4 Japan Abroad: The Neomercantilist State

In two generations Japan was transformed from a war-devastated, poverty-stricken country into the world’s most dynamic economic superpower. Tokyo’s single-minded drive for global power has been harshly criticized. Recently, the former French Prime Minister Edith Cresson asserted that there ‘is a world economic war going on. France is not waging it . . . Japan is an adversary that doesn’t play by the rules and has an absolute desire to conquer the world. You have to be naive or blind not to see that’.\footnote{Cresson wanted to reverse a severe imbalance of power, outlook, and strategies between Europe and Japan: ‘I’m against the clear imbalance that exists between the European Community, which is not protectionist at all, and the Japanese system which is hermetically sealed’\footnote{Cresson’s views were severely criticized by the Japanese and their foreign spokespeople, who claim constantly that Japan’s markets are the world’s most open and that foreigners sell little because they do not try hard enough and their goods are poorly made. As evidence, Japanese point to average tariffs lower than America’s and Europe’s, and to a series of ‘market opening packages’, ten alone in the 1980s. No markets in the world are more competitive than ours, the Japanese constantly argue. We work harder, save more, and invest more – that is the secret of our success! Are Cresson’s fears justified? Does Japan somehow threaten an unsuspecting Europe? Or are Japanese claims true? Does Japan epitomize the ‘magic of the marketplace’? Is Japan’s success simply attributable to corporate hard work and constant attention to improving quality and cutting costs? Just what are Japan’s foreign policy goals and the means to obtain them? This chapter will analyze those and related questions by first examining Japan’s traditional relations with the outside world, and then exploring the range of policies it has pursued since 1945 which fall under the rubric, foreign policy.

TRADITIONAL FOREIGN POLICY

For over 1,500 hundred years until the modern era, Japan’s foreign relations were limited by a combination of geographic isolation and disinterest. Japanese tribute missions would occasionally set sail for China while the

W. R. Nester, *European Power and The Japanese Challenge*  
© William R. Nester 1993
trickle of trade with the continent expanded and contracted with Japan’s political struggles. Limited as they were, these contacts were vital to Japan’s development. Japan borrowed and assimilated much of its high culture from the continent, including Buddhism, Confucianism, Chinese imperial institutions, and the fine arts.

Japan’s foreign relations were overwhelmingly peaceful. In the prehistoric era, the Japanese enclave of Mimana in southern Korea existed for several hundred years but was finally overrun by Korean armies in 562. Whether it was established by force or peaceful migration is unknown. Japan’s only historic example of imperialism occurred a millennium later in 1592 when Hideyoshi, dreaming of conquering East Asia, sent a Japanese army to Korea. The Japanese overran the peninsula but were defeated by Chinese and Korean armies at the Yalu River, and were withdrawn. A second invasion by 140,000 Japanese troops in 1597 was likewise recalled after Hideyoshi’s death the following year. Likewise, Japan only twice in its premodern history faced the specter of foreign invasion – the failed Mongol attacks of 1274 and 1281. The latter invasion was defeated by a typhoon which destroyed the Mongol fleet, a salvation attributed by the Japanese to a ‘divine wind’ (kamikaze).

There is a dynamic relationship in Japanese history between foreign influences and shifts in domestic power. Over a millenium and a half of Japanese history, there have been a half-dozen cycles in which new regimes displaced old decadent ones during periods of extensive foreign contact. The ambitious power seekers use foreign technologies and ideas to strengthen their position and undermine those in power. Having taken power, the new regime then engages in wholesale cultural borrowing to consolidate and legitimize its power. But eventually this orgy of cultural borrowing reaches a saturation point and a reaction occurs in which the Japanese elite severs its foreign relations. The regime then matures and slowly decays. Foreign relations are renewed. The loosened control over the country enables ambitious opponents to utilize a new wave of foreign technologies and ideas to undermine the regime, and the cycle repeats itself.

The last three great cycles of Japan’s regime change and foreign relations have been with the West. Japan relations with the West have always been ambivalent and often downright acrimonious. The first Westerners – three Portuguese priests on a Chinese junk – arrived in 1542. For the next 100 years, Japanese lords absorbed a range of European technologies and ideas into Japan’s culture, the most significant of which was firearms. The skilled use of artillery and muskets helped bring an end to feudalism in Japan, just as it had earlier destroyed European feudalism. But like previous regimes, the Tokugawa clan which unified Japan in 1600 eventually reached its