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Japan's dilemma: can the U.S. strategic decline be reversed?

by Peter Ennis, Special Services Director

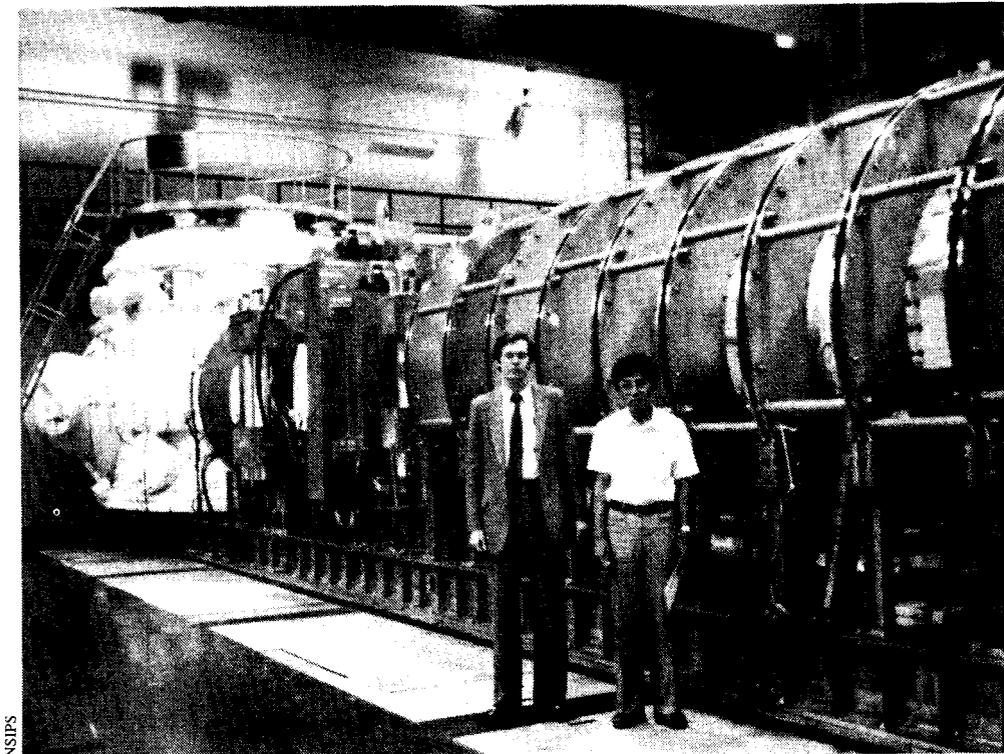
Recently, during a lengthy conversation, a Japanese friend described to this writer his view of the international political and economic environment surrounding Japan. Japan, he said, is like a person standing on the bank of a river, watching a destructive fire rage on the opposite bank. The observer, he said, must determine if the fire will spread across the river, and if he sees that it will, then he must decide how to respond. Three options are available: do nothing, and be engulfed by the fire; try to insulate his side of the river, so the fire cannot engulf him; or, try to extinguish the fire. Japan, he said, increasingly sees that the fire can indeed spread across the river, but has yet to choose its option.

When I complimented my friend on his poignant use of imagery, he rejected my compliment, insisting that he is a "typical Japanese," and that the fears he described are now common throughout Japan.

During the course of a three-week visit to Japan, this writer talked with business, political, and journalistic leaders, and found that a high degree of anxiety about the world economic and political situation does indeed exist throughout the country. On the one hand, almost all Japanese are extremely proud of the enormous progress made in the country since World War II. On the other hand, almost all of them have an extreme feeling of vulnerability, that their geographically tiny country, endowed with no raw materials, has developed an economy so powerful that its future is now inseparable from the course of international events—events which Japan, in the view of most Japanese, can only slightly influence and certainly not control. The old Japanese saying, "when the world economy sneezes, Japan catches a cold," is now taking on strategic meaning for the Japanese.

Most people in Japan firmly believe that the roots of the last world war lay in the 1930s decade of depression, and they fear that the growing instability of the world economy today could lead to a similar fate—a new world war which Japanese are all too aware would lead to their destruction.

In essence, the Japanese now see the world undergoing a process identical in every essential feature with the process that led to World War II. The anxiety in Tokyo is compounded by the fact that the United States, the country that Japan



Mr. Ennis (l) with Dr. Atsushi Mase, Associate Professor at the University of Tsukuba's Plasma Research Center, in front of the Tandem Mirror Gamma-10 experimental fusion reactor, now in construction. The Gamma-10, one of the largest machines of its kind in the world, reflects Japan's commitment to high-technology development in general and advanced energy sources in particular.

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has depended on throughout the post-war period to maintain world peace and stability, is increasingly seen in Tokyo as the "fire across the river": a major contributor to, rather than a force against, the growing world crisis.

The disastrous 1930s

The last time around, in the 1930s, the Japanese responded by asserting their world military power. In the midst of world economic depression, export markets which had collapsed by half, waves of protectionist legislation, and threats to supplies of vital raw materials, Japanese policy amounted to a military effort to create an autarchic economic structure throughout East Asia—a structure designed to allow Japan to control its own destiny and weather the raging international storm.

Most Japanese see as disastrous the consequences of those military actions; not only was Japan virtually destroyed, but the country was occupied by a foreign power for the first time in its 2,000-year history. That the defeat and occupation were the result of Japan's first real effort to exert itself as a world power has enormously influenced the way Japanese leaders think today. Few Japanese feel guilt for World War II, which they see as having been caused by the world depression. But very few see as viable any effort by Japan to again assert itself as a world military power, strategically independent of either the United States or the Soviet Union. Instead, they insist on the necessity of depending on American power to provide the environment of stability in which Japan can develop. The high degree of continuity between Japan's pre-war and post-war leadership has strengthened this view.

Alliance with America

Therefore, a discussion at this time with a Japanese leader on the proper response to the world's crisis inevitably boils down to Japan's relationship with the United States. The Japanese analyze in-depth the world's strategic, especially economic, problems, but insist that only the United States can act to restore world economic and political stability.

At the same time, Tokyo is watching in horror the effects of America's "shoot yourself in the foot" policies—high interest rates, low capital investment, hostility towards the developing countries. They wonder whether or not America is unalterably on a course of decline. Will Japan, allied with the United States, be engulfed by America's decline? Or will America's decline lead to a rupture of the U.S.-Japan alliance, leaving Japan alone, as in the 1930s, to fend for itself in the midst of growing world tension? Or, can Japan take actions to help reverse the decline of America? These are the questions Tokyo is now grappling with.

Ultimately, the Japanese reluctantly admit, their only option is to try to get the United States to act as a positive force once again in world political and economic affairs. In this regard, Japan will have to provide leadership to an America that was once the inspiration for many countries, including Japan. The dilemma for Japan is to find ways to effectively communicate to Americans the disastrous nature of its policies and provide concrete alternative directions. Failure to change the course of American policy surely means the long-term decline of the United States and possibly war with the Soviet Union. In either case, Japan would surely be engulfed by the fire.