

Comment on “US and East Asian Security under the Obama Presidency: A Japanese Perspective”

Kishore MAHBUBANI†

Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy

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Soeya (2009) has written an excellent paper that provides a Japanese perspective on US and East Asian security. I agree with some of his key points. Firstly, the most important strategic relationship in East Asia has been and will continue to be the one between the USA and China. Secondly, China is a truly independent strategic player, Japan is not. Thirdly, the time has come for Japan to look for new strategic approaches.

It is a great mystery why China has emerged as a truly independent strategic player while Japan has not. From the Meiji Restoration of 1868 right up to Deng Xiaoping’s launch of the Four Modernizations in 1978, Japan has performed better than China. How did the more successful nation end up as the less successful nation in the geopolitical arena?

As far back as 1992, I alerted Japan in a Foreign Policy article entitled “Japan Adrift” that with the end of the Cold War, Japan should explore new strategic options. I wrote that Japan would gain little strategically by functioning like the Tonto to the American Lone Ranger. “Tontos” do not get respect as strategic players, even from the Lone Ranger that they support. Indeed, at the end of the Cold War, Japan received two major insults from the USA. Firstly, the then Secretary of State James Baker called for the creation of a new community from Vancouver to Vladivostok. The only major country excluded from this community was America’s most loyal ally – Japan. Secondly, Japan paid \$13 billion to support the first Iraq War in 1991. At the end of the war, Japan was not seriously thanked.

Despite these geopolitical shocks, Japan has never considered new strategic approaches. Instead, the new thinking comes from Washington, DC. As Professor Soeya mentions, the Bush administration suggested “a US–Japan alliance more closely modeled on the US–UK relationship.” This suggestion is problematic. The more the British government has behaved as America’s Tonto, the less respect it has obtained internationally. The time has come for Japan to stop behaving like a Tonto and to start thinking of developing a truly independent foreign policy. This does not mean the end of the USA–Japan alliance. Instead, Japan could add much value to this alliance by becoming an independent strategic player.

†Correspondence: Kishore Mahbubani, Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, National University of Singapore, 469C Bukit Timah Road, Singapore 259772. Email: kishore.mahbubani@mahbubani.net

Secondly, Professor Soeya has suggested some new approaches for Japan. He suggests, “there is a rationale for Japan–South Korea–Australia minilateralism as a future possibility.” He does this assuming that Japan, like South Korea and Australia, will become a middle power. Actually, Japan still has the potential to remain a major power. Goldman Sachs predicts that by 2050, the four largest economies will be China, India, USA, and Japan (Wilson & Purushothaman, 2003). Hence, Japan will remain in the major league for a long time. Both South Korea and Australia feel deeply insecure about their future as they have existential security challenges: North Korea for South Korea and a western island left behind in a resurgent Asia for Australia. Hence, Japan–South Korea–Australia is the wrong strategic triangle for Japan.

The right strategic triangle for Japan to consider is the Japan–Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN)–India strategic triangle. The biggest puzzle of Soeya’s paper is that he only mentions India in the context of the USA–China relations, not as a major emerging power in its own right. This lack of attention to India suggests that Japan has still not engaged in new strategic thinking.

ASEAN remains the region that provides Japan its greatest strategic opportunity. The biggest weakness in the Japanese strategic thinking is the failure to understand the geopolitical value of ASEAN. In my latest book (Mahbubani, 2008, 2010), I have explained why the European Union is an economic superpower and a diplomatic minipower while ASEAN is an economic minipower and a diplomatic superpower. Few Japanese have absorbed this paradoxical truth.

This explains why Japanese diplomacy has failed in ASEAN. The ASEAN–Japan relationship has a longer and deeper history than the ASEAN–China relationship. Yet “in a bolt from the blue” (to quote a Gaimusho official), China, instead of Japan, proposed a free trade agreement with ASEAN.

The fundamental point I would like to put across is that the time has come for Japan to engage in totally new strategic thinking. We are entering a new era of world history marked by the end of Western domination (but not the end of the West) and the return of Asia. Yet Japan, which has tried very hard to become a member of the Western club since the Meiji restoration, has never considered a fundamental change of course. Japanese strategic thinkers need to suggest radical new approaches. I hope that Professor Soeya’s paper will encourage more Japanese to engage in new strategic thinking.

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