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## Japan's rise and fall (and rise again) in *The Pacific Review*

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### ABSTRACT

Japan has featured prominently in *The Pacific Review* (TPR) since the journal's inception; and the very first issue in 1988 was essentially a Japan special issue with four out of six articles devoted to considering the implications of the country's then seemingly relentless rise as a regional and increasingly global power. Thereafter, TPR has carefully documented Japan's changing international pathway, forming indispensable reading for all Japan experts. TPR has always been distinguished by a rare ability to question the conventional wisdom on the study of Japan.

**KEYWORDS** Japan; *The Pacific Review*

Japan has featured prominently in *The Pacific Review* (TPR) since the journal's inception; and the very first issue in 1988 was essentially a Japan special issue with four out of six articles devoted to considering the implications of the country's then seemingly relentless rise as a regional and increasingly global power. Thereafter, since Volume One, in a total of 128 Japan-titled papers between 1988 and 2016, not to mention other papers including coverage of the country, TPR has carefully documented Japan's changing international pathway. But in undertaking this task over the past nearly 30 years, and forming indispensable reading for all Japan experts, TPR has always been distinguished by a rare ability to question the conventional wisdom and often be ahead of the curve on the study of Japan.

For much of the conventional wisdom in the late 1980s—unaware just around the corner in 1991 of the bursting of the Japanese financial bubble and the ensuing 'lost decade(s)' of relative economic stagnation—Japan's subsequent international trajectory surely contained unexpected outcomes. Contrary to many early predictions, or at times plain hyperbole and scare-mongering, in academic and journalistic analysis, Japan has obviously not gone on to displace the USA as the leading economic power globally or even in the Asia-Pacific. Even more unexpectedly, Japan has faced competition for economic leadership in the region from the new rising force of China. Instead, Japan has been witnessed—accompanied by much seeming domestic political introspection and indecision—to search for a new international role, involving not just economic means, but also the re-emergence as a diplomatic player, US alliance partner, and more capable military power.

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TPR, however, whilst tracking many of these trends in Japan's evolving trajectory, and participating closely in key related debates, has arguably often avoided—with occasional exceptions—many of these pitfalls and surprises of analysis found elsewhere. TPR analysis has managed to not only perceive clearly and comment centrally on trends in Japan's international role, but also in certain cases to identify alternative trajectories and set the agenda for the study of Japan. As this article seeks to elaborate, TPR can be seen to have contributed to the debate about Japan's rise and fall, then rise again of sorts, in different guises as an international actor, across four broad phases of Japanese history during the last 30 years and the journal's life. Specifically, TPR, as explicated across the four main sections of this article, made key interventions in first identifying in the 1980s that Japan's economic rise was not inexorable and its future international role limited; second, in taking the lead in analysis of Japan's refashioned role as an economic and political leader via regionalism projects in the 1990s and early 2000s; third, in discerning the rise of Japan as a more important security actor and US ally from the mid-1990s onwards; and fourth, in pointing to Sino-Japanese ties as the new nexus of Japan's international relations and the future fulcrum of regional cooperation from the late 1990s onwards.

### **TPR and the Japan agenda (1): Japan as not such a superpower or problem after all**

As noted above, TPR launched at the point of almost 'peak Japan'; the late 1980s and early 1990s characterised by endless metaphors of Japan's rising sun seeking to assume economic dominance. The 'Japan revisionist' scholars in the USA, set against a background of popular media and culture speculation, tended to view Japan as practising a developmental state model and neo-mercantilism that threatened US hegemony (Johnson, 1995; Prestowitz, 1988; van Wolferen, 1986/1987). The 'Japan problem' was routinely talked of in trade and financial circles as it sought to secure market share in the USA and Europe with a lack of reciprocal access to the Japanese market; to utilise post-Plaza Accord yen appreciation to buy up foreign assets and gain a stranglehold on US treasury bonds and government finance; and to assert control over the rapidly industrialising economies of East Asia through their organisation into a Japan-centred division of labour. Japan's reckless pursuit of supposed economic hegemony, with minimal countervailing willingness to contribute in political or security terms to international affairs, was seen to challenge the entire liberal economic and political order. Japan's harshest critics argued that domestic culture and history simply rendered it different or even unique from other advanced liberal democracies and that it could only be made to conform and cooperate through coercive measures such as trade sanctions.

TPR in initiating its examination of Japan was not entirely immune from the influence of the 'Japan revisionist' atmosphere. The 1988 Volume One special issue contained thoughtful essays that argued Japan would struggle to assume a leadership role in Asia given its own believed cultural and racial distinctiveness (Giffard, 1998; Thayer, 1988). However, more striking about the other articles in volume one and subsequent articles in this period is an effort to deal with Japan not as unique but as an actor motivated by similar rationality to the USA and other states. Moreover, TPR contributors recognised early on the feet of clay of potential Japanese economic hegemony, and that Japan itself recognised the need to diversify its international role.

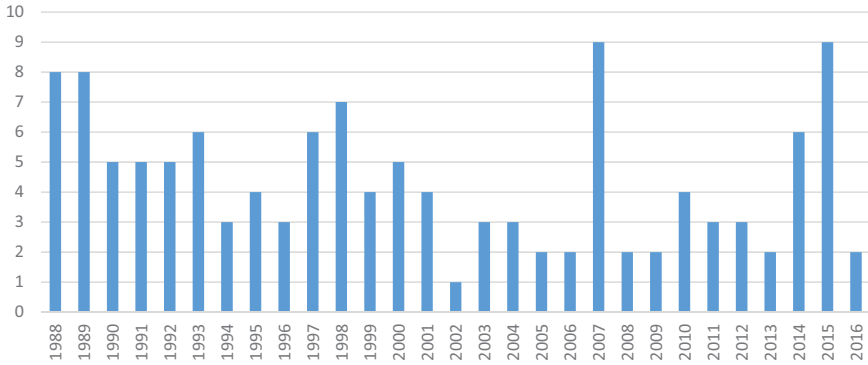


Figure 1. Number of Japan-titled papers in TPR, 1988–2016.

As Figures 1 and 2 illustrate, Japan received a heavy degree of coverage in the 1980s and 1990s and much of the early coverage of Japan was dominated by articles on political economy and domestic politics, with some excellent, if rather expected, analysis of many of the domestic barriers to imports and foreign direct investment (FDI) (Boling, 1990; George, 1990; Hamada, 1989; Wilson, 1989). Nevertheless, TPR contributors were quick to realise by the early 1990s that Japan's model of domestic political economy was undergoing fundamental transformation, or in fact unravelling. TPR carried prescient papers that argued the sun was already setting on Japan's economic miracle due to banking issues and the impending demographic crisis brought about by a rapidly ageing population profile (Emmott, 1989, 1992; Itoh, 1995). Japan was also no longer regarded as a monolithic actor with the state fully in control of mercantile objectives, and instead TPR articles demonstrated the rich plurality of actors involved in managing its political economy, the divergence of state and private sector priorities, and the emerging pressures for liberalisation (Yoshimatsu, 1998, 2007).

By the mid- to late-1990s, the discussion of the 'Japan problem' had largely disappeared from TPR contributions to be replaced by the treatment of Japan as a more 'normal' domestic political economy, facing the same problems of economic maturity as

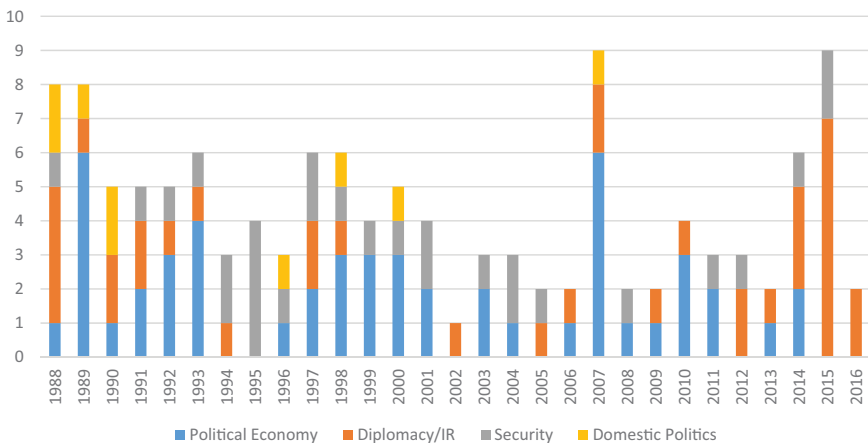


Figure 2. Distribution of major topics in Japan-titled papers in TPR, 1988–2016.

other developed states. Indeed, if there was a Japan problem at all, it was more to do with potential financial weakness and the impact on the regional and global economy (Reich, 2000). In turn, Japan's maturing economy was then to lead to a general shifting of attention away from its domestic situation and instead towards its increasing interdependence with and influence over the developing regional political economy (Walter, 2006). It was in divining the trends of regionalism, and the creation of informal and formal institutions, that TPR next began to help set the research agenda on Japan.

### **TPR and the Japan agenda (2): Japan goes regional**

Following the Plaza Accord, as Japan's FDI and production networks fanned out across East Asia much of the analysis of East Asia political economy refocused on the prospects for region-building and Japan's central role within these processes (Katzenstein & Shiraiishi, 1997). TPR was an early and key leader in the analysis of East Asian regionalism, and consequently from the mid-1990s onwards many of the articles on political economy dealt with this new development.

The TPR was a leader in first of considering the 'de facto' processes of regionalisation (Higgott, 1997) identified in the Asia-Pacific and how these were playing out in Japan's Northeast Asian neighbourhood through 'micro-regionalism' (Arnold, 1993; Bae, Shin, & Lee, 2011; Postel-Vinay, 1996; Takao, 2010). Similarly, the role of firms and non-state actors in furthering Japan's regional networks with other countries and its regional influence more broadly received attention (Harwitt, 2013; Saxonhouse, 1999; Zhang, 1998). But TPR's strongest analysis was perhaps reserved for considering the unfolding trends in 'de jure' macro-regionalism. The journal featured central and highly cited coverage of first the varying fortunes of Asia-Pacific Economic (APEC) as a potential but flawed vehicle for Japan to promote regional cooperation (Krauss, 2003; Terada, 1998, 2001), and then shifted to consider Japan's reaction to the rise of competing regional fora in both the trade and financial sectors (Gilson, 2004; Rapkin, 2001). The key themes of these articles were the frustrations that Japanese leadership experienced in the face of residual US hegemony but also with China's emergence as a regional player (Krauss, Hughes, & Blechinger-Talcott, 2007; Terada, 2010). TPR was further active in exploring how the stuttering progress of macro-regional projects by the early 2000s led to a switch of Japanese strategies and the initiation of economic cooperation centred on bilateral free trade agreements (FTAs) (Capling, 2008).

### **TPR and the Japan agenda (3): Japan's rise as a diplomatic and security actor**

Japan's relative decline in economic status and its difficulties in promoting regional economic cooperation precipitated a gradual shift in its international trajectory from the late 1990s onwards. Japan, having essentially ruled out a significant political and especially security role for itself for much of the post-war period, was obliged by changing East Asian and global circumstances to begin revitalise these aspects of its international profile (Hook, Gilson, Hughes, & Dobson, 2011). Consequently, TPR also began to detect this shift and to expand the number of articles devoted to examining its bilateral diplomatic ties and increasingly expanding security and military role.

Japan's first significant moves against the post-war grain of its international profile were discerned as early as the Volume One in 1998 which contained a far-sighted article

on the impact of the Nakasone Yasuhiro administration on the US–Japan alliance, although the conclusion was that Japan was likely to remain highly cagey about future security commitments (Langdon, 1988). The impending and then eventual collapse of the Soviet Union led to burst of articles on the future prospects for Japan–Russia relations and resolution of the Northern Territories dispute (Bridges, 1991; Buszynski, 2006; Clark, 1988; Drifte, 1993; Rozman, 1988a, 1988b). However, it was the Gulf War of 1990–1991, and the perceived Japanese abject failure to provide a contribution to the US-led international coalition beyond ‘chequebook diplomacy’ economic assistance, that really opened up new pressures and vistas for Japan to assume a more active political and security role (Akaha, 1995; Buzan, 1995; Shimizu-Niquet, 1994). Japanese diplomats and other influential commentators in the pages of TPR predicted an expanded international security role for their nation globally and regionally via more proactive contributions to the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) (Chiba, 1991; Itoh, 1995; Spruyt, 1998) and the newly established ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) (Kawasaki, 1997; Sato, 1995). Indeed, a number of articles revealed Japan’s crucial role in promoting the establishment of the ARF and other multilateral security fora, and the general reaching out to the Southeast Asian states as a new security partner to offer reassurance about its military motivations (Ashizawa, 2003; Hughes, 1996; Midford, 2000; Okawara & Katzenstein, 2001).

Nevertheless, as the problems of the ARF and other multilateral security fora in the Asia-Pacific region became apparent, not least due to the persistence of North Korea as a security concern and the resurgence of great power politics in the form of US and Chinese competition, so the analysis of Japan’s security role began to shift from the prospects of multilateralism to assume a harder edge. TPR articles considered Japan’s complex identities as a diplomatic and security actor, often torn between more a more ‘liberal’ role focused on ‘soft power’ and multilateral institutions (Hatakeyama, 2014; Heng, 2014; Honna, 2012; Oros, 2015; Singh, 2008) and a more ‘realist’ role disappointed at the progress of multilateralism and focused instead on the developing the US–Japan alliance and national military capabilities (Calder, 1992; Choi, 2004; Hughes, 1998; Kawasaki, 2001; Lind, 1997; Menon, 1994; Nakamura & Dando, 1993; Yuzawa, 2007).

Japan’s increased proactivity as a security actor has been accompanied by coverage in TPR of its more diversified diplomatic relations. TPR has kept a constant watch on the fluctuations in Japan–South Korea ties (Bukh, 2015; Rozman, 2002; Wiegand, 2015); and been an early mover in spotting the reengagement of Japan with Myanmar and Africa (Black, 2013; Cornelissen & Taylor, 2000) and Japan’s new effectiveness in global governance institutions for trade and the environment (Dobson, 2012; Okana, 2012; Pekkanen, 2003).

#### **TPR agenda setting (4): Sino-Japanese rivalry takes centre stage**

But even as Japan has assumed a more prominent role as a security actor and attempted to diversify its international relations in the post-Cold War period, the TPR has also documented how its international engagement has been forced back towards a more narrow focus due to the rise of China. Japan–China relations have always received close attention in the journal, with earlier analyses in the post-Cold period looking forward to the prospect of enhanced cooperation bilaterally or within the framework of a US–Japan–China strategic framework (Wang, 1994; Wishnick, 2008; Zhang, 1997; Zhang, 2014). In the last decade, though, the number of papers on Japan–China ties has

ramped up significantly and have tended to dwell on the deterioration of the relationship in political and economic terms.

TPR papers have provided early and continuing analyses of the growing tensions in bilateral ties brought about by the Senkaku/Diaoyu islets territorial dispute (Hagstrom, 2004; Koo, 2009; Nakano, 2016) and history issues, especially associated with Yasukuni Shrine (Cheung, 2010; Gustafsson, 2015; Koga, 2016). In the last three years, roughly half of the 14 papers on Japan have centred on Sino-Japanese relations, with other topics clearly taking a backseat in comparison. TPR's contributors have pondered the growing complexity of bilateral relations (Suzuki, 2015), and often escalation into outright competition and suspicion, in terms of food security (O'Shea, 2015), resource diplomacy in Southeast Asia, Central Asia and Africa (Dadabaev, 2014); and maritime security (Wirth, 2015).

Hence, the TPR in its coverage of Japan has not been able to escape the increasing shift in emphasis to considering the centrality of China's rise in the region, but the journal has not made the mistake of some analyses of marginalising the study of Japan. Instead, all TPR analyses have foreseen very clearly that even if Japan may never be number one in its own region, the key to understanding the potential new number one's rise in the guise of China is very much bound up in the state of Sino-Japanese relations.

### **Conclusion: Japan still matters for TPR and the region**

Japan's enduring interest in the TPR and the resultant excellence of analysis is the function of many inputs. Despite relative economic decline, Japan's sheer economic size means that it still continues to count centrally to the region's political economy, prospects for institution-building, presence of the USA, and hopes for promoting peaceful cooperation. Just as importantly, Japan, as noted in this article, continues to be of great interest because of its gradual and quiet, but nevertheless very significant transformation. In the space of 30 years, Japan has shifted from a position of being thought to be ready to impose potential *Pax Nipponica* (however outlandish a prospect that might now seem) through purely economic means (Vogel, 1986), to now turn itself into a more assertive political and military actor and increasingly staunch US ally. Japan's path has proved unpredictable and, of course, confounded many early analyses as found in the 1980s. But Japan has arguably never been more interesting and important to study because of that unpredictability and the challenges it poses to the region.

Finally, beyond the transformation of Japan itself as subject matter, TPR has performed a key role in maintaining Japan's centrality because of its essentially open approach. The journal has always demonstrated pulling power for many of the best Japan experts and IR scholars in the field, whether already well-established or newly emerging researchers. In fact, TPR and its early editors were often generous in giving a start in publishing to many of the emerging Japan scholars, and continues to offer an opportunity for early career researcher to break into the publishing field and to build an international profile. As Figure 3 demonstrates, TPR has also drawn on as mixed international authorship, drawing on insights from specialists in the UK, Europe, and the Asia-Pacific region, and not just from the USA which has tended to dominate the study of Japan's international relations in the pages of many other journals. Importantly, TPR has always had a relatively high proportion of contributors from authors based in Japan itself, whether scholars or policy-makers, so adding to the authenticity of its analysis

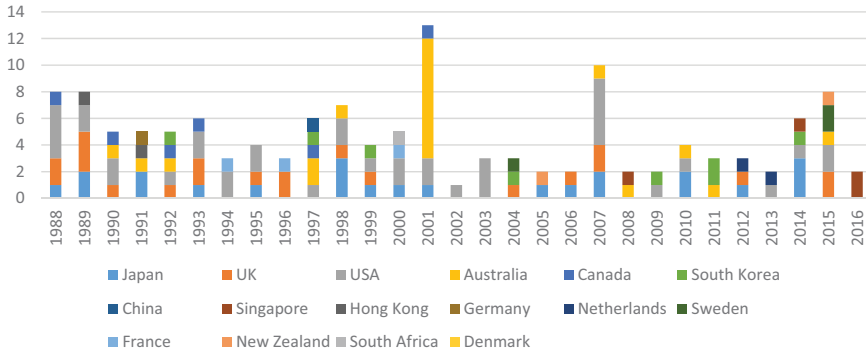


Figure 3. Distribution of country-base for TPR contributors, 1988–2016.

and giving a key voice to Japanese perspectives which might not always appear in English in top quality refereed journals. Moreover, the general editorial policy of encouraging eclectic theoretical and policy-oriented approaches, and a broad range of subject matter including domestic politics, political-economy and increasingly international relations and security, has contributed to the TPR's generation of new and critical perspectives. The TPR has thus always struck the right balance between fostering critical approaches and making sure these are embedded in sober scholarship. This has enabled TPR to fill a crucial niche amongst international relations and political economy, area studies, country-specific and policy journals in dealing with Japan. The hope is that TPR will continue for its next 30 years to follow this editorial policy and stay ahead of the game yet again in examining Japan's international trajectory.

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## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## Notes on contributor

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