

Japan and the Modern World: Lessons from Meiji

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Abstract

From the “Japan bashing” era of the 1980s, we have entered another era of “Japan passing,” this time even more serious than during the Clinton administration. Selling Japan was easy when the Japanese economy was the envy of the world. In 2018, however, academics and pundits need an extra incentive to talk about Japan. How might we restore international attention to Japan? We might do so by looking at Japan through a global prism. The history of Meiji and modern Japan have limited relevance for those outside Japan unless we change the fundamental focus of our examination. Investigations should aspire not simply to explain the when, where, what, and how of modern Japan. Rather, a history of Meiji and modern Japan should, most fundamentally, be fashioned as a history of the modern world. A global history of modern Japan recognizes the power of Edo era Japan; talks about Meiji as critical to the rise of modern economics, politics and empire; and understands Japan’s vital contribution to an internationalist and integrated twentieth- and twenty-first century. A global history of modern Japan is, in essence, a history of the modern world through the prism of Japan, and it indicates that continued Japanese leadership in the twenty-first century may help sustain a world political and economic order that lacks full American support.

I have been thinking and teaching about Japanese history for thirty-five years. When I began my academic career, Japan was a very different place. In 1980, while I was an exchange student at Sophia University in Tokyo, the Japanese economy boomed, and Japan was the envy of the world. Like everyone else, I eagerly purchased the latest in audio gadgets, a Sony Walkman, and marveled at the fax machines that had begun to revolutionize communications among Japanese firms. A year earlier, American sociologist Ezra Vogel had published a sensational book titled, *Japan as Number One*. Vogel hailed not only Japanese economic and technological superiority, but real organizational strength, as well.¹

Although intended originally for an American audience, *Japan as Number One* sold many more copies in Japan. While good for the world economy, after all, Japanese economic might raised significant anxiety in the U.S. Proud of their country as the industrial engine of the world since World War I, many Americans saw in Japan’s new economic power visions of a darker national future. At the same time that Japan became the envy of the world, in other words, she became the source of growing fear. By 1985, the U.S. trade deficit with Japan had ballooned to \$50 billion. In 1987, a group of Republican Congressmen judged it politically advantageous to smash a Toshiba boombox to pieces with sledgehammers on Capitol Hill.

Clearly, Japan in the 1980s and 90s did not receive the kind of publicity that Japanese statesmen and citizens desired. But it did, at least, make the headlines. This is the great

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¹ Ezra Vogel, *Japan as Number One: Lessons for America* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1979).

difference between teaching Americans about Japan in the 1990s and doing so today. Despite its continuing centrality to world politics, economy, and culture, Japan today is largely invisible outside the Asia-Pacific region. That is not entirely the fault of Japanese statesmen and citizens. Geopolitical shifts have drawn the attention of policy-makers, pundits, and students elsewhere. From a time of “Japan bashing” in the 1980s, we have entered an era of “Japan passing” more sustained than during the Clinton administration in the 1990s.

A perfect recent example was the Trump administration’s January 2017 decision to withdraw from the Trans-Pacific Partnership. The announcement was, of course, a reflection of a distinctly impetuous negotiating style by the American president. But it also reflected significant changes in American foreign policy posture under the Obama administration. Despite the powerful show of support for Japan and Asia in Obama’s declaration of an “Asia pivot” in November 2011, Japanese policy-makers spent much of the Obama years lobbying Washington to actually live up to the grand promises of the “pivot.”

Toward a Global History of Modern Japan

Selling Japan was easy when the Japanese economy was the envy of the world. In 2018, however, academics and pundits need extra justification to talk about Japan. What can be done? Let us begin with the Meiji era. There are two common narratives of Meiji Japan. One was popular in the immediate postwar era. The other was a product of Japan’s subsequent high economic growth.

The devastation of World War II moved many in Japan to ask pointed questions about the causes of the calamity. The most influential narrative for at least three decades was the scathing critique of the Japanese state promoted by the Historical Science Society of Japan (*Rekishigaku kenkyūkai*). According to the *Rekishigaku kenkyūkai*, the war stemmed from the pathology of the Meiji state. The product of an “incomplete” revolution in 1868, the state suffered from “feudal remnants,” particularly, a triumvirate of power between the emperor, military, and bureaucracy (described as an “emperor system,” or *tennōsei*), which made for an oppressive, authoritarian polity bent upon foreign conquest.²

The economic boom of the 1960s helped generate a more positive vision of nineteenth-century Japan. In the hands of a group of conservative American scholars inspired by a new focus on “modernization” among American political scientists, the Meiji era became associated primarily with the rise of a modern Japan.³ In a series of six edited volumes published in the 1960s, this so-called “modernization school” gradually replaced the dark vision of Japanese militarism and imperialism with a tale of surprisingly modern Japanese political and economic development.⁴

As Japan became the first Asian country to host an Olympic Games in 1964, this more positive vision of Meiji and modern Japan certainly made sense. After the 1990’s economic crash, however, the vision of Meiji “modernization” is no longer any more useful in luring non-Japanese audiences than the earlier tale of a militarist/imperialist Japan.

How may we look at Meiji, therefore, in a way that makes sense for the twenty-first century? What kind of history of Meiji is serviceable for our present circumstances and for the future? The

² *Rekishigaku kenkyūkai*, ed., *Kindai Nihon no Keisei* (Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 1953).

³ For a convenient introduction to and critique of this modernization school of American Japan specialists, see John W. Dower, “E. H. Norman, Japan, and the Uses of History,” in John W. Dower, ed., *Origins of the Modern Japanese State: Selected Writings of E. H. Norman* (New York: Pantheon, 1975), pp. 3–108.

⁴ Included in this “modernization series” were Marius B. Jansen, ed., *Changing Japanese Attitudes Toward Modernization* (1965), William W. Lockwood, ed., *The State and Economic Enterprise in Japan* (1965), R. P. Dore, ed., *Aspects of Social Change in Modern Japan* (1967), Robert E. Ward, ed., *Political Development in Modern Japan* (1968), Donald H. Shively, ed., *Tradition and Modernization in Japanese Culture* (1971), James William Morley, ed., *The Dilemmas of Growth in Prewar Japan* (1972), all published by Princeton University Press.

obvious answer is embodied in a term that has recently become very popular: global. Why not produce a global history of modern Japan?

The term “global” can mean many things. It might be most useful, however, as an indication of the principle focus of historical analysis. The history of Meiji and modern Japan have limited relevance for those outside Japan unless we change the fundamental focus of our examination. Investigations should aspire not simply to explain the when, where, what, and how of modern Japan. Rather, a history of Meiji and modern Japan should, most fundamentally, be fashioned as a history of the modern world. A global history of modern Japan is, in essence, a history of the modern world through the prism of Japan.

A Global History of Tokugawa

To get a sense of a global history of Meiji first requires analysis of its antecedent. A critical foundation for the narrative of a dynamic, modernizing Meiji has long been the contrasting vision of a dark, “closed” Tokugawa. The idea of a “closed” Tokugawa has, of course, been around much longer than Japan’s high growth era. It derives, in fact, from German naturalist and physician, Englebert Kaempfer, who spent two years in Japan as chief surgeon with the Dutch East India Company between 1690 and 1692. Kaempfer published an account of his travels when Japan had begun to scale back trade, a development that spelled disaster for the Dutch East India Company. According to Kaempfer, this “closing” of Japan was counter to the will of God.⁵ The Japanese translation of Kaempfer’s idea—the term “sakoku”—came to circulate among shogunal counsels in the early nineteenth century as the bakufu debated whether to allow greater trade with the outside world.⁶

The idea of a “closed” Japan, in other words, had political utility for the Dutch in the early eighteenth century, the Japanese in the early nineteenth century, and for American modernization scholars in the mid-twentieth century. However, most historians today reject the idea of “sakoku” as a gross misrepresentation of reality. Tokugawa Japan systematically managed foreign trade and its borders. But it continued a vibrant trade with China, Korea, the Ainu, Southeast Asia and the West throughout the era. The trade was mediated by a substantial Chinese merchant community in Nagasaki, the Dutch factory in Deshima (Nagasaki), the Shimazu family of Satsuma, the Sō family of Tsushima, and the Matsumae domain in Hokkaido.

If we abandon our singular focus on the tale of a “modern Japan” in the nineteenth century, we may not only avoid the ahistorical claim of “closure” in the early modern period. We may also discover ways that Tokugawa Japan actually helped define the contours of the early modern world. Historians typically associate the early modern era with the rise of a Western world. There is, of course, no denying the impressive new power of the West from the fifteenth century. But the ability of the Tokugawa polity to define the terms of trade with the West until 1854 raises serious questions about the usual tale of a “rise of the West.”

Western historians have fashioned a formidable legend of Western power by forefronting stories of Western success and concealing evidence of dependence and failure. Thus, early modern history is dominated by tales of the Age of Exploration in the Americas. Modern history, in turn, focuses on European industrialization and colonization in Africa and South Asia.

A critical component of the Age of Exploration is, of course, the overwhelming allure of riches in East and Southeast Asia. The preeminent hero of the Age of Exploration, Christopher Columbus, was inspired by the great tale of riches in China found in the classic travelogue by

⁵ Englebert Kaempfer, *Amoenitatum exoticarum politico-physico-mediciarum* (Henrici Wilhelmi Meyeri, 1712).

⁶ Beatrice M. Bodart-Bailey, ed. & trans., *Kaempfer’s Japan: Tokugawa Culture Observed* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press, 1999), p. 19.

Marco Polo.⁷ And we know that the Jesuit missionaries who arrived in fifteenth-century Japan found the Japanese to be “the best heathen who have yet been discovered.”⁸ From the perspective of East Asia, in other words, the Age of Exploration is less a story about the “rise of the West,” more a tale of the great allure of Asia.

More importantly, the experience of Western states in East Asia pales by comparison with their activities in the early modern Americas and in modern Africa and South Asia. While sixteenth-century Spanish conquistadors gobbled up Central and South America, Britain colonized India in the nineteenth century and European states carved up Africa after the 1884 Berlin Conference, no Western state ever succeeded in colonizing China, Japan, or Korea. Western scholars have long described Chinese, Japanese, and Korean resistance to Western approaches as East Asian failure to adopt the norms of modern political and economic intercourse. From the perspective of East Asia, however, this resistance represents enduring East Asian strength and a distinct limit on the ability of Western states to control events in the Age of Imperialism. Like early modern China and Korea, Tokugawa Japan continued to control its own terms of trade and diplomacy through the early nineteenth century. In global terms, Edo Japan represents not Japanese failure in the face of overwhelming European strength but formidable Japanese strength in the context of enduring European weakness.

A Global History of Meiji

If Edo Japan was an era of formidable Japanese strength, we can assume that there is some remnant of that strength in Meiji, as well. Meiji, of course, typically begins with a dramatic scene of Japanese capitulation. Commodore Matthew Perry arrives in Uraga Bay in 1853 with the latest in naval technology—steam power—and compels Japan at gunpoint to begin a new relationship with the United States. It is the beginning, moreover, of an “unequal treaty” system in Japan, which deprives Japan until the early twentieth century of its sovereign right to set its own tariffs and to try foreign nationals in its own courts.

Despite the indignity, however, recent scholarship emphasizes the degree to which bakufu officials were able to significantly shape their new relationship with the intruding Western states. While the U.S. sought to open Shinagawa to American trade and residence, Japanese negotiators skillfully changed this to Yokohama, farther from Edo and off the main Tokugawa era thoroughfare, the *Tōkaidō*. Although the 1858 commercial treaty between the U.S. and Japan originally called for eight ports to be opened by 1863, the bakufu pared this to six, and Edo, Osaka, and Hyōgo remained closed through the fall of the dynasty in 1868.⁹

Western historians like to accentuate the idea of Japanese “capitulation” by describing Japanese development in the latter nineteenth century as “Westernization.” By contrast, understanding the formidable power of Edo Japan and recognizing the significant ways in which bakumatsu and Meiji leaders fashioned their own fate enables us to see the much broader global significance of nineteenth-century Japan. The most interesting history of Meiji is not the tale of “Westernization” but of how much Meiji, in fact, contributed to the contours of the nineteenth-century world.

Western historians commonly describe nineteenth-century Japan as a “late-developing” state. But Japan was the first Asian state to industrialize. More importantly, like France, the U.S.,

⁷ For the latest analysis of Marco Polo’s travels and influence, see Hans Ulrich Vogel, *Marco Polo Was in China: New Evidence from Currencies, Salts and Revenues* (Leiden: Brill, 2012).

⁸ To quote founder of the Jesuit order, Francis Xavier, who arrived in Kagoshima in 1543. Quoted in John K. Fairbank, Edwin O. Reischauer & Albert M. Craig, *East Asia: Tradition and Transformation* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1973), p. 31.

⁹ Michael Auslin, *Negotiating with Imperialism: The Unequal Treaties and The Culture of Japanese Diplomacy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), p. 86.

Germany and other Western states that followed eighteenth-century British precedent, Japanese development was central to and helped define the story of nineteenth-century industrialization.

Japan introduced the infrastructure of a modern state at roughly the same time that new conventions swept Western Europe and the United States. Even before the advent of Meiji, Japan boasted four modern shipyards. Telegraph service opened between Tokyo and Yokohama in 1870, just twenty years after a telecommunications boom in the U.S. and Europe. Just as the creation of a US postal service followed upon the heels of the American revolution, the new Meiji leaders mobilized three years after the Meiji Restoration to establish a government-operated national postal network. Japan's first rail link tied Tokyo and Yokohama in 1872, just three years after the completion of America's transcontinental railroad. Authorities adopted the Gregorian calendar on New Year's Day, 1873, several years after most of Catholic Europe and the United States, but well before eastern Europe, Russia, and the Middle East. Japan's first public electric utility, the Tokyo Electric Light Company, began operations in 1887, just five years after New York's Edison Electric Company launched the world's first public power station. Electric streetcars and hydroelectric power arrived in Japan in 1895 and 1897, eight and nine years, respectively, after the same in the U.S.¹⁰ Tokyo legislated compulsory education in 1872, eight years before the same in Britain.

Most importantly, Japan played a key role in defining the modern state. Appearing over a century after the world's first modern constitutions, the Meiji Constitution, nonetheless, joined a vibrant ongoing global discussion over economic, legal, and political development. Distressed over the increasingly destructive human and environmental consequences of industrialization, theorists such as English philosopher T. H. Green began calling in the mid-nineteenth century for tighter state regulation.¹¹ In constitutional theory, Rudolf von Gneist and Lorenz von Stein, with whom Itō Hirobumi had consulted during a tour in Germany in 1883, both stressed the importance of a state structure designed to moderate the excesses of class conflict.

The Meiji Constitution thus symbolized a growing international departure from the classic liberal faith in individualism, and laissez-faire and distrust of state power. As Itō declared in February 1889, "in the medieval period Montesquieu advanced the theory of the separation of powers." But, "according to a theory based on careful study and on actual experience and advanced by recent scholars, sovereignty is one and indivisible."¹² Drafters of the Meiji Constitution viewed their project as the latest, most advanced experiment in constitutional government, designed to moderate the excesses of classic liberalism. Western observers, in fact, hailed the Meiji Constitution as a novel combination of internationally accepted constitutional principles and indigenous cultural preferences. The *London Times* celebrated it for its "broad and catholic eclecticism, tempered by a purely native respect for the inalienable rights of the EMPEROR." That the emperor required ministerial consent, declared American Secretary of State James G. Blaine, marked an improvement over the Constitutions of Europe and the United States.¹³

Diplomatically speaking, the "unequal treaties" marked a capitulation for Japan. But this "capitulation" was not only a great victory for the U.S. It marked a critical foundation for the rise of American power. American historians tend to highlight this rise as a natural process of

¹⁰ Susan Hanley, *Everyday Things in Premodern Japan: The Hidden Legacy of Material Culture* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999), p. 191.

¹¹ Germaine A. Hoston, *Marxism and the Crisis of Development in Prewar Japan* (Princeton, N.J. : Princeton University Press, 1986), p. 289.

¹² Quotation in Ryūsaku Tsunoda, *Sources of Japanese Tradition*, 2 vols. (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1964), vol. 2, p. 160.

¹³ Hidemasa Kokaze, "The Political Space of Meiji 22 (1889): The Promulgation of the Constitution and the Birth of the Nation," *Japan Review*, no. 23 (2011), p. 127.

marshaling the impressive resources of the vast American continent (“manifest destiny”). But without the distinction of vanquishing the well-established premodern Tokugawa state, American power could have easily gone nowhere.

Japan’s military defeat of Qing China in 1895 and Russia in 1905 had an even more decisive effect on global history. The Sino-Japanese war turned the attention of the world toward Asia. According to the grandson of American president John Quincy Adams, “Eastern Asia is the prize for which all the energetic nations are grasping.”¹⁴ Intently searching for opportunities in the Asia/Pacific after 1895, Washington leapt at the opportunity in 1898 to vanquish the Spanish Empire and assume control of the Philippines. The power of the Meiji state, in other words, was partially responsible for America’s transformation into a Pacific empire.

Japan’s defeat of Imperial Russia in 1905 marked an even greater global watershed. The first instance in the modern era of the defeat of a Western empire by an Asian state, the Russo-Japanese War forecast the rise of an Asia/Pacific Century. Asian revolutionaries such as Sun Yat-Sen, Phan Bội Châu and Ho Chi Minh widely hailed the defeat of Russia as the dawn of a new age.

The most powerful significance of Meiji, in other words, is that it represents many larger nineteenth-century global trends. Most importantly, Meiji Japan plays a critical role in actually fashioning global economic and political trends in the nineteenth-century. Meiji demonstrates that both nineteenth-century industrialization and nineteenth-century state-building were global, not just Western enterprises. The American empire would not have emerged so dramatically in the latter nineteenth century without the Meiji state. And Japan’s defeat of Russia in 1905 forecast the Asia/Pacific world in which we currently live.

A Global History of Taishō

If our image of Meiji is strongly swayed by our understanding of Edo, discussions of Taishō likewise have an enormous effect on our vision of Meiji. The Meiji-Taishō contrast is most graphically demonstrated by a comparison of the Meiji and Taishō emperors. As highlighted by Donald Keene’s magisterial 900-page biography, the Meiji emperor remains enveloped in luminosity.¹⁵ By contrast, most scholars would echo Marius Jansen’s complaint that the Taishō emperor “was unimportant in life and his death was irrelevant.”¹⁶ Of course, the more we decry the Taishō emperor and his era, the more important the Meiji period becomes.

One could argue that a reevaluation of Taishō is even more critical than rethinking Edo in transforming our understanding of the importance of Meiji. After all, we see a full flowering in Taishō of what we only get a brief hint of in Meiji—Japanese globalization. Taishō is global in at least three important senses. First, Japan transforms from an agricultural to largely industrial power during the Taishō era, particularly during the First World War. Second, the First World War creates an incredible new U.S.-Japan economic interdependence. Between 1914 and 1939, the U.S. becomes the greatest source of machinery and consumer goods in Japan.¹⁷ By 1924, Japan, in turn, becomes America’s third largest trading partner, behind only Britain and Canada.¹⁸ After the First World War, trans-Pacific trade becomes critical not only for the Pacific. It is essential for

¹⁴ Rupert Eric Davies, Richard J. Jensen, Jon Thares Davidan, eds., *Trans-Pacific Relations: America, Europe, and Asia in the Twentieth Century* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003), p. 3.

¹⁵ Donald Keene, *Emperor of Japan: Meiji and His World, 1852-1912* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002).

¹⁶ Marius B. Jansen, *The Making of Modern Japan* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2000), p. 495.

¹⁷ W. G. Beasley, *Japanese Imperialism 1894–1945* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), pp. 127, 211, Tables 3, 9, respectively.

¹⁸ Tsuneo Matsudaira, “Some Principles of Japanese Foreign Policy,” *Advocate of Peace through Justice*, vol. 87, no. 7 (July 1925), p. 408.

the world economy, setting the stage for a global world after 1945.

Taishō is global in a third sense in the establishment of the foundations of twentieth-century internationalism. The best glimpse of this is Japan's participation at the Paris Peace Conference. Despite their relative detachment from most discussions over European security, two Japanese plenipotentiaries participated in the leadership council of the conference, the Council of Ten, as representatives of one of the five victor powers. Historians frequently highlight US-Japan tensions at Paris over Japan's proposal of a "racial equality" clause in the covenant of the new League of Nations and over Japanese presence in the Chinese province of Shandong.¹⁹ But Japan at Paris obtained its two most cherished demands: great power recognition of its new presence in China (Shandong) and in the South Pacific (the Marshall, Caroline and Mariana Islands).

More significant, however, was Japan's dramatic transformation from an initial victim of great power imperialism in the latter nineteenth century to one of the world's five great powers in 1919. This spectacular metamorphosis was possible only through Japan's remarkable geopolitical advance from the Sino-Japanese through the Russo-Japanese War and, most importantly, its critical contribution to the allies between 1914 and 1918. Tokyo declared war in August 1914, several weeks after initial declarations by the principal belligerents (Austria-Hungary, Germany, Britain, Montenegro, Serbia, France, Russia) but many months prior to such important players as the Ottoman Empire, Italy, and the United States. Between 1914 and 1918, Japan eliminated German power in China and the Pacific; helped patrol Pacific sea lanes; helped escort British imperial troops from Australia and New Zealand to the Indian Ocean; sent destroyers to help hunt German U-boats in the Mediterranean; and supplied the allies with sorely needed arms, shipping, and loans.²⁰

Japan's intimate involvement in the First World War and the Paris Peace Conference became the foundation for an indispensable Japanese role in the international construction of a postwar culture of peace after 1918. Japan was intimately involved in every major postwar peace initiative—the Peace Conference; League of Nations and its many affiliated organizations such as the International Labor Organization and the International Court of Justice; the Washington Naval Conference; the Kellogg-Briand Pact, and the London Naval Conference.²¹ By contrast, the U.S. failed to ratify the Versailles Treaty and refused membership in the League of Nations. And France and Italy refused to abide by the terms of the London Naval Treaty.

In the 1930s, Japan would, of course, deal a serious blow to this interwar peace infrastructure that it had so painstakingly helped to construct. But without Japan's pivotal contributions throughout the 1920s, liberal internationalism would have imploded long before the 1931 Manchurian Incident. It most certainly would have had much greater difficulty re-emerging after 1945. Even after the Manchurian Incident, renowned Asianist Owen Lattimore recognized the pivotal role Japan had played in constructing a twentieth-century world. Japan, he wrote in 1932, is the "chief protagonist of Western civilization" in Northeast Asia.²² Japanese participation at the Paris Peace Conference and in the construction of an interwar infrastructure for peace would become a pivotal foundation for the multi-lateral and global age in which we live today.

¹⁹ See Naoko Shimazu, *Japan, Race and Equality: The Racial Equality Proposal of 1919* (London: Routledge, 1998) and Russell H. Fifield, *Woodrow Wilson and the Far East: The Diplomacy of the Shantung Question*, Hamden: Archon Books, 1965), respectively.

²⁰ For details, see Frederick R. Dickinson, "More than a 'Moment': Woodrow Wilson and the Foundations of Twentieth Century Japan," *Japanese Journal of Political Science*, no. 19 (Dec. 2018), pp.688-700 doi:10.1017/S146810991800035X

²¹ For details, see Frederick R. Dickinson, *World War I and the Triumph of a New Japan* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 2013).

²² Owen Lattimore, *Manchuria, Cradle of Conflict* (1932).

Conclusion

How, in the twenty-first century, might we restore international attention to Japan? We might do so by championing a global history. A global history of modern Japan recognizes the power of Edo; talks about Meiji as vital to the global project for economic, political, and imperial development; and understands Japan's critical contribution in the Taishō era to an internationalist, integrated, globalist twentieth- and twenty-first century. It also raises the very interesting prospect that if Donald Trump had known this history, he might not have abandoned the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). Rather, he would have understood Japan as an important economic and political partner for the future of Japan, the U.S., and the world.

Luckily for President Trump, the Japanese have extensive experience during the Taishō era stepping into the leadership vacuum left by others. Japanese participation in the new liberal internationalist order after World War I helped assuage the complications of a lack of full American participation in that order. Likewise, Japanese leadership in the twenty-first century may very well help rescue a world political and economic order that lacks full American support.