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The Rocky Marriage: Japan and America in War and Peace, as Observed by Akira Iriye

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Akira Iriye, *Pacific Estrangement: Japanese and American Expansion, 1897–1911* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1972), 290 pp.; Akira Iriye, *Power and Culture: The Japanese-American War, 1941–1945* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1981), 304 pp.

FOR OVER FORTY YEARS, UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO HISTORIAN Akira Iriye has written some of the most perceptive, penetrating contributions to the literature on the Japanese-American relationship from the end of the 19th century until the postwar era. His early *Across the Pacific* (1967) suggests that, despite occasional conflict, the long-term relationship has been sounder than the love-hate Sino-American match. His *Power and Culture* (1981) presents World War II in the Pacific as an aberration in this long-term U.S.-Japan bond, and shows how Japanese and American leaders followed parallel ideologies and policies, even as their military forces battled the length of Asia and the Pacific. In between was *Pacific Estrangement* (1972), an analysis of fourteen formative years for the relationship at the turn of the century, 1897 to 1911, or the period from President McKinley's inauguration to shortly before the death of the Meiji Emperor. Iriye believes that during this brief time of interaction, a relatively benign expansionist competition between the two countries erupted into outright hostility and potential for armed conflict. The book is thus a study of how two expansionist policies developed and came into conflict.

Iriye begins by noting two differences between his work and other studies of the period. First, he intends to focus more on the Japanese and American expansionist thought than on the clash of Japanese and Western interests in China, and second, he wants to show how Japanese imperialistic thought ran parallel to that

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of Western countries. Through most of the 19th century, he asserts, the U.S. followed a primarily expansionist policy, as opposed to an imperialistic one. Americans pursued several avenues of expansion from the founding to the end of that century, including seizure of territory until mid-century, peaceful economic penetration of overseas areas after the Civil War, missionary activity in China, and non-violent acquisition of foreign territory toward the close of the century. Overall, Americans operated with a sense of mission based on "liberal exceptionalism," that is, Americans saw themselves as the most progressive people in the world, and it was their duty to civilize the world (p. 5). Such a view precluded acceptance of any sort of expansionism on the part of non-Western peoples, especially in the form of Chinese labor sent to the West Coast to work on the railroads and in mining.

Americans' early impressions of Japan envisioned the latter as the actualization of America's liberal principles, a heathen nation developing by imitating the U.S. However, expansionist thinking began to stir among Japanese elites just as America embraced the Japanese people. Security worries over the nearby Korean peninsula and revision of the unequal treaties forced on Japan by the Western powers combined with concern over high population growth and admiration of Western wealth and power to stimulate desire to expand beyond the home islands. Iriye says early Japanese expansion was entirely peaceful, taking the form of "economic strengthening through trade and emigration" (p. 20), and he implies there was never a direct link between this essentially private expansion and government policy. Japanese merely saw U.S. territories as "spheres for peaceful, economic activity" (p. 151). In fact, three forms of expansion competed for ascendancy during the first half of the Meiji Era: 1) "non-nationalistic universalism," or development of Japan as a liberal, peace-loving country, 2) "nationalistic particularism," or aggressive acquisition of territory abroad, especially on the Asian mainland, and 3) "non-aggressive nationalism" embodied in economic development and strengthening of national defense (pp. 23–25). All three envisioned some sort of expansion abroad, but none yet dominated the picture.

Both countries transformed themselves from expansionists to imperialists in the critical decade of the 1890s, contends Iriye. American and European thought converged, especially in writings on the unity and mission of Western civilization and "cultural particularism in the service of nationalistic expansion" (p. 32). It was only at the end of the decade that such thinking became strong enough to influence U.S. foreign policy behavior, just as Japanese thinking turned to more forceful expansion to the south. Iriye notes striking similarities in imperialistic thought on the eves of Japan's Sino-Japanese War and America's Spanish-American War. Japanese expansionist dreams received double defeats in American annexation of Hawaii and assumption of colonial rule in the Philippines, and this began to turn Japan toward more aggressive use of power on the continent.

Iriye insists that the U.S. was not an imperialist power in China, despite its abortive plans to seize a naval base on the China coast and its participation in suppression of the Boxer Rebellion in 1900. Secretary of State John Hay's celebrated Open Door policy was only a "codification of the peaceful, liberal expansionist strain in American foreign affairs" (p. 66), both idealistic and economic expansionist in nature. Having acquired an empire, American writers shifted from universalist promotion of imperialism to concentration on narrow nationalistic and security concerns, such as protecting U.S. possessions in the Pacific. By 1904, the Japanese became preoccupied with its conflict with Russia over Korea, which soon culminated in their victory in the Russo-Japanese War. Manchuria was to remain the focus of both economic and military expansion aims, and Japanese writers began reflecting a sense of mission beyond Manchuria as muscular as any missionary sentiments voiced in America. Even so, Japanese expansionist thought still evidenced a great deal of diversity. Meanwhile, peaceful emigration to Hawaii and California continued to outstrip movement to the new Japanese possessions of Taiwan and Korea.

This steady Japanese migration to American territory resulted in the first Japanese-American crisis. Racism toward Japanese immigrants erupted during 1906 and 1907 in San Francisco, where the school board segregated students, and a number of Japanese-owned businesses were attacked. Japanese leaders felt it prudent to sacrifice emigration to America to preserve overall relations with the U.S. by acquiesing in a series of compromises, but Japanese writers and public opinion were deeply offended by the incident. The immigration imbroglio forced writers such as Kayahara Kazan to drop their previous assumptions that America and Japan were the world's most advanced countries and could cooperate in Asia (pp. 138–43). Japanese expansionists finally turned away from the notion of peaceful multidirectional expansion and thenceforth concentrated almost exclusively on East Asia. Overall, concludes Iriye, Japanese were more dismayed and hurt than angered with a nation they had considered a friend.

Many Americans, by contrast, saw the immigration crisis as an indication of Japanese-American incompatibility and a portent of future war with Japan. Iriye takes President Theodore Roosevelt's thinking as typical: while he deplored discrimination and violence, he felt that the white and yellow races could not live together. Roosevelt's attitude and quiet handling of the matter seems to have had widespread support, but Secretary of State Elihu Root spoke for a large segment of opinion which linked Japanese emigration with Japanese aggressiveness abroad. Many feared imminent war with Japan, while the Army put itself on the lookout for Japanese spies and the Navy began drawing up strategy against Japan in the event of war. As tempers died down, many American writers felt the only way to maintain peaceful relations with Japan was to divert her imperial designs from the Pacific to the Asian continent.

During the Taft years, events in China came to dominate U.S. attitudes toware Japan. American policy embraced the beleagured Chinese in the face of

Japan's determination to pursue continental expansion. However, says Iriye, the basis for Sino-American cooperation was slender at best, whereas the actual rivalry between Japan and the U.S. in China was "minimal." So, China inevitably became the prime arena for confrontation of the two countries' expansion aims. For America, China "embodied the ultimate in the unrealized goals of universalistic expansion," that is, America had a mission to save and remake China. For Japan, though, expansion to China was not merely an extension of Japanese power but became "a forced alternative to expansion eastward across the Pacific" (p. 227). The Taft administration's "economic-moralistic" approach, moreover, set the stage for the Wilsonian yearning for a new non-imperialistic order in Asia. By 1911, neither country would seriously consider cooperation with the other in Asia.

Iriye's study is a lively complement to the usual straightforward diplomatic rendering of this period of U.S. foreign policy. Through extensive use of print editorials, popular novels, and writings on international relations, economics, and cultural affairs, taken almost equally from both countries, he provides needed intellectual context to the development of Japanese-American relations. His is perhaps the first book that lets one see the trends of thought on the Japanese side of the equation, especially among Japanese military strategists and diplomats. Iriye also carefully weaves a variety of secondary sources into his analysis.

Iriye's discussion of the evolution from peaceful expansion to aggressive imperialism in both countries is an original approach to the period, and his thesis of the interaction of the two expansionisms is an antidote to traditional characterizations of America as sincere, if sometimes inept, and Japan as the rising menace of the East. His analysis of the Open Door policy as a summation of the American approach amplifies a point made in *Across the Pacific*. He bravely takes on the racial dimensions of the immigration dispute; from Shimoda to Portsmouth, to Pearl Harbor, and on to today's trade disputes, the Japanese-American relationship has always contained a subtext of racial and cultural conflict. His focus on intellectual currents on both sides of the Pacific brings the cultural and psychological aspects of foreign policy to the forefront of foreign policy analysis.

A groundbreaking work, Iriye's book nonetheless contains a few flaws. First, its heavy use of Japanese sources unfortunately makes it a bit unbalanced in places. One learns a great deal more about Japanese thinking than American. This may be a needed correction to past scholarship on the subject, but does not help the book stand on its own. Second, Iriye concentrates too much on writers. He seldom shows explicitly how their opinions affected policymaking in either country, especially on the Japanese side. Aside from such important theorists as Mahan, one often does not know how influential these writers really were, anyway. Third, he never exactly spells out his distinction between expansionism and imperialism. No doubt many political scientists would call this distinction hair-

splitting; it is probably more a difference of degree than of kind. Further adding to the confusion, he refers to expansion and expansionism even after he has declared the two countries imperialist at the end of the 1890s. Fourth, his beginning chapter on the early days of the bilateral relationship is much weaker than sections dealing with the years listed in the title.

In any case, these are quibbles that should not detract from a well-written, insightful analysis. Iriye lays out the complexity of the Japanese-American relationship by noting the various levels on which expansion simultaneously took place, particularly economic, migratory, military, and intellectual. Showing how America and Japan moved from vague friendship to hostility and widespread expectation of war in just a few years provides a distant mirror for both the years leading up to Pearl Harbor and the trade wrangles of the past twenty years. Iriye then cleverly breaks this brief span of years into four rough periods—the formative stage in which mutual perceptions took shape, the transformation of expansionism in the 1890's, the shift to aggressive imperialism on both sides by 1905, and the hardening of attitudes through clashes over immigration and China, up to 1911.

As Americans and Japanese confront each other across the negotiating table today, they would do well to note that many of the patterns of interaction they act out may have been set eighty years ago. The bilateral relationship has shifted from overt military competition through Japanese political/economic dependence to economic struggle for world hegemony. All the while, the two nations have operated in parallel while failing to understand each other at a fundamental level.

The coming of war in the Pacific and the ferocious Japanese-American conflict there from 1941 to 1945 have usually been presented by historians and commentators as straightforward cases of a breakdown in communications between two nations that did not even know how to talk to each other, and a clash of vastly differing war aims, respectively. Revisionist historians may question traditional answers concerning why Japan and the U.S. took the road to Pearl Harbor and Hiroshima, but they generally note the gulf of psychological, cultural, and political differences that divided the two countries. In *Power and Culture*, Iriye contradicts much of postwar scholarship on World War II in the Pacific by asserting that it was all a tragic misunderstanding, that Japan and the U.S. were not far apart in either policy or war aims, and that the narrowing of differences as the war went on laid a foundation for the successful postwar Japanese-American alliance.

Iriye's "operative assumption" is that international relations require three levels of analysis: "power-level interactions, cultural exchanges, and the relationship between these two sets of relations" (p. vii). The two countries committed themselves totally to the military struggle, but each also took pains to set forth what it was fighting for. It is this latter dimension of ideas that chiefly concerns Iriye, for he intends to use the Pacific War as a case study, and "examine the

symbolic aspect of the war, and to arrive at . . . tentative conclusions about its cultural significance" (p. viii). Since politics is a reflection of the culture from which it springs, Iriye hopes to use documentation from both sides to show the war and the "cold war" that preceded it in the 1930s as aberrations from the norm of harmonious U.S.-Japan ties. In that he is one of the few bilingual scholars of this period, he succeeds admirably: the wealth of information on official Japanese thinking during the war is undoubtedly unavailable in any other study. Examples are his discussion of the Hsin-min Hui organization, an unsuccessful attempt by the Japanese to displace the Kuomintang (KMT) and Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in occupied China; the debates within the Japanese government over war aims; and Japanese musings about the shape of the postwar world.

Iriye begins in the 1930s when, he says, economic depression forced both nations off the cooperative, internationalist path they had followed in the 1920s. Japan was one of the first countries to envision the creation of a regional economic bloc tied to the metropole as a solution to the worldwide economic upheaval. At the same time, Japan began to formulate a pan-Asian doctrine that called for the expulsion of Western imperialists from East Asia and Asian unity under Japanese leadership. Even so, Japanese expansion of the 1930s was ever tentative and defensive in nature, unplanned and a reaction to international events as they occurred. The Japanese also pursued good relations with both the Soviets and Americans as assiduously as they did their alliance with the Germans. Accordingly, pan-Asianism ran up against continued political and economic dependence on the West, and Japan's foreign policy remained largely ad hoc and opportunistic.

American foreign policy toward Asia also drifted for much of the 1930s. Preoccupied with the depression, America became briefly nationalistic, and its spurts of foreign activism—like Japanese actions—were reactions to events rather than the products of a coherent policy process. As war approached, U.S. policy toward both Europe and Asia became more Wilsonian, with an emphasis on international stability "through an understanding by all the major powers . . . looking to the reopening of the globe to economic activities" (p. 18). The U.S. mainly hoped to avoid a two-ocean war, and so considered inducements to Japan to keep Tokyo from becoming too close to Berlin. In the end, though, both nations arrived at a point where they felt compelled to offer each other an essentially non-negotiable choice: acceptance/elimination of the Japanese position in China, or war.

When the war commenced, Japan quickly ran into problems implementing its planned Greater East Asian Co-prosperity Sphere, since it had no plan for integration of the former European colonies into the Japanese Empire. Therefore, it had to fall back on the old colonial system to administer the territories. As the war continued, the Japanese gradually moved away from pan-Asianism and embraced the notion of at least limited independence for Asian countries. Simi-

larly, America had only vague ideas about how to treat Southeast Asia and the Pacific islands after the war. At first, the U.S. promoted the idea of trusteeship, rather than outright liberation, for the former colonies. Like the Japanese, though, many U.S. officials eventually came to believe the Europeans should leave Asia. For both, the course of the war, rather than a considered examination of the local situation, determined policy to the former Western colonies.

Both countries were also at a loss over how to deal with China. Neither could understand the political confusion involved in the conflict between the ruling KMT of Chiang Kai-shek and the CCP under Mao Zedong. The Japanese could not make their puppet regime in Nanjing a real state, and made no serious efforts to talk to anti-Japanese leaders, while the U.S. became exasperated at the corruption and ineffectiveness of Chiang. Both countries also saw the need for the Soviet Union to play an important role in Asia. The Japanese wanted the Soviets to play mediator and serve as a check on the British and Americans, while the U.S. believed the USSR would be a partner in maintaining peace in the postwar era.

The most important point on which the two Pacific antagonists converged, says Iriye, was their increasingly internationalist view of the world. Many in the U.S. State Department believed that a postwar Japan under American tutelage could be brought back to the peaceful principles of the 1920s, and so integrated into a U.S.-dominated Wilsonian world order. The ideas of such men as Joseph Grew and Hugh Borton helped insure lenient treatment of devastated Japan. Similarly, as the war began to go badly for Japan, a number of influential Japanese such as former Prime Minister Konoe Fumimaro and future Prime Minister Yoshida Shigeru thought surrender to the U.S. would not necessarily be a terrible thing for Japan because of the "common ground" the two nations shared in their approach to geopolitics.

Iriye rightly notes the genuine differences that separated the two countries. For example, U.S. Presidents Franklin Roosevelt and Truman were Wilsonian only in their public statements, operated according to careful calculation of U.S. national interests in the Pacific region, and certainly had no respect for the Japanese people. Both countries acted from their individual perception of traditional great power interests.

As valuable as Iriye's work is as an antidote to traditional treatments of the Pacific War, and as a balanced presentation of both sides of the Pacific conflict, it has a few flaws. The most obvious is that, despite its pretension to link culture and politics, it deals primarily with power politics and its practitioners. There is almost no analysis of how Japanese or American culture affected foreign policy, war aims, or military strategy, just as there is no discussion of how those things in turn affected the respective cultures of the time. For example, Iriye presents Japanese pan-Asianism in detail, but fails to explain from what wellsprings this idea sprang, except to note it was partially a reaction to the pervasive Westernization of Japan and East Asia at the time. Equally, he ignores crucial elements

of America's handling of Asia in the 1940s, especially the deep-seated racism that manifested itself in the relocation of nearly the entire Japanese-American community on the west coast and the persistent denigration of Japanese capabilities before and during the war. Ironically, while trumpeting the importance of culture, he downplays the profound cultural differences that have always separated the two countries. In the end, he falls back on Wilsonian ideals, great power politics, the balance of power, Asian nationalism, and all the other regalia of traditional international relations studies. This is really just a traditional study with a slightly different point to make.

Another problem is contained in Iriye's thesis that Japanese and American wartime leaders operated similarly and on parallel lines. This is a provocative notion, but Iriye seems to be going out of his way to prove the point, to the near exclusion of the previously accepted idea of fundamental clash. If he would state that as his intention, fine, but he presents his study as an evenhanded examination of the link between culture and politics. Many of the people he cites on both sides of the Pacific were out of power at the time they held a particular view, were not decisive actors in the decision making process, or expressed distinctly minority views. Also, some of them were probably just thinking out loud.

Even if some of these points of view were expressed by a majority or by decisive actors, that does not automatically make them evidence of convergence of Japanese and American official thought. For example, the Japanese elites who late in the war thought a U.S. victory would not be the end of the world were probably just trying to make the best of a bad situation, or plan for what they wisely realized was the inevitable. Their belated conversion to the cause of Asian nationalism was simply a change of tactics to keep restive populations under control. Iriye berates Japan's wartime leaders for not seeking peace with the U.S. earlier than they did, yet there was no real inclination to so until the last moment. Perhaps he forgets that Japanese peace initiatives prior to August 1945 were tentative at best, and that it was only the combined effects of the nuclear bombing of Hiroshima and, especially, Soviet entry into the Pacific War that made them give up what could have been a futile fight to the death.

These Japanese leaders did not really share a liberal, Wilsonian view of the world with their American counterparts, in any case. The supposed confluence of thought on international relations in the 1920s was more apparent than real. The "Taisho liberalism" between World War I and the Depression had no deep roots, and was easily swept away. What is more, the principles embodied in Japan's declaration of the Greater East Asian Conference did not constitute a Wilsonian position in line with the Atlantic Charter, as Iriye suggests (pp. 120–21). The Atlantic Charter was a statement on behalf of captive peoples and in opposition to fascism, whereas Japan's declaration was an affirmation of its hegemony over East Asia.

Despite these misgivings, Iriye's study of the Pacific War is a valuable contribution to any discussion of Japanese-American relations. At an intuitive level,

Iriye's conclusions make great sense. Having lived in Japan and noted the deep cultural differences between the two countries, I am continually amazed by the lasting strength of the bilateral relationship, which has grown to what former U.S. ambassador to Japan Mike Mansfield often called the world's most important, "bar none." There may be a harmony of economic, strategic, and security interests so central that the relationship can persist over a century and withstand the most horrible of wars. Without doubt, Japan had no equal as a loyal ally (some Japanese would say client) of the U.S. in the first twenty-five years of the postwar era. As Japan grew into an economic superpower from the 1980s, trilateralist commentators such as Zbigniew Bzezinski even advocated a Japanese-American economic union.

As in his earlier *Across the Pacific*, Iriye describes the long-term Japanese-American relationship as one of continuity and basic cooperation, in contrast to the clashing national interests of the U.S.-China tie, one often perceived on a popular level as more sympathetic. To Iriye, World War II was merely an unfortunate blip marring an otherwise stable Japanese-American relationship. Given the intensity of the Pacific struggle, in which both sides invoked extreme race hatred, this thesis is a bit hard to accept. Fundamental issues were at stake, and while a Japanese victory might not have been as threatening as a Nazi triumph, the U.S. was dead-set against the creation of the Japanese colonial empire envisioned in the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere. One should weigh John Dower's *War Without Mercy* against Iriye's arguments about the nature of the Pacific War.

There are, of course, alternative ways to examine the Japanese-American relationship through history. World systems theory, for instance, would easily explain why the two powers have worked well together most of the time, but naturally came to blows in the late 1930s. As an emerging core, or leading economic, nation of the early 20th century, America found cooperation with the semi-peripheral Japan useful in exploiting the resources of China and Southeast Asia. However, as the U.S. stood on the verge of hegemonic power before World War II, Japan's colonial ambitions became a threat to America's leading position in East Asia. Once Japan had been tamed, the Occupation intended to transform Japan into a semi-periphery that would support its Cold War objectives in the region. Japan's sudden metamorphosis into a core nation by the 1970s brought economic competition back to the fore, but this was muted by the Japanese economic slowdown in the 1990s. Iriye would do well to survey contending theoretical perspectives on the Japanese and American political economies.

After *Power and Culture*, Iriye produced two more books dealing with Japan: *After Imperialism: The Search for a New Order in the Far East, 1921-1931* (1990), and *Japan and the Wider World: From the Mid-Nineteenth Century to the Present* (1997), in which he elaborates themes developed in his earlier works. He also published both general and documentary histories of the run-up to the Pacific War, which extend the idea of the war as a tragic aberration. He

turned to the China-Japan relationship in *China and Japan in the Global Setting* (1994), in which he suggests that a different form of interaction can be seen in each of three key periods of modern history. The stress of bilateral relations shifted from strategic competition at the end of the 19th century to cultural influences in the interwar year, and to economic interactions since World War II.

Iriye's more recent works have dealt with far more general topics. His volume of the *Cambridge History of American Foreign Relations, 1913–1945* (1995) shows how America became the leading power, primarily by extending trade and culture. *Cultural Internationalism and World Order* (2001), one of his most intriguing works, is a history of the movement for international cooperation from before World War I through the interwar period. This was a widespread effort, including efforts to promote student and cultural exchanges, and create an international language. The movement foundered on the shoals of increasingly conflictual politics in the 1930s, but Iriye suggests it could have been more successful if it had taken account of political realities.

Throughout his career, Iriye has kept his focus on the importance of multi-layered and constantly evolving interaction as a driver of trans-Pacific relations. The Japanese-American bilateral relationship remains as complicated as ever. The 1980s era of bilateral trade friction is now far in the past, and the two countries have progressively strengthened their security relationship, as a result of the Gulf War of 1991, the North Korea and Taiwan Strait crises of the mid-1990s, and the post-9/11 War on Terrorism. More insistent elite Japanese voices call for a more independent foreign policy, and for Japan to behave as a "normal country" with its own military and even nuclear capacity, yet Japan still behaves as a junior partner or even American client state. As long as it serves elite political and economic interests to ride America's foreign policy coattails, this relationship is likely to remain intense. For the foreseeable future, the only thing that is likely to change it will be American economic weakening and military slackening. If the Japan-America alliance fades, Japan will be forced to tend to its own ties with the rest of Asia, especially China. But if Iriye is right about the essential strength of the U.S.-Nippon combine, that may not happen for several decades.