of issues involved with opening up the Japanese economy to foreign participation (e.g., agriculture, telecommunications, financial sectors). Next in order of importance would be the ministries that play an important role in Japan's external relations as they affect large domestic firms and broad economic policy (notably the Ministry of Finance and the Ministry of International Trade and Industry). One might also place the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in that category, given the widely accepted importance of understanding the external world and dealing with foreign governments. The department most similar to the U.S. Department of Defense, the Japan Defense Agency, matters much less and has yet to achieve cabinet membership. Its direct economic influence is limited by its small share of the national budget, the

modest role of military sales in the overall activity of private firms, and the comparatively little dependence of electoral district economies on military spending. The JDA's role is to serve other interests, especially through close ties with the U.S. Department of Defense, to gain support for continuing the current U.S. relationship with Japan and its opposition to harsh U.S. measures that might jeopardize it. Departures from established policies are unlikely if they threaten the domestic ministries. They are less unlikely if they serve to maintain or expand the position of the more powerful internationally oriented ministries.

In relative terms, that favors steps to increase broad coordination between the key foreign economic policy parts of national governments and the proliferation of multilateral diplomatic forums and working groups. And indeed, those are the aspects of international affairs in which Japan has become one of the most active countries in the world.

Japan has opted for an energetic and vigilant set of foreign and security policies to cope with and adjust to the lessons of history, the implications of national strengths and vulnerabilities, foreign opportunities and dangers, and domestic political realities. Those policies continue, with slight modifications in light of dynamic international circumstances, because they seem to have worked well for Japan. After all, postwar Japan has avoided wars, invasions, and military expenditures. At the same time, it has avoided economic or diplomatic isolation or acts that might lead others to treat Japan as an enemy to be constrained. This is a pretty impressive record for a country defeated and occupied half a century ago and with a record of imperial repression in large parts of Asia. Japan's policy elites and citizens know that the world may change in adverse ways, and thus they maintain hedging options. For the most part, they believe that adverse changes will come with enough warning to "crank up" those options. They have been ingenious and determined in avoiding changes with highly uncertain prospects of success, while not diminishing the possibility of changes that either sustain foreign hopes or arouse foreign fears.

Davis B. Bobrow

Davis B. Bobrow is Professor Emeritus in the Graduate School of Public and International Affairs (GSPIA) and Political Science at the University of Pittsburgh.