



Sigur Center for Asian Studies

THE GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

Asia's Reckoning: China, Japan, and the Fate of US Power in the Pacific Century

China's rise to power has been accompanied by its increased assertiveness in Asia. As it has established itself as the dominant power in the region, Chinese ambitions have often clashed with interests of other powers, especially Japan. A conflict in Asia has the potential to reverberate across the world today since China and Japan are the fulcrum of international trade. The pragmatism of the two Asian giants means that the possibility of an armed conflict occurring is low. However, recent escalation of tensions especially over the Senkaku/Diaoyudao Islands means that a conflict is likely now more than ever. What does this entail for the US role in the region? Richard McGregor, journalist and a former visiting scholar at the Sigur Center for Asian Studies discusses the bilateral history of China and Japan and addresses the question of the US role in light of the changing dynamics in the region in his new book *Asia's Reckoning: China, Japan and the Fate of US Power in the Pacific Century*. He presented his views at a recent [book launch at the Sigur Center for Asian Studies](#).

China - Japan Antagonism

Before discussing the reasons for the hostilities between China and Japan, McGregor noted what it entails for the US. If China and Japan were to get along, it would effectively mean the end of Pax Americana in the Pacific. Thus, in a way the hostilities actually help the US maintain its current presence in the region. From the 1950s onward, there are several events that have laid the foundation of a conflict between the two powers.

First, both China and Japan were isolationist states that were forced open by Western powers. On the one hand, Japan coped well with the invasion of foreign influence through the Meiji restoration. On the other hand, China could not embrace the West as easily as Japan did. Second, both China and Japan have struggled to gain recognition from Western countries. Essentially, they are revisionist powers in the quest to be treated at par with the West. Finally, the changing regional order has always pitted China and Japan against each other. Prior to the 1850s, a Sino-centric world existed in Asia. This Sino-centrism is viewed seriously in Japan even today, although they claim to have never been a tributary state. In the 1920s, Japan became a beacon of progress in Asia. Subsequently, a military government took the reins in Japan in the 1930s and established a rigid hierarchy in Japanese society. Fuelled by its economy, Japan continued to remain dominant in Asia throughout the 20th century until it was overtaken by China over the last decade.

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Pax Americana and the Current Asian Order

The conventional view of the history of the conflict is that China was invaded by Japan, who never apologized for its colonial regime. Some of the reason why anti-Japanese propaganda in China is so widespread is because it is partly based on historical experience. McGregor argues that this past history can be further divided into 'history of history' and thus there are layers of hypocrisy in any view.

In the aftermath of WWII, Japan was to remain the dominant East Asian power. But it was Pax Americana that laid the template for a post-war regional order. This began with the Treaty of San Francisco in 1951. China was not invited to participate in these talks. Thus, Beijing bases its vision for the international order on the Cairo and Potsdam declarations, which envisaged a post-war world where China would be a great power. East Asia witnessed many economic miracles, with the notable exception of North Korea. This was made possible due to the well-trained bureaucracies and strong, financial controls in these countries and a wide US market for their exports. Meanwhile, the responsibility of the regional

security was guaranteed by the US military through its robust naval presence and its role in preventing post war Japanese aggression.

The flip side of this new order was the fraught underlying politics in the region. With the US military assuming the role of regional security provider, pre-existing conflicts were essentially frozen between the 1950s–1990s and early 2000s. As a result, a political solution for the Korean peninsula, the Chinese civil war or the long-standing China-Japan hostilities were never found. Graham Allison of Harvard University has applied the concept of the Thucydides’ Trap to explain the future of Pax Americana. According to Allison’s argument, a rising power will always clash with a dominant power. Thus, the US may inevitably find itself in a military conflict with China. However, McGregor believes that China wants a gradual US exit from the region since a rapid exit may threaten to destabilize the region.

Changing Dynamics

The US-Japan alliance is strong as the two powers are on a more or less equal footing given their economic might. This alliance will remain vital for the interests of the two allies to defend the weakening status quo with China’s role. In the 1960s-1970s, US Defense Secretaries had urged Japan to be more proactive militarily to defend its interests. However, with the rise of China and increasing threats from North Korea, McGregor finds this is starting to change. Historically, a conservative Japan has always adopted a more aggressive stance in its national security interests. This has further intensified under Prime Minister Abe’s government.

Japan’s activism in realizing its security responsibilities was not always encouraged by the US. Many US allies after the 1950s such as Thailand, Australia and New Zealand were wary of Japan. Henry Kissinger had always been inclined towards China and strongly opposed an alliance with Japan. Japan’s techno-nationalism was generally seen as a threat by the US. Further, many Japanese conservatives harbored some resentment against the US. After its defeat in the war, some Japanese had reservations on the pacifist constitution that was imposed on them or how the US bypassed Japan in defining its relations with China. In addition, Japan had always wanted recognition for its claim to the Senkaku/Diaoyudao Islands. Initially, the US recognized residual claims but later settled only on administrative recognition.

According to McGregor, decades of trade wars between Tokyo and Washington did little to ease the reservations of the Japanese conservatives. Certain attitudes of US diplomats and officials further added insult to injury. For example, Prime Minister Abe’s officials

did not appreciate being lectured on history by US delegations. It is also likely that Former Vice President Joe Biden's characterization of Japan as "a forty-year-old kid who won't move out of his parent's basement," meant to be a reassurance for a Japan that cannot have nuclear weapons, was not received well in Japan.

As Japan and the US dealt with minor hiccups in their alliance, China was the main beneficiary from the US role in providing security in Asia. China needed a peaceful environment to rise. After 1971 and the subsequent modernization, China focused on building up its economic might as the regional security was guaranteed. In 2000-2001, China joined the WTO and has since benefitted from the American made liberal world order. McGregor identified many competing arguments on what the next regional and global order would look like, from Zbigniew Brzezinski's US-Japan alliance to William Saphire's combination of US-China, US-Japan and China-Japan alliances. The bottom line remains that if China wants to change the current status quo, it would have to pull Japan away from the US.

There were three turning points in the relatively short history of diplomatic ties between China and Japan. The first was in the aftermath of the Taiwan Straits crisis in the mid-1990s when the US and Japan authored new security doctrines to include Taiwan. The second came when Japan revised its school textbooks with nationalistic fervor. The final came as China overtook Japan's economy in 2007-2008. This was a long time in the making after Japan had remained a powerful global economy but China's own economy had taken off by 1989.

Changing US Role

Looking ahead, McGregor points to the tough choices for the US. Previously, the US Navy had free reign in the region. However, today China can track every ship in South China Sea and the Pacific. China has become increasingly more assertive regarding its stance on the Senkaku/Diaoyudao Islands. There are round the clock patrols around these islands by rings of fisher boats, disguised Chinese Coast Guard ships and the Chinese navy. These patrols are not meant to start an armed conflict but rather to force Japan and the US to negotiate. In an interview with *The Economist* in 2015, Donald Trump stated that if the US stepped back from the region, Japan would be able to defend itself very well citing that historically it used to beat China in armed conflicts. Two days after the elections in 2016, Prime Minister Abe met with President-elect Trump in New York and presented him with a \$3000 Honda golf club. After this meeting, Trump has been more committed to the alliance with Japan. The bottom line is that the US is in Asia by

choice, not out of necessity like China. It has remained China's goal to make this choice more costly for the US, and to allow for a gradual exit.

By Dyuti Saunik, Research Assistant, Rising Powers Initiative, Sigur Center for Asian Studies, the George Washington University

About the Rising Powers Initiative and Sigur Center for Asian Studies



The Sigur Center for Asian Studies is an international research center of The Elliott School of International Affairs at The George Washington University. Its mission is to increase the quality and broaden the scope of scholarly research and publications on Asian affairs, promote U.S.-Asian scholarly interaction and serve as the nexus for educating a new generation of students, scholars, analysts and policymakers. The Sigur Center houses the Rising Powers Initiative, a multi-year, multi-project research effort that studies the role of domestic identities and foreign policy debates of aspiring powers.

Sigur Center for Asian Studies
Elliott School of International Affairs
The George Washington University
1957 E St. NW, Suite 503
Washington, DC 20052

TEL 202.994.5886
EMAIL gsigur@gwu.edu
<http://www.gwu.edu/~sigur>
<http://www.risingpowersinitiative.org>