

May 17, 2007

**BOOKS**

**DOW JONES REPRINTS**

---

## **Pursuing Power -- and Trying to Keep It**

By **EMILY PARKER**

May 17, 2007

The day after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, the shockwaves through Washington were echoed in the words of one New York congressman: *The Japanese have gone stark, raving mad.*

Actually, they had not. The seemingly irrational military strike was in keeping with a long tradition of Japan's going to extreme lengths to pursue power and prestige. Pearl Harbor is just a particularly catastrophic example of America's failure to read Tokyo's intentions. Long before Dec. 7, 1941, and in the decades since, Japan has demonstrated its capacity to stun the world.

Kenneth Pyle, a professor at the University of Washington, is hardly predicting another Pearl Harbor. But the message of his "**Rising Japan**" is clear: Don't be fooled by appearances. Japan may seem to be sitting on the sidelines and watching China's rise as a formidable Asian power, but U.S. policy makers would be unwise to assume that this passivity will continue.

Japan has been a relatively docile global citizen since World War II, largely because of a postwar constitution, written by the victors, that shackles its military. In the modern era, many view Japan as a tradition-bound country where change is glacial and pacifism deeply rooted. But looks can be deceiving. Mr. Pyle shows how, through much of its history, the country has shown a startling willingness to jettison tradition and start anew.

"Japan's role in the international system has not been driven by great transcendent ideals or universal principles," Mr. Pyle writes. Instead, its behavior "has been marked by its pragmatic, often opportunistic pursuit of power."

The Meiji Restoration is a case in point. Fed up with economic backwardness and an inferior global status, Japan in a matter of decades re-fashioned itself, taking cues from the West. The young samurai who seized power in 1868 "were remorseless in their readiness to sacrifice Japan's own time-honored institutions to the demands of foreign policy," Mr. Pyle writes. The Meiji leaders created the most centralized state in the nation's history, imported thousands of advisers and adopted European legal codes.

In the 1930s, Japan saw another opportunity. "Other powers were forming closed regional spheres, the international system was collapsing, and fascism seemed to be the wave of the future," Mr. Pyle notes. The Japanese leaders "did not want to miss the bus." Such conditions may have prompted Japan to invade Manchuria in 1931 and then launch a wider war with China in 1937.

Japan's defeat in World War II marked the end of more than a decade of aggression. But the seeming meekness that followed is easy to misinterpret. It was widely thought to express "the trauma of defeat, the nuclear allergy, and a deeply divided public." What was rarely recognized was that "Japanese realism was as strong as ever. It was simply being exercised in a different fashion," Mr. Pyle argues. Or, to put it more bluntly: "Pacifism" allowed Japan's leaders to focus on economic growth, leaving the defense burden to the U.S.

Today, external factors may once again drive Japan to change its ways. Threats from North Korea, for example, may spur Japan to revise its constitution so that it can take a more robust military posture. Or maybe, the pursuit of status will drive change. Mr. Pyle describes how the economic realism behind Japan's passive defense role has come at the cost of self-respect and national pride.

For decades the Japanese may have seemed content to focus on the economy -- with wildly varying degrees of success -- but signs of discontent have not been hard to find. Perhaps the most theatrical example came in 1970, when the novelist Yukio Mishima "drew the nation's attention to the loss of its samurai spirit," as Mr. Pyle puts it, by going to the Self-Defense Forces headquarters and committing hara-kiri, or ritual suicide. "A deferential stance," Mr. Pyle contends, "was never easy for a proud and spirited people."

If Mr. Pyle is right and Japan is on the rise, then what about China? Its growing power and importance are widely taken for granted. But in "**China: Fragile Superpower**" Susan Shirk argues that China's Communist leaders are a lot more insecure than they let on.

Ms. Shirk, a former deputy assistant secretary of state (1997-2000) responsible for U.S. relations with China, says that Chinese leaders are haunted by a sense of impending doom. And with good reason: The wounds of Tiananmen Square have never fully healed. "In 1989 the Communist dynasty almost ended in its fortieth year," Ms. Shirk reminds us. "For more than six weeks, millions of students demonstrated for democracy in Beijing's Tiananmen Square and 132 other cities in every Chinese province. The Communist Party split over how to deal with the demonstrations. And the People's Republic just barely survived."

The specter of public unrest still spooks Beijing. Ms. Shirk lists a host of domestic threats, such as uprisings by Chinese peasants who are frustrated with burdens like high local taxes and land seizures. Given that farmers make up 60% of the population, Ms. Shirk writes, they "certainly would gain from electoral democracy."

Another potential source of trouble is Chinese nationalism, bubbling up from below. The Communist Party, in constant fear of mass protests, now finds itself hampered by a population that may be more aggressively nationalistic than the government itself. Of course, the party

fueled such nationalism for years by focusing the attention of China's media and schools on inflammatory subjects, such as Japan's wartime brutality.

Beijing may especially regret spending so much time propagandizing about the importance of Taiwan. Chinese textbooks have insisted that "the 'century of humiliation' will not end until China is strong enough to achieve reunification," Ms. Shirk notes. But such a claim puts the party in an impossible position. It can't afford a war over Taiwan, which the U.S. might feel compelled to defend; but it cannot appear to allow Taiwan to shatter the status quo by formally declaring independence. "It is universally believed in China," Ms. Shirk writes, that the party "would fall if it allowed Taiwan to become independent without putting up a fight."

Thus Beijing's insecurities should be the real concern for U.S. policy makers, not its "rise." And the stakes are high: Ms. Shirk even goes so far as to claim that "preventing war with China is one of the most difficult foreign policy challenges our country faces." She argues that America should avoid overreacting to China's economic rise with protectionism; nor should it go about "inflaming [Chinese] nationalist public opinion by public hectoring or chest thumping." Such actions might prompt Beijing -- counterproductively -- to try to look tough on America.

We still have no clear vision of what a world with a strong Japan *and* a powerful China would be like. What we do know is that they are both proud nations that demand to be taken seriously on the world stage. They pose similar challenges to Washington as well. Ms. Shirk writes that, after many years of sitting on the sidelines, "the Chinese leaders and public crave respect and approval from the world community, especially from the United States." Hmm, sounds a bit like Japan.

***Ms. Parker is assistant editorial features editor at The Wall Street Journal.***