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# The Pacific Ocean and U.S.-Japan Relations: A Way of Looking Back at the 20th Century

AKIO WATANABE\*

Speaking of a “Pacific Age” is now commonplace. About a hundred years ago, however, it was almost a flight of fancy. In 1890, Manjiro Inagaki, a Cambridge-educated Japanese diplomat, wrote: “Without doubt the Pacific will in the coming century be the platform of commercial and political enterprise. This truth, however, escapes the eyes of ninety-nine out of a hundred, just as did the importance of Eastern Europe in 1790 and of Central Asia in 1857.”<sup>1</sup> Inagaki’s belief was based on the seemingly inevitable clash of interests between England and Russia in those years. The rivalry for spheres of influence between the two “super powers” extended from the Balkans to Central Asia/Afghanistan and was now, he thought, extending to Eastern Asia and the Pacific. The “Pacific Question” was, he maintained, an inevitable extension of the “Eastern Question.”<sup>2</sup>

Inagaki sought through his writings to arouse the interest of the government and people of Great Britain about the importance of Japan. While Vancouver, which was connected with the east coast of North

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1. MANJIRO INAGAKI, *JAPAN AND THE PACIFIC AND A JAPANESE VIEW OF THE EASTERN QUESTION* 21–22 (1890). Born in 1861 in Nagasaki, Inagaki studied in Cambridge under the guidance of Professor John Robert Seeley. He was assigned to Siam in March 1898 as chargé d’affaires at the Japanese legation. There he served as minister plenipotentiary from 1899 to 1905 (with a seven-month interval in 1903). Inagaki then served as minister plenipotentiary in Spain from February 1907 until his death on November 25, 1908.

2. *Id.* at 10.

America by way of the Canadian Pacific Railway and further with the British Isles across the Atlantic Ocean, provided Great Britain with an outlet for the Pacific, the Siberian Railway and Vladivostock provided Russia with an exit for the Pacific. Korea—"the Turkey" of Asia—was becoming a bone of contention between Great Britain and Russia, which might cause a second Crimean War in the Pacific instead of on the Black Sea. Given these facts, Inagaki argued, Japan would be the key of the Pacific since its navy would be able to sever communication between Vancouver and British outposts in the Far East, such as Port Hamilton, Shanghai and Hong Kong. Inagaki noted: "Port Hamilton is rather useless with regard to the Japan Sea and the Canadian Pacific Railway road without a Japanese alliance, but it would be of immense importance in withstanding a Russian attack on the British interests from the Yellow Sea through Mongolia and Manchooria."<sup>3</sup>

An Anglo-Japanese alliance, which would eventually come into being in 1902, was not yet a foregone conclusion. In 1887, Great Britain abandoned the Port Hamilton scheme in deference to Chinese concern. Instead, it chose to obtain a written guarantee from China against any future Russian occupation.<sup>4</sup> In other words, Great Britain's commercial and diplomatic interests with China still far surpassed the possible merits of its alliance with Japan. This is not the place, however, to bring the story of Anglo-Japanese diplomatic relations to any further point. Suffice it to say that Japan's victory over China, only five years after the publication of Inagaki's book, significantly altered the contours of Far Eastern international relations, as did Japan's British-aided victory over Russia some ten years later. Inagaki's prediction as to the importance of Japan for Great Britain's Asian diplomacy, and vice versa, was fulfilled.

Inagaki also correctly predicted the important place that the Pacific was to occupy in 20th century international history. Inagaki's perception was in large part due to the teachings of John Robert Seeley, his teacher at Cambridge. A historian and renowned author of *The Expansion of England*,<sup>5</sup> Seeley taught Inagaki the way to get the right perspective on international history. According to Seeley, "In the school of Carl Ritter much has been said of three stages of civilization determined by geographical conditions, the potamic which clings to rivers, the

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3. *Id.* at 34.

4. In 1885, when Russia advanced its army to Afghanistan, Britain occupied Port Hamilton (three small islands on the southern tip of the Korean Peninsula) in preparation for a planned attack on Vladivostock. The scheme to make it a permanent naval base was abandoned two years later.

5. JOHN R. SEELEY, *THE EXPANSION OF ENGLAND: TWO COURSES OF LECTURES* (2nd ed., 1899).

thalassic, which grows up around inland seas, and lastly the oceanic.”<sup>6</sup>

Substitution for the Mediterranean Sea by the Atlantic Ocean as the highway of commerce represented a transition from the second (thalassic) to the third (oceanic) stage of civilization. This new oceanic age was ushered in with the explorations of Christopher Columbus and the two sister nations on the Iberian Peninsula. At the time of Inagaki’s writing, the transcontinental railways across America and Eurasia, together with the then ongoing scheme of the Panama Canal, were about to transform the Pacific Ocean into a new highway for commerce. As Inagaki rightly said, humankind was witnessing the arrival of a new era called “the railway-oceanic.”<sup>7</sup>

Inagaki reminds us of Halford J. Mackinder, a British scholar of geopolitics. Both Mackinder and Inagaki stressed the importance of the Siberian railway, which made Russia a formidable rival for Great Britain in the Far East.<sup>8</sup> But it would be more appropriate to remember here the name of Captain A. T. Mahan of the United States Navy, a contemporary of Inagaki. His famous book, *The Influence of Sea Power upon History: 1660-1783*, was first published in 1890, the same year in which Inagaki’s book was published in London. As a fervent advocate of a powerful United States navy, Captain Mahan, like Inagaki, viewed the Pacific Ocean as an important theater of competition among nations in the coming century.

In forecasting the future, Mahan drew the reader’s attention to, among other signs of the times,

the development of . . . new commercial [centers], notably in China and Japan, that was the most prominent feature, . . . and, . . . the stirring of the East, its entrance into the field of Western interests, not merely as a passive something to be impinged upon, but with a vitality of its own, formless yet, but significant,

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6. *Id.* at 102. What Ritter and Seeley called “the thalassic” stage roughly corresponds to Fernand Braudel’s “coastal navigation.” According to Braudel: “The sea in the sixteenth century was an immensity of water: man’s efforts had only conquered a few coastal margins and tiny ports of call. Great stretches of the sea were as empty as the Sahara. Shipping was active only along the coastline. Navigation in those days was a matter of following the shore line, just as the earliest days of water transport, moving crab-wise from rock to rock, from promontories to islands[,] and from islands to promontories.” FERNAND BRAUDEL, *THE MEDITERRANEAN AND THE MEDITERRANEAN WORLD IN THE AGE OF PHILIP II* 103 (Sian Reynolds trans., University of California Press 1995).

7. INAGAKI, *supra* note 1, at 53.

8. Halford J. Mackinder, *The Geographical Pivot of History*, 23 *THE GEOGRAPHICAL JOURNAL* NO. 4 421–27 (1904) (paper read to the Royal Geographical Society in 1904). Mackinder elaborated on the theme in HALFORD J. MACKINDER, *DEMOCRATIC IDEALS AND REALITY* (Anthony J Pearce ed., W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1962) (1919).

inasmuch as where before there was torpor, if not death, now there is indisputable movement and life.<sup>9</sup>

Mahan did not necessarily foresee inevitable clashes of interests between East and West, but he was naturally concerned about military implications of “the stirring of the East” for America. It was apparently China, not Japan, however, that aroused his anxiety. Referring to the naval value of Hawaii, he wrote as follows:

There is one aspect of the recent revolution in Hawaii which seems to have been kept out of sight, and that is the relation of the islands, not merely to our own and to European countries, but to China. How vitally important that may become in the future is evident from the great number of Chinese, relatively to the whole population, now settled in the islands.

It is a question for the whole civilized world and not for the United States only, whether the Sandwich Islands, with their geographical and military importance, unrivalled by that of any other position in the North Pacific, shall in the future be an outpost of European civilization, or of the comparative barbarism of China. It is sufficiently known, but not, perhaps, generally noted in our country, that many military men abroad, familiar with Eastern conditions and character, look with apprehension towards the day when the vast mass of China—now inert—may yield to one of those impulses which have in past ages buried civilization under a wave of barbaric invasion.<sup>10</sup>

The truth of the matter is that the government of Japan, not that of China, was protesting attempts by the U.S. government to annex Hawaii by taking advantage of the island kingdom’s 1893 revolution. According to a survey in 1896, there were 24,407 Japanese settlers on the islands (22.4 percent of the whole population of Hawaii) as compared to 21,616 Chinese (19.8 percent). Only four years later the number of the former group reached 61,111 (about 40 percent of the total population), while that of the latter group was 25,767.<sup>11</sup> In 1893, Japan’s Imperial Navy dispatched a cruiser, the *Naniwa*, to Hawaii under the command of Captain Togo Heihachiro,<sup>12</sup> ostensibly to protect lives and properties of Japanese settlers on the islands. This move created a strained atmosphere in Hawaii, as well as in diplomatic relations with Japan and the United States. Fortunately, this problem was peacefully settled and did not leave a lasting effect on U.S.-Japanese relations.

It might be the case that Captain Mahan overlooked the potential strength of Japan, while being impressed rather excessively by the sheer size of China. A victory for Japan against Russia in 1905 changed that

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9. CAPTAIN A.T. MAHAN, *THE INTEREST OF AMERICA IN SEA POWER, PRESENT AND FUTURE* 234–35 (1897).

10. *Id.* at 31.

11. SARUYA KANAME, *HAWAII OUCHOU SAIGONO JOUOU (THE LAST QUEEN OF THE HAWAIIAN DYNASTY)* 219–20 (2003).

12. The hero in the historic battle on the Sea of Japan with the Russian Baltic Fleet in 1905.

perception of Japan. Theodore Roosevelt was one of those American politicians who, apparently influenced by Mahan, became aware of Japan's potential power. He volunteered to act as the mediator for a Russo-Japanese peace treaty, negotiations for which were held in Portsmouth, New Hampshire. In 1905, when Roosevelt said that the 20th century would be that of the Pacific Ocean, a realist like him was anticipating, even if only vaguely, an increasing rivalry with Japan. But it was of course beyond his, or anybody else's capacity, to know in advance exactly in what manner history would actually evolve.

Looking back now, about a hundred years after Theodore Roosevelt's time, we know that international relations in the Pacific during the 20th century were not really pacific. During the four decades between Theodore Roosevelt and Franklin Roosevelt, "the Pacific Question" was defined more and more in terms of U.S.-Japan rivalry, not Anglo-Russian rivalry. Those years witnessed a continuous aggravation of the relationship between the two rising powers in the Pacific, culminating in the Pacific War.

Reflecting on these developments, the word "Pacific" gradually crept into the vocabulary of Japanese diplomacy, although it never replaced the term "Asia," which remained the most frequently used referent in pre-World War II discourse in Japan about international relations.<sup>13</sup> Despite their insular character, Japanese people remained unfamiliar with the Pacific Ocean throughout its long history. This was partly because of Tokugawa's self-imposed seclusion policy, under which the building of large vessels was strictly prohibited. Nature was another reason. Japanese archipelagoes are surrounded by strong currents, which prevented the inhabitants on the islands from launching out into the "great ocean," at least until modern times. Once awakened from the century-old seclusion policy, Japan quickly tried to emulate Great Britain, the leading naval power. The expansion of Japan, however, only partially resembled that of England. On the whole, the pull from the Asiatic Continent was stronger than that from the Pacific Ocean. The army prevailed over the navy; the northern advance school (hokushin-ron) over the southern (nanshin-ron); and the military approach over the commercial. It is symbolic that what Japan called the Great East Asian War was the Pacific War for the Americans.

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13. This is based on a content analysis of the speeches of prime and foreign ministers at the Diet, in Akio Watanabe, *Taigai Ishiki Ni Okeru 'Senzen' To 'Sengo,' in KINDAI NIHON NO TAIGAI-TAIDO (ATTITUDES TOWARD THE OUTSIDE WORLD OF MODERN JAPAN) 225-74* (Sato Seizaburo & Roger Dingman eds., 1974).

It is only after 1945 that Japan began to feel a stronger pull from the Ocean than that from the Asian continent, which was due in large part to American policy. A possible combination of Japan's industrial potential and China's great mass was a nightmare for the Cold Warriors of the United States. That type of anxiety was particularly acute in the early years after the April 1952 San Francisco Peace Treaty by which Japan resumed its diplomatic status. One of the policy papers prepared by a member of the American Embassy in those years spoke of two competing forces pulling Japan in opposite directions: continental and oceanic. Although suddenly severed from the Asiatic continent, Japan remained very vulnerable to the influence of continental Asia because of strong material and spiritual ties. The implication for American policy was clear: Enhanced efforts would be needed to tow Japan into the American orbit.<sup>14</sup>

Under the subtitle of the "continental pull," the paper stated:

There is a special quality in Japan's view of China and a gravitational pull toward the mainland with its ties of culture, blood, tradition, personal experience, and the recent memory of an earlier life. Various rationalized, this ends with "bridge theory" of Japan's mission between East and West. All this, and much of it wells up from the deepest springs of Japanese consciousness, [sic] appears to many Japanese to be served at least for the time being by neutralism.

A similar logic propelled the Eisenhower Administration to reorient U.S. policy towards Japan with a greater emphasis on its economic rehabilitation in the international society. With the assistance of the United States (and to some extent that of Canada as well), Japan was admitted to such international economic organizations as the Colombo Plan, the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, and the International Monetary Fund. This was a rather bitter pill to swallow for some U.S. allies in Asia and the Pacific region. Countries such as Australia and New Zealand felt betrayed by the wartime leader who, to their chagrin, now tended to put Japan's economic interests before those of its former allies.<sup>15</sup> Washington's concern about a possible Japan and China alliance was shared by London, which devoted its best efforts to persuade its

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14. *A Preliminary Reappraisal of United States Policy with Respect to Japan*, Embassy Study prepared by William Leonhart and submitted to Walter S. Robertson, Assistant Secretary for State, on Oct. 25, 1954 (National Archives RG 611.94/10-2554), at 28.

15. An earlier example was General Douglas MacArthur's Occupation policy to restore Japan's fishery and whale industry, which aroused strong resentment from Australia and New Zealand. The Tripartite International North Pacific Fisheries Convention was, to those South Pacific nations, nothing but an arrangement to protect interests of America and Canada at the expense of the other nations in the Asia and Pacific region. This story is well told by HARRY N. SCHEIBER, *INTER-ALLIED CONFLICTS AND OCEAN LAW, 1945-53: THE OCCUPATION COMMAND'S REVIVAL OF JAPANESE WHALING AND MARINE FISHERIES* (2001).

Commonwealth members to follow suit as the United Kingdom endorsed American policy with regard to Japan. In a diplomatic note handed down in the middle of 1954, United Kingdom Government stated that it was prepared

- (a) to play its part in preventing the economic distress which might foster Communism in Japan, by maintaining as high a level of trade between Japan and the sterling area as is consistent with the national interest; [and]
- (b) to take whatever opportunities occur to effect a change in the climate of United Kingdom opinion towards Japan so as to bring it into closer accord with the overriding requirements of the national policy and interest.<sup>16</sup>

Prompted by the British suggestions, Sir Robert Menzies's Cabinet started to reassess its own Japan policy and ended up advising the Australian people to "behave as a 'grown-up' nation which knows that the greatest stumbling block to peace is the perpetuation of enmities."<sup>17</sup> The policy of Australia, as the paper argued, "should be guided by the principle of allowing Japan, through cooperation with non-communist nations, to have reasonable facilities by expanding her export trade, and for developing her political and economic life and institutions in a way that will strengthen Japan's association with the West."<sup>18</sup>

Rational calculation is one thing, and political dynamics is another, be it in Washington, London, or Canberra. As for Australia, it concluded a commercial treaty with Japan in 1957, lifted a two-decade-old iron ore embargo in 1959, and concluded a friendship treaty in 1976. But the basic framework for Japan's entrance (or reentrance) into a web of political and economic interdependence in the Asia-Pacific region had been set up by the end of the 1950s.<sup>19</sup>

The international landscape in the Asian and Pacific region showed remarkable changes in the ensuing decades. Japan's high economic growth during those years is a well-known story. Concurrent prosperity was shared by most of the nations facing the Pacific Rim/Basin. In 1980, U.S. transpacific trade (i.e. trade with Asia) began to soar past its transatlantic trade (i.e. trade with Europe).<sup>20</sup> Ohira Masayoshi, then Prime Minister

16. Record of Conversation with Mr. G.W. Tory, U.K. High Commissioner, 17th June, 1954. Australian Archives ACT CRS A517 Item 46-1931 pt.XXI.

17. Australian Policy towards Japan, Submission No. 30, July 28, 1954.

18. *Id.*

19. See SAYURI SHIMIZU, *CREATING PEOPLE OF PLENTY: THE UNITED STATES AND JAPAN'S ECONOMIC ALTERNATIVES, 1950-1960* (2001).

20. MARK BORTHWICK ET AL., *PACIFIC CENTURY: THE EMERGENCE OF MODERN PACIFIC ASIA 2* (1992).



of Japan, proposed the scheme for the Pacific Basin Cooperation, which gave an impetus to establish the Pacific Economic Cooperation Conference, which held their first meeting in Canberra in September 1980.<sup>21</sup> It may be said that remarkable progress in communications and transport technologies in modern times has transformed the vast Pacific Ocean into virtually an inland sea.

The 20th century witnessed conflict and bloodshed between the two emerging powers across the Pacific Ocean in its first half and then economic prosperity—though not without conflict—among them in its second half. It seems that, with the emerging power of China before the turn of the century, the development of Pacific international relations is entering a new phase. A group of plate tectonic experts tell us that the Japanese archipelagoes have moved closer to the Chinese Continent on average by 2.9 centimeters per annum. Commenting on this scientific finding, a Japanese newspaper wrote: “This means that Japan is moving away from the American Continent by that distance.”<sup>22</sup> More seriously, Japan’s export to China increased by 32 percent in 2002, whereas its export to the United States grew by only one percent. As a result, the U.S. accounted for 28.5 percent of Japan’s export, while China for 9.6 percent (or 15.7 percent if Hong Kong is included), in 2002. Moreover, Japan’s import from China surpassed that from the United States for the first time in 2002 (¥7,725 billion for China and ¥7,217 billion for America).<sup>23</sup>

Do these changes foretell that the Asiatic Continent has begun to give Japan a stronger pull than the Pacific Ocean? Or is it that the entire region of Asia and the Pacific will become closer, embracing America and Asia together, in the new century? “The Bridge Theory” of Japan’s mission between East and West will be critically tested on the stage of Pacific theater in the new, 21st century.

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21. The Pacific Basin Cooperation Study Group, *Report on the Pacific Basin Cooperation Concept* (May 19, 1980).

22. MAINICHI SHIMBUN, Oct. 26, 1992.

23. NIHON KEIZAI SHIMBUN, Jan. 27, 2003 (evening), and Jan. 28, 2003.