

1970

## Japan: An Alien Ally

John E. Bex

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review>

---

### Recommended Citation

Bex, John E. (1970) "Japan: An Alien Ally," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 23 : No. 9 , Article 5.  
Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol23/iss9/5>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Naval War College Review by an authorized editor of U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu](mailto:repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu).

# JAPAN: AN ALIEN ALLY

*Many Americans have misled themselves into believing that the brief U.S. postwar occupation of Japan produced a major change in the Japanese people, remaking them in the American mold. In reality Japanese national feeling has remained distinctive and intact throughout the postwar period, and it may well surface in the future in the form of a foreign policy which is neither passive nor consistent with American foreign policy objectives.*

An article

by

Colonel John F. Bex, U.S. Air Force Reserve

Most Americans feel grateful in some degree to the part that Japan has played since World War II as our loyal ally. In comparison with De Gaulle's France or even Britain, the Japanese have shown themselves to be remarkably content to follow our lead in foreign affairs, despite the fact that they were so recently our enemy. Thus news of their economic success has been welcomed as no more than due such an admirable junior partner. Our relationship with Japan has, in fact, been surprisingly good. This can, however, lead to a dangerous complacency regarding Japan's future role in relation to our national security. There are several factors which may make this role very different in the next 25 years from what it has been in the past 25 years. Some of these heighten certain dangers, while others merely increase the world's ultimate unpredictability

and remind us of how different the world is and will be from what it has ever been before.

Japan is unique in many ways among all oriental nations of the world in its adaptability, its speed of assimilation of western technology and its national character. But in nothing is it more unique and remarkable, perhaps, than this. It is the first and only non-Western country to make the breakthrough to modern industrialization and economic productivity. And it has done so at a speed which at least in the last decade is unparalleled, since its sustained annual real growth rate of over 10 percent is unique in world history.

There is no doubt that this fact has very positive aspects for us and other capitalist nations, since Japan is a model of what capitalism can accomplish, a demonstration of especial significance

and effectiveness for all non-European nations. This is all the more striking in view of the failure of the Chinese with their much vaunted "great leap forward."

Moreover, the Japanese have shown that industrialization and the mastery of the most advanced technology can be obtained without surrendering or obliterating their national culture. They remain thoroughly Japanese and have preserved their most ancient traditions and artistic specialties intact. This can be most interesting to certain other countries who have feared, not without reason, that modernization would inevitably erode and destroy many of their institutions.

Since military strength and national power have become ever more closely tied to industrial and economic power, Japan's economic success has thrown new weight into the capitalist and anti-Communist scales. But success has its own problems, and it is necessary to consider some of these.

In view of the facade of fairly smooth relations, it has become all too easy for us to assume that the Japanese are much more like us than they really are. During World War II we realized or were constantly reminded that Japan was the most alien enemy we had ever faced and fought. What has happened is that our most alien enemy has become our most alien ally. She has not been an unfriendly ally, but she is still alien, nevertheless. Whatever illusions some Americans may have, certainly the Japanese do not believe that the few years of military occupation have transformed them into junior Americans or Westerners, and they have no desire to be considered as such for one moment. The simple fact is that most Japanese have no doubt but that they are superior to Americans and to people of all other nations whatsoever. In official and unofficial meetings between the Japanese and Americans, each of which have their own national pride, only the con-

siderable fog of language veils the absurdity of the two groups simultaneously and graciously condescending to each other.

The fact is that there are Americans and other Westerners who have lived in Japan for many years who have not fully realized this, though they may have suspected it. It is hard to think of another country in the entire world where foreigners can live as long and yet feel and confess that they do not really understand the people at all. The fact that the Japanese have certain traits in common with Americans, such as the desire for modernity, the love of gadgets of all kinds, quick response to the latest crazes; all this can, in fact, increase the likelihood of Americans gaining a false confidence of understanding. At deeper levels the Japanese are not merely very different from Americans and Europeans, but also from other oriental nations as well.

If one attempts to account for the remarkable Japanese economic upsurge in purely economic terms, one soon reaches an impasse. In the first place, few countries anywhere are as poorly endowed with natural resources, there being hardly anything of significant mineral value yet to be discovered in the entire archipelago. An unusually small percentage of the land is suitable for cultivation. Finally, the economic base of industrial facilities which remained after the destruction of World War II was not impressive. Even today there is not a great accumulation of individual wealth in terms of homes and farms as in many countries. Though their productivity has rocketed upward, most Japanese still live modestly on a relatively low-protein diet and in fragile houses with extremely sparse furnishings. They have merely added some new electrical appliances and fattened up their bank accounts.

The greatest economic resource—almost the only one—is, in fact, the Japanese people. They are literate and

## 44 NAVAL WAR COLLEGE REVIEW

educated, of course, though this has been exaggerated and is alone not sufficient to account for their success, since it is in part an effect rather than a cause. One is forced in the end to fall back on the much abused concept of national character, notwithstanding all the dangers that can be associated with it. It is simply an empirical fact that, rated by any of several means, the Japanese are outstanding in the possession of the classic middle-class virtues which sociologists have found to be associated with the success of capitalist development. These are such things as a strong if not actually compulsive drive to work, a tendency toward saving and thrift, cleanliness, the delay of immediate gratification in favor of long-term future objectives, and a firm sense of duty and obligation. It is this complex of traits, not necessarily always amiable, which has been the decisive variable and which stands in such contrast to many other Asian peoples.

Americans, of course, possess a good measure of these middle-class traits and owe to them an important part of their material success, though not to quite the degree that the Japanese do. But then neither will the Japanese be likely to be so extreme in terms of discipline and self-denial after a few more decades of material success. Natural character is far from being unchangeable but evolves according to natural experience and circumstances. The other key factor in the Japanese economic success is their opportunity to apply this disciplined force to purely economic goals with the important aid and cooperation of the United States in the peculiar circumstances of the post-World War II world. Finally, they have been able to incorporate Western technology during the postwar era at low cost and great speed.

Despite the similarities with Western capitalist countries and the fact that it is unmistakably a capitalist country, Japan has a version of capitalism all its own. Though certainly not socialist, the

economy is based on the intervention of the state in many key decisions. Far from being opposed and attacked, cartels are fostered and carefully developed—they are the foundation of the modern economy to such a degree that the Japanese find it hard to imagine any other system. The Japanese are competitive, but the competition is channeled and more directed against the outside world.

The free employment market to which we are accustomed, with both workers and executives seizing the opportunity to move into a better job, is still today almost unknown in Japan. When a Japanese leaves school and enters a firm, he does so for life, both in fact as well as intention. This produces some results which seem very queer indeed. The American term "you're fired" and all its implications are most difficult for a Japanese to comprehend since even relatively incompetent employees are seldom, if ever, "fired." Such a system seems pretty unworkable and probably would be under American conditions. But in Japan it works. The evidence is undeniable. This is related to the differences in national character, since the Japanese of all classes brings with him from childhood onward a fantastic sense of duty and obligation. There are, in fact, many American firms which go to some lengths to avoid firing a person who shows the right attitudes and is trying his best—and the Japanese worker is practically always trying.

It is clear that the Japanese have shown the world, for better or worse, an alternate version of capitalism—an alternate road to the top. But where do they go from here? If this question is puzzling in regard to ourselves, it is still more puzzling in regard to the Japanese. A Swedish writer (in a book which is soon to be translated into English and published in the United States) has estimated that at current comparative rates of growth, Japan will have a greater gross national product per capita

than the United States, long before the year 2000. Clearly we are debauching into a different sort of world, where the "junior partner" concept must be abandoned and relationships reconsidered and readjusted.

The problem of newly emerging Japan would be complex enough in terms of its relation to our national security. But it needs to be considered in another setting—in regard to two culturally and historically related states, China and Korea, both of which are now divided countries. Important cultural associations exist between all three nations. There is a deep and ancestral family relationship and an ambivalent love-and-hate emotional relationship among these three sister cultures and peoples. The Japanese can never quite enjoy their feelings of superiority undiluted in regard to the Chinese, since it is all too obvious from whence much of Japanese culture is derived.

It would be a serious error to assume that the current atmosphere of relative distrust and isolation among these three countries will continue or to base one's foreign policy and strategy on the basis of this. Yet this is easy and natural to do. Certainly Koreans, both in the North and the South, would like to maintain their independence and recover their natural identity without dependence on any "big brother," whether Chinese, Japanese, Russian, or American. As a further item in this complex theme, it is interesting to note that in North Korea there is a pro-Russian Communist faction, while the main Japanese party seems to be led by pro-Chinese leaders.

The continuation of peace and the comparative reasonableness of the Japanese Government, as well as governmental changes in South Korea, have all contributed to a *rapprochement* between South Korea and Japan and a lessening of distrust. This trend is likely to continue and may reach the point of an economic and eventually political

breakthrough. Japan has much to offer Korea, both North and South. It would be a curious result if Korea were eventually reunified in some fashion through a process of economic development fostered by a third party, its former oppressor and enemy, Japan. The Japanese, on their part—at least those who are not Socialists or Communists—still fear and distrust Communist China and Russia. It is this that makes them value and respect their military alliance with the United States and moderate their revisionist desires. But the sense of cultural oneness and sympathy with China is an immense latent force, greater than many Westerners realize, because it has been so effectively checked by recent history and Japanese repugnance toward communism. A less fanatical and more reasonable attitude on the part of the Chinese might change this with a swiftness that would astonish the rest of the world. The present fanatics may not demonstrate such reasonableness, but their successors may. Certainly when the main obstacles have been removed or relieved, *rapprochement* between Japan and China will not be greatly deterred merely because the United States declares it does not approve.

It should be no surprise to find that a people so different from us as the Japanese have a different attitude toward contracts and treaties than we or most Europeans do. In business dealings, as in other matters, the Japanese have been most persistent and successful in keeping foreign firms and individuals outside the economic power structure, even when the printed words in the contracts and agreements seem to indicate otherwise. Agreements, as the Japanese see them, are merely the formal expression of existing forces and facts. When the situation changes sufficiently, then the agreement loses its reality and can be voided in practice at will. Does this mean the Japanese are immoral and dishonest? In fact, the Japanese are

excessively moral in a sense, for the heavy load of *on* (being roughly equivalent to obligation plus duty) they carry is almost unbelievable. But it is a morality of a concrete and particular sort, tied to a particular time, place, and persons. It is not abstract and is without devotion to a disembodied principle. (For this one might read Ruth Benedict's book *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* or any of a number of books by American or European businessmen and diplomats, who break through to the understanding that they have long misunderstood the Japanese—but who often still love Japan despite that.)

There is loyalty to the family or extended family in the broadest sense, to the paternalistic firm, to the Emperor and the nation, but not much to anything outside this. Until they realize this, foreigners, especially diplomats, are likely to meet with unpleasant surprises. Added to this there is the all-pervasive confusing effect of the Japanese language. Its fog index is certainly one of the highest in the world, and it operates, oddly enough, in a similar way to confuse the Japanese themselves, as well, as many of them have confessed. It is not the spirit of the language nor is it good manners to come to the point or define things in an unequivocal fashion, to state things in wholly cold, objective fashion without a consideration of subjective personal factors of status and desire. Among other things, this means that the language itself and the various possible understandings and misunderstandings of it give the Japanese an out from any no longer desirable agreements without recourse to other excuse.

The enormous and, at the same time, naive and almost innocent assurance that the Japanese have in their overwhelming superiority was, in fact, shaken a bit by the outcome of World War II, and ready alibis like that of the German "stab in the back" to account for their defeat in World War I were difficult to manufacture. But according

to recent polls, Japanese pride has recovered, and if they continue to surpass one nation after another in economic growth, can one say they are altogether wrong? Japan has acted in a relatively modest and becoming fashion since World War II, both toward the United States and the rest of the world. But this is quite in accord with Japanese custom and tradition, that one should assume a low posture if circumstances indicate it, which may be far removed from one's own feelings and ultimate objectives.

Since circumstances have changed and are changing so rapidly, one should not be surprised if Japan begins to assume a different posture with regard to the United States and her own position in the world. In addition, objective dependence on the United States is being further reduced.

Consider the matter of rockets, space technology, and artificial satellites. European nations were not too proud to base their progress on U.S. hardware and technology, to ride piggyback on our program, both figuratively and literally. But the Japanese, 7 years ago, insisted on going it alone, though it has been an expensive, failure-ridden experience for them. If they have done so even under these circumstances in the face of overwhelming American superiority, one must be prepared for still more independent actions now that their strength has multiplied so greatly.

Up until now Japan has benefited from the U.S. nuclear umbrella and has been able to concentrate its resources on building up its economy. There was really no great need or benefit to be derived from extensive rearmament. There are signs that this quiescent period may come to a close in the next few years.

What about nuclear weapons which are, after all, the ones that count in an ultimate sense? True, Japan has agreed to the nuclear nonproliferation treaty and, in fact, many Japanese have a

genuine and most sincere dislike of the whole subject of nuclear warfare. After all, they were its first and up to now its only victims, the original "nucleorels." Further serious fallout incidents such as the Lucky Dragon affair have reinforced this feeling. Nevertheless, it is likely that Japan will have nuclear weapons of its own before many years have passed. In fact, the Japanese are already beginning to think so and say so themselves. In the *San Francisco Chronicle* of 2 June 1970, a young and perceptive political scientist at Kyoto University, Mosataka Kohaaka, whose thesis is that Japan may go nuclear even if it does not make good sense, commented as follows:

Nuclear weapons are meaningless for Japan, because they would destabilize the world situation possibly leading to other nations like West Germany or India acquiring them. Such a decision by Japan also would create anxiety among other Asian nations who already distrust us. And finally, nuclear weapons would not be adequate enough protection for Japan.

(Few nations anywhere are quite as vulnerable.) But explaining that the compelling reason for Japan to go nuclear will not be dictated by cold logic, but by traditional emotions, he continued, "... Japanese have had a strong desire to be recognized and accepted by

the other world powers. This desire has not been clearly recognized by the Japanese themselves."

To summarize, one can say that it is precisely in the area where things have been going most smoothly that the greatest problems and surprises may lie in store for the future American national security policy. Many factors and forces just now emerging make this very probable and, in any event, render the future far less predictable than may seem to be the case.

---

### BIOGRAPHIC SUMMARY



Col. John E. Bex, U.S. Air Force Reserve, did his undergraduate work at the University of Chicago. He received a commission in the U.S. Army Air Corps in World War II, specializing in communications, fol-

lowing officer training at Yale University. While serving in Japan, his duties included those of Staff Judge Advocate and Public Relations Officer, which allowed him to gain a firsthand knowledge of local customs and traditions. Colonel Bex has remained very active in Air Force Reserve affairs and completed the Squadron Officer Course in 1954 and the Command and Staff course in 1960, was an honor student at the Industrial College of the Armed Forces in 1961, and was an Air Force Reserve augmented member of the Class of 1970 at the Air War College.

Colonel Bex's civilian occupation is president of Bex and Associates, a firm engaged in the counseling, sales, and leasing of electronic therapy equipment.

---

— ψ —

Even the final decision of a war is not to be regarded as absolute. The conquered nation often sees it as only a passing evil, to be repaired in after times by political combinations.

Clausewitz: *On War, 1832*