

In Search of Japan's Position in Asia

By Kokubun Ryosai

SINCE modern times, Japan has been in a continuous struggle to define its position in Asia. This definition, however, continues to be elusive. After the arrival of the Black Ships from the United States, a secluded Japan agonized over its own survival. Ultimately, the country broke away from its tradition-oriented path and began to study all aspects of Western civilization through the Meiji Restoration. This constituted a real revolution in Japanese history. Other Asian nations were also coming into conflict with Western civilization at this time, forcing them into a fierce struggle with their traditions. Earlier than Japan, Qing China was forced to open by the British military in the Opium War, but the continuation of dynastic control was prioritized in its domestic systems. However, the dynasty suffered an enormous shock when it was defeated in the Sino-Japanese War of 1894-95. After that war, China began sending students to Japan to learn about the nation's rapid modernization. Japan, which had been peripheral to the Chinese world order, thus became the central model for learning. This represented a significant paradigm shift for East Asia, initiating Japan's prominence in the region during the 20th century.

How did Japan feel about Asia at this time? Fukuzawa Yukichi, the founder of Keio University, published an essay entitled "Leaving Asia" in 1885 in which he argued that Japan needed to separate itself from Asia as quickly as possible to avoid heading down the same path as the other Asian countries that had been invaded by the Western powers. Tarui Tokichi, by contrast, promoted the "Daito union theory," advocating that Japan and Korea should annex equally to become a single nation which would then ally itself with China as a means of opposing Western aggression. As history has shown, Japan was able to achieve modernization by following the path outlined by Fukuzawa, and did not fall prey to the major powers. Rather, Japan used its victory in the Russo-Japanese War to follow the same path of overseas expansion as the Western powers, as reflected in the Japan-Korea Annexation Treaty of 1910 and its "21 Demands" on China in 1915. Japan, in spite of its location in Asia, began to fall in step with the Western powers in terms of its international strategy, and began competing with them for its interests in the region.

In the late 1920s, a hard-line approach to foreign diplomacy was adopted by the Tanaka Giichi Cabinet, and military activities were stepped up on the Chinese continent. This resulted in the Manchurian Incident in 1931 and the establishment of the Manchukuo in 1932. Japan and China ultimately went to war in 1937 following the Marco Polo Bridge Incident. Later, under the Konoe Fumimaro Cabinet, Japan began to expand into other



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parts of the Asia-Pacific region as well as the Chinese continent under the pretense of establishing the Greater East Asian Co-Prosperty Sphere to "liberate" the region from the West. This conflicted with US interests in the region, and culminated in the start of the Pacific War in December 1941. Although Japan wore Asian clothes, it behaved no differently than the Western powers. On Aug. 15, 1945, Japan was utterly defeated by the Allied Powers, and had no choice but to deny its past and to start down a new path as a renewed state.

It was the United States that determined Japan's direction in the postwar period. The emperor system was retained, but all other elements linked to the past militarism were renounced. Japan was reborn as an independent democratic state under the San Francisco Peace Treaty in September 1951. However, Japanese diplomacy in the Cold War period had limited its own initiative. The administration of Yoshida Shigeru had considered establishing diplomatic ties with the People's Republic of China just after its emergence, but due to strong opposition by the

United States, it recognized the administration of the Kuomintang in Taiwan instead. In this regard, Japan was basically left without any room for developing its own diplomatic relations with the rest of Asia.

Under the Cold War balance of power and the sanctuary provided by the United States, Japan concentrated all of its attention on economic growth. Japan's diplomacy toward Asia, which still had scars from the war, was regrettably limited. It began with the war reparations that were stipulated in the San Francisco Peace Treaty. Japan's economic ties with Southeast Asia were strengthened through compensation provided to Burma, the Philippines, Indonesia and South Vietnam, as well as by Japanese grant aid provided to Laos, Cambodia, Thailand and Malaysia. However, this was backward-focused diplomacy to make up for the debts of the past, and not exactly forward-looking Asian diplomacy.

The most pressing issue for postwar Japan in terms of its Asian diplomacy was the normalization of relations with South Korea and China. Japan restored diplomatic relations with South Korea in 1965, an achievement that would have been impossible without the strong backing of the United States. Japan reached the normalization of its diplomatic relations with China in 1972, which would also have been essentially impossible without the direct contact between the United States and China achieved through President Richard Nixon's earlier visit. The compensation for South Korea took the form of economic cooperation packages including interest-free and soft loans, but China renounced all compensation from Japan. This seemed to have resolved the problems of the past on a superficial level, but the scars remained in various forms.

Japan's first postwar attempt to clearly suggest a forward-looking diplomacy in Asia came in the form of the Fukuda Doctrine in 1977. This emphasized Japan's desire to make an emotional connection with Southeast Asian countries. The next administration, led by Prime Minister Ohira Masayoshi, worked with Australia to hammer out the Pacific Rim Concept, to expand this idea. To keep China, which had just entered the age of modernization, from backsliding, Japan also began to promote the provision of yen loans. More than 30 years after the war, Japan was finally engaging in a proactive diplomacy that was strongly aware of Asia. Even then, however, Japan was yet unable to develop a diplomacy that applied to Asia alone.

In the 1980s, South Korea, Singapore and Taiwan achieved rapid economic development and became known as the newly industrialized economies (NIES), which ultimately sparked development in Thailand and Malaysia as well. Even the socialist countries of China and Vietnam began to introduce market economics and liberalization policies. Japan no longer had the monopoly on economic development, and the world started to pay attention to the "East Asian miracle." Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad advocated an East Asian Economic

Caucus (EAEC) that excluded the United States and other Western countries, but Japan, of course, was unable to support this. Later, the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation Forum (APEC), an Asia-Pacific Cooperation included the United States along with Asia, became the central cooperative body in the region, and Japan also actively promoted it.

The confidence Asia had developed from its economic growth setback in the 1997 Asian currency crisis. In response to this, Japan proposed the creation of an Asian Monetary Fund as an Asian version of the IMF, but it later pulled its support due to opposition from the United States. This process, however, prompted a recognition of the need for proactive cooperation within the Asian region and gave a serious boost to cooperation between ASEAN and Japan, China and South Korea (which later became known as the "10+3" group). Unlike EAEC, however, this structure was based on an "open regionalism" that did not strive to exclude the United States.

Later, the focus on APEC was replaced with an emphasis on the 10+3 in the Asian region including Japan, and an epoch-making meeting between the leaders of Japan, China and South Korea developed into a schedule of regular meetings in the late 1990s. At the beginning of the 21st century, Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro proposed the "East Asian Community" concept as an outgrowth of this movement. This was one of the consequences of Japan's proactive Asian diplomacy which had been shaped by its reparation diplomacy, the Fukuda Doctrine, the Pacific Rim Concept, and APEC. However, the moment Japan proposed this idea and began to take a straight look at Asia, it began to get a real taste of the complexity and difficulty of Asian diplomacy. Relations with China and South Korea began to sour, all as a direct result of the historical problems.

A historical review will show that in more than a century, Japan has never truly faced Asia and dealt with the other Asian countries as equals. The countries of Asia have gained confidence as a result of their economic development, making the region fundamentally different from what Fukuzawa was concerned with. In one sense, all of the Asian countries are now trying to "leaving Asia" through globalization shedding the skin of the old Asia. In a postwar period characterized by the Cold War, Japan was definitely not able to address Asia as proactively as it needed to. How should prewar debts be dealt with in the postwar period? What results have already been achieved in this regard, and what still remains to be done? Even more important than the problems of its prewar history, is how Japan has addressed those issues over the course of its postwar history.

To develop a thoughtful Asian diplomacy that goes beyond temporary interests, Japan needs to revise, reconstruct and study its view of Asia's modern history that reflects Japan's relative position within Asia. Although Japan may be a liability for Asia in some ways, it is also a positive asset for Asia in many ways.

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