Pacific Rim Report No. 11, September 1999

Why the U.S. - Japan Security Treaty is in Trouble
by Chalmers Johnson, Ph.D.

In this issue of Pacific Rim Report we are pleased to provide the text of a public talk given by Chalmers Johnson at the USF Center for the Pacific Rim on 23 September 1999.

Chalmers Johnson is president of the Japan Policy Research Institute, a non-profit research and public affairs organization devoted to public education concerning Japan and international relations in the Pacific. He taught for thirty years, 1962-1992, at the Berkeley and San Diego campuses of the University of California and held endowed chairs in Asian politics at both of them. At Berkeley he served as chairman of the Center for Chinese Studies and as chairman of the Department of Political Science. His B.A., M.A., and Ph.D. degrees in economics and political science are all from the University of California, Berkeley.

He first visited Japan in 1953 as a U.S. Navy officer and has lived and worked there with his wife, the anthropologist Sheila K. Johnson, virtually every year since 1961. Chalmers Johnson has been honored with fellowships from the Ford Foundation, the Social Science Research Council, and the Guggenheim Foundation; and in 1976 he was elected a fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. He has written numerous articles and reviews and some twelve books on Asian subjects, including Peasant Nationalism and Communist Power on the Chinese revolution, An Instance of Treason on Japan's most famous spy, Revolutionary Change on the theory of violent protest movements, and MITI and the Japanese Miracle on Japanese economic development. This last-named book laid the foundation for the "revisionist" school of writers on Japan, and because of it the Japanese press dubbed Johnson the "Godfather of revisionism." In this vein he went on to publish Japan: Who Governs? The Rise of the Developmental State, (W.W. Norton, 1995)

He was chairman of the academic advisory committee for the PBS television series "The Pacific Century," and he played a prominent role in the PBS "Frontline" documentary "Losing the War with Japan." Both won Emmy awards. He is author of a new book, Blowback: The Costs and Consequences of American Empire (Holt, Winter 2000), and an edited volume, Okinawa: Cold War Island (JPRE, 1999).

We gratefully acknowledge the Kiriyama Chair for Pacific Rim Studies at the USF Center for the Pacific Rim for funding this issue of Pacific Rim Report. If you would like to subscribe to Pacific Rim Report, please email us.

The latest of a long list of American pundits to make fools of themselves commenting about Japan is Thomas L. Friedman of the New York Times. The essence of this genre of American ideological writing—going back at least to the Tokyo Olympics of 1964—is that Japan is just about to undergo fundamental social change that will make it look more or less like the United States. The visiting American oracle claims to have discovered that societal transformation is imminent and reports these tidings with a breathless, eye-witness buzz. On April 30, 1999, Friedman wrote, “After visiting Tokyo a few weeks ago, I left convinced that Japan has indeed begun its third great modernization,” the first two being the innovations that followed Commodore Perry's incursion in 1853 and MacArthur’s democratization from above following World War II. According to Friedman, it will be a “wrenching transition,” but “the good news is that Japan is really changing.”

I am not here to claim that I have a better record on these matters than Thomas Friedman's, although I do, nor to suggest that knowledge of a foreign country's history and language is actually useful in making such judgements, although it is. I first arrived in Japan in 1953 thanks to the U.S. Navy and have been studying it ever since, but that is not the kind of challenge I want to offer American change-mongers. It is rather that they do not know what would have to be changing in Japan for their predictions to make any sense at all, and they do not understand that from their point of view of maintaining American hegemony over all other nations of the world, real change in Japan will not be what they would call “good news.”

The important thing to understand is not that Japan might be on the verge of change but why nothing fundamental has changed since the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty came into effect 47 years ago. Why does Japan pay $6 billion a year, more than any other so-called American ally, to build houses, churches, golf courses, and swimming pools for 47,000 American Marines, Air Force, and Navy personnel and an equal number of their dependents? Why is Japan, after thirty years of unprecedented high-speed economic growth, seemingly paralyzed by an economic slide
that began a decade ago? Why do the Japanese continue to tolerate foreign troops stationed in Japan when the conditions that once may have justified their presence have disappeared? Why do we in the United States continue to accept trade deficits with Japan that have transferred trillions of dollars westward across the Pacific and hollowed out much of our manufacturing? In short, why do both the United States and Japan continue to shore up the old Cold War system rather than dismantle it?

Friedman and others are certainly right that there are many tensions and strains in Japanese society today, but these are less signs of social change than of the pressures caused by the lack of change in the Japanese-American relation-ship. These tensions are comparable to the signs of strain that could be seen in the Soviet Union’s satellites in East Europe on the eve of the breaching of the Berlin Wall. Some examples include, first, Japan’s birth-rate has fallen to such record low levels that the country is actually shrinking in population. Second, the Japanese people invariably vote against their government whenever they get a genuine, non-rigged opportunity to do so—notably in local referenda against nuclear-power plants, American military bases, and other dangers foisted on them by Tokyo. And third, contempt for the official state bureaucracy, whether it is the Ministry of Health and Welfare, or Finance, or Foreign Affairs, is close to universal. Such disgust with government was the critical factor in the election in April of Shintaro Ishihara, a sort of Japanese version of Pat Buchanan, as mayor of Tokyo.

The Japanese people are not ignorant or poorly informed. They know that peace is breaking out in their region. The USSR is no more. China has turned in a commercial direction. Kim Dae Jung in South Korea is actively courting the north and declaring that he wants nothing to do with the American Theatre Missile Defense. Even the Philippines are finally starting to grow economically after throwing the American military out of bases it had occupied since 1898 (with, of course, a short interregnum during World War II). The Japanese also know that the policies of the IMF and the U.S. Treasury Department were the primary causes of the Asian economic meltdown that started in 1997. American economic credibility in East Asia is close to non-existent, and most Japanese believe we are currently experiencing a highly volatile “bubble” similar to theirs of the 1980s. Why then should the Japanese still be working so hard to perpetuate a creaky, anachronistic relationship with the United States?

An even harder question is why the Americans also refuse to acknowledge how the world has changed after the Cold War. Even though our two wars against Communism in Asia—in Korea and Indochina—resulted in stalemate in the first case and defeat in the second, why does the U.S. government persist today in plotting even more hopeless military adventures against North Korea and China itself? The answers to both the Japanese and the American questions is that vested interests in the Cold War system are doing everything in their power to perpetuate it. For the Americans, the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty is the foundation of their empire in the Pacific, and for the Japanese the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty is their guarantee of unrestricted access to the American market and the $100 billion to $250 billion Japan earns through this access each year.

Like an old Ross McDonald mystery novel, the key to these political puzzles lies in the past, in incidents and commitments that many Americans today know nothing about. I believe there was actually much more symmetry between the postwar policies of the USSR and the United States than most Americans are willing to recognize. The USSR in Europe and the United States in East Asia created their systems of satellites for essentially the same reasons. During the course of the Cold War, the USSR intervened militarily to try to hold its empire together in Hungary and Czechoslo-vakia. The United States intervened militarily to try to hold its empire together in Korea and Vietnam. The United States, incidentally, killed a great many more people in its two losing interventions than the USSR did in its two winning interventions.

The richest prize in the Soviet empire was former East Germany; the richest prize in the American empire remains Japan. Japan today, much like East Germany before the wall came down, remains a rigged economy brought into being and maintained by the Cold War. Japan’s people are tired of the half-century of American troops on their soil and the gray single-party regime that presides in Tokyo. Walter Ulbricht and Erich Honecker appear as dynamic modern leaders when compared to most of the prime ministers Japan’s Liberal Democratic Party has put in office since 1955. Raymond Aron once described the Soviet Union's lieutenants in East Europe as “shameless mediocrities,” which fairly well also characterizes the United States’ lieutenants in Japan.

Just as the two satraps of the German Democratic Republic faithfully followed every order they ever received from Moscow, each and every Japanese prime minister once in office gets on an airplane and reports to Washington. And just as in the former East Germany, Japanese voters long ago discovered that nothing they do ever seems to change their political system so long as they are allied with the United States. Serious Japanese have learned to avoid politics like the plague, voting only in local elections, where they often vote Communist because at least that party is competent and honest and Communism itself is no longer relevant to any country in East Asia. Japanese political idealists tend to become nihilists, not unlike their German brethren before 1989.

The Soviet Union started setting up its satellites largely because it could not compete with the largesse of the United States in the Marshall Plan. (This of course reflected a major outcome of World War II: the Soviet Union had been severely damaged by the war whereas the U.S. emerged essentially unscathed.) The USSR recognized that in the conflict between democracy and totalitarianism that was developing in postwar Europe, it was on the less popular side. In Eastern Europe it could not bring its supporters to power through the ballot box and it therefore ruthlessly ousted local democrats. In the Czech coup of February 1948, and elsewhere it imported Stalinism, claiming it was merely a version of socialism. The Soviet Union also had a national security need to try to secure its Western approaches.

By contrast, after Japan's defeat, the U.S. was never directly threatened by any regime in East Asia, least of all China, which had been devastated by war and revolution. We therefore built our system of satellites for more genuinely imperialist reasons, although the U.S. government argued that Sino-Soviet Communism and the ‘domino theory’ made our efforts necessary.
The United States’ decision to create satellites in East Asia followed from two sets of events. The first was the Communist revolution in China, which meant that American plans for a new postwar international order in East Asia based on an alliance with China were no longer viable. We were unwilling to go to war against the popular forces of Chinese Communism in order to prop up Chiang Kai-shek. We therefore reversed ourselves in our policies for the occupation of Japan, giving up on efforts to democratize the country and committing ourselves instead to Japan’s swift economic rehabilitation. Japan replaced China as America’s primary East Asian ally. American policy devoted itself to defending Japan and making it an alternative to the appeals of the Chinese revolution within Japan and elsewhere in East Asia. We did not try to roll back the Chinese revolution, but as a result of Truman’s intervention in the Chinese civil war—that is, his order to the Seventh Fleet to defend Taiwan and police the Taiwan Strait—and MacArthur’s excesses in Korea, we still ensured Chinese hostility for at least two decades.

Needless to say, the United States did not consult the Japanese people about these decisions but instead cultivated remnants of the Japanese wartime establishment because they were unquestionably anti-communist. Our reliance on old war criminals in Japan—for example, former Minister of Munitions Nobusuke Kishi in Tojo’s wartime cabinet became Japanese prime minister between 1957 and 1960—and a CIA-financed single-party regime from 1949 to 1993 were the mirror image of Soviet policies in the former German Democratic Republic. These policies actually led to a Japanese revolt against the U.S. in 1960. In the largest mass demon-strations in postwar Japanese history, protestors surrounded the parliament building and demanded that lawmakers not ratify the Japanese-American Security Treaty. The situation became so tense that President Eisenhower was forced to cancel his proposed visit to Japan. The first sitting American president ever to visit Tokyo, fifteen years later, was Gerald Ford. Using its rigged majority, the Japanese conservative party forced through ratification of the treaty keeping American troops in Japan, but Japanese politics never again regained the trust of the public.

Newly elected President Kennedy then sent Ambassador Edwin O. Reischauer and his Japanese-born wife to paper over the differ-ences, and from these efforts there emerged an American ideology reinterpreting Japan as a misunderstood democracy. Even the war years emerged from this reinterpretation as a brief, aberrant interlude. Domestically, Japan's Liberal Democratic Party turned over foreign policy to its U.S. masters and the revival of the economy to its dirigiste state bureaucracy. By the end of the 1990s Japan was the world's second richest country but with a government remarkably similar to that of the former East Germany.

The second reason why the Americans decided to build military satellites in East Asia was an unintended consequence of our concern that in the face of the USSR’s efforts the rest of Europe might ‘go Communist.’ In order to support Britain, France, and Holland, the United States abandoned its World War II promises to help liberate these nations' Asian colonies. Instead, as these colonies fought to free themselves from their defeated overlords, the U.S. replaced the former imperialists. This meant that in East Asia, except for our own colony of the Philippines, we wound up on the wrong side of history. Even in the Philippines, which we granted formal independence on July 4, 1946, we kept our largest military bases until the Filipinos expelled us in 1992.

However, the main Cold War conflicts in East and Southeast Asia were not between democracy and totalitarianism, as they were in Europe, but between European colonialism and national independence. The reluctance of the main European powers to give up their colonies led to wars of national liberation in Indochina against the French, in Malaya against the British, and in Indonesia against the Dutch, in all of which the United States supported the side of imperialism. After the Dutch were driven from Indonesia, the British fought a decade-long war against insurgents in Malaya, finally acquiescing in Malaya’s becoming Malaysia and Singapore. After the French were defeated militarily in Vietnam, the U.S. fought an incredibly bloody and prolonged conflict before it was also forced to abandon its imperial role there. We also supported a long counter-insurgency in the Philippines against guerrillas who considered the post-independence Filipino government a creature of the United States. Only after our defeat in Vietnam did we begin to adjust to the idea that East Asia was different from Europe. Nixon’s opening to China was the first sign that some understanding of East Asian history was finally starting to penetrate Washington minds.

The problem for the United States was that national Communist parties had filled the vacuum of leadership of these East Asian liberation movements since we were supporting the Europeans in their attempts to keep their colonies. In order not to see all of East Asia, possibly even including Japan, come under the influence of nationalistic Communist parties, the United States from time to time used the same brutal methods the USSR resorted to in Eastern Europe to hang on to its sphere of influence. The best example of this was the role played by the United States in South Korea from 1945 to the present, a history that has been almost totally suppressed in the United States.

South Korea has been occupied by American forces virtually continuously since the end of World War II. It was the scene of the most important armed conflict of the early years of the Cold War, the place where the United States and China fought each other to a standoff and froze relations with each other for twenty years, until Zhou Enlai and Richard Nixon unfroze them. Thanks to the U.S. and the former USSR, who in 1945 divided the country for their own convenience, a half-century later Korea remains the last place on earth whose borders are determined by where the armies of World War II stopped. South Korea's postwar rise as a “miracle economy” and then its spectacular financial collapse are also directly related to its status as a satellite of the United States.

For more than forty years the United States sacrificed its own economy in order to win and retain the loyalty of its satellites in East Asia. During the Cold War and for the decade after its end, the U.S. offered unrestricted access to the American market and defended East Asian protectionism and mercantilism. In return the East Asians accepted and helped to pay for American military bases in their countries and gave at least verbal support for America’s foreign policies. For the first half of the Cold War, down to about 1970, the U.S. also encouraged the East Asians to take positive advantage of these terms in order to prosper economically. Economic growth was the American way of inoculating them against Communism, neutralism, socialism, and other potentially anti-American political orientations.

The East Asian non-Communist countries accepted this deal and worked hard at what was called ‘export-led growth,’ which meant primarily exporting to the American market. The Japanese led this movement but behind them were three ranks of followers. The first were the ‘newly
industrialized countries’ (NICs) of South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore. They were followed by the late-developers of Southeast Asia-Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, and the Philippines. Most recently they were joined by China, at present the world’s fastest growing economy. The Japanese liked this so-called flying-geese pattern, flattered that they were the lead goose and the inspiration for those who followed. All of them assumed that their destination—namely, Los Angeles (and from there the rest of the American market)—was a permanent feature of the international environment. And so long as the Cold War existed, it was as permanent as anything ever is in inter-state relations.

Over time, however, this pattern produced gross overinvestment and excess capacity in East Asia. It also produced the world's largest trade deficits in the U.S., huge trade surpluses in East Asia, and in general a lack of even an approximation of equilibrium in supply and demand across the Pacific. Moreover, contrary to the Communist accusations of neocolonialism, these terms were costly to the United States. They cost American jobs, destroyed American manufacturing industries, and smashed the hopes of American minorities and women trying to escape from poverty.

The American government continued to accept these costs as the price of keeping its empire together. From about the Nixon administration on, the U.S. did start to negotiate more or less seriously with the Japanese and the other ‘miracle economies’ to open their markets to American goods and to ‘level the playing field.’ But the attempt to lessen trade friction and open reciprocal markets in East Asia always collided with the security relationship. In order to level the economic playing field, the United States would also have had to level the security playing field, and this it was never willing to do.

**Basing a capitalist economy on export sales rather than domestic demand ultimately contains the seeds of its own destruction.** It subverts the function of the unfettered world market to reconcile and bring into balance supply and demand. Instead of producing what the people of a particular economy can actually use, an export regime thrives on foreign demand artificially engineered by an imperialist power. In East Asia during the Cold War, the strategy worked so long as the American economy remained overwhelmingly larger than the economies of its dependencies and so long as only Japan and perhaps one or two other smaller countries pursued this strategy. But by the 1980s the Japanese economy had become the size of two Germanies. Anything it did affected not just the American but the global economy. Moreover, virtually everyone else in East Asia (and potentially every underdeveloped country on earth) had some knowledge of the miracle economies and was trying to duplicate Japanese-style high-speed growth. The overcapacity for things oriented to the American market (or that were needed to expand East Asia productive capacity even further) became overwhelming. There were too many factories turning out athletic shoes, automobiles, television sets, semiconductors, petrochemicals, steel, and ships for too few buyers. The current global demand for auto-mobiles, for example, peaked at around 50 million vehicles, but capacity has already grown to 70 million. As a result of the global economic crisis, auto sales in Southeast Asia fell from 1.3 million in 1997 to 450,000 in 1998.

Meanwhile, the hollowing out of American industry continues unabated. Even though American trade representatives sometimes berate Japan for its protectionism and dumping, the Japanese have learned simply not to listen. Whenever the U.S. Trade Representative seems about to do something serious about Japanese predatory trading practices, the Japanese government invokes the U.S. Secretary of Defense. The Pentagon then tells the U.S. Trade Representative that the “broader relationship,” meaning the fifty or so U.S. bases in Japan and the 100,000 troops in Northeast Asia, takes precedence over any other interests of American citizens. If there should be an active protest from American industry or labor, the Central Intelligence Agency or the Defense Intelligence Agency steps in and finds a new military threat to justify the Pentagon’s primacy. These are among the costs of maintaining the American empire.

Perhaps these American policies made strategic sense during the period from approximately 1950 to 1970, when they also had the desirable consequence of bringing real competition to such complacent industries as American automobile manufacturing. But today these old policies are utterly destructive to both the security and economic well-being of both the U.S. and Japan. They continue to alter the American economic system away from manufacturing and toward finance capitalism, and they prevent Japan from producing an economy that can stand alone and trade with other economies on a mutually beneficial basis. The day of reckoning for American pride and Japanese myopia cannot be very far away.

The U.S.-Japan Security Treaty is also in trouble because both the American and Japanese publics and their governments actually have very different goals and visions concerning security issues in the Pacific region. When during the Cold War Japan was used as a launching pad for American troops, ships, and aircraft, Japan had no voice in the matter. During the Korean War, Japan was still under American occupation, and during the Vietnam War, Okinawa was still under American occupation. Today, the Japanese Diet would have to approve any U.S. military action emanating from its soil. And it is not likely, despite the Security Treaty’s nebulous assurances, that Japan would countenance the U.S. launching air strikes against either North Korea or China from its Okinawan or mainland bases. Only Washington’s so-called strategists, totally ignorant of East Asian history in the 20th century, can seriously believe that Japanese facilities can today be used for American wars against Japan’s former colony, Korea, or against Japan’s main legacy of war crimes and crimes against humanity, China. The equivalent would be to reopen the Vietnam War with more American napalming of Vietnamese civilians.

Professor David Calleo has observed “The international system breaks down not only because unbalanced and aggressive new powers seek to dominate their neighbors, but also because declining powers, rather than adjusting and accommodating, try to cement their slipping preeminence into an exploitative hegemony.” I believe the United States at the end of the twentieth century fits this description. The U.S.-Japan Security Treaty today is an anachronism left over from the Cold War. When it begins to change, we can speak of real change in Japan. Until then the Security Treaty is the main obstacle to needed social and economic change in Japan and elsewhere in East Asia.
Other articles where United States-Japan Security Treaty is discussed: Japan: International relations: which it exercised through the United States–Japan Security Treaty (1951) by which U.S. forces remained in Japan until the Japanese secured their own defense. Japan agreed not to grant similar rights to a third power without U.S. approval. Officially remained committed to the Mutual Security Treaty, which keeps Japan under the U.S. nuclear weapons and permits thousands of U.S. troops to be stationed there, particularly on Okinawa; however, many Japanese favour redefining the relationship between the two countries and reducing the number of U.S. troops.