
“What is happening in Japan is not its re-Asianization but Japan’s ‘reassociation’ with Asia at the economic, security, and cultural/societal levels. For most of its modern history, Japan has not been part of Asia. In fact, the re-Asianization of Japan is an oxymoron.”

Distant Neighbors? Japan and Asia

BY TAKASHI INOGUCHI

Both in and outside Japan, it has become fashionable to argue that Japan is in the process of re-Asianization. This is part of a larger argument that not only Japan but all of Asia is asserting an Asian identity in economic affairs, security arrangements, and social and cultural values.¹

This argument rests on three lines of evidence. First, Asia’s rapid and steady economic development has led to the expansion of intraregional economic transactions—hence, the re-Asianization of Asia is under way economically. Second, in reaction to the scaled-down American military presence in Asia (which is part of the global reduction in United States military forces), there have been some attempts to indigenize security arrangements in Asia, albeit within a broader framework of an American security hegemony. Third, economic development has helped the region regain its self-confidence, which has manifested itself in assertions of Asian cultural traditions and values. Singapore’s trumpeting of Asian values, Japan’s highlighting of the Japanese economic model, and Malaysian and North and South Korean nationalism are often mentioned as examples.²

While Asia’s re-Asianization has been taking place for years, Japan has had a very ambivalent role in the process. What is happening in Japan is not its re-Asianization but Japan’s “reassociation” with Asia at the economic, security, and cultural/societal levels. For most of its modern history, Japan has not been part of Asia.

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¹See for example Yoichi Funabashi, “The Asianization of Asia,” *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 72, no. 5 (November/December 1993).

²See Kishore Mahbubani, “The Pacific Way,” *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 74, no. 1 (January/February 1995).

In fact, the re-Asianization of Japan is an oxymoron. This can be seen in the phrase “Japan and Asia,” which is as accepted as “Britain and Europe.” “Japan in Asia,” however, sounds like the phrase “Britain in Europe.”

JAPAN’S SECURITY RELATIONSHIP WITH ASIA

Japan’s reassociation with Asia can be discerned in its widening security, economic, and cultural links with the continent.

United States security requirements have dominated Japan’s security relationship with Asia. Born out of Japan’s defeat by the United States in World War II, the Japan–United States security treaty ceded United States security hegemony over Japan and the surrounding region at the end of the American military occupation of Japan in 1952. Since the cold war between the United States and the Soviet Union had already flared up in the late 1940s, it was natural for the United States and Japan to extend their victor-vanquished security relationship once the occupation ended.

The basis of Japan’s security relationship with Asia was thus overshadowed by American cold war logic. Hence, although Japan normalized diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union in 1956, a peace treaty did not follow. Similarly, Japan’s normalization of relations with China in 1972 took place only after the United States had done so in 1971. Diplomatic normalization with Vietnam became possible only after the United States withdrew from Vietnam in 1973. And Japan and North Korea still have not normalized relations.

Diplomatic relations with South Korea also illustrate this cold war logic at work. The fact that Japan and South Korea, two United States allies in East Asia, were at odds with each other between 1948 and 1965 (when relations were normalized) impeded the establishment of a more effective United States–led security hegemony in the region. Security ties between the two countries, however, were more a function of United States security strategy than Japanese–South Korean security concerns.

Except for its ties with South Korea, Japan did not