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USAFA Harmon Memorial Lecture #23 "Western Perceptions and Asian Realities" Akira Iriye, 1980

I am very honored to have been invited this evening to address this distinguished audience. I am extremely impressed with this year's Military History Symposium, which brings together many specialists to discuss aspects of United States involvement in East Asia. I only hope that my paper will do justice to the enormous amount of preparation that has gone into the planning for this symposium.

In considering the broad theme of tonight's topic, Western perceptions and Eastern realities, I think it might be useful to take a long look at the last half-century, going back to the Manchurian crisis of 1931. That crisis began a fifteen-year war between China and Japan, a war that eventually involved the United States, the Soviet Union, Britain, and many other countries of Europe and Asia. That year may therefore be taken as a point of departure for American military involvement in the Far East. It also happened that in the same year, far away from Mukden where the Manchurian crisis began, an American sociologist, Robert E. Park, was in the Chinese city of Hang- how, delivering a paper for a meeting of the Institute of Pacific Relations. The paper was entitled "The Problem of Cultural Differences" and discussed the transmission and diffusion of culture. Following William Graham Sumner, Park noted that the Orient and the Occident constituted "two grand divisions of culture in the world." China represented the former, and America the latter; in the sense that each embodied certain traits that had become part of its cultural heritage. The paper contrasted the Orient's stress on permanency, stability, equilibrium, and repose with the Occident, where "life is prospective rather than retrospective . . . [the mood] is one of anticipation rather than of reflection . . . [and the] attitude toward change is embodied in the concept of progress." The United States exemplified the West's preoccupation with action and mobility. It was a society where "changes of fortune are likely to be sudden and dramatic, where every individual is more or less on his own . . . ; [fashion] and public opinion take the place of custom as a means and method of social control." In sum, Park said, in the West, and particularly in America, the "individual is emancipated, and society is atomized." In sharp contrast, the Orient, especially China, was more "immobile" and "personal and social relations tend to assume a formal and ceremonial character." The individual in such a society lost initiative and spontaneity, preferring stability and security to adventure. Whereas Occidental and American culture, Park said, "may be said to have had their origin and to have found their controlling ideas in the market place," it was from the family that Chinese and Oriental civilization derived "those controlling ideas that constitute their philosophy of life." Having listed all these differences between Orient and Occident, Park concluded the paper with a cryptic statement that "everything" in our modern world, under the pressure of changing conditions, has begun to crumble." Even the Western world's "conviction of its own superiority" on which "its faith in its future is finally based, has also begun to crack."

Fifty years after these thoughts were penned, it is easy to say that many of Park's ideas were superficial observations by a generalist without the knowledge of the languages and histories of Asian countries. Even in 1931, the facile dichotomy between a fast-moving, individualist West and an immobile, tradition-bound East would have been too simplistic. If anything, it was the countries of Asia that were undergoing rapid political and social change, whereas economic production and population movements had slowed down in the United States and European countries, due to the spreading world economic crisis. Some Western observers were already beginning to be skeptical, if not cynical, about the assumption that the West's market place orientation had been synonymous with individualism and

freedom, whereas the East's family-centeredness and economic underdevelopment sustained each other. Daniel Bell has argued that after the turn of the century there developed a disjunction between productive capacity and mental habits in modern societies, so that while automated systems of production continued to generate more goods, the Protestant ethos of hard work and self-discipline was eroded.² In contrast, the Chinese had begun what Alexander Eckstein was to term a major "economic revolution" without fundamentally affecting their family and kinship structure.³ In Japan the pace of economic and cultural change was even faster; but like China, some of the people's personality traits and social habits were not seriously affected .4

My point is not to ridicule some old-fashioned generalizations made by a venerable sociologist. Rather, I cite Park's paper because the juxtaposition, fifty years ago, of that paper and the developing crisis in Manchuria enables us to trace two levels of U.S. involvement in East Asia. One is the level of invasions, wars, armament and other factors that constitute "power realities." American military power in Asia at the time of the Japanese invasion of Manchuria was extremely limited. The second level of American-Asian relations is more existential. It is the fact that the United States, Japan, and other countries evolve their respective domestic institutions and economics and that their people engage in their own daily pursuits. American-Asian relations at this level are simply the sum total of all these activities and pursuits. Because this is a very complex phenomenon and difficult to come to grips with, many images and concepts are used to comprehend and represent what is happening in other societies. Park was doing this when he resorted to some familiar views about cultural differences between East and West. Unlike American power, those ideas were enormously influential. Edward Said has argued, in his study of European attitudes toward the Middle East, that the division of the world into Orient and Occident was something that originated in Europe after the eighteenth century. According to him, "the Orient" was not so much a real world of Oriental people but a creation of Western minds which were preoccupied with Europe. Starting from the late eighteenth century, European archaeologists, anthropologists, novelists, and linguists "discovered" an Oriental world which the indigenous peoples had never discovered themselves. These people really had no consciousness of their identity or their heritage, but now the Europeans gave it to them by writing about Oriental civilization. Thus, from the very beginning, Orientalism was given its definition and character by non-Orientals, and the Orient was of necessity represented in terms of the more familiar West. The East was what the West was not, lacking the latter's vitality, spirituality, and individuality. It is easy to see how such a dichotomizing scheme affected generations of Europeans even as they broadened the scope of the Orient beyond the Middle East to include India, Southeast Asia, and East Asia.⁵

Americans inherited such conceptions of the Orient from Europeans, but added elements of their own. As Park said, the United States was often viewed as the most Western of Western societies. This view went back to the nineteenth century, when American writers and orators were fond of describing the United States as the most progressive of nations. The idea of progress, as Ernest Tuveson has pointed out, had two roots. One went back to, and modified, the Christian idea of millennium, the kingdom of heaven. Whereas in traditional Christian doctrine the millennium was by definition something that would not be realized on earth, some Protestant thinkers, notably Americans like Samuel Hopkins, converted the vision into that of a more perfect society here in this world. And, not surprisingly, these thinkers believed that America was closer to the earthly millennium than any other country. The second component of the idea of progress was more secular; derived from Enlightenment thought. Henry May has noted that most Enlightenment figures were not extremists; this combined a sense of moderation and a healthy skepticism with belief in reason. But the Enlightenment clearly had an impact; man's rational faculties to create more enlightened conditions generated optimism about human progress. Here, too, it was easy for Americans, conscious of their freedom from the past, to conceive of their society as the most advanced of all. The perception of America as the most progressive, modern, or "civilized" nation of the West became fixed by the early nineteenth century, and while other perceptions were periodically added to dilute some of the naive

optimism, the view that the United States was in many ways at the forefront of modern societies remained strong even during the Depression.

A subtheme of the idea of millennium was what Tuveson has termed the notion of America being a "redeemer nation." The United States, according to this perception, believes it already is or is close to being the most perfect of all societies and thus serves as a model to which other countries can aspire. Otherwise, America would be a singular exception in a sea of wilderness. America's selfdefinition contains the optimism that other societies can be transformed in its image. Indeed, Americans have a mission to ensure such transformation. Implicit in such views is the assumption that while Orient and Occident are two sharply contrasting civilizations, the latter is bound to be a more normative pattern of human development than the former and that the Orient is more likely to be influenced by the Occident than the other way round. If indeed America is the most advanced of Occidental countries, and if the Occident is more progressive than the Orient, it follows that Oriental societies would come under its influence. They will be attracted to many of its features and tend to become Americanized. Park himself noted that in China, American movies and social dances had so permeated the country that many Chinese were influenced by the Western notion that marriage, or for that matter divorce, is based upon romantic love. Park assumed that this was a healthier institution than the Chinese system of family-arranged marriages and that the acceptance of the new concept of marriage would liberate individuals and destroy the traditional family structure in China.

Such were some of the prevailing ideas at the beginning of the 1930s. The influence of those ideas was far out of proportion to the actual military power of the United States in East Asia, which was severely limited due to the naval disarmament agreements and to the policy of reducing marines in China. Even the Philippines, the bastion of American military power in the Pacific, were on the way to obtaining independence. Nevertheless, one could agree with Said that ultimately, Western ways of viewing the world of Asia were a reflection of, indeed necessitated by, Western economic and military supremacy in the modern world. The West's relative power position vis-a-vis the rest of the world since the sixteenth century provided the terms and vocabulary for representing the East. A key question, then, would have been whether America's relatively inconspicuous military presence in East Asia foreshadowed a declining cultural influence of the West, or whether, despite the erosion of Western power, its cultural impact would remain predominant.⁸

In actuality, one thing that drastically changed was the power position of the United States in East Asia. After 1931, the United States government and military steadily became convinced that maintenance of the balance of power in the Asia-Pacific region was crucial to the nation's security and that steps must be taken to insert and augment American power in the area to maintain the balance. Stephen Pelz has pointed out in his study of the Japanese-American naval rivalry during the 1930s that the naval armament race fundamentally altered these two countries' relations because each side regarded the other as increasingly dangerous to stability. Toward the end of the decade, as Michael Schaller has noted, the United States government became concerned that Japanese domination over China would compromise American security, and began intensive efforts to buttress China, primarily through military aid to the Kuomintang regime. 10 These two themes, naval rivalry in the Pacific and clashing policies in China, were joined when Japan entered into a military alliance with Germany and Italy in September 1940. From the American point of view, it became all the more imperative to discourage the growth of Japanese power, whether Japanese expansion was at the expense of the Soviet Union or the European colonies in Southeast Asia. More and more items were placed on America's list of goods embargoed for Japan, and the U.S. Pacific fleet was reinforced. Air power was added to the equation; volunteers were given official encouragement to train Chinese pilots in bombing Japanese bases, and the Philippines were designated as the major bastion for placing fighter planes and heavy bombers to deter Japanese advances. 11

From this perspective, there is little doubt that power was what determined the state of U.S.

Japanese relations. American strategists may not have had a sophisticated understanding of Japanese or Chinese culture, but what mattered was that the balance of power was being steadily eroded by Japan and that it had to be redressed through American power. In this sense, all sides understood what was at stake. Chinese and Americans were pitted against Japanese, now allied with Germans. An uneasy equilibrium could still have been maintained if the power situation prevailing at the beginning of 1941 could have been frozen. For this reason, Japanese and American strategists were extremely sensitive to signs of any intention on the part of the other side to alter the balance. When the Japanese invaded the southern half of French Indochina in July 1941, after the German invasion of Russia, American reaction was instantaneous. The United States embargoed oil shipments to Japan and sought to strengthen strategic coordination with China, Britain, and the Dutch East Indies. The Japanese, on their part, viewed such moves as evidence of America's intention to extend its power at the expense of Japan. Just as the Americans considered Japanese action detrimental to the status quo, the Japanese resisted what they regarded as America's determination to alter the status quo by strengthening the "ABCD powers." Escalation of the crisis would have been averted only if both sides had been able to arrive at a mutually acceptable definition of the status quo or if one of them had decided to retreat. Neither was the case, and war came. It was not entirely hypocritical for the Japanese to call it a war for national survival, just as it was not an exaggeration for the Americans to view it as a direct threat to national security. By 1941 both sides' definition of security had become so extended that a balance of power for one of them seemed to imply a provocation to the other.

It is clear in retrospect that in their road to war, the leaders in the United States and Japan understood each other perfectly, as far as the power equation was concerned. There was nothing abnormal or irrational either about the Japanese decision to challenge the United States, given their perception of the type of Asian order required for their country to survive, or about the American policy of embargoes and stiff negotiating strategies, given Washington's view that further Japanese expansion was detrimental to the balance of power. The struggle was in essence between a nation that was trying to define a new regional system of power; and a country that resisted the attempt. What is also interesting is that Japanese and Americans shared the view that their relationship had been drastically altered after 1931. Such a view implied that before 1931 there had existed an older order of stability and peace based on a balance among the United States, Britain, Japan, and other countries.

During the war; numerous writers in Japan and the United States debated whether the pre-1931 balance could ever be restored. The answer was not a simple one. For one thing, the war indicated that the United States and its allies had the resources to punish Japan for its violation of the peace and to deprive it of all fruits of victory, not just those acquired after 1931 but all the territories it had obtained after the late nineteenth century. In that sense what was restored after Japan's defeat would be not so much the world of 1931 as an earlier period when Japan was weaker. At the same time, it was thought that after Japan's defeat, postwar Asian stability would to a great extent be based upon close coordination between the United States and the British empire, as it had been during the 1920s. What were uncertain at first were the roles of China and Russia in the area. Japan's wartime new order had been built on the assumption that there would be collaboration between Japan and a pro-Japanese China and between Japan and the Soviet Union. The idea that Japan, China, and Russia would constitute a new grouping to check Anglo-American power stayed with Japanese consciousness until the very end of the war. They made a mistake to believe, rather naively, that China and Russia would opt for such an alliance rather than for an affiliation with the Anglo-American powers, but they were not wrong to anticipate the emergence of those two countries as significant factors in future power equations in Asia and the Pacific.

In any event, when the war ended, with Japan disarmed and reduced to its home islands, the United States was faced with the choice of whether to continue to emphasize cooperation with Britain as the key to security in Asia or to invite China and Russia to join in the undertaking. By and large Washington was inclined to choose the first alternative, the more so after 1947, when the Soviet Union

emerged as the new potential adversary. The question then was whether China, now increasingly under Communist influence, should be co-opted into working with Anglo-American powers as a check on Russia or viewed as lost to the Soviet camp and therefore as an object of containment. Recent studies by Warren Cohen, John L. Gaddis, and others amply demonstrate that Dean Acheson and the State Department were extremely interested in splitting China from Russia by offering various inducements to the Chinese Communists. 12 In the meantime, they also advocated ending the occupation of Japan and rearming the country as a potential ally against Russia and, should it become necessary, China. The Korean War settled the debate in Washington about policy toward the People's Republic of China. It became virtually impossible to form a de facto alliance with a country which was at war with the United States. Instead, United States policy in Asia came to focus on the containment of China through such means as mutual security pacts with Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan, the encouragement of Japanese economic recovery through expanding trade ties with non-Communist areas in Asia, and, ultimately, its own military involvement in Vietnam to frustrate what was believed to be China-backed attempts by North Vietnam to unify Indochina. Some of these efforts were more successful than others, but in the end they failed to deal adequately with the question left over from the Second World War: how to incorporate China and Russia into a stable system of Asian international politics. The status quo, defined in terms of holding the line against Chinese expansion, was costing America tens of thousands of lives and billions of dollars, while the Soviet Union steadily augmented its military capabilities not only in Asia but in Europe and elsewhere. One result of this development was increasing tension between Russia and China, which came to a head after the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, followed by the Chinese-Russian border clashes in 1969. The United States had sought to act as the regional stablizer, but the situation was becoming more and more volatile.

Under the circumstances, it was not surprising that the United States should have abandoned the strategy of containing both Russia and China, and replaced it with a bold attempt at rapprochement with the People's Republic. The architects of the new policy, Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger, practiced the traditional art of balance of power in approaching China as an instrument to weaken the Soviet hold on world politics. The Chinese willingly obliged, for they were, as Kissinger has recorded in his memoirs, "the most unsentimental practitioners of balance-of-power politics I have encountered." Kissinger's memoirs can be read as a 1,400-page apologia for his China policy which was based, in his view, totally on realistic calculations of power, not on sentiment or economic needs. He simply felt it would be foolish for the United States not to take advantage of the rift between the two Communist giants and supplement America's power by the appearance, if not the reality, of an alliance with Chinese power.

The story since the Nixon-Kissinger years has, on the whole, confirmed the outlines of their strategy. The United States and China established normal diplomatic relations in January 1979, while China and the Soviet Union did not renew their thirty-year alliance which terminated in 1980. The America-China axis, rather than the Soviet-China axis, now defines the base line of Asian international politics. Not only politically, but militarily, too, Chinese and American officials have been intensifying their efforts to join forces against the increasing power of the Soviet Union. A key assumption has been that America's sophisticated weapons can be combined with Chinese manpower to deter Soviet ambitions. As the United States has had to divert its resources increasingly to such regions as the Middle East and Latin America, China is emerging as the principal military partner in Asia to maintain stability. In the meantime, Japan's role in the American security system has undergone change. Japan is no longer a junior partner of the United States in the strategy of containing China. It is rather a "fragile super-power," to use Frank Gibney's phrase, in the sense that while it is a leading economic power, its foundation is extremely fragile in the absence of indigenous natural resources and because of the constitutional restrictions on building up its military capabilities. ¹⁴ This situation has led Chinese, American, and Japanese officials to urge that Japan incorporate itself more

fully into the emerging security system in Asia through increased military spending and development of more efficient systems of detecting and deterring hostile moves by the Soviet Union. A minority of Japanese have even begun calling for the country's nuclear armament.

Whatever develops in Japan, there is little doubt that the United States, China, and Japan are now on the side of regional stability and cooperate together to prevent Russian expansion. Whether a new equilibrium will in fact emerge on that basis remains to be seen. It may be noted, however, that a system which completely isolates the Soviet Union will certainly remain unstable. Russia is and will remain an Asian and Pacific power, and it will be futile to think that anything other than a temporary balance will prevail so long as the Soviet Union is shut out of regional security considerations. The Soviets may be expected to take military steps as a reaction to increases in the combined forces of America, China, and Japan. The arms race can escalate, and in the end the region will be no closer to stability than before. In this sense, the one question bequeathed by the Second World War, namely how to incorporate the new power of Russia into the international system, has not been satisfactorily solved.

This is a very hasty sketch of the vicissitudes of American power in East Asia during the last fifty years. My purpose in recounting this familiar story has been twofold. One is to emphasize that the story can be told as military history, in terms of armaments, strategies, and wars. The key ingredient is power, and cultural differences are of minor importance, if not irrelevant. The reversals in United States-Japanese relations-from war to peace- or in U.S.-Chinese relations- from alliance to cold war to quasi-partnership- can be viewed as indicating, in Kissinger's phase, "the absolute primacy of geopolitics." One characteristic of geopolitics is interchangeability of actors; that is, it really makes no intrinsic difference whether the United States is in alliance with China against Japan or with Japan against China. What matters is the fact that all are playing the game of power politics. The United States became militarily involved in East Asia after the 1930s not because of some actual or perceived cultural differences between Americans and Asians but because all the actors were oriented toward power balances, regardless of who was doing the balancing or unbalancing.

My second aim is related to this point. It is to raise the question of the impact of America's military involvement in Asia upon the cultures of the United States and of East Asia. Although culture was essentilly irrelevant to the story of that involvement, the fact remains that Americans and Asians continued to develop their respective cultural values and institutions during these fifty years. Because military history can be discussed in power terms, one must not assume that power is everything. When Park described East- West relations in 1931, he assumed that the differences between Occident and Orient were fundamental. But he also sensed that the Oriental world was becoming more and more Westernized, while the Westerners' sense of superiority was beginning to be undermined. What has happened since then? Has the deepening involvement of American power in Asia and the Pacific brought about new developments in American-Asian cultural relations? These are difficult questions to examine, but let me make three observations.

First, it would seem that the kind of dichotomous generalizations that Park mentioned have continued to represent a very influential way of looking at Asian affairs. The growth of Japanese power in the 1930s, for instance, was seen by Americans as a challenge to Western civilization and its values. Chinese, whether Nationalist or Communist, were considered more "Western" in their heroic nationalism, resourcefulness, hard work, and their alleged determination to establish a more democratic form of government. After Japan's defeat, Gen. Douglas MacArthur measured the success of his occupation policy by such Western yardsticks as the Japanese people's acceptance of democracy and Christianity. During the 1950s and the 1960s there was a vogue of modernization theory, according to which a country was considered either more or less modernized by means of certain criteria. Not surprisingly, the criteria were derived from the experience of the United States and western European nations. Even in the 1970s and later, when post-industrial society, rather than modernized society, became a norm for Western development, non-Western societies were analyzed in

terms of the distances they had travelled in the direction of modernity and post-modernity. In the meantime, the idea that East-West differences are substantial and perhaps unbridgeable seems very influential even today. Travellers to Japan and China still come back with tales of the mysterious and exotic East, and, on the other side of the coin, Americans readily define themselves as Westerners, meaning they are not inheritors of certain characteristic traits that allegedly govern the behavior and thoughts of Easterners.

The fact that such ideas have persisted for so long is very interesting. It is as if the ups and downs of America's military involvement in Asia have had little impact on how Americans view Asians. This is surprising in view of the fact that today, far more than in 1931, there are major differences among the countries and peoples of Asia. Whatever validity there may have been fifty years ago in speaking of Orientals as a distinguishable group, the concept would seem totally inadequate as an all-embracing term to include Japanese, Koreans, Chinese, Vietnamese, Cambodians, Filipinos, Thais, Burmese, Indians, and many others. The persistence of certain stereotypes indicates that all the turmoil of wars and invasions has not really affected long-accepted categories of thought.

So long as these categories are employed in order to define one's own cultural boundaries, they may be considered harmless. But sometimes simplistic dichotomies in terms of "we" and "they" can cause serious damage, as happened during the war when the Japanese sought to justify their invasion of Asian lands in the name of pan-Asianism. They mouthed slogans about Asia's liberation from the West and about the West's spiritual bankruptcy. They put Park's ideas upside down and called on all Oriental peoples to reject the Occident as a model. Instead, they were exhorted to return to their historic purity and to create a moral order free from such Western vices as materialism and egoism. The Japanese vision was just as flawed as Park's generalizations, for as soon as Japanese troops landed in the Philippines, the Dutch East Indies, and elsewhere, they started behaving just like the Western colonial masters. For the mass of Chinese, Indochinese, and others it made no difference whether the Japanese called themselves Asians; what did matter was that the United States and its Western allies were willing to help throw the invaders out.

This, then, is the second point I would like to make. Simplistic generalizations can sometimes cause serious damage. Cultural misconceptions and stereotypical images will undoubtedly remain, but let us hope that they will be confined to private spheres and not allowed to confuse international relations by imposing artificial boundaries between human groups.

My third and final observation is to go a step beyond this second point and say that cultural boundaries seem to have become less and less distinctive in the past fifty years. If Park's generalizations about the contrast between East and West in 1931 were not very sound, today it would make even less sense to divide the world into rigid cultural groupings. In part this has been due to the military interactions between Asia and the West. Wars and their aftermath (such as military occupation) have brought Americans and Asians into direct contact to a far greater extent than ever before. The results have not always been good, as direct encounters sometimes confirm one's prior prejudices. But certainly one by-product has been to enable more and more people of these countries to see one another as individuals, not simply as aggregate masses. Most important, the wars have provided them with a shared experience in a broad sense, so that they are all heirs to the horrors of war. If there is one thing that unites Americans, Chinese, Koreans, Japanese, and others, it would be their determination not to repeat the horrible experiences of Asian wars, which lasted more or less intermittently from 1931 through 1975.

Shared experience, after all, is what enables one to transcend national and cultural boundaries. An American today may share as much experience with an Asian thousands of miles away as with an American a hundred years ago, even fifty years ago. But do shared experiences produce shared perceptions, values, and attitudes? Forty years ago one might have said that Americans and Japanese had absolutely nothing in common. Twenty years ago the same thing might have been said of Americans and Chinese or Americans and Koreans. But today it would be an extreme bigot who does

not recognize that all these peoples are concerned with similar things and pursue similar objectives. In practical policy matters, in trade disputes, and in responding to specific questions, they may from time to time come together or drift apart. But, underneath such events, one senses growing awareness in these countries that what is good for one of them is also good for the others and that craving for a higher and more humane standard of living, for a cleaner environment, for knowledge, for art and music and, ultimately, for mutual understanding is not a monopoly of one cultural group.

Such being the case, I believe we should confront the situation by discarding time-worn cliche's about the mutually exclusive civilizations of the Orient and the Occident and by considering American-Asian relations in a broader framework of interdependence. Fifty years ago, America's interactions with Asia, both in power and cultural terms, were largely superficial. The situation is vastly different today. The destinies of Americans and Asians are interwoven, and the greatest challenge facing them in the next fifty years may well be the question of whether they will succeed in making use of the growing interdependence among them to devise a regional community not only of peace and security but also of tolerance, humaneness, and compassion.

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