

U.S.-Japan Ties Since the San Francisco Peace Treaty — A Look at the Trump Administration’s Japan Policies from the Perspective of Diplomatic History —*

Michael Schaller**

Abstract

After being defeated in 1945 and occupied, Japan regained its sovereignty in 1952 and went on to achieving spectacular economic growth. This presentation looks at how the United States viewed Japan after World War II as communism spread in East Asia, and how the status of Japan in the eyes of the U.S. evolved. It also looks at the significance of the United States for Japan that emerged exhausted after losing a war and was desperate to regain its sovereignty. The current administration’s Japan policies in the context of diplomatic history is also discussed, building upon the analysis on the evolution of the U.S.-Japan relationship during and after the Cold War.

I hope I don’t disappoint you because I’m an historian, and historians predict the past. We are quite unreliable at predicting the future, so we try to stick to predicting the past which, to be honest, can also be very challenging! But I’ll try to explain some of the links I see between the past and the present. Less than a month after Japan’s surrender in the Pacific War, in September 1945, a young American diplomat, John Emerson, moved into his new Tokyo office that had been requisitioned from the Mitsui Corporation. When he arrived, a Mitsui executive was clearing out his desk and as he left, he pointed to a map on the wall of the Co-Prosperity Sphere and said to Emerson “There it is...We tried. See what you can do with it!” A shaken Emerson recalled that suddenly, the whole burden of American foreign policy in Asia hit him in the stomach. What was America going to do with it? During the next several decades and in some ways continuing today, that question remains relevant. Where would an American-allied Japan fit into post-World War II Asia?

Five years after Emerson’s Tokyo encounter, a leading American diplomat, George Kennan, the so-called Father of Containment, pondered the same question at a meeting of State Department officials. How, he asked, in the wake of China’s communist revolution, could Japan overcome its “terrific problem?” How was it going to secure viable raw materials and markets unless it once “again re-opened some sort of empire to the south?” With China “lost,” another diplomat agreed, the United States had to devise a way to “get Japan into, I’m afraid,” he said, “the old Co-Prosperity Sphere.”

Another five years later on, in 1954, with Japan’s economic recovery then underway, American officials continued to insist that Southeast Asia, not the West, must become Japan’s primary economic partner. But theory and practice had already begun to clash. In 1954, the American

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** Michael Schaller is Regents Professor of History Emeritus at the University of Arizona.

Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles, the author of the 1951 peace treaty, declared that Japan's low-quality exports would never find a market in the United States and so it must turn to Southeast Asia. And then suddenly, one of his aides recalled, Dulles reached into his briefcase. He "pulled out a cheap Japanese sports shirt" that he had purchased in an American department store and he yelled at Prime Minister Yoshida, "You can't do this to us after all America's done for you!"

More recently, historical memories appear to have also informed President Donald Trump's view of Japan. At a June 2018 meeting with Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, Trump launched into a list of complaints over Japanese trade and tariff policy. He dismissed seven decades of Japanese-American friendship, and Trump told a flustered Abe, "I remember Pearl Harbor! OK?" Literally, this was impossible, because Donald Trump had been born six years after Pearl Harbor, but he considered it an important symbolic way to make his point. I want to explore the question of how we got from the San Francisco peace treaty in 1951 to Trump Tower in 2018.

The American-drafted peace settlement that formally ended the occupation, signed in San Francisco in 1951, has been praised understandably as a document that welcomed a peaceful and a democratic Japan back into the community of nations. However, it is important to remember the context. Only two major members of the wartime grand alliance that fought Japan, the United States and Great Britain, actually signed the treaty. The United States barred the People's Republic of China from the conference. India and Burma boycotted the meeting, although they later signed separate treaties with Japan. The Soviet Union and its allies attended the San Francisco conference but refused to sign the final document. Privately, this refusal delighted the United States because it left unresolved the problems of the Soviet-held northern territories and the fate of Japanese prisoners of war still held by the Soviet Union. Soviet-Japanese tension also deflected Japanese resentment over the U.S. retention of Okinawa. Other participants at the conference made no secret that they still mistrusted Japan. The governments of the Philippines, New Zealand, and Australia only endorsed the treaty after the U.S. agreed to provide them with security guarantees against both communist and potential Japanese aggression.

So, in spite of its many virtues, the 1951 peace treaty cannot be fully understood without examining it in both time and space. The restoration of Japanese sovereignty was just one element of a much broader series of U.S. diplomatic, military, economic arrangements that both reflected and in some ways outlasted the Cold War. The distinguished historian John Dower has referred to the events of 1951 as creating the "San Francisco system," an interlocking set of arrangements that limited Japan's autonomy and defined its relationship to the United States and its Asian neighbors for several decades. I would go even further. To properly understand the armature or structure or skeleton of containment, it helps to visualize a set of Russian nesting dolls. At its core is the 1951 peace treaty with Japan. Despite its generous terms, the U.S. retained Okinawa as a vast military complex for the next two decades. One level further out from the core treaty, we find the bilateral U.S.-Japan security treaty also signed in San Francisco. This treaty had very little to do with defending Japan but had much to do with projecting U.S. power in the rest of Asia. Moving on, we encounter an additional set of security treaties concluded in 1951 between the U.S., the Philippines, Australia, and New Zealand. Further out still, we come upon the 1953 and 1954 U.S. security treaties with South Korea and Taiwan. Enveloping all of these other agreements, there is an additional set of security arrangements, the 1954 Manila treaty that created the U.S.-sponsored Southeast Asia Treaty Organization or SEATO. Dulles, by then U.S. Secretary of State, inserted into the SEATO treaty a separate special "protocol," declaring that the U.S. had an interest in the security of the just established non-communist portion of Southern Vietnam, just coming into existence.

These concentric rings of defense treaties represented a military shield as well as a tripwire. But equally important, it signified a vital economic security zone that the American Secretary of

State Dean Acheson in 1949 named the “great crescent.” Without Japan, none of these protected areas were critical to the United States, but all were deemed essential to safeguard Japan, and by extension U.S. security. The two major wars fought by the United States in Asia after 1945, in Korea and Vietnam, were to a great degree fought both for and from Japan. This structure of containment radiated outward in time and space from the 1951 peace treaty and evolved to secure what John Foster Dulles and his many successors called the key U.S. goal in Asia: “keeping Japan on our side.”

From 1948 until the mid-1960s, successive American leaders worried that economic vulnerability, not Soviet or Chinese military power, posed the most significant threat to Japan and its alliance with the United States. Economic pressure alone, they feared, by either locking Japan out of Southeast Asia or by dangling the prospect of trade with communist China might push Japan toward neutrality or still worse, an alliance with the Soviet bloc. A neutral Japan would deprive the United States of its base network vital for military operations in the entire Asia/Pacific region. A Japan whose industrial and military potential was added to the Soviet bloc could fundamentally alter the balance of power in Asia and beyond. Preventing either of those possibilities became the prime motivation of American policy in many ways from the 1950s right through the 1960s and in some ways still resonates today.

In the two years following Japan’s surrender, the Truman administration paid surprisingly little attention to the question of Japan’s future. Instead, the emerging east–west divisions in Europe, fears of Soviet designs in the Near East, and the dramatic Chinese civil war dominated almost all American discussions of foreign policy. President Truman was quite happy to have one less problem on his plate and left Japan in the hands of General Douglas MacArthur, the Supreme Commander of the Allied Powers. The President allowed MacArthur a nearly free hand in implementing plans for demobilization and democratization. The general, in turn, relied upon a talented team of specialists who staffed his headquarters.

For his part, General MacArthur saw Japan as the ideal platform from which to launch his own pursuit of the 1948 Republican presidential nomination. By mid-1947, MacArthur announced, without consulting Washington, the time had come to hold a peace conference in Tokyo, presided over by himself. Japan, he said, would be able to fend for itself economically as soon as the occupation ended. As for security, MacArthur claimed that a “spiritually transformed” Japan could rely on a pledge of protection from the United Nations and no American troops or bases should remain on the island.

These assertions stood in dramatic contrast to the policy outlook evolving in Washington. In March of 1947, President Truman went in front of Congress to warn of a global Soviet threat to democracies, the so-called Truman doctrine. In May of 1947, Undersecretary of State Dean Acheson publicly announced that world peace and security required that the two “great workshops of Europe and Asia,” Germany and Japan, be rebuilt. In June of 1947, Secretary of State George Marshall called on Congress to fund a massive European reconstruction program later known as the Marshall Plan.

Even as MacArthur tried to bully his way towards a peace settlement, key Washington policymakers decided to dramatically reconfigure American occupation strategy. Men like Navy Secretary, soon to be Defense Secretary, James Forrestal argued that the Soviet threat meant that the U.S. had no choice but to “put Japan and Germany and the other affiliates of the Axis powers back to work.” MacArthur’s call for a quick peace treaty risked “complete economic collapse” in Japan, followed by Soviet intervention. Privately, Forrestal and other cabinet officials told the President that the survival of the free world required rebuilding the former Axis enemies that America had vanquished.

Gradually, responsibility for reshaping Japan was handed over to George Kennan’s State Department Policy Planning Staff and to like-minded Army officials. Kennan, of course known

as the father of containment, viewed Japan much like he did Germany. Kennan wrote to his superiors and to the President that the “radically changed world situation” required that what he called “Hirohito’s islands” be made a “buffer state” against the Soviet Union. A “new Japan” would not “possess an identity of its own,” he wrote, but would “function as an American satellite.” A stable Japan, in turn, required securing supplies of vital raw materials which were at risk given communist control of China. This made access to Southeast Asia increasingly important.

Despite MacArthur’s challenge, President Truman was reluctant to curb the general’s authority until the spring of 1948. MacArthur lost a series of presidential primary elections in the spring of 1948 and quickly withdrew from his quest for the presidential nomination. In October of 1948, Truman approved the so-called Reverse Course in Japan, signified by a document produced by the National Security Council, NSC 13, that decreed economic recovery and security were the two “primary objectives” in Japan.

Over the next three years, from the end of 1948 until 1951, American civilian strategists forged a consensus about the opportunities and risks confronting Japan. In late 1948, Kennan’s policy planning staff described the importance of using Japan as an “instrument of political warfare with respect to communist Asia” while encouraging the flow of raw materials from Southeast Asia to Japan and Western Europe. By 1949, the State Department planners warned that since the Soviets had been effectively blocked in Europe by the Marshall plan and NATO, Stalin had launched a “coordinated offensive” in Southeast Asia to block the flow of raw materials to Japan and therefore push Japan toward neutralism or communism. Communist control of Japan, the CIA estimated in 1949, would add an astounding 25% to Soviet military–industrial capacity.

With the formal establishment of the communist regime in China in October of 1949, fear increased in Washington that the People’s Republic would, at Stalin’s direction, use the lure of trade to blackmail Japan. During 1950 and 1951 and in preparation for the peace conference in San Francisco, U.S. diplomats and journalists described a race they saw between Moscow and Washington to create either a communist or non-communist Co-Prosperity Sphere. They warned of contrasting plans to establish a “Red Co-Prosperity Sphere” binding Japan to Northeast Asia or a U.S. Co-Prosperity Sphere linking Japan to Southeast Asia. The Kremlin, American journalists wrote, were determined to forge a vast “Asiatic Co-Prosperity Sphere.” They didn’t see a need to attack Japan directly or risk provoking a U.S. military response. Instead, the Soviets would rely on what one American journalist called the “bowling pin theory.” This was a predecessor to the domino theory. The bowling pin theory argued that the Soviets and/or China planned to first seize Southeast Asian resources and use that control to bludgeon Japan into submission.

Soon after the Korean War began in June 1950, special ambassador John Foster Dulles, who was tasked with writing the peace treaty with Japan, insisted that negotiations for a peace treaty continue despite the uncertain outcome in Korea. The “communist offensive in Korea,” Dulles said, was “probably aimed at getting control of Japan.” If South Korea had fallen, “Japan would fall without an open struggle.” At the same time, Dulles argued, despite the ongoing fighting in Korea, it was vital to keep the peace process going. “If we became totally preoccupied with Korea,” Dulles said, “we would lose in Japan more than we gained in Korea.”

On the eve of John Forster Dulles’s trip to Japan in February of 1951, to work out the details of a peace settlement, Newsweek magazine, then one of the two big American news weeklies, featured a cover story on Japan with a picture of Prime Minister Yoshida, and it was called “America’s latest ally.” Newsweek featured two maps in that article, both of them superimposed on Japan’s wartime Co-Prosperity Sphere. One showed U.S. military bases in Japan, which could dominate Asia in the future. A second map demonstrated how after the “loss of China” Japan must “look to Southeast Asia” as a source of raw materials.

When consulting with Japanese and American officials in Tokyo in early 1951, Dulles stressed that Japan’s chief long-term value as an ally lay in its industrial potential, not as an

American forward base. This was a source of endless arguments between American civilian and military leaders. Dulles always believed that it was dangerous to over-militarize the U.S.–Japan relationship. Japan was more useful as an economic than military ally. In contrast, the Joint Chiefs of Staff insisted that Japan's greatest value was as a vast military base network in Northeast Asia. Dulles insisted that the “principle problem” that he foresaw in post-occupation Japan was how, with China off-limits, Japan could possibly prosper without becoming a burden to the United States. He envisioned Southeast Asia as Japan's most likely source of raw materials and markets, assuming communism could be stopped in Indochina. Unless the U.S. made sure, he said, that “Japan worked for us,” he cautioned, “it will work for the other side.” This fundamental belief shaped American policy in Asia and the Pacific for a generation. It inspired Washington's determination to isolate China and it spawned the various regional military alliances mentioned earlier. Above all, it became the prime motivation for America's escalating involvement in Vietnam, which became seen as the pivot for control of Southeast Asia and hence, indirectly, the key to Japan's survival.

It hardly mattered that over the next twenty years, absolutely none of these dire fears and predictions voiced by American planners about China, Southeast Asia, or trade with the U.S. were actually grounded in fact. They were, quite simply, illusions. During the 1950s, China's primitive economy as well as Mao Zedong's ambivalence about foreign trade severely limited Beijing's willingness or ability to blackmail Japan. Southeast Asia, of course, later became a major trading partner of Japan's, but only in the 1960s, long after economic recovery was underway. And to the consternation of American economic experts who questioned Japan's ability to ever find markets in the West, Japan by the mid-1950s had begun selling textiles, ceramics, consumer electronics in ever increasing volume to the United States. Even though American fears were highly exaggerated, they nevertheless shaped U.S. policy in the 1950s and 1960s.

The most contentious issue facing John Foster Dulles as he prepared the San Francisco peace treaty related to China and U.S. military bases. The British, who were understandably concerned about the vulnerability of Hong Kong and worried about potential Japanese competition in Southeast Asia, were appalled at the pressure the Americans applied to Tokyo to deal only with Taiwan in the post-occupation period. When Prime Minister Churchill suggested that a sovereign Japan should be free to set its own China policy, Dulles snapped at him that it was simply “inconceivable” Washington would ever permit Japan to “pursue foreign policies which cut across those of the United States.”

When the peace and security treaties came up for ratification in the U.S. Senate in early 1952, Secretary of State Acheson and John Foster Dulles testified in front of the Senate in secret. They explained that the U.S. needed a friendly Japan as much as Japan needed a friendly U.S. The Soviet Union, they said, had determined to exploit the industrial capacities of Germany and Japan. If the Kremlin ever gained control of Japan, the “stage would be set for a climactic struggle of doubtful outcome.” After a prolonged delay, the Senate finally ratified both the peace and security treaties in March 1952, acting only after the Japanese government agreed to surrender legal jurisdiction over U.S. military personnel in Japan, accepted strict limits on Japan's trade with China, and pledged to sign a peace treaty with Taiwan, not the People's Republic.

Despite the many achievements at San Francisco, Americans still worried about Japan's future. They voiced special concern over the erosion of the French position in Indochina. During the summer of 1952, the National Security Council analyzed the impact of a possible French defeat in Indochina. They predicted that “Japan's access to raw materials and markets” would determine its future cooperation with the U.S. The “loss of Southeast Asia,” the National Security Council concluded, would “inevitably force Japan into an accommodation with the communist-controlled areas of Asia.” The loss of Indochina would “lead to swift submission or alignment with communism by all states in the area.” Unfortunately, the National Security Council reported, the

American public remained “largely indifferent” to the struggle against communism in Southeast Asia and it called on the President to prepare the public for more direct intervention.

Within days of President Dwight Eisenhower’s taking office in January of 1953, his new Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles, delivered a radio and television speech in which he argued that the Soviets were “making a drive to get Japan,” not only through their actions in Korea, “but through what they were doing in Indochina.” The loss of the “rice bowl of Asia,” as he called it, would jeopardize Japan’s survival as an American ally. Military leaders as well as civilian leaders argued that the loss of Indochina would lead to the loss of Southeast Asia and that “would lead to the loss of Japan.” As John Foster Dulles put it privately, the moment Indochina fell to communism, the “Japs...would be thinking on how to get to the other side.”

These concerns explained much of the anxiety that gripped Washington from 1954 forward as the Vietminh guerrillas laid siege to French forces at Dien Bien Phu. President Eisenhower, John Foster Dulles, the American Joint Chiefs of Staff all feared that a French defeat or a political deal at the peace talks underway in Geneva in the spring of 1954 might breach what they called the “great crescent” of containment surrounding China. The possible outcomes, a French surrender, creation of a coalition government, or the partition of Vietnam, the Joint Chiefs of Staff warned, would impress most Asians as a “communist victory.” Inevitably, Japan, the “keystone of U.S. policy in the Far East,” would reach an “accommodation with the communist bloc.” A Red victory in Indochina, Dulles announced at a Cabinet meeting, would cut America’s defense lines in half. Stopping communism in Indochina, Dulles told journalists, was of “transcendent importance.”

Nevertheless, by April, the French garrison at Dien Bien Phu faced annihilation. President Eisenhower made a deeply personal appeal to British Prime Minister Churchill for some sort of united American–British action to save the French garrison. The loss of Indochina, Eisenhower wrote to Churchill, would place such tremendous pressure on Japan, it would be impossible to prevent Tokyo from “reaching a deal with the communist world.” Failure to act, Eisenhower implored, would be as grave a mistake as the failure of the democratic states in the 1930s to “stop Hirohito, Mussolini, and Hitler by not acting in time.” The President said much the same thing in public. The U.S. “simply can’t afford” to lose Indochina, Eisenhower told journalists. A French defeat would cause all Southeast Asia to “go quickly,” like “a row of dominoes.” Japan, clearly the ultimate domino, would have no choice, he said, but to gravitate “toward the communist area in order to live.” In a briefing to members, leaders of Congress, Eisenhower warned the loss of Japan would push the U.S. “out of the Pacific” and the entire Pacific Ocean “would become a communist lake.”

In spite of these and other warnings, neither the British government nor the U.S. Congress supported military intervention to save the French. At Geneva, following the defeat of the French at Dien Bien Phu, France agreed to disengage from Indochina. The U.S. declined to sign the Geneva Accords in 1954, but Dulles expressed relief at the “relatively moderate” terms accepted by the communists, given their military strength on the ground. The United States, Dulles explained, would “go along” with the Geneva Accords if the British and French promised to “support American efforts to create a Southeast Asia Treaty Organization.” These efforts, Dulles made clear, all related to Japan, which he again described as the entire “soul of the situation in the Far East.” Denied access to Southeast Asia, Japan would slip away and without Japan, the U.S. position would “become untenable” in Asia. To prevent this, of course, Dulles and Eisenhower began plans to support anti-communist forces in southern Vietnam, doing everything possible, they said, to “avoid having elections” since the communists would probably win at the polls.

In September of 1954, Dulles convened a foreign ministers’ meeting in Manila, attended by only two regional nations, the Philippines and Thailand, that produced one more alliance, the Southeast Asia Treaty. Dulles worked around the prohibition that barred Vietnam from joining a military alliance by declaring in a separate protocol to the SEATO pact that the U.S. retained a

vital security interest in Vietnam.

Throughout the remainder of the 1950s, Japanese and American officials squabbled over many issues, such as the levels and pace of rearmament. The U.S. wanted more and faster Japanese rearmament while the Japanese wanted less, slower. They argued over how to manage Japan's bid to relax restrictions on trade with China. They argued about how best to promote trade expansion between Japan and Southeast Asia. Through it all, President Eisenhower proved surprisingly adept at smoothing over the hard edges of U.S.–Japan disputes. Much to the displeasure of American manufacturers, Eisenhower actually encouraged the expansion of Japanese exports to the U.S., and he even showed some flexibility towards permitting Japanese trade with communist China. Eventually, he overruled Dulles and endorsed revising the 1951 U.S.–Japan security treaty.

On several occasions during the late 1950s, Eisenhower responded to critics of his policy by explaining that since Japan must export to survive, it had a clear choice. It could sell battleships to Beijing or cotton blouses to American consumers. And he said, U.S. textile manufacturers would simply have to adjust to that reality. In one of his last comments on Japan and Southeast Asia, in a 1959 speech that Eisenhower gave at Gettysburg College that was widely circulated among Japanese government officials, Eisenhower revealed what he saw as the link connecting American security, the Japanese economy, and the survival of South Vietnam. America, he insisted, must increase its commitment to South Vietnam to prevent the crumbling of the barrier to communism in Southeast Asia. Why did this matter? It mattered because Japan, the essential counterweight to communist strength in Asia, needed the regions' trade to live. Strengthening Vietnam and Southeast Asia, Eisenhower declared, ensured Japan's survival as an ally. Abandoning Vietnam or restricting Japan's trade with the U.S. (as some protectionists favored) the President warned, would risk the free world's stake in the entire Pacific.

From the 1950s through 1968, Presidents Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Johnson remained committed to protecting South Vietnam as part of the strategy to stabilize and secure the alliance with Japan. Between 1955 and '65, the U.S. steadily increased economic and military support for South Vietnam, culminating eventually in the full Americanization of that war in 1965.

All three American presidents, Eisenhower, Kennedy, Johnson, believed that a failure to hold the line in Southeast Asia would inevitably create conditions that pushed Japan toward neutralism or an accommodation with the communist bloc. In their private discussions, American political leaders and strategists often worried that unlike the European allies, Japanese loyalty to the West was purely situational, that even nominally conservative Japanese political and economic leaders might switch Cold War allegiances if faced with the loss of U.S. or Southeast Asian markets. Despite all evidence to the contrary, right through the early 1970s, American policymakers continued to fear that Japanese trade with China would somehow lure Japan behind the Iron Curtain, rather than luring China out.

Although Japan played no direct role in the Vietnam War, the conflict impacted Japan and the region in many ways. The extremely high levels of Vietnam-related U.S. military spending during the 1960s reinvigorated Japanese economic growth and created a mounting Japanese trade surplus with the U.S. Equally significant, the wartime flow of U.S. dollars into the Southeast Asia region stimulated and partly financed the rapid growth of Japanese trade with Southeast Asia, the very thing Americans had been hoping for since the 1940s.

Despite the fact that U.S. policies in East and Southeast Asia during the Vietnam War era were intended to bolster the San Francisco system, the unintended results of American policies simultaneously undermined the very system that Washington struggled to preserve. For example, the unpopular stalemated war in Vietnam, Japan's growing trade surplus, the erosion of the dollar, and the Chinese–Soviet split all compelled American policymakers to revisit their long standing assumptions.

The Nixon Shocks of 1971, ending dollar–gold convertibility, threatening to impose stiff tariffs

on Japanese imports, and the U.S. opening to China, reconfigured key elements of U.S. strategy throughout Asia. It also led to a discussion that had been latent in U.S.–Japanese relations for many years, the notion of “double containment.” This concept held that the American military alliance with Japan served two purposes. It not only protected Japan from external aggression, but also allowed the United States to exercise a key measure of control over Japan’s behavior. Even John Foster Dulles who had spent so much energy urging Japan to rearm in the 1950s, at one point in 1957, said that he sometimes questioned if it made sense to arm Japan too heavily if it meant “putting arms in the hands of people who are going to shoot in the wrong direction.” Richard Nixon, as Vice President in the 1950s, also urged Japan to rearm, but in 1972, he explicitly promoted the idea of “double containment” during his conversations with Chinese communist leaders. Nixon pushed back against demands from Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai when he met them in February of 1972 that the U.S. abandon its security alliance with Japan. The President asked Mao and Zhou whether they had seriously considered the alternative, a Japan uncoupled from American restraints. “Do we want the second most prosperous powerful nation in Asia to go it alone,” Nixon asked, “or do we provide a shield?” Wasn’t a U.S. veto over Japan “less dangerous to China than a Japan-only policy?” Without U.S. bases in Japan, Nixon added, the “wild horse of Japan could not be controlled.”

During the thirty years following Nixon’s opening to China, the U.S.–Japan relationship bent in many ways but never broke. The U.S. was no longer obsessed after 1972, at least until recently, by the “China threat.” Presidents Nixon, Ford, Carter, and Reagan actually looked at China as much as at Japan as a buffer against the Soviet Union during the last stages of the Cold War. After the Soviet collapse in 1991, Presidents Bush and Clinton promoted Chinese economic modernization and its entry into the global trading network as the best way to stabilize Asia. The U.S.–Japan security treaty remained nominally in effect but it appeared less and less central to America’s regional strategy in Asia.

That dynamic shifted again after 2001. Responding to terrorist attacks, U.S. policymakers refocused resources and attention to the Middle East. Meanwhile, with remarkable speed, China became the second largest economy in the world and a global export giant. Gradually, the People’s Republic of China channeled its new wealth into military modernization and has asserted bold territorial and maritime claims in the South China Sea and the East China Sea. China went from being a late-Cold War ally of the U.S. and a counterweight to Russia and possibly a counterweight to Japan to becoming what Washington now perceives as an economic and security rival. One of the many interesting aspects of Trump’s recent anti-China rhetoric is the ways in which it closely echoes the anti-Japanese rhetoric popular among American officials during the 1970s and ‘80s when Washington pundits warned of Japanese schemes to dominate the world economy and turn the Pacific into a Japanese lake. Some of the most critical “Japan-bashers” even spoke of a secret Japanese plan to reverse the verdict of the Pacific War and subdue the United States.

In more normal times, we might anticipate that increased trade and security tensions between the U.S. and China would result logically in closer U.S.–Japan cooperation, But in the era of Trump, few things are that simple. President Trump has challenged traditional American allies, such as Canada, Mexico, South Korea, and the European Union, over a variety of trade and security issues. At the same time, he has deployed a charm offensive toward traditional adversaries, including Russia and North Korea.

Trump’s treatment of Japan seems to lie somewhere in the middle, between these two extremes. In spite of Prime Minister Abe’s public and private efforts to appease the President, Trump has continued to complain bitterly about Japan’s trade practices, to threaten tariffs, and fume about the high cost of American-provided security. This resentment seems to have surfaced in his cruel reference to the Pearl Harbor attack during his meeting with Prime Minister Abe.

These tensions, along with Trump's unpredictability on issues such as North Korea's nuclear and missile threats, have increased anxiety among Japanese that their interests and security may be casually sacrificed by a mercurial President with little interest in or understanding of history. In my lifetime, certainly, I had never expected to see an American leader describe exchanging what he called "love letters" with a North Korean dictator. Might Trump make a nuclear weapons and missile deal with North Korea that undercuts both South Korea and Japan? What once seemed unimaginable now appears at least possible. Is the U.S. willing or even able to confront Chinese hegemony in the South China Sea? We simply don't know. Uncertainty over these and related issues will most likely add momentum to efforts within Japan to jettison the no-war clause of the constitution and adopt a more independent and assertive foreign and security policy.

Let me close by revisiting the question posed to John Emmerson in September 1945 by the junior Mitsui executive. How did the United States propose to reorganize post-war Asia? In some ways, I would argue, during the occupation and the Cold War, it did reconfigure its own version of a Co-Prosperity Sphere in which Washington and Tokyo formed a dominant partnership over the region. That arrangement dominated East and Southeast Asia through the mid-1970s. It persisted in a modified form through the end of the century, maintaining an imperfect balance of power. But, increasingly the U.S., Japan, China and the other nations that sit astride the "great crescent" are moving into uncharted waters without any clear navigational aids to guide them.