



# The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus

in-depth critical analysis of the forces shaping the Asia-Pacific...and the world.

## Japan, Europe and The Dangerous Fantasy of American Leadership

Karel van Wolferen

The peculiar and unique U.S.-Japan relationship has entered a new phase, in which its future is shrouded in mist. While few Americans can be bothered ever to think about it, in the back of many Japanese minds it is something as generally accepted as a fact of nature, but at the same time a permanent complication that is recently showing sharp and irritating edges. Quite a few have begun to think that they should shake themselves out of the habit of taking it so much for granted.

When thinking about the relationship between two powerful countries such as that between the United States and Japan it is useful to take a step back to view it in the context of our planet's geopolitical reality. This also enables a quick overview of what has been happening to it recently. Both Japan and the United States were until the collapse of the Soviet Union considered countries that belonged to the 'First World'. They kept company in that category with all European countries west of what was known as the 'Iron Curtain', and with the formerly British possessions populated by mostly white settlers like Australia, New Zealand, and Canada. The First World overlapped with what used to be known as the 'free world', to which also a handful of countries in East and Southeast Asian belonged.

What is immediately obvious from looking at the world's geopolitical organization until 1989 is that, outside the United States, this 'free world' was positioned on either end of that great Eurasian landmass which, for the greater part, was covered by the so-called 'Second World' of communism. And a general idea in the minds of policy thinkers and planners who lived in the 'free world' was that they were helping literally 'to contain' that Second World, whose leaders, especially those in Moscow, were believed to harbor expansionist ambitions, and were therefore considered dangerous. As such the 'free world' and First World were also referred to as the Western Cold War alliance, with Japan automatically included as a kind of honorary member of The West. One thing and another was formalized, formulated and legally consolidated with treaties and official alliances.

The so-called First World had come into being soon after World War II, in the course of the 1950s. It added up to a kind of empire run out of Washington. Although very different from well-known empires in history it functioned as an empire in that Washington was essentially in control of the foreign policies of all its parts. But it could not officially be labeled an 'empire' because that was precisely what the notion of 'freedom', crucially important to the 'free world', precluded. The fact that it actually had constituted a kind of empire, albeit a relatively loose one, only gradually became more obvious when having a Cold War alliance was no longer necessary to contain that supposed enemy which spanned most of the Eurasian continent. We will return to that revelation in a moment.

The Cold War Alliance was not an arrangement founded only on simple political convenience. More than fear of a potentially violent enemy was behind it. It formed the central support of something else, something abstract, which was frequently invoked in tones of reverence as the 'Pax Americana'. This concept had gained luster as it seemed to bear a resemblance to that grand historical imagery of the Pax Romana - the 'peace' and international order maintained by that greatest ever of all Empires, which ruled from Rome between the decline of Greek civilization and the European middle ages. We still use legal principles first instituted by the Romans. 'The American Peace', which is what Pax Americana means, brought order in post-World-War-II international life. The absence of cross-border wars in the geographical area it covered helped produce trade, economic development and prosperity. The former World War II

enemies were also treated benevolently and benefited from America's initial economic largesse.

Pax Americana required more than soldiers; it drew its political energy and enthusiasm from principles. Those ideals that Americans tended to believe were quintessentially American, like 'freedom', the rights of the individual, democracy and unlimited economic exchange, were held aloft for members of the free world to follow, and for denizens of the non-free world to admire. By endorsing Pax Americana you promised allegiance to a way of life, made possible by sticking to a form of political and economic organization conducive to the flourishing of something - capitalism - that stood in stark contrast to the communism on the Eurasian continent.

Hence, the prevailing enthusiasm for transpacific as well as transatlantic relations during the second half of the twentieth century encompassed spiritual and intellectual elements besides military prowess, strategic doctrine, and free exchange. It provided something to hang on to in periods of doubt and through political ups and downs, something differentiating good and bad. For some this even became a kind of secular religion.

That 'political faith of the free world', so to speak, together with the trust among the Japanese and European political elites that Washington would block communist expansionism if it became a true threat, made it virtually impossible to imagine a different geopolitical organization of the world; at least not one attainable in practice. Leftists too, including even strong Marxists who might play mental games with fantasies of a levelling of society along socialist egalitarian lines, could not take seriously a world order in which the United States wasn't a crucial element, representing long-term safety. Strong criticism of the United States as a capitalist country exploiting workers, and as a negative force with regard to conditions of the poor countries in the 'Third World', was tolerated and sometimes even cheered on. It did no harm. Elites understood that in practice this criticism would make no difference anyway. In Japan there could be huge anti-American demonstrations. In Europe noisy international movements emerged; against the placing of American cruise missiles for example. These did not tear the fabric of the Cold War alliance.

Fast forward to the situation today. The world that saw the birth of the Cold War alliance is no more. There is no 'Second World' with a great communist expansionist enemy in it, and hardly any communism left at all. But one could not guess that manifest reality from looking at the way in which the political elites of what used to be called the 'free world' have positioned themselves vis-à-vis the United States. One would instead get the impression, from their great reluctance to re-examine their attitudes toward Washington, that these political elites are still driven by fear of a potential political calamity; an anxiety similar to that which during the Cold War was at the bottom of their accommodating to Washington's wishes.

It also seems to work in two directions. The United States flexes imperialist muscles. The fact that hidden beneath the surface demeanor of democracy and benevolence was a genuine, although strange, American empire, has been illuminated by two things once the Berlin Wall was torn down and the Soviet Union ceased to exist. The first is the way in which Washington's power elite expects obedience from its former Cold War allies. The second is the way in which the countries on both ends of the Eurasian continent apparently cannot bring themselves to stand on their own legs. Their foreign policy, their diplomacy, their

attitudes to what used to be the two biggest communist enemies, Russia and China, and, not in the least, their ways of thinking as to how international business ought to be conducted, are more than just influenced by American example, they are largely determined by American wishes.

This situation is for the most part fully understandable. The policy elite in Washington fears a loss of power, and those in Europe and Japan have for two generations not been called upon to position themselves with regard to basic foreign policy and defense. They have had no practice. The US-Japan Security Treaty was originally meant to be provisional, something to be kept in place only until no longer needed. But the successors of Yoshida Shigeru and Kishi Nobusuke never reminded themselves of that, and lost the ability even to imagine an independent Japanese foreign policy that would have to be elastic enough to adjust to changing world conditions. Britain and France tried to flex their international muscles (together with Israel) with the invasion of Egypt in 1956, after Abdul Nasser had nationalized the Suez Canal. Although this action had military success, President Eisenhower made sure that the 'Suez Crisis' became a political defeat for Paris and London. From then on both disappeared as significant world powers. The Europeans got stuck in a NATO that began to lead a life of its own after its original reason for existing - the Soviet Union - had totally disappeared. It has even been suggested that the Afghanistan War is only kept going to help keep NATO alive, because it is a useful military reserve pool for the United States, and helps give American war making a semblance of legitimacy.

Thus, since the 1960s, political elites in what used to be called the 'free world' outside the United States have not been forced to think deeply about international affairs, and have not felt the responsibility to operate in the world as truly independent countries.

For Japan this state of dependence is more complicated than for Europe. The bilateral US-Japan relationship is most of the time regarded on both sides as a normal bilateral, albeit unequal, relationship between two countries of a kind like dozens of others in the world. But that is a lazy assumption. It prevents both sides from realizing the essence of things. The US-Japan relationship is, in fact, a super extraordinary relationship. One without parallels in history. To see that more clearly we should move for a moment from the geographic perspective laid out above to a more historical one.

The United States was a crucial factor in the development of today's Japan. While the famous visit of Commodore Perry, and his unwelcome command for Japan to "open up!", triggered the end of a Japanese policy that had over the course of two and a half centuries molded the main shape of Japanese political *sakoku* culture, about a century later the United States made it possible for Japan to return to a kind of strategic and diplomatic *sakoku* policy.

Inbetween those two developments Japan resembled more 'a normal country' when looked at from the outside through the filter of 19th and early 20th century standards. Following foreign example, Japan had tried something that European powers had excelled at only a few decades earlier: collecting colonies, and building an empire of its own. The fateful decision to tangle with the United States, which Japan's imperial action in China disastrously led to, is still relevant to the situation in which we live at the moment, because it relates to that persistent historical reality abbreviated as *sakoku*, which remains crucial to Japan's political organization today.

Japan's catching up with 'The West', after having been forced to open up, became one of the most spectacular episodes in world history. But as the Meiji reformers built upon what was there, politically speaking, they had left out the very difficult task of providing for arrangements to ensure a peaceful transfer of power from themselves to later political elites. In other words, as they replaced feudal type authority, beginning with what was essentially a *coup d'état*, they had overlooked the necessity of establishing a political center, a core to the state, that would be acknowledged by all to possess the right to rule. Establishing who has the right to rule is a paramount dilemma for most nations whose political history is accelerated through revolution or decolonization. This is the intriguing phase into which Egypt has just entered. In the case of Japan, the quite capable bureaucracy that had evolved around the great reformers of the Meiji oligarchy was not accountable to effective central political leadership, and could easily be hijacked by ambitious military elements. The fact that these decided to attack a target that was attached to an industrial base 10 times the size of their own should be seen as overwhelming evidence that there was no central leadership with a sufficient sense of proportion to function effectively in an international context.

After 1945, no action was undertaken to create an entity in the middle of the Japanese political system that would have true authority over the various bureaucratic clusters that together form the administration of the country. (I have described that in some depth in a book on Ozawa Ichiro that is just being published.)<sup>1</sup> That Japan was defeated and occupied by the United States was a fateful development in this context. Americans had no clear understanding of the dynamics of Japanese power that had led to the Pacific war to begin with. As Yoshida Shigeru famously and accurately said: "the occupation with all the power and authority behind its operation was hampered by its lack of knowledge of the people it had come to govern, and even more so, perhaps, by its generally happy ignorance of the amount of requisite knowledge it lacked." What Gen. MacArthur and his fellow occupiers had misunderstood above all was that it had been the *absence* of strong central civilian leadership rather than a dictatorial center - as in Hitler's Germany - that had led Japan to embark on its Asian conquests and attack the United States. At any rate, instead of encouraging the formation of a solid central government, centered on a cabinet consisting of elected officials - a political steering wheel in other words - the occupation actually increased the influence of the career officials in the ministries, who were of course not interested in having politicians telling them what to do.

It apparently never occurred to Americans dealing with Japan that this was a major weakness. A personal experience with Edwin Reischauer brought this home to me. When we were taping a conversation for a radio broadcast,<sup>2</sup> I made the point that this had remained a central problem, to which he responded that Japan not having a strong government was a good thing, because it "would not have been up to much good anyway." There is also no question that this weakness, which is a recurrent theme in my writing about Japan, suited the power elite in Washington on the whole quite well. It ensured dominant bureaucratic influence that, in the end, would always stick to American wishes because of its dependence on those odd, pseudo-colonial, bilateral power arrangements.

To see this more clearly, imagine a Japan without that dependency. If a dramatic rupture in the relationship between Japan and the United States were to take place, Japan would have to create in a hurry a central governing entity with the responsibility of designing entirely new policies and enough practical power to carry those out. Without that center Japan would not at all be able to function internationally. This is perhaps not easy to understand for people who have never looked closely at the international decision-making of more independent countries. In their day-to-day political decision-making the governments of those countries may frequently flounder, they may be confused, and their media may scold them for their lack of leadership. But if you study their history you may see how such countries can, at moments of crisis, take effective decisions to cope with such crises.

Helmut Kohl, head of the German government in 1990, immediately responded to the collapse of East Germany with a 10-point plan for unification of the two Germanies. When in 1958, French generals in Algeria started a crisis that could have led to a *coup d'état*, Charles de Gaulle took immediate action, which led to France's so-called 'fifth Republic', a reordering of the political system with a chosen president. A stunning example was the action that Gorbachev took when his communist empire began to shake on its foundation. He actively prevented the regimes of the East European communist countries from resorting to violence as they tried to stop the crumbling of communism. The Chinese government took action immediately after the credit crisis of 2008, which caused Chinese exports to the United States to plummet. It used the opportunity to put measures in place, and allocate funds to assure a spurt of industrial development in the interior provinces, which meant that part of the migrant workforce that had gone to the coastal provinces but whose factories were now closing, could return home to become workers or entrepreneurs.

Japan was also very badly hit by the American credit crisis, but that economic challenge was not answered by any new industrial policy.

Japan had no cabinet-centered government comparable to the Chinese leadership that could launch such new initiatives. Many conversations that I have had about the sluggish Japanese economy and desirable changes in the structure of Japanese industrial financing, along with other policies that could harness Japan's economic energy and talents, end with the sad observation that there exists no effective government to initiate any of this. Vis-à-vis its giant neighbor, Russia, Tokyo did not come up with a new approach concerning the return of the Northern Territories - or concerning anything - when the Soviet Union collapsed. Since then the situation involving Moscow and the islands has only deteriorated further. Under these and other circumstances where it must deal with major political changes in the world Japan gives the impression of being a state without a head.

The broader Japanese political culture that has never experienced genuine national leadership in the international world doesn't know what to do about shaping a position vis-à-vis China either. It is hardly an exaggeration to say that the momentous global changes in the world after the end of the Cold War have, notwithstanding the huge consequences these have had in the realm of economics, for practical purposes hardly registered in Japan's broader political culture.

The rest of the world has become used to the fact that Japan, while an economic giant, remained what some have called a 'pigmy' in world affairs. By now, no one expects it to get involved in global issues. I have called that '*sakoku* by other means', something made possible by that odd, and I would say 'pathological', relationship with the United States.

But this kind of *sakoku* could well, from now on, become quite damaging to the genuine interests of the Japanese people. Because the most fateful recent consequence of there being no intelligent center to the administration of the Japanese state is Tokyo's failure to respond to the transformation of the United States, and its side effects.

A near-revolution has happened there of which Japanese policy makers, and also intellectuals or other commentators, have not evinced much awareness. The essence of the situation is that the United States is no longer the same country as the one Japan and the other Cold War allies had to deal with until about a dozen years ago. The most important development has been the success of what is known as the 'American Right'. This has been the world's most successful political movement in recent decades. It is extremist. It has as good as destroyed the Democratic Party as an effective liberal-minded party. The administration of George W. Bush was most symptomatic of this swing to the right, with the accompanying aggressive attitudes and the waging of unjustified wars. But it has dragged the so-called American political center so far to the right that sympathetic visitors from Japan and Europe can hardly recognize America's new political priorities. A majority of leading Democratic Party politicians take their cues - believe that they have no choice but to take their cues - from this movement. It has almost completely taken over the mainstream American media.

That something had gone very wrong with the convergence of several domestic political developments in the United States was, by the end of George W. Bush's term, widely acknowledged by most Americans and by the politically interested in what used to be called the 'free world'. The strong hope and general expectation that President Obama would reverse some of these developments was proof enough of that. That Obama has not put a brake on undesirable developments, and in fact has allowed some of them to deteriorate further, ought to be seen as evidence of factors that have created an even worse condition than the rightwing revolution. The United States has become deeper involved in unnecessary war, has spread it to Pakistan and Yemen, and has failed to create preventive measures against further financial crises. American investment banks have, through Obama's inaction, been allowed to become bigger, more centralized and dominant, and even less stable than when they created the credit crisis with the ensuing recession from which much of the world is still suffering. The biggest change in the United States today, overlooked by Japan's policymakers and broader political culture, is that the fundamental elements of the American state, such as its financial system and its defense apparatus, are no longer under political control. Or under any control. It is clear that Obama has no grip over the country that he is supposed to be leading, and neither has anyone else.

This metamorphosis the United States has undergone is nothing less than a national tragedy. This is compounded by the fact that it has not yet been sufficiently understood by the rest of the world. It is particularly tragic for Japan for the obvious reason of Japan's peculiar dependency relationship with the United States.

This tragedy was partially predicted, or rather warned against, by President Eisenhower. In his Farewell address broadcast to the American nation on TV he introduced the famous concept of the Military-Industrial Complex - militarist thinking, coupled with huge industrial interests, intertwined with the re-election interests of the politicians in America's Congress. The fear of the Soviet Union had created something that critics were to call the 'national security state', in which policies and institutions had outgrown their original purpose and had begun to live lives of their own.<sup>3</sup> Eisenhower warned against this as a development that was threatening to escape from political control and might, in the long run, undermine and destroy American democracy. Developments since then have gone far beyond what then existed and what Eisenhower feared. Especially from 2001 onward, pushed by the administration of George W. Bush, they have greatly accelerated. To place these developments in perspective one only has to look at how since the disappearance of the Soviet Union - which was after all its ostensible reason for existing - it continues to absorb more than \$1 trillion a year, and is still growing.

When the original purposes of institutions are no longer remembered or re-examined for relevance, they inevitably begin to live lives of their own. When they are small, like the passport control after you descend from the train at Narita airport, they can be harmless. But when they are powerful they can change the world. We must understand that the American military-industrial complex is totally out of control, and has turned the United States into a militaristic nation.<sup>4</sup>

The Pentagon has seized far more power than it used to have at its disposal. Without the great Soviet enemy there was suddenly no longer any need for sophisticated and intricate diplomatic maneuvers to keep 'friends' loyal and to make sure that neutral countries would not turn against Washington. Hence America's diplomatic resources shriveled. The State Department became increasingly less important in the last decade of the 20th century. Some of its functions simply vanished, others were taken over by the Pentagon.<sup>5</sup> When Obama appointed a retired general of the Marines as national security advisor he demonstrated that he hadn't thought much about the details when he campaigned with the message that he would replace the military approach to the world taken by his predecessor with diplomatic solutions.

We clearly see the effect of the switch from State Department to Pentagon as the main determiner of foreign policy in the way that Washington has treated the first prime minister of Japan's government formed by the *Minshuto*. US-Japan relations had for quite some time not been under an American scrutiny that was guided by the old-style diplomats and the traditional Japan hands. For a while the most significant diplomatic link between the two countries reached from the American Treasury Department to the Japanese Ministry of Finance. But today it is simply the Pentagon that is in charge. Most of the American officials dealing with Japan, also those in the State Department, are alumni of the Pentagon. Secretary of Defense, Robert Gates, has set the tone in dealing with Japan under its new government, with President Obama showing not the least interest. In the old days, when diplomats still had influence on America's foreign policy, they would have been interested in exploring new possibilities of cooperation. As it is, the American president has simply not been willing to meet the Japanese Prime Minister for the expressed purpose of a serious contemplation of how the two countries should proceed in dealing with regional problems in East Asia. His advisers on Japan, again mostly Pentagon alumni, told him literally not to give Hatoyama more than 10 minutes of his time, in case they ran into each other at an international meeting.

It is popularly believed that the current relationship between the United States and Japan must remain as it is because of mutual concerns about the security situation in East Asia. But looking closely at the security situation in the region, and the contribution of this bilateral relationship to it, one may quickly detect a huge central fantasy element in it. Farsighted concern would command that the two new heads of government take a fresh look at how to adjust to changed circumstances. Instead, Washington turned something as trivial as the relocation of a Marine base, something that the LDP did not wish to burn its fingers on, into a test of the loyalty of the new government the Japanese had voted into power. The American State Department has done nothing to divert the attention of the Pentagon, or rather of the Marines in the Pentagon, away from the rights they believe they have to make themselves as comfortable as possible on Okinawa. It is no longer in the business of helping to develop farsighted policies.

The United States used to have a strategy when the Soviet Union was still around, but that strategy is obviously no longer valid. Nothing has taken its place. Establishing the United States as the dominant and unchallenged political force on the planet forever and ever is a fantasy and not a strategy. The 'war on terrorism' is a fantasy, like the 'war on drugs'. Both perversely encourage the proliferation of what they seek to eliminate. A 'strategy' must be achievable to be called that. The end of the Cold War gave an impulse to fantasies like the End of History, a Clash of Civilizations, and of the Iraq invasion as a first step to spread democracy all over the Middle East. It gave rise to speculation over the new 'main rival', with China as the frontrunner. Washington's foreign policy planners and an International Relations 'science' that is built on antiquated theory have not been able to replace their traditional Cold War frame of mind with something new that takes the world's changes, obvious before our eyes, into account. The American response to the upheaval in Egypt is a perfect recent example.

We can connect this with what I said earlier about the loss of control. This also means loss of intelligent purpose. There is no intelligent purpose behind

wasting a fortune on two unwinnable wars, tax money that should have gone to rebuilding the crumbling American domestic infrastructure. All over the world political observers are puzzled by America's strategic intentions. The key to the puzzle is that it has no meaningful strategy. This has probably been the most important development in the world's geopolitical reality since the end of the Cold War.

The Cold War allies have not kept up with this development. The heads of government of the European Union member states are themselves not capable of dealing with geopolitical change. All one has to do is to imagine the current ones standing next to those in the early post-World-War-II years: Sarkozy next to de Gaulle, Merkel next to Adenauer, Cameron next to Churchill, to perceive the collapse of caliber. The European political elites are not really driven by anxiety about terrorists based in Afghanistan, or other fantasies with which they explain to European populations why we must all stay in the backwash of America's military adventures. They just cannot shake old habits.

For Japan the problem is more acute. Considerable anxiety prevails concerning the dangers that lurk on the Asian continent. Much of it is artificial, purposely encouraged by Washington and Japan's bureaucrats as well as politicians in thrall to a Pentagon view of the world. I have heard *gaimusho* officials say that whereas for Europe the Cold War is finished for Japan it is still continuing. It is a view nurtured by ignorance, one shared by the broader Japanese political culture. There exists a big lie at the center of this ignorance: The threat of North Korea. As a focus of national fear it has created a totally unrealistic perspective. Of course North Korea is a problem. Its nuclear ambitions and missiles constitute a threat of some kind. But not a virulent one. The continued existence of North Korea is not really an extension of Cold War conditions in our present world, as parts of the Japanese bureaucracy and those they have been able to convince of it, continue to believe. Any North Korean aggression, were the rulers of Pyongyang so suicidal to indulge in it, would not be supported by either China or Russia.

The headlessness of Japan has been much on display in this context. Prime Minister Koizumi's ill-fated initiatives were backed up with insufficient preparations, and a dismal lack of understanding of the medium term effects that might result. Indignation about the abductees, stirred up in waves by the media, took over from rational decision-making. As a result Japan became marginalized in the so-called Six Party Talks. A Japan with a functioning head, and a center capable of strategic thought, would be able to place in perspective the North Korean nuclear weapons ambition more accurately. North Korea is a unique case, its hostility has on its own become a separate political reality, demanding an entirely new diplomatic approach. North Korea is the only country in the world that has had atomic weapons, ready to go, directly pointed at it ever since the Korean War. What it has wanted from Washington is some kind of nonaggression guarantee. It is not a crazy wish.

Any kind of conflict on the Korean Peninsula, any kind of violence triggered by developments in Pyongyang, will have to be dealt with in the first place by the South Koreans and China. The idea that one runs into in Japan a lot, that an American initiative will become crucial in this context, is downright silly. A Japan that is serious about the potential threat from North Korea should work on deepening relevant diplomacy with South Korea and China. And it would also very much help to try to make Washington see an obvious fact: even a tyrannical, isolated, and self obsessed regime will behave differently, and more predictably, when it receives certain reassurances that it has been asking for. But here Tokyo will run into a knot of convoluted arguments that will follow from its pathological relationship with the United States. If the North Korea problem disappeared, Washington would have to find other excuse, and cultivate another lie, to maintain as much military might in Japan as it does now.

The supposed threat from North Korea certainly does not justify the huge American military presence in Japan, much less the fact that about 70 percent of the costs of running the bases, are born by the Japanese tax payer. One of the biggest lies connected with the *nichibei* relationship perpetuated on the diplomatic level, and even on the academic level, as well as among mainstream journalism is that all that American military might on Japanese soil exists to defend Japan in case its neighbors want to conquer the islands. The American marines on Okinawa, whose controversial base was made a silly and entirely damaging test case for relations with the Japanese government by Obama's Pentagon, are actually part of an attack force for action in the Middle East and other far-away places. Much of the rest of America's military in Japan is part of an encirclement of China scheme.

A problem that the European Cold War allies do not have to contend with is Washington's tone of voice when it addresses Japan. This is much of the time imperious and condescending. There is a psychological aspect to Japan's dependency relationship that is rarely discussed. But it is important, because the response of the Japanese involved has tended to fall into a pattern decreed by Washington, and as the responses of the Kan Naoto cabinet confirm, this has become automatic.

When in the United States a prisoner is released from prison before his sentence has been fully served someone is assigned to him to keep an eye on him and make sure that there is not a relapse in his behavior. Such a person is called a parole officer. Over the 40 years that I have been observing American attitudes toward Japan, on the part of officials but also scholars and assorted Japan hands, I frequently had the impression that they were treating Japan as if they were parole officers. It is an attitude often copied by journalists. Japan had made a big mistake in the past, and it was still under permanent examination as if it's 'good behavior' must constantly be measured. Both Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, when visiting Japan just before and just after the election that brought the *Minshuto* to power, came with strong messages that fitted the pattern.

A variant on this theme is a desire expressed by Washington for a 'more mature' partnership, in which it is taken for granted that it is Japan that should be doing the maturing. High up on the list of Americans who visiting Japanese officials and politicians wish to see in Washington are Richard Armitage and Joseph Nye. Armitage has neocon sympathies, was a Deputy Secretary at the State Department under George W. Bush, and continues to be a crucial figure in formulating American positions vis-à-vis Japan. Nye is a scholar of international relations, and a well-known advocate of 'soft power', whom Foreign Ministry officials in Tokyo very much wanted to have had as ambassador. Right at the beginning of the 21st-century these two led a group of foreign-policy specialists and security analysts and other scholars to make recommendations for the relationship, which were cast in the terminology of 'maturity'. To quote one of the keenest observers of the relationship between Japan and the United States, the Australian Gavan McCormack, "the fact that 'maturity' in the relationship would be reached to the extent that Japan submitted to the US agenda was a pointer to how immature the relationship really was".<sup>6</sup>

A mature Japan, so it is almost taken for granted in America's halls of power, is one that is grateful for American protection, is willing to open more of its markets, and give a bit more assistance to America's war making in Afghanistan.

Taking into account how much the discussion about US-Japan relations has become focussed on the military bases on Japanese soil, and how frequently Japanese people are asked about this by opinion pollsters, one should not quarrel with the idea that the Japanese public ought to be enlightened about the details of America's military. I should embroider on two points I have already made. A straight conclusion following from what I have said about America's military not being under effective political control is that it is no longer a tool of the American state. It now lives a life of its own. If that were otherwise, president Obama would not have had to be afraid of what the generals might do to him, or might make their Republican supporters do to him, when toward the end of 2009 he had to give in to their demand to send more soldiers to Afghanistan, and escalate that unwinnable war. If it were otherwise, there would exist something thought out by representatives of the elected American government worthy of the label 'strategy'. Japanese versed in the history of their country in the first half of the 20th century may see interesting parallels there. The Imperial Army in China was not under effective civilian control from Tokyo. And, as many scholars who studied that period have since acknowledged, while the Japanese military could often boast of superior tactics, that did not add up to a credible, all-over, strategy. Tokyo ruling the Asian part of the planet plus Oceania was not an achievable goal.

The second point I should say more about is that while America's military is no longer a controlled tool of the state, it has radically altered the foreign policy vision of the state. These are probably interdependent conditions, with the latter ensuring that the former may continue undisturbed to live a life of its own.

America's foreign-policy vision used to center on the notion of effective diplomacy. After victory in 1945, the United States labored to bring into being a relatively peaceful and relatively stable world order, using the United Nations and other international organizations as its tools, and encapsulating the communist nations of the Second World as much as possible in a universe of its own, so as to limit the damage it could do to that world order. Diplomacy was a key concept in all of this, and was connected with ideals like liberty, believed by Americans to be specifically American. This gradually changed after the Soviet Union disappeared. But more fatefully, the fiction of a 'war on terrorism' has altered the political culture of the United States, and has severely

undermined the democratic principles in which Americans had always taken pride.

The mistake that some on the left make when they aver that American aggression today is merely an intensification of what has come before (and that, therefore, there is nothing new under the sun) is to miss the status of warmaking in the minds of American policymakers then and now. The much invoked Vietnam War in their comparisons actually serves as a good guide for what I want to say. "Never again!" was the slogan shared by antiwar protesters and the military alike. Military thinkers of course must always pay some attention to the kind of war they might be asked to fight in the future, but they were, until recently - until the presidency of George W. Bush - not preoccupied with America's 'future wars' and did not speak of them as if they are a foregone conclusion. Warmaking in Washington is no longer a final resort when diplomacy has failed; it is now in many cases thought of as a valid substitute for diplomacy.

This could hardly be more different from the general Japanese perspective concerning war and peace, which I have come to know over the years. In the 1960s one would get an overwhelming impression of that mindset. Middle and high school students, trying out their English, would approach foreigners like me with lines like: "what do you think of world peace?" Industrialists and politicians would pepper their speeches with declarations about how much they hoped that peace might continue to prevail in the world. And I remember an official statement by the Foreign Ministry in response to criticisms about Japan's inactivity in the world, which took foreign critics to task for not appreciating how much Japan had done and was doing for the "cause of world peace". This kind of talk had become habitual, of course, with not much thinking behind it. But it did express a strong feeling about something that the Japanese people agreed on.

This original peace enthusiasm may have worn off, but I cannot imagine the Japanese people becoming enthusiastic about being swept along by American war making. And I cannot imagine that, when they know all the details, the Japanese public would want to have their government's attitude toward Beijing, Moscow or anywhere else be dictated by the likes of Armitage or Nye, whose idea of Japanese maturity equates to following American priorities. Yet, now that the United States has changed its priorities since Ampo, claiming that it is necessary to fight wars in several parts of the world simultaneously, Japan is inevitably drawn along with those changes, and has in fact become part of what many people and governments around the world have begun to see as an imperialist effort.

Of even more immediate importance for Japanese to think about is that under present circumstances American influence helps block or postpone Tokyo coming to terms with neighboring powers. In no way can tension, never mind open conflict, with Japan's neighbors be good for the future of the Japanese people. But Japan is not presently free to determine its own policies toward China. A move to improve and expand relations is immediately portrayed as a supposedly anti-American attempt to marginalize the United States in Asia. Washington also wishes to make sure that Japan will not enter into any arrangement with Asian countries, along the lines of ASEAN +3, of which the United States is not a part.

When foreign policies are no longer connected with world realities they become unrealistic. This is what characterizes not only Washington's policies, but also those of Tokyo and the European capitals inspired by the old fear and anxiety. Terrorism has replaced communism as the main threat. And vague ideas about a possible belligerent China in the future, as American propaganda successfully portrays it, help as well, especially in Japan. All of this ignores how the world has changed. It ignores the fact that whatever one may say about American policies they no longer stimulate any kind of global order. Besides war, they have instead brought torture and an attitude towards international organization and war making that is very much contrary to what the United States stood for in the 1950s and 1960s.

To think that today the United States can ensure global political security is ludicrous. So far, however, throwing overboard that way of thinking has apparently been too big a move for political elites of what used to be called the 'free world'. What may alter that situation is the realization that in its present condition, with major institutions out of control, the very idea of American leadership is a fantasy. When we accept it voluntarily, leadership always has a positive connotation. Being led over a cliff by a 'leader' only happens to unfortunate populations who have been seduced and misled. Even a little knowledge of 20th century history should help Japanese and Europeans to remind themselves of that.

*This is a revised and expanded version of an article that appeared in Bungei Shunju in the March and April issues of 2011.*

*Karel van Wolferen is a Dutch journalist, writer and Emeritus University Professor of Comparative Political and Economic Institutions at the University of Amsterdam. He is the author of [The Enigma of Japanese Power](#) and of *George W. Bush and the Destruction of World Order*, as well as numerous books in Japanese to be found [here](#). His website in English is [karelvanwolferen.com](http://karelvanwolferen.com)*

*Recommended citation: Karel van Wolferen, "Japan, Europe and the Dangerous Fantasy of American Leadership," *The Asia-Pacific Journal* Vol 9, Issue 14 No 1, April 4, 2011.*

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> His book *The Character Assassination of Ozawa Ichiro* is appearing in Japanese in 2011.

<sup>2</sup> This program was never aired, as I withdrew permission and stopped the recording when I realized that the tape would be edited. This could easily, I thought, result in a distorted picture of what I wanted to say.

<sup>3</sup> A very instructive and very readable book on this subject is James Carroll, *House of War*.

<sup>4</sup> A former American colonel, who has become one of America's finest political philosophers, Andrew Bacevich, has written several books identifying the fundamental characteristics and symptoms of American militarism, most recently, *Washington Rules: America's Path to Permanent War*.

<sup>5</sup> See Dana Priest: *The Mission: Waging War and Keeping Peace with America's Military* for an early account of this switch.

<sup>6</sup> Gavan McCormack, *Client State - Japan in the American Embrace*. p. 62.