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Japan's Role in the Future International Order

Makoto Iokibe
Professor of History
Graduate School of Law, Kobe University

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Kobe University

1. Japan's Historical Experience

In the history of East Asia, the island nation of Japan has not been a pillar of the international order.

Japan simply studied the civilization of neighboring China (a pillar of the East Asian order), developed a high degree of culture, and guarded its own independence.

As the great powers of the West bore down on East Asia in the nineteenth century, China was witnessing the decline of the Qing dynasty and proved unable to react in a timely fashion. Japan, by way of contrast, newly opened to the world after long isolation, learned the secrets of the power of Western civilization at break-neck speed, and used them to defeat Russia, a major power, a mere 50 years after opening itself up to the world.

Within the milieu of non-Western society, Japan modernized rapidly and became the sole imperial power in Asia. Unskilled in foreign policy, however, after the First World War the Japanese empire proved unable to strike a balance between its own national interests and the awakening nationalist aspirations of other Asian countries. The Japanese empire attempted to use its military might to crush nationalism in neighboring countries, starting with China, and thus embarked on the road to destruction. In short, Japan grabbed at the chance to become a pillar of the international order for the first time in modern history, but failed in its attempt.

2. The role of Post-War Japan

As a consequence of Japan's past bellicosity, its post-war actions were constantly portrayed in a negative light. Throughout the history of the post-war period, other Asian nations kept up an incessant drumbeat of criticism, charging that Japan was reverting to militarism.

In fact, post-war Japan may well be the most pacifist nation in the world and appears to have played a humble yet constructive role in the East Asian order.

For the regional order, it was a most welcome development that Japan, which bore responsibility for the war, had reverted to a peaceful way of life. Post-war Japan's pacifism originated in the World War Two victors' enforcement of their policy of demilitarization. However, when Japan sought to reclaim its independence at the time of the Korean War, the United States government pressured Japan to undertake full-scale rearmament in rapid fashion. Prime Minister Yoshida insisted, however, that Japan would only engage in light rearmament over a protracted period and under secure civilian control, and established a policy of putting economic reconstruction first.

During the 1970s Japan was the only democratic nation in East Asia to achieve economic growth. As the anti-Japanese riots that erupted in East Asia in 1974 demonstrated, Japan cut a lonely figure in Asia. However, events after the Fukuda doctrine of 1977 showed that it was not that Japan was being isolated, but that East Asia as a whole was converging on the same path as Japan. A chain reaction of economic development took place—newly industrializing economies (NIEs), ASEAN,

China, Vietnam—and the nations of East Asia became exporters of manufactured goods to the world. Japan helped this major transformation along by means of trade, direct investment, and ODA (overseas development assistance). A good many countries have sought economic growth within an authoritarian system of development; however, the social changes that accompany economic development gradually form the foundations for democracy.

Not only did post-war Japan tread the path of peaceful development and democratization itself, using its influence it also planted the seeds for similar transformations throughout East Asia. Thus it can be said that, in its quiet pursuit of the furtherance of mutual interests, Japan has made a substantial contribution to the international order in the region.

3. Future Issues—the East Asian Order

The last two decades of the twentieth century witnessed a headlong advance by East Asia. However, out of this success story, new problems are arising.

One problem is that North Korea—excluded from the market-driven economic prosperity blanketing the rest of East Asia—has sullied its hands with nuclear materials and missiles.

Another major long-term problem is the question mark over the kind of international order that China is heading for, having made great strides and restored itself to its original position as a pivotal nation in East Asia. From a historical perspective, nations that rapidly acquire power (such as Germany and Japan in the twentieth century) have then become bent on overturning the status quo, which has been apt to provoke wars with those nations that seek to preserve the status quo. Contemporary China's advances are on a larger scale than those of twentieth-century Germany and Japan. For some time China made economic development its top priority; since this required a peaceful international environment, China maintained a uniform pace in its military modernization efforts. However, China's continuing leaps and bounds on the economic front have yielded fiscal surpluses, and recent years have witnessed a striking military expansion by the nation. Under its territorial sea laws, China regards islands whose sovereignty is disputed with neighboring countries as its own territory. If China were to resort to using its superior military power to restore these "legitimate" territories, East Asia could be transformed into a maelstrom of military tensions.

Although mighty China holds a deep-rooted belief in power politics, the Hu Jin-tao administration is emphasizing collaborative relations with neighboring countries and pursuing peaceful development. Nations such as Japan and the United States must act to ensure that this path is the principal one that is taken. Unlike the Soviet Union in the former Cold-War era, for the past 25 years China has embraced international market economics and experienced growth. It is reasonable to assume that, if this continues for another 25 years, China is heading for democratization. There are still realists in the United States who regard China as a future rival and allude to a US-China showdown. However, China is the principal nation within the East Asian order engaging in mediation with North Korea. Although a few Chinese voices have raised the possibility of war with the US over the issue of Taiwan, China would be unlikely to engage in such folly.

At present, it is essentially only Japan whose relations with China are deteriorating. Although the Japanese economy was in recession during the 1990s,

Japan pursued a central role in East Asian international relations up until the era of the Hashimoto and Obuchi administrations. As the current prime minister vigorously rejects China's interference in Japan's internal affairs and persists in his visits to Yasukuni shrine, he is reminding the world of Japan's war of aggression, the most shameful hour in the nation's past. As a result of this mounting folly, Japan's role in East Asia is rapidly diminishing.

In the end, Japan and the United States have been trying to absorb a rising China into the fold of international society—essentially by adopting a policy of engagement that seeks to encourage China to become a major power with a responsibility to international society. For the East Asian order, the success or failure of this initiative is the key issue. For success to be achieved and rapid decline avoided, China itself will have to demonstrate humility and intelligence as its progress continues, and Japan and the United States, who are coming under challenge from China, will have to display wisdom and tolerance.

Will it be possible to establish a twenty-first century regional order that makes use of the region's assets—ASEAN-based international cooperation in Southeast Asia and the six-nation talks over North Korea in Northeast Asia? It is to be hoped that, amid all the vacillations, the East Asian community can continue to grow.

N.B. Translation of this paper from Japanese to English was done by IIPS.