The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus
In-depth critical analysis of the forces shaping the Asia-Pacific...and the world.

Emerging From the Shadow of the Black Ships

by Yoichi FUNABASHI

The author is an Asahi Shimbun senior staff writer and foreign affairs columnist. This article appeared in Asahi Shimbun on May 27, 2003. Posted at Japan Focus on June 1, 2003.

"In the century and a half since (Commodore Matthew) Perry came to Japan, Japan-U.S. relations have probably never been better," gushed Deputy Chief Cabinet Secretary Shinzo Abe, on the eve of Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi's departure for summit talks with U.S. President George W. Bush.

Patting itself on the back, the government is chalking up the good relations to Koizumi's strong support for the U.S.-led war against Iraq.

This year and next, the Japanese government is organizing commemorative events to mark the 150th anniversary of Perry's visit to Japan.

The official Web site for these series of events offers the following explanation: "It was the visit of the Black Ships, commanded by Commodore Perry, to Uraga (in Yokosuka) on July 8, 1853, that provided the impetus for Japan's awakening from its long isolation and put the nation on the path of modernization. On March 31, 1854, Japan and the United States signed the Japan-U.S. Treaty of Peace and Amity in Kanagawa Village (present-day Yokohama), marking the start of official exchanges between the two countries."

On the site's home page is a picture of a brawny Perry in naval uniform. Planned programs include the issue of commemorative stamps, an essay contest for American junior and senior high school students and a visit by the Maritime Self-Defense Force to Perry's hometown of Newport, Rhode Island, the site of the Black Ship Festival.

In the Seiron column that appeared in the Sankei Shimbun on April 14, commentator and Reitaku University professor Kenichi Matsumoto pointed out problems with a historical understanding that fawns upon the United States and refers to Perry as "the benefactor who opened Japan." Matsumoto also reassessed the political leadership of Abe Masahiro, the head of the roju (senior officials of the Tokugawa regime, equivalent to the prime minister) for "leading Japan to open up without war."

Where should be the foundation of the Japanese perspective? How should Japan view Perry's visit?

Perry's visit was a typical case of gunboat diplomacy. His fleet was one of the world's strongest at the time, with unrivaled destructive power. He used it to open up Japan with "shock and awe." Perry's eyes were fixed on the Ryukyu Islands (Okinawa) like a hawk. He advised President Millard Fillmore that unless the United States occupied the islands, they could be claimed by the navies of Britain, Russia or France, and urged him to take action before the others. It sounds like the first-strike theory advocated by the neocons. Maybe Perry was an early neocon.

But the president turned down his request, saying that only the U.S. Congress had the prerogative to wage war and told him to exercise caution in carrying out his duties. He warned Perry against using force to bolster his own standing in the military.

Perry landed in Okinawa on May 26, 1853, more than a month before coming to Uraga. He led more than 200 fully armed Marines to visit Shuri Castle. Perhaps it would be more appropriate to use the term "marched into." In Naha, a U.S. sailor raped an Okinawan woman. Furious townsfolk threw stones at the sailor, who failed to escape and drowned. Perry, who learned of the incident later, demanded that the people who threw the stones be tried.

Perry saw Okinawa as a geopolitical strategic point to cover all of East Asia and tried to use it as a lever and a wedge to move Japan into submission. We need to look honestly at such U.S. realism.

In 1953, on the centennial of Perry's visit, the United States declared the "Ryukyu goodwill" in Okinawa, which was still under U.S. occupation. What outlook for the future of Okinawa will be incorporated into commemorative programs to celebrate the 150th anniversary?

While in the United States, I heard some people express skepticism about a commemorative-event diplomacy that seems intent on raising the festive mood of Japan-U.S. relations, as if in time to the music played at the Black Ship Festival.

"Americans don't care about the 150th anniversary of Perry's visit," said a New York-based leading expert on Japan. "Why is the Japanese consul-general busying himself on such a matter?"

"Since the United States virtually forced Japan to open up, we don't really feel like celebrating," said an American diplomat who has worked in Asia for a long time.

Discord, struggle and war often give rise to the intermingling of civilizations. Perhaps profound engagement occurs more frequently in muddy, rather than purified, water. Perry's visit, Japan's opening, war, alliance, gaiatsu (external pressure) and market liberalization have all contributed to forming the shades of engagement and history between Japan and the United States. All are part of the legacy of the 150-year history between them. It is not my intention to use this column to criticize Perry and the United States. I merely want to make the following point.

After World War II, Japan and the United States made a fresh start and formed an alliance. The relationship protected Japan during the Cold War and has continued to be an important part of post-Cold War Japanese diplomacy and security. To continue to make good use of it, Japan must develop an independent spirit and historical understanding. Dependence does not lead to mutual trust and respect. We must take a realistic look at history to derive lessons that look to the future. We must not forget to develop our own perspective.

Created by Datamomentum