



Southeast Asia's Pacific War

By Marvin Ott

The cataclysm that was World War II produced seismic changes on a planetary scale. Few regions were more deeply impacted than Southeast Asia. The war fundamentally reshaped the region in ways that unmistakably define the present.

When Imperial Japan attacked Pearl Harbor in 1941, it was the opening salvo in a military blitzkrieg aimed primarily at Southeast Asia—rich in resources and a natural complement to Japan's military conquests in China. Southeast Asia had for decades been under European and later American colonial rule. Western hegemony dated back to the 16th century when

Portuguese, Spanish, and French warships and merchant men appeared off the region's coasts—drawn initially by the lure of spices, other exotic tropical products, and the China trade. By the late 19th century, the entire region, except Thailand, was under colonial rule. The colonies were profitable and the region peaceful. Local resistance to colonial authority was minimal—nothing comparable to the broad popular movement against British rule in India led by Mahatma Gandhi.

The territorial contours of Southeast Asia that we know today were shaped and drawn by colonial officials. The map of present-day Indonesia looks

the way it does solely because it marks the extent of the Dutch East Indies. Cambodia exists as a national entity only because Napoleon III intervened to create a Khmer protectorate in lands that otherwise would have been absorbed by an ascendant Vietnam. As late as 1940, for the inhabitants of Southeast Asia ranging from peasant farmers to urban sophisticates, European colonial authority seemed unassailable.

Then came Japan's attack—first on American airfields in the Philippines and then with stunning speed down the coast of Indochina. Two months after Pearl Harbor, Japanese infantry overwhelmed the supposedly impregnable British defenses on Singapore. The Indonesian archipelago, Malaya, Borneo, Burma, and the Philippines soon followed. In a blink-of-an-eye, Japan shattered the entire structure of colonial rule and, with it, the myth of white European omnipotence. For the peoples of Southeast Asia, it was breathtaking. Now, suddenly, an entirely new future, with unimagined opportunities, opened up.

In the immediate aftermath of the war and Japan's defeat, the colonial powers returned—but their era was over. By the end of the 1940s, Indonesia, Burma, and the Philippines had emerged as independent states. By the end of the next decade, the French had been forced out of Indochina and Britain had lowered its flag over Malaya. Only Singapore and the Borneo territories of Sabah and Sarawak remained under British rule and, in 1963, they became constituent parts of an independent Malaysia. (The eastern portion of the remote island of Timor remained an atavistic colonial possession of Portugal until 1975.)

In 1955, Indonesia hosted the Bandung Conference of newly independent, post-colonial, and nominally nonaligned states. It was a seminal moment when the leaders of these

new states met one another—most for the first time. Japan was not present. But the gathering would have been impossible without Japan's radical transformation of Southeast Asia's political landscape less than 15 years before.

For Southeast Asia, a second major consequence of the Pacific War was the sudden emergence of the United States as East Asia's primary power. The United States acquired a string of island territories formally controlled by Japan and regained control of Wake and Guam, as well as the vast maritime domains that went with them across the western Pacific. American military forces garrisoned Japan itself. The United States had become a resident East Asian power.

That reality was rapidly augmented and clarified as the Cold War became the defining reality of global geopolitics. The onset of the Korean War brought large U.S. forces into the Korean Peninsula and triggered formal military alliances with Thailand and the Philippines—including basing rights for U.S. troops. Clark Air Force Base and Subic Bay Naval Station in the Philippines hosted large American military facilities—giving the United States a significant armed forces footprint in Southeast Asia. It is worth remembering that while the Cold War remained cold in Europe, it was hot in Southeast Asia with major communist-led insurgencies across the region. Washington provided counterinsurgency advice and equipment to governments in the Philippines and Thailand—and then became heavily engaged with combat forces in Vietnam, as well as Laos and Cambodia. As a direct result of Cold War conflicts, the U.S. Navy became a regular presence in East Asian waters routinely patrolling from bases in Japan to the Philippines and on to Singapore and beyond. America had become East Asia's great power with its navy acting as the de facto guarantor of regional peace and stability in particular. This



development would not have been possible without U.S. bases in Japan supported by the Japanese government. Paradoxically, the American security role crystallized after the United States ceased military operations in Vietnam in 1975 and despite a sharp diminution of Washington's attention to Southeast Asia. Subic Bay and Clark Field were closed and U.S. forces removed at the beginning of the 1990s. But the American naval presence remained. Following the U.S. withdrawal from Saigon, Southeast Asia settled into a remarkable 35-year period of geopolitical tranquility. The countries of Southeast Asia were all committed to the same overriding objective of economic development—a goal shared by post-Mao China. Regional economic institutions, along with trade and investment, flourished. It all provided the perfect ecosystem for postwar Japan.

Japan's postwar government was very different from the neo-shogunate regime that created the remarkable, if momentary, Japanese empire across much of Asia. With initial American tutelage, a constitutional democratic government assumed political power in Tokyo. Under the leadership of an extraordinary prime minister, Yoshida Shigeru, Japan did something few countries have accomplished; it formulated a thoughtful, long-term, and exquisitely intelligent national security strategy. Yoshida embraced the new constitution that effectively required that Japan become something very rare, if not unique, on the world scene—a pacifist major country. In the words of Article 9 of the "Peace Constitution": "The Japanese people forever renounce war as a sovereign right of the nation and the threat or use of force as a means of settling international disputes."

At the same time, the imperatives of geography

had not disappeared. Japan was part of Northeast Asia, a region replete with conflicts and first order security threats. War raged on the Korean Peninsula until July 1953 when hostilities were suspended but not ended by an armistice. In China, Mao Tse-tung launched one ideological campaign after another designed to remake the country in the likeness of "Mao Tse-tung Thought."

Meanwhile, China supported—rhetorically, politically, and sometimes materially—communist insurgencies throughout Southeast Asia. Lest we forget, China's own civil war remained unconcluded with Chiang Kai-shek's Kuomintang government now on Taiwan and Beijing promised to "restore" China's rule over Taiwan by military conquest, if necessary.

It was, to put it mildly, an unlikely environment for an experiment in pacifist statecraft. At the same time, Japan's postwar economy lay in ruins—destroyed by a relentless American air campaign that included two nuclear bombs. What remained was human capital—the technical and organizational expertise that had propelled the post-Meiji emergence of Japan as an advanced industrial economy. For any Japanese government, job one had to be rebuilding the economy on the foundation of that same human capital.

Yoshida made a virtue of necessity by committing all of Japan's limited resources to economic reconstruction while leaving national defense—the protection of the nation's interests in a dangerous region—in the hands of Washington. This policy, in turn, required a formal treaty of alliance that would permit the stationing of substantial American sea, air, and land forces in Japan, including a large Marine Corps presence on Okinawa. For the United States, this meant it was logistically feasible to project naval and air power along the western Pacific littoral, through Southeast Asia and



across the Indian Ocean. For Tokyo, it meant that the very considerable burdens of national defense had been subcontracted, at a manageable cost, to the Americans.

The other major component of Yoshida's strategy followed logically. National economic revival required accessible markets and resources outside the country. Japan's land area, population, and natural endowments were far too limited to even entertain notions of economic autarky. The overriding requirement for external markets and resources (including workers) was the engine behind Japan's seizure of Manchuria in 1931. The same logic had propelled the creation of a "Co-prosperity Sphere" in Southeast Asia.

With the military instrument off the table, Yoshida turned to civilian alternatives—the erstwhile "samurai with briefcases." They were the offshore investors, manufacturers, and traders—the overseas arm of Japan, Inc. Their efforts were closely coordinated with government programs offering aid (monetary and advisory) to targets of Japan's economic attention, notably China and Southeast Asia. The net result was a remarkably well coordinated outreach into Southeast Asia featuring Japanese banks, trading companies, and manufacturers working closely with government agencies including the Official Development Assistance agency, JETRO, and Foreign Ministry diplomats. Although no one put it this way, it was all dedicated to achieving the original economic objectives of the Co-Proprosperity Sphere by nonmilitary means. For a while in the 1990s, a new metaphor captured the imagination of Japanese officials and businessmen—"the flying geese." Japan would guide Southeast Asia to a better future like geese flying in V formation behind a leader.

It was crucially important that Japan found in

Southeast Asia a far more hospitable political climate than it did with its neighbors, Korea and China. In both of the latter, publics harbored bitter memories of Japan's military occupation and quasi-colonization. Governments in Beijing and Seoul (and Pyongyang) often found it convenient to stir the embers of popular anger. It meant that Japan was always treading on thin ice—even as it offered assistance and needed investments.

There was no comparable minefield of public suspicion or official manipulation in Southeast Asia. This was particularly striking in cases where Japanese rule was brutally repressive, notably the Philippines and Singapore. In the former, the Japanese army faced prolonged armed resistance and the latter, with its ethnic Chinese population, became a proxy war for Japan's bloody campaign in China. In Indonesia and Burma, Japanese occupation meant the removal of unpopular colonial regimes. With manpower stretched thin, Japanese military authorities turned to promising local youth who could be trained and empowered as agents of Japanese rule. In Indonesia, Sukarno and Suharto were among those so selected. Something similar happened in Burma with Aung San and his "Thirty Comrades." The leaders of the first independent postcolonial governments in Jakarta and Rangoon emerged from the ranks of Japan's trainees. Not surprisingly, those new leaders harbored little ill will toward Tokyo. In Vietnam, too, Japan's conquest was, more than anything else, a blow against French colonial rule.

These attitudes carried through the postwar and Cold War years up to the present. I recall a conversation with a prominent journalist in the Philippines who commented that he was regularly invited to China for conferences and symposia. Invariably, his Chinese hosts would press him to agree that they shared a common hatred for Japan as a result of wartime trauma. The journalist would



reply, “No, the Philippines suffered greatly during the war, but this is all in the past. We have no ill-will toward Japan today.” It was both a political judgment and a cultural trait.

There was good reason for postwar Southeast Asia to welcome Japan. Most of the new governments were struggling. They needed everything—investments in factories that would employ large youthful populations, help in creating government bureaucracies and health care systems, and training in modern agricultural methods, as well as markets for their primary products. Tokyo offered all of these and it did so without the political baggage that often came with U.S. assistance or with the historical memories that came with aid from a former colonial ruler. U.S. military bases hosted by Japan were critical to the American war effort in Korea and Indochina, but Japan studiously avoided any formal military participation thanks to a constitution that forbade it. For Southeast Asians, Japan was all about economics and nothing else—and that was just fine.

The Yoshida strategy proved remarkably durable and essentially unchanged for over fifty years. In 1977, Prime Minister Fukuda concluded a trip through Southeast Asia with a speech in Manila where he restated the strategy with language that came to be known as the “Fukuda Doctrine.”

“Throughout the world’s history, great economic powers have always been great military powers as well . . . We have not chosen to take the path to great military power . . . A Japan which does not pose any threat to its neighbor countries, either in a military way or in any other way whatever, can only be viewed as a stabilizing force in the world,”

The strategy, whether articulated by Yoshida or

Fukuda, rested on the proposition that a non-militarized Japan offering mutually beneficial economic ties could build friendly relations with its Asian neighbors, including China. The People’s Republic of China emerged from the Mao years and the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution in desperate shape economically. Japan mounted a large ODA effort in China in parallel with huge investments by Japanese corporations that built factories utilizing China’s seemingly inexhaustible pool of willing and capable workers. The hope and expectation in Tokyo was that Japan’s evident goodwill would be reciprocated by an appreciative Beijing. Therefore, it came as a great shock when Chinese citizens and officials—in the late 1990s and after—began to resurrect and express deep anger over Japan’s wartime role from many years before. The shock was two-fold; it was about both power and attitude. As seen from Tokyo, China was big, it was next door; it was no longer weak, it was strong and getting stronger; and it was not friendly—far from it.

From a strategic standpoint, the regional security context for Japan had changed and key assumptions underpinning the Yoshida strategy no longer pertained. Japan urgently needed a new security strategy—and Southeast Asia would be a key, essential element. However, a new strategic orientation would not come easily and would require a fundamental break with entrenched modes of thought—including wishful thinking about China.

I visited Japan in 2005 with an opportunity to interview selected officials in the Japanese Self Defense Force (JSDF) and Foreign Ministry. In retrospect, two specific moments stand out. During a conversation with a senior civilian official at JSDF headquarters, I used the phrase “strategic thinking.” He stopped me, leaned back with his eyes toward the ceiling and said, “Ah, strategic



thinking; it's rarer than diamonds in Tokyo!" A second such instance occurred in a conversation at the Foreign Ministry with the chief of the China Division. During that exchange he commented:

"I have been known in this Ministry as someone sympathetic toward China. But, recently, an event altered my entire perspective. China sent a navy intelligence collection ship very close to Japan's territorial waters and then circumnavigated the entire Japanese archipelago. Then it repeated that circuit a second time. I saw this as a calculated expression of contempt and hostility. It changed my view of China."

The logic of Japan's situation in the first decade of the 21st century seemed two-fold. First, confronted with a rising, unfriendly China, Japan should redouble its commitment to the U.S. alliance. Second, and equally critical, Tokyo must cast off its pacifist restraints so it can mount an effective defense of its own vital interests—both in partnership with America and, when need be, alone.

It would clearly require a very strong and determined Prime Minister to fundamentally recast Japan's security strategy beyond Yoshida and Fukuda. Abe Shinzo became Prime Minister for the second time in December 2012—this time with a strong electoral mandate. Abe is a great rarity among Japanese politicians: he is a true strategic thinker. In word and action he made clear that he saw Japan's security as seriously threatened—requiring, in response, a strengthened alliance with the United States and, as a necessary corollary, a Japan capable of defending itself and serving as an effective, equal partner in the military alliance. Abe did not shrink from one logical conclusion: Article 9 of the constitution should be amended or abolished so

Japan could become a "normal country." When it became clear that the Japanese public simply would not support an amendment, the Abe government resorted to a familiar work-around—a "reinterpretation" of Article 9.

There is another critical component of Abe's strategy—Southeast Asia. As previously noted, Japan's economy requires markets, sites for offshore investment (manufacturing and services), sources of critical raw materials, and a good supply of affordable labor. Southeast Asia could supply all of these. Furthermore, the sea lanes that carry vital supplies of oil from the Middle East traverse Southeast Asia. As China becomes increasingly problematic for Japanese investors and traders, Southeast Asia looms larger as an alternative. Beyond the tangible economic benefits, Southeast Asia provides something else—a welcome. Relations with immediate neighbors—China, South and North Korea, and the Soviet Union/Russia—often toggled difficult and very difficult. Japan needs friends—Asian friends. Tokyo found them in Manila, Jakarta, Kuala Lumpur, Rangoon/Nyapidadaw, Bangkok, Singapore, and Hanoi. In a 2018 survey of elite opinion in Southeast Asia, Japan earned the top ranking with 65.7% "trust" whereas China was last with 19.6%.

Abe made his strategic perspectives and priorities clear almost immediately upon assuming office. His first foreign trip was not to Washington or Beijing, it was to the ten capital cities of the member states in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). In a keynote address at the 2014 Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore, Abe pledged that "Japan will offer its utmost support for efforts by ASEAN member countries to ensure the security of the seas and skies and rigorously maintain freedom of navigation and overflight." It is hard to imagine any of Abe's near-



term predecessors making such a statement. In 2016, he presented the first formulation of a strategic vision of a “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” (FOIP) underpinned by a regional “Rules-Based Order” (RBO) that would serve the economic and security interests of the entire international community. These formulations quickly became common currency in security deliberations among Washington, Canberra, New Delhi and Tokyo. All of this was animated by a growing consensus that China posed a real and rapidly growing threat to the vital interests of all.

The China challenge had two major components: (1) The drive to convert the South China Sea from an international maritime commons into a sovereign Chinese lake, and (2) Beijing’s “Belt and Road Initiative” (BRI) using massive state subsidized infrastructure investments to penetrate Southeast Asian economies resulting in dependence on and subservience to China. At stake was whether Southeast Asia would remain a regional collection of genuinely independent, autonomous actors or whether the region would take policy direction from China and become a de facto economic extension of southern China.

No country had a greater stake in the outcome of this new strategic contest than did Japan, and the policies of the Abe government reflected that fact. One of Abe’s first actions was to invite ASEAN leaders to Tokyo for a Commemorative Summit in December 2013. Japan used the event to roll out a two-year, two trillion yen ODA package that included monies for “quality infrastructure,” maritime patrol ships, and other commitments that came to include more varied and numerous Japanese coast guard and naval cooperation missions in Southeast Asia. Much of this was designed to increase local support and capacity for preserving the security of the sea lanes. This overriding concern led Tokyo to champion

quadrilateral maritime security cooperation among the United States, Australia, India, and Japan. The rationale was spelled out in Japan’s 2016 Defense White Paper, which cited China’s attempts to rewrite the rules for maritime Asia by:

“Changing the status quo by coercion based on its own assertions incompatible with the existing order of international law. These actions include dangerous acts that could cause unintended consequences. China is poised to fulfill its unilateral demands without compromise.”

In 2015, the Japanese Diet approved Abe’s proposed bill reinterpreting the constitution to permit the JSDF to use military force in cooperation with allies if necessary to defend Japan’s vital security interests—presumably including the sea lanes through Southeast Asia. New responsibilities required new capabilities including helicopter carriers converted to carry F35 advanced fighter jets.

With a strategy in place along with new legal authorities, Tokyo initiated a growing list of joint defense activities with allies and Southeast Asian partners. In 2015, for example, Japan joined India and the United States as a permanent partner in the annual Malabar naval war game. The 2019 iteration was hosted by Japan and involved surface ships, aircraft, and submarines in anti-submarine warfare exercises. In 2018, Japan initiated an annual SDF Indo-Southeast Asian Deployment (ISEAD) with a helicopter carrier accompanied by destroyers and a submarine to conduct joint exercises with partner naval forces that have included Indonesia, Singapore, the Philippines, Australia, the United States, France, India, and Brunei—plus port calls in Malaysia and Vietnam. Japan moved to counter China’s use of paramilitary fishing fleets and armed coast guard vessels by altering its assistance programs in



Southeast Asia to include modern patrol ships and dual use domain awareness equipment. Other initiatives involved coast guard and military training for Southeast Asian counterparts—to include joint exercises and joint patrols.

Japan's strategy also contains a critical economic component that can be understood as a counter to China's BRI. The centerpiece is a "quality infrastructure initiative" that Abe announced in 2015—a \$110 billion package to support infrastructure projects in cooperation with the Asian Development Bank that are high quality, sustainable, and free of corrupt practices and debt traps. Interestingly, despite the huge prominence of China's BRI, as of 2019, Japan's infrastructure projects in Southeast Asia were valued as \$321.8 billion compared to China's \$225.3 billion. As a trading partner with Japan, Southeast Asia ranks a close third behind China and NAFTA. But more Japanese firms, more Japanese expatriates, and more Japanese tourists are in Southeast Asia than in China—and the trend lines point in Southeast Asia's direction. Tokyo rescued the Trans Pacific Partnership initiative when the Trump administration abandoned it and now leads the world's third largest trade bloc—one that includes Singapore, Malaysia, Vietnam and Brunei.

It all adds up to a remarkable transformation over 75 years. Strategic thinking is no longer "as scarce as diamonds in Tokyo" and that strategy is driven by the imperatives of an increasingly challenging regional reality that continues to be impacted by the legacy of the Pacific War.

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