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Japan and the East Asian Balance of Power

JEROME K. HOLLOWAY

Thirteen years after the collapse of the American enterprise in Vietnam, there exists in East Asia a balance of power reasonably tolerable for the United States. Few would have predicted this when the last helicopter lifted from the roof of the American Embassy in Saigon. We would do well to recall that this balance contrasts with the situations that existed in 1946, 1953, and 1964 during which the United States, in following its 20th-century policy of opposing the hegemony of any single power in East Asia, embarked on quasi-hegemonic policies of its own. As of now, dangers to the East Asian balance of power seem remote, despite growing Soviet military power and increased political interest in the area. However, the relations of the United States and Japan are pivotal to sustaining the current balance of power in the region, and many Americans, including some of influence, do not recognize this.

In the new, non-colonial order that the United States aimed to create in Asia after World War II, there was to be a major role for a victorious China—a China, it was hoped, beholden to the United States for its political eminence as one of the Big Five in the United Nations. Such a role for China was probably beyond its power, as Churchill tried vainly to explain to Roosevelt. However, before such a role could even be tested, something had to be done to end the split between the Nationalists and the Communists in China. Hence, in December 1945, the Marshall mission. But this commitment of one of the most distinguished Americans to the Chinese problem was accompanied by military measures that seemed to be aimed at gaining a major American position on the Asian continent. The Secretaries of War and Navy recommended in 1945 that 50,000 Marines be left in China, in spite of the admitted danger of involvement in China's civil war. In the same year the Joint Chiefs of Staff sought to create a 4500-man military advisory group which, the State Department noted, would have not only an extraterritorial position—not unlike the US units stationed in China from the Boxer Rebellion until Pearl Harbor—but which might be construed as a projection of US military power onto the Asiatic continent. The Navy, while reporting that no

formal written agreement on stationing US naval vessels at China ports was known to exist, did consider it had the personal concurrence of the Generalissimo, Chiang Kai-shek, in the use of Chinese ports and waters.

In 1946 the American position in China was based on a Treaty of Friendship, Commerce, and Navigation that seemed to many Chinese to be one-sided, appearing to benefit only the United States. In reaction, a "Buy Chinese" movement was started in late 1946 which even had some Chinese government approval. The various threads of American policy, when taken in conjunction with Lend-Lease, surplus property grants, and proposed Export-Import Bank loans to China, suggested confirmation of the "informal empire" charge so often made against US policies in Asia. True, the entire apparatus collapsed in January 1947 when the Marshall mission was terminated as hopeless, but naval commanders maintained readiness to defend ports such as Tsingtao and Shanghai until authority to do so was lifted in 1948 and 1949 as the United States waited for the dust to settle.

In 1953 the enemy seemed plain. China had allied itself firmly, or so it seemed to American officials, with the Soviet Union. It intervened in the Korean War with serious consequences for the United States, and now seemed poised for a takeover of Southeast Asia. The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs considered the United States and China to be in a state of war. The United States organized an international response to the threat of Chinese hegemony that drew on many elements of the containment policy against the USSR in Europe. Security pacts were entered into with South Korea, Japan, Taiwan, the Philippines, Thailand, and Pakistan. Trade and financial controls were instituted. An unrelenting effort was made to isolate China politically, not only in the United Nations, but in international organizations, even including the Red Cross and the International Philatelic Union. Behind this international effort was an exclusively American agenda aiming at the political downfall of Peking. In January 1954, the following colloquy took place between a congressional inquirer and the Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs: "Did I understand you to say that the heart of the present policy toward China and Formosa is that there is to be kept alive the constant threat of military action vis-à-vis Red China in the hope that at some point there will be an internal breakdown?"

"Yes, sir. That is my conception."

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This threat was primarily naval and air, although it included raids on the mainland from Formosa, raids into Tibet, and the use of two Nationalist Chinese divisions in Burma for attack into Yunnan. Secretary of State Dulles was even more determined. He told the US NATO commander that there should be "a three-pronged attack on the Chinese mainland: through Korea, through Chekiang from Taiwan, and through Hainan Island on the south." The possibilities of such a war became real in the Formosa Straits, to the extent that in 1955 a Republican President had to ask a Democratic Senator to assure the Senate that war, if it came, would be declared by the government of the United States and not the President of China (Formosa) or some line officer off the China coast. This immense US effort to prevent Chinese hegemony petered out in the early 1960s when the Sino-Soviet split became apparent to American allies, if not to American officials.

The American commitment in Vietnam need not be rehashed here in great detail, but it is certainly relevant to recall that behind most of the explanations offered to the American public for the Vietnam involvement was the threat, as Secretary of State Dean Rusk expressed it, of a billion Chinese armed with nuclear weapons. Liberals such as Vice President Humphrey, Senator Mike Mansfield, and Professor Arthur Schlesinger all based the case for American intervention in Vietnam on the need to prevent Chinese expansion. It is ironic to contemplate the situation today on China's border with Vietnam. But it is important to note that all three post-World War II Pacific policies depended upon US ability to influence events on the Asian continent through an American military presence there. Much sport has been made of the Chairman of the JCS who, when asked what the United States would do if it won in Vietnam, replied, "The US would have to keep major forces there for several decades." The officer was just stating, albeit somewhat baldly, what was in essence the aim for American intervention in Indochina, a point d'appui on the Asian mainland for possible use against China.

It was not to be. The mocking chord was that the final chopper to leave Saigon ended a policy that had been doomed over seven years before by the US Presidential election of 1968. In what proved to be a seminal article in *Foreign Affairs* in 1967, Richard Nixon, the heir to John Foster Dulles' Sinophobic policies, called for a reassessment of American positions in the Far East.¹ His presidential campaign featured a "secret" plan to end the Vietnam War. And, in a stopover at Guam in July 1969, Mr. Nixon put forth a conception of American policy in the western Pacific that would eschew any foothold on the mainland. The concept became known as the Nixon Doctrine. It was opposed by the President's National Security Advisor as well as large elements of the foreign policy and defense establishments, all still groping unsuccessfully with the twin problems of avoiding defeat in Vietnam while making withdrawal look like victory. Failure was to attend these,

largely because they were subsumed by the President's successful ending of the two-decade American confrontation with the People's Republic of China. Yet, even after the Carter Administration completed Mr. Nixon's breakthrough, problems remained.

Taiwan remains separated from China. Korea is divided. The Vietnamese have shown a sharp appetite in Kampuchea and Laos. New Zealand and the United States have engaged in a mutually hobbling exercise over disclosure of nuclear weapons in US naval vessels calling at the former's ports. Unrest in the Philippines is serious. The Soviet Union has increased its military presence in East Asia and is trying to increase its political weight there. But in light of the predictions of disaster that followed the demise of the Saigon government in 1975, the present regional balance of power does not damage US interests.

What could damage those interests is a change in Japan's role. In an illuminating book jointly prepared by American and Japanese contributors in 1975, this statement appeared: "The only remotely plausible change in the current alignment of nations that would threaten the security of the United States is for Japan to become hostile."² The same statement would fit the 1980s and will probably fit the 1990s. Now, no one expects Japan to become hostile, but, substitute the words "indifferent," "neutral," "non-aligned," or "aloof," and the relationship is changed ominously.

What factors might change the Japanese-American relationship? First would be an attempt to revise the formal treaty status to expand the scope of Japanese military obligations in East Asia and to relate these to contingencies in the Middle East or Europe. No Japanese government or political party can risk "opening up" the present arrangements with the United States. The result would be not greater Japanese participation and responsibility: it would be a call from both intellectuals and the public for a decrease in Japan's security obligations. One may decry this, and most American politicians would, but the history of negotiations over the US-Japanese security relationship suggests that American attempts to get precise, legal language on Japanese commitments usually fail. To get an expansion of those commitments both in concept and language that will make the bureaucrats and the military comfortable is self-defeating. This is not an exercise in Oriental pop-psychology, as many attempt to portray it. It is not that the Japanese prefer a vague, all-things-to-all-men formulation; it is a fact of political life. To attempt to change the present treaty arrangements is to risk the good in hopeless pursuit of the better or best.

The second danger is clearly trade and finance. One would think that enough has been written on this, and that there is sufficient objective evidence that the average man can see for himself (Japanese cars, cameras, and appliances work better and are cheaper than their American-made

competition) to obviate ritualistic recounting of brutal truth about the decline of the American smokestack belt. But here we are in a world where emotions must be counted. No American policymaker can explain to the unemployed steelworker with a family that he is a victim of the international division of labor or even of the corporate blindness of his own business and labor leadership. His woes are a fact of life, as politically potent as Japanese distaste with commitments that could risk war. Hence, to try to suggest, as the US defense establishment must, that a trade war with Japan would endanger higher political and military interests is a difficult effort. But the effort must be made. The present American administration has done very well thus far in resisting the primitives, but in the run-up to the 1988 election it must be better prepared to explain that the US trade deficit is probably amenable to treatment only by wise domestic economic policies. Japanese sensitivity to the problem would help, but realism rules out much hope for that.

The average Japanese is an austere consumer; the Liberal Democratic Party cannot reduce substantially the agriculture subsidies that ensure the party's majority in the Diet; the Japanese bureaucracy changes no more quickly than other bureaucracies, and its ties to special interests in the business and political worlds bind it much the way many American regulatory agencies are bound; the labyrinth-like Japanese distribution system will change very slowly; and American manufacturers will still have difficulty getting their minds and efforts away from sole concentration on the huge, rich, and integrated market that is the US domestic economy. Japan has its bill of grievances against US policies, including a 1973 US embargo on the export of soybeans to Japan that was seen in Tokyo as analogous to the July 1941 US embargo.

Given the structure of US decisionmaking on trade and investment with Japan, the Pentagon's *locus standi* is weak, but the case of security considerations must be pressed.

The third lever that might move Japan is related to the first—defense expenditures. Again, the present administration, after a few false starts in 1981, has realized that the “free ride” label, like protectionism, fits headlines and stump speeches better than it fits policy and strategy. But such restraint has not crossed the Potomac. In the Pentagon we find flag officers planning ways to bring on Japanese involvement with strike group operations in the western Pacific and joint participation in carrier strike forces. Other planners devise force capabilities that Japan should purchase to meet an allegedly iron-bound commitment to 1000 miles of merchant ship protection. Meanwhile, on the wilder edges of planning, there is touted the idea that Japanese neutrality in a NATO/Warsaw Pact war could be ended by a unilateral US strike against the USSR from Misawa.

No one argues that Japan should not be able to defend itself to the extent of making a would-be aggressor at least calculate his probable losses.

But continuing attempts to co-opt a greatly augmented Japanese force into American operational plans risk alienation of the Japanese public and Japan's neighbors. Arguments that the Seventh Fleet is doing Japan's job in the Indian Ocean break down on the assumption that Japan sees a job that needs doing; it doesn't. One might also turn the problem around and ask what the United States would do differently if there were no Japanese armed forces at all.

Fourth, there is a remote danger that the United States might eventually seek a special relationship with the People's Republic of China as a substitute for the Japanese one. This is basically a variation on the 1945, 1953, and 1964 quasi-hegemonic concept. The truth of the Nixon coup is that the United States was relieved of a heavy strategic burden, the burden of a two-and-a-half-war scenario. No actual accrual of strategic strength to the American side took place. In the same fashion, China regained a great deal of strategic flexibility, but it did not gain any great strength. The low priority given the defense establishment in China's Four Modernizations underlines the limitations to US-Chinese strategic cooperation. We learned, albeit at great cost, that we are ill-served by a friendly China and an unfriendly Japan, but that we can find bearable a hostile China and a friendly Japan. If both were hostile (a 21st-century scenario) there would be little point in US participation in the Asian balance of power, except, of course, as a partner of the Soviets, a dubious prospect.

Now none of this means that we should not pursue actively with Japan the enhancement of American political, economic and strategic objectives. But we should consider the extent to which we want to pursue the four courses warned of above. Japan's role now is comfortable to Japan; it is reasonably comfortable to the other noncommunist nations of East Asia. Perhaps we should accommodate ourselves to the present arrangements, however irksome they may seem to some elements of our government and society. A cold-eyed look at the Soviet menace to the balance of power in East Asia would help. The USSR has military power; but the Soviets have no political or economic power in the area, they have unresolved territorial problems with both China and Japan, and it would be a rare Asian who would find any attraction in Soviet society. True, if the balance of power in East Asia were to begin to turn against US interests, there would be opportunities for the Soviets. But the argument here is that this balance is now at risk only if the United States mishandles its relations with Japan.

NOTES

1. Richard M. Nixon, "Asia After Viet Nam," *Foreign Affairs*, 46 (October 1967), 112-25.
2. Morton H. Halperin, "U.S.-Japanese Security Relations," in *United States-Japanese Relations, the 1970s*, ed. Priscilla Clapp and Morton H. Halperin (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1974), p. 203.