

## First among Equals

---

Fundamentally, Japan shares a wide range of values and interests with the United States. The essentially similar long-term goals of these two nations, whose economies produce nearly 43 percent of the world's wealth, facilitate envisioning a world order that would be ideal from both countries' viewpoints. Such a world order would be premised on democracy, human rights, and free markets. Based on these principles, Japan would willingly support this world order. In fact, the United States, as the ultimate guarantor of such an order, is unlikely to meet substantive objections from any of the major players on the world stage. Nevertheless, while promoting this world order, the United States must be cautious and attentive to local conditions around the world.

For this ideal situation to be realized—at least with regard to Asia—two requirements must be met: a continued working partnership between the United States and Japan and a solid base of public support for the domestic and international goals of both nations.

### A Matter of Perspective

---

The great challenge for the United States in securing this ideal world order will be coming to terms with its unprecedented relative and absolute power. Already evident are two diametrically opposed risks: complacency and arrogance.

As with Gulliver on his travels, it is all a matter of perspective. The self-complacent protagonist may easily shirk his global responsibilities. Yielding to self-absorption, indifference, or just plain laziness, he may not even realize

---

Akio Watanabe is professor emeritus of the University of Tokyo and president of the Research Institute for Peace and Security in Tokyo, Japan.

---

Copyright © 2001 by The Center for Strategic and International Studies and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology  
*The Washington Quarterly* • 24:3 pp. 73–81.

how gossamer-thin is the tissue of multilateral obligations that enmeshes him with the smaller and weaker members of the international community. For example, the United States may not heed what global warming means to the Lilliputian island nation of Micronesia. Naturally, for them, any portent of the Pacific Ocean's waves swamping their islands is of the utmost concern.

By the same token, the din of humanitarian disasters in faraway places with unpronounceable names is unlikely to motivate a self-complacent United States, unless others can somehow demonstrate that responding to

them complements Washington's immediate self-interest. In either of these cases, other countries will be highly attuned to any sign that the United States is preparing to neglect or abandon them.

Conversely, Gulliver may become all too conscious of his own real or imaginary weaknesses and shortcomings; he may fall prey to suspicion, doubt, anxiety, and fear of the unknown. This paranoid protagonist will meddle in everyone else's business on the spur of the moment, foisting his own prefer-

ences on others with scant regard to the actual needs of the people and the regions concerned—all, ostensibly, in the name of "moral leadership." The danger here is overreaction to perceived crises—humanitarian or otherwise—under pressure of domestic public opinion agitated by CNN.

U.S. unilateralism is thus simply the other side of the coin from U.S. isolationism. From the perspective of the smaller members of the international community, the sheer unpredictability of the superpower's behavior is most disturbing. Irrational swings between isolationism and internationalism, between complacency and arrogance, are part and parcel of an unfortunately recurring pattern in U.S. history—a story as old as the United States itself.

New in the twenty-first century, however, are the repercussions these swings will have on international events, simply because of the sheer disproportion of U.S. power. Whether as formal allies or as potential antagonists, all nations in the world expect certain things of the United States, just as if they were its clients. They watchfully anticipate every U.S. move, lest they be abandoned, trampled, or entangled—the typical attitude of the junior party of an alliance toward its superior. Now more than ever, what the United States does is just as important as what it does not do.

When trying to understand the U.S. point of view and craft appropriate responses, Asians must keep the U.S. perspective in mind. Ironically, the prize for being the sole superpower is, by definition, that one is surrounded

**Asia's ongoing reforms will not necessarily lead to U.S.-style capitalism or democracy.**

by potential antagonists, resulting in extreme sensitivity to any sign of external threats coupled with an obsession for absolute security. The quest to build a Fortress America—impregnable armed with a national defense missile system—is clearly part of this superpower syndrome.

The United States must therefore learn to be highly cautious in discharging its global responsibility. As the sole superpower, with global reach in both soft and hard power, the United States would be wise never to lose sight of the unique international role it plays. Above all, it should prudently adopt an attentive, watchful, and flexible stance, in order to remain sensitive to local conditions.

Commonly, nations—no less than individuals—will profess the same values in an abstract sense, but will rarely agree in actual practice on how those values should be implemented. The concept of human rights, for example, for any given country is substantively grounded in the tangible effects of legal procedure. Ultimately, however, the energy behind the concept emanates from intangibles, probing into the very question, “What is humanity?” The answer of course will differ broadly from culture to culture and civilization to civilization. Even a cursory review of the concepts of democracy and market economies reveals that they are nebulous, meaning different things to different people; indeed, at different times, they may even mean different things to the same people. Both a problem and an opportunity result: as a practical matter, the abstract concepts of human rights, democracy, and free markets are easily turned into slogans, which can be used as much to unite as to divide people. When grounded in the concrete reality of practical politics, they become the policies that make or unmake our strategic relationships.

For example, a group of Western nations (led by the United States) has been critical of non-Western (and especially Asian) countries’ reported violations of human rights. Despite the compromise reached at the World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna in June 1993, the gap between the Western emphasis on civil and political rights and the Asian preference for economic, social, and cultural rights remains. The financial typhoon that hit many Asian countries in 1997 further exposed these discrepancies. Many Western commentators declared that the financial crises demonstrated the failure of Asian “developmental capitalism” in face of a superior, Western model. Little doubt exists that authoritarian regimes or dictatorships, and their attendant economic models (sometimes called “crony capitalism”), are things of the past. Yet many experts on the Asian economy believe that mechanistically applying the so-called IMF (International Monetary Fund) model will not provide an ideal solution.

The search for a new model continues. As this process unfolds, the United States must remember that Asia’s ongoing reforms will not necessar-

ily lead to U.S.-style capitalism or democracy. The free market, regardless of its theoretical excellence as an economic model, cannot function smoothly in practice unless it rises as a function of each society's indigenous conditions. The same setting holds true for democracy. One cannot simply "import" democracy from abroad by writing constitutions and holding elections.

In this new and ideal world order, therefore, as allies and friends, we should most appropriately speak of "democracies and market economies" in the plural. Pluralism is indeed a key term here, referring simply to the existence of diversity. Tolerance of diversity does not necessarily need to mean the same thing as endorsement of relativism. An ideal world order would include various types of democratic states living together and various forms of market economies flourishing side by side.

Above all, the ideal world order would not be uniform. Indeed, if everything were ultimately measured in terms of economic efficiency, a horrific type of "one world-ism" would prevail. Global standards are good for enhancing instrumental values (such as entrepreneurial dynamism) but are not necessarily beneficial for the sake of intrinsic values (such as spiritual serenity). If the eventual outcome of a free-trade world is the victory of uniformity, undoubtedly the result would be an ironic defeat for democracy. Hopefully, that world does not wait for us in the new century.

## **The Imperative of Collective Action**

---

Such an ideal world will not be free from conflict among states. Keeping the peace, however, will be much easier if the military preeminence of the United States lasts for the foreseeable future. This preeminence is a stabilizing element because, as a general rule, unbridgeable gaps in the military capabilities of countries make war between them unlikely in the modern age. Risks would outweigh the gains of potential success, and a weaker country or group of countries would not dare of its own accord challenge stronger ones, unless highly provoked. A second Pearl Harbor can be safely ruled out in the foreseeable future.

Apart from such comprehensive, global considerations, many regional problems can be solved or, at any rate, ameliorated only through continued engagement and collegial action between allies, based on the principles outlined above. As a result, to obtain the results it desires from coordinated action, the United States must expect, and be prepared for, all sorts of time- and energy-consuming demands as the world's security manager. As the experiences of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) or the U.S.–Japan alliance amply demonstrate, despite all the good will in the world, hammering out a workable formula for power sharing and the division of la-

bor is not easy. Even when that task can be accomplished, one must then sell the resulting arrangements to the public.

As the proverb goes, too many cooks spoil the broth. Political leadership, more than military leadership, is subject to local sentiment and parochial perspective. Certainly, in war, each new level of command raises, by degrees, the potential for confusion. Furthermore, because the stakes are lower, collaboration during peacetime is far more difficult than in times of war or crisis. Politics is neither cookery nor war; for most issues, precisely collective or collegial leadership is needed. Except in extreme situations, dividing leadership among colleagues, not dictating it from one place, is the best option.

### **Asian Regional Perspective**

---

The Asia–Pacific region displays both reassuring and disconcerting trends. Overall, the news is good. Not much imagination is required to grasp the tremendous progress that many nations in this region have made during the last century. One hundred years ago—a mere bump in the region’s long march through history—colonial Western powers ruled the greater part of Southeast Asia, except for Thailand. The immemorial Chinese Empire was in creeping decline, yielding to the encroachments of Western imperialism. Japan was preparing to absorb Korea. The Commonwealth of Australia was in its infancy.

Only since World War II and the end of colonialism can one truly speak of the emergence of a genuine regional system of international relations in Asia and the Pacific. Indeed, just a few decades have passed since the two largest European settlements of the South Pacific (Australia and New Zealand) gained their political independence. Despite occasional setbacks, in this part of the world today, we witness a youthful, vibrant, growing group of nation-states. This dynamism is a distinctive feature of Asia, in contrast to other regions of the developing world.

Some disquieting phenomena, however, move hand in hand with these reassuring trends. Despite progress, the region remains undoubtedly the world’s most explosive; the two major hot wars of the Cold War were fought in Asia. Moreover, nation building, a central project of post-colonial development, remains an unfinished business in Asia: witness the continuing division of Korea and the undetermined status of Taiwan. Other Southeast Asian states (Myanmar, Vietnam, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Malaysia) are not yet firmly consolidated. Their frailty was exposed during the 1990s, when they were caught in the rising tide of globalization, with its attendant ups and downs.

Such signs warrant caution, but should not lead to the conclusion that Asia's twenty-first century prospects are dim. On the contrary, the future appears bright and encouraging. Ongoing political turmoil and confusion might well amount to nothing more than the growing pains of youthful states, rather than a congenital condition. Little likelihood exists that Asia will stagnate or fall to the fringe of the international community.

Thus, for the United States to rearrange its foreign policy orientation away from Asia, for whatever reason, would be absurd. Doing so would be a blunder from every point of view: a self-inflicted wound of world-shaking magnitude. Undoubtedly, the United States is currently absorbed in the process of building momentum toward economic integration of the Western Hemisphere, and this process will accelerate through instruments such as the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). Yet the United States must not lose sight of opportunities to play a constructive role in Asian regional organizations, such as the APEC (Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation) forum or the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF).

By the same token, the United States should adopt a more relaxed attitude toward the "Asianization" of Asia. In the past, the United States tended to be hypersensitive to any idea of regional cooperation in Asia, simply because the United States was not considered a constituting member, whether of Malaysia's plan for the EAEC (East Asian Economic Caucus) or Japan's proposal for an AMF (Asian Monetary Fund). This "Asianization" process, which in principle is highly desirable, is part of the price the United States must pay for perceived U.S. aloofness during the Asian financial crisis of 1997. Partially because of this experience, some Asian countries recently began to investigate the possibility of bilateral free-trade arrangements. For example, in January 2001, Japan and Singapore concluded an Economic Agreement for a New Age Partnership.

## **The Great Enigma: China**

---

Despite these other challenges, the region's most daunting challenge is presented by its largest member—not because China, like the Soviet Union in the past, poses an actual military threat, although indeed it potentially is; but rather because it is an enigma on so many fronts. Apart from their vast population and territory, the Chinese are justly proud of the fact that they had attained a high-level civilization when Rome was nothing but seven wild hills overrun by wolves. China has long been the center of a magnificent world all its own.

Despite this vantage, or rather because of it, the Celestial Empire failed to adapt to modernity and was forced to endure the humiliation of serving

as a quasi-colonial nation for about 100 years beginning in the mid-nineteenth century. After a long period of national tribulation, China is now at last on the verge of becoming a genuinely sovereign state.

With its newly acquired economic power, China ardently seeking “equal” standing among the advanced powers of the world is no small wonder. In the eighteenth or nineteenth centuries, when a classic paradigm of *realpolitik* prevailed in international relations, this accession would have been a matter of course. Contemporary international society is, however, substantially different now. All nations, small and large, are closely intertwined in a complex web of interdependence. The global village is a reality, and it has no room for what Kenneth Boulding has called “unconditional viability,” either in the economic or the strategic sphere. Without mutual tolerance, forbearance, and compromise, none of us will survive, let alone flourish.

**U.S. military preeminence would ideally last for the foreseeable future.**

China should be allowed to take its rightful place in the sun. We may well be excused for holding back on other emerging nations (such as India), but foreseeing the problems of acting otherwise toward China requires no stretch of the imagination. Under the existing principle of national sovereignty, each state’s leaders are primarily responsible for providing for their population’s economic and social welfare. Everyone, including China’s leaders, realizes that the Chinese cannot expect to solve their economic problems unilaterally.

The consequences of China’s economic modernization will be enormous. Simply in terms of the physical world in which we live, if modernization continues to be successful and maintains its current pace, it will place a huge burden on the environment. For example, try forecasting, with China in the mix, a future equilibrium of demand and supply of natural resources such as oil and gas. Conversely, if China’s economic modernization fares poorly, social dislocation on an unprecedented scale and political upheavals are not unfathomable. Either through success or through failure, or—as is more likely—something in between, China’s future is destined to affect the life of every human being in the twenty-first century.

Although differences between past and present are evident, the lessons of history are well worth examination; they provide insight into how things may turn out and what must be done to ensure a positive outcome. In some ways, the Chinese problem resembles the German problem or the Japanese problem that vexed neighboring countries when each quickly emerged as great powers. Regardless of their underlying intentions, the mere emergence

of Germany and Japan necessarily aroused the concern of the existing great powers. Following unification in the late nineteenth century, and well into the twentieth, Germany experienced fierce economic friction with its advanced neighbors, especially Great Britain. Japan had a similar experience with the colonial powers in Asia during the 1930s. Japan's economic competition with the United States during the 1970s and 1980s was intense, but could only be characterized as benign.

Economic competition thus does not have to be a precursor to military strife. Yet it takes great effort to prevent economic disputes from spilling into other unexpected and sometimes malignant rivalries. Indeed, recently the West suspiciously viewed Japan as a power comprised of elements ultimately incompatible with Western ideals and essentially "not like us."

China will likely face a similar ordeal. For the time being, by virtue of being a fast-rising power, China poses perplexing questions to its neighboring countries and to the prospective new world order. Given China's deeply ingrained sense of frustration, attributable to unpleasant memories of its recent past, it will probably continue to voice its international concerns in revolutionary language, and perhaps even behave belligerently to some extent. The United States must possess and utilize a far-ranging insight into Asian psychology and, above all, great patience and forbearance to respond in a manner allowing itself to accomplish its objectives and help us all build that bright new world order.

## **An Ideal Division of Labor**

---

As stated at the outset, little disagreement between Japan and the United States about what should be done in an ideal new world order exists. Disagreements that may arise will more likely be about how things should be done.

Japan's continuing inclination to address the "soft" elements of a comprehensive security strategy, while leaving the "hard" elements to the United States, is one harbinger of how this pattern of behavior might ultimately translate into a division of labor. Nevertheless, even if Japan departs from its unique view of collective self-defense—namely, that it has the right to participate in collective self-defense but chooses not to exercise that right—the Japanese military's extraregional role in international affairs will continue to be modest. On the other hand, Japan's military contribution to the security of the region, as a powerful, well-equipped, and steady U.S. ally, will remain an important part of the security equation. The U.S. Forces in Japan (USFJ) should start thinking of the Japan Self-Defense Forces (JSDF) as a colleague. Japan will remain an auxiliary to the United States, not just because



of the “peace constitution,” but because of the simple reality of the enormous gap in military capabilities between Japan and the United States. In any case, the Japanese concept of comprehensive security is based on the application of economic and nonviolent measures. Japan’s fondness for that concept is related to a general Japanese cultural preference for the indirect approach.

The success of any U.S. economic or security strategy in Asia—particularly with regard to engagement with China—ultimately depends on a firm bond of friendship between Japan and the United States. First, in terms of cultural issues, Japan plays a valuable role as an interpreter of “the Asian mind.” Second, despite the bizarre tragicomedy of Tokyo’s efforts to deal with the country’s economic malaise, Japan’s influence will continue to be decisive in the region’s economic development. Third, in terms of security issues, even in the age of “real time” and information technology, the enormous physical distance between the United States and East Asia is a serious drag on the projection of military force during a crisis. The forward deployment of U.S. forces in the vicinity of Japan will remain indispensable. In all these ways, Japan can help the United States enforce their common vision for democratic world order.

**Without mutual tolerance, forbearance, and compromise, none of us will survive.**

