The Pragmatic Japanese

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Most neighborhoods in suburban America are densely packed affairs with houses standing perhaps as little as twenty feet apart. The contractors who build them try to use the space as efficiently as possible, building as many houses per acre as the home-buying public can bear. A single house in such a subdivision is likely to be closely flanked by two very similar homes, and another house stands just beyond the back fence. In the front, a solid row of houses lines the other side of the street, more distant but contributing to the sense of closeness.

In its own way, the earth has neighborhoods too, and some are more densely packed than others. The nations that inhabit these areas of the planet must spend more time thinking about their borders and their neighbors' reactions than others who have more elbow room. They must either make peace and cooperation treaties with their neighbors or prepare for almost constant border skirmishes or all-out war.

Japan may not seem to be surrounded by competing nations. After all, it lies in the western Pacific Ocean, encompassed by water. But modern technology—particularly jet engines and guided missiles—makes Seoul, South Korea, a close neighbor at just 720 miles away (and their southern extremities lie even closer, less than 100 miles). Pyongyang, North Korea, is just 800 miles from Tokyo. China's capital, Beijing, lies just 1,300 miles to the west, and Taipei, Taiwan, is a similar distance to the southwest. Vladivostok, Russia, is closer than all of them, just 660 miles to the northwest!

Since the end of World War II, Japan's staunchest ally has been none of these near nations but the United States on the other side of the Pacific. America's military strength, especially its deep-water navy, allowed Japan the peace and prosperity to rebuild both its cities and its economy so that by the early 1970s, the Land of the Rising Sun had once again become a major

economic power in Asia and the Pacific region. Soon, it was also flexing political muscle worldwide and joining the conferences of the planet's most significant commercial players.

Yet, Japan did not seek to restore its military might. Instead, it constrained itself constitutionally to defensive armaments only, capping its military spending to around 1% of its gross domestic product. It outsourced its security and a great part of its foreign policy to the U.S. With few ripples, the arrangement worked well for upwards of six decades.

However, the situation has changed. Japan's near neighbors, particularly China, have not remained static, presenting Tokyo with new economic and political challenges. Beijing's bellicosity is most concerning, upgrading its naval and air capabilities to overwhelm U.S. allies in the region, threatening Taiwan, and reviving its claims on the Japanese-controlled Senkaku Islands. The rhetoric from Chinese leaders leaves little doubt that they are itching to repay Japan for Imperial Era atrocities.

At the same time, the Japanese leadership grows increasingly uneasy about the reliability of their chief ally and protector, the United States. The last two presidents have done little to assuage their fears. Following his "America First" policy, President Donald Trump played economic hardball by withdrawing from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), a move intended to check China's growing dominance, but which also undermined Japan's economy.

Joe Biden has done little to improve matters other than to restore a more normal tone to the relationship. His administration has not worked out a new trade deal for its Pacific partners, nor has it made any significant contribution to balancing China's military dominance of the region. These failures of initiative—and the bad taste of America's botched withdrawal from Afghanistan—leave Japan in an uncomfortable position.

Its leadership is not sitting on its hands. In 2016, then-Prime Minister Shinzo Abe began pushing the idea of a "free and open Indo-Pacific," reviving the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (called the "Quad") with the U.S., India, and

Australia. In 2018, it reinvigorated the TPP with its own, smaller version and signed a major trade deal with the European Union to limit its reliance on Chinese merchandise and supply chain.

As previous administrations had also done, it continued loosening the constitutional constraints on its military, allowing it to project power farther abroad. For instance, Japanese leaders have hinted that, should China assault Taiwan, its military would join U.S. forces in the regional war that would surely follow. Already, it is installing anti-ship missiles on the Ryukyu Islands, which almost reach Taiwan far to the south. It also has plans to employ submarines to deny China access to the open Pacific if war erupts.

For its part, China is watching Japanese policy closely and with rising anger, warning that Japan is once again becoming militaristic and aggressive. A Chinese propaganda piece even threatened to wage nuclear war on its islands if it interfered with its handling of Taiwan. Rather than warning Japan off, its hyperbolic reaction could backfire, spurring Tokyo to hasten its plans to take a more significant role, even militarily, in the region.

This pragmatic approach to foreign policy is typical for Japan. It has fundamentally overhauled its stance at least three times in the last two centuries: when, in the 1850s, Western powers compelled it to transform into a modern nation; when it adopted a policy of militaristic expansion during the Great Depression, leading to WWII; and when it renounced its aggression after suffering catastrophic defeat by the Allies. At this pivotal point in history, a fourth change of direction will certainly align with Japanese self-interest.

Using Jerusalem as an example, Lamentations 1:2 warns Israelite nations that ally themselves with foreign powers: “. . . among all her lovers [allies] she has none to comfort her. All her friends have dealt treacherously with her; they have become her enemies.” In short, allies will cut and run when a nation shows weakness.

We cannot expect old alliances to hold when circumstances on the ground change because nations will always follow their self-interests. Japan’s recent history demonstrates that it will turn on a dime to put itself in the most advantageous position. If America continues to retreat from its premier

position on the world stage, Japan—and others of its allies—may just choose to find new friends elsewhere.