



## **THE IMPLICATIONS OF JAPAN BASHING FOR U.S.-JAPAN RELATIONS**

by *Elizabeth Dahl*

For the purposes of this paper, “Japan bashing” shall be defined as those perspectives that routinely blame the Japanese for the breakdown in communication and refuse to consider that the American side might also be part of the problem. It should be noted that there are elements of truth in most Japan-bashing arguments, but this does not mean that their perspective is complete nor the virulence entirely justified.

While close allies since World War II, significant tensions arose between Japan and the United States in the 1980s concerning economic, political and security issues. While Japan bashing has subsided in the 1990s, there remains a considerable distrust between the two states that will continue to affect relations between them.

In the early 1980s, American outrage arose over the significant trade deficit and related controversies associated with Japan. The statistics revealed:

*The trade imbalance stands at 50 billion dollars annually in Japan’s favor; Japan’s per capita income is higher than that of the United States; eight of the world’s largest banks are Japanese; a single Japanese corporation, Nippon Telegraph and Telephone, is worth more than IBM, AT&T, General Motors, General Electric, and Exxon combined; nearly a third of the U.S. budget deficit is now shouldered by Japanese investors; Japan’s share in the global financial and capital market stands at 40 percent.<sup>1</sup>*

The acrimonious debate that ensued forced the Japanese to adapt their foreign policy to address some American concerns. While many aspects of the relationship have changed since the 1990s, lingering suspicions still remain between the two countries, who are traditional allies.

It remains difficult to find a balanced treatment of the recent U.S.-Japan relationship. As Stephen Cohen notes, most “[a]nalyzes are colored by underlying assumptions, whether of a Japanese economic conspiracy or sour grapes by a jealous, fading superpower.”<sup>2</sup> Specific issues between Japan and the United States get tangled up in emotional negativity and stereotyping, and, at times,

certain opinions merit the label of “Japan bashing.”

However, what are the criteria for “Japan bashing”? This conceptual problem is noted by Miyoshi:

*A basher can be informed or uninformed, analytic or irrational, honest or deceptive; in short, anyone who is less than encouraging, enthusiastic, or euphoric about Japan seems to qualify as one.*<sup>3</sup>

It is for this reason that the charge of “Japan bashing” may not hold much weight in influential American policy-making circles. “Japan bashing” is potentially tautological, much like other emotion-laden charges. One accused Japan basher, Claude Prestowitz, retorted that the label was “a McCarthyist trick to avoid discussion of the issue.”<sup>4</sup> Another aspect of this circularity is that, depending on the context, “Japan bashing” may be a symptom of underlying problems in the U.S.-Japan relationship or one of its causes.

Given the lack of certainty regarding the term, why does “Japan bashing” matter? For one, the phenomenon of “Japan bashing” and the polarized positions of the U.S. and Japan indicates the presence of a significant conflict between these two nations commonly described as close allies. At times, difficult U.S.-Japan negotiations have been framed much like a zero-sum game. Also, while substantive issues exist, a more fundamental problem -- that of cultural misunderstandings and misperceptions between Japanese and American negotiators -- has been under-addressed. In the United States, Japan bashing represents a political shortcut, a rallying cry for Americans to rouse from their apathy and feelings of powerlessness. Moreover, an America that has a foreign scapegoat does not have to look so much at its own problems. The idea that Japanese trade was costing American jobs and that America’s decline was being hastened by Japanese ascendancy was intuitively appealing.<sup>5</sup> In sum, American “Japan bashing” may suffice in the short-term, but it ultimately is destructive, misguided, and diversionary.

Moreover, Japan bashing may have the unintended deleterious effect of fueling Japanese nationalism and neo-militarism. A common feature of the situation is the plaintive lament of those Japanese who at some level feel personally wounded by the charges, as well as the enraged response of some Japanophiles. Some have reported that “Japan has begun to ‘view both reasonable and unreasonable requests as U.S. pressure and reacts defensively and antagonistically.’”<sup>6</sup> It should be noted that some Japanese believe that American Japan-bashing comes from the motivation of keeping Asians down; that the American-European powers conspire, perhaps, subconsciously, to discriminate against Asians. Another charge is that “Americans started out talking about rules, but now are switching to results. Many Americans assume that if they don’t keep winning, the whole system must be ‘unfair’.”<sup>7</sup>

American attitudes toward Japan range from those who desire to give Japan the benefit of the doubt to those who come dangerously close to collapsing their image of Japan into negative stereotypes. However, while Japan and the United States have had negative, conflicted interactions, military conflict remains a remote possibility. Of course, there are those who believe

otherwise, such as Friedman and Lebard, who envision the possibility of a “long, dreary Cold War” between Japan- and American-led coalitions in the Pacific.<sup>8</sup>

As Stephen Cohen suggests, however, emotion and oversimplification are present on both sides of the conflict;<sup>9</sup> there are "America bashers," too. Thus, another feature of the conflict is that of dueling victimhoods; both sides feel unjustly persecuted. However, this paper shall focus primarily upon the psycho-social phenomenon of Japan bashing as well as its impact on the U.S.-Japan relationship.

### ***The Phenomenon of Japan Bashing in the United States***

In the mid-1980s, negative stereotypes of the Japanese began to appear in popular books and movies, such as Michael Crichton's *Rising Sun* and the movie “Black Rain.”<sup>10</sup> Deep-seated fears of Japanese infiltration of the United States and frustration over perceived ruthless trade practices and “job stealing” worked to mobilize anti-Japanese sentiments in the American populace. According to a *Newsweek* report,

*Most now view Japan as a greater threat than the Soviet Union. They consider its trading practices unfair and think Washington should push Tokyo harder to change them.*<sup>11</sup>

It also is well known in the United States that Japanese businesses have a reputation for being sexist toward women workers, and that their best, highest-ranking job positions go to Japanese.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, such opinions as Nakasone's infamous comments on Afro-Americans and Hispanics have reinforced a sense of racism on the part of Japanese.<sup>13</sup> Various incidents such as these worked to prick Americans' pride and inspire a sense of nostalgia for a mythically pure American past.

During this time, isolated acts of violence against Asians began to occur. In Detroit in 1982, unemployed workers mistook a Chinese-American for Japanese and beat him to death.<sup>14</sup> Little punishment was meted out for this violent, racially-motivated crime, but it garnered significant attention in Asian communities.

Meanwhile, the concerns of the American populace did not go unnoticed by members of the U.S. Congress. Representatives and senators had a prime opportunity to pander to their constituencies. Powerful American businesses also lobbied extensively so that Japanese protectionism and influence would be countered. Moreover, many congressional staffers read such books as Pat Choate's *Agents of Influence* to acquaint themselves with the American version of the troubled U.S.-Japan relationship. As Choate's title suggests, the role of the Japanese lobby in the United States was frowned upon for its attempts to influence and co-opt American policymakers.<sup>15</sup> At some level, many came to assume that Japan could not be trusted.

The MOSS (Market Oriented Sector Specific) talks in 1985 are one example of this perception. These talks were designed to address particular Japanese trade barriers in areas in which American businesses were internationally competitive and yet unsuccessful in Japan.<sup>16</sup> However, “some impatient congressmen said . . . [the MOSS talks] really stood for “More of the Same S---,”<sup>17</sup> even though some progress was made.

In May 1989, after experiencing significant Congressional pressure, the Bush administration took the step of placing Japan on the Super 301 list of “unfair” trading partners with the understanding that sanctions would be imposed in eighteen months if Japanese markets did not open.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, this economic brinkmanship brought results. After being included on the Super 301 list, Japan reduced import barriers on supercomputers, satellites, and wood products—three key American products.<sup>19</sup> Therefore, experience has demonstrated that Japan bashing serves an instrumental purpose<sup>20</sup> as a “good cop” (executive branch), “bad cop” (U.S. Congress) tactic to obtain compliance.

However, the tendency to blame economic hardship on other countries comes dangerously close to perceiving the other as an enemy. This linkage is acknowledged at times, as one student told me in regards to the U.S.-Japan conflict that, “It’s good to have an enemy”<sup>21</sup>--economic competition leads to progress. However, violence against Asians due to Japan bashing is not a remote possibility.<sup>22</sup> This scapegoating justifiably concerns some Asians.<sup>23</sup> Japan bashing presents a reminder that a “hint of racism has always existed on the fringe of U.S. attitudes toward Japan.”<sup>24</sup>

### ***Areas of Tension in U.S.-Japan Relations***

This section will contain a discussion of the different arenas in which tensions between the United States and Japan have arisen. First, Japan’s domestic political structure will be discussed, in part because of the advantages it accords Japan economically. Then, the economic level will be considered. Lastly, the security dimension of the conflict will be discussed. It should be noted that these three areas overlap, but at present the dominant element is that of economics.

Although usually considered to be a democracy, Japan has significant differences from Western democracies. According to Chalmers Johnson, Japan’s political style demonstrates a “soft authoritarianism.”<sup>25</sup> Interestingly, the authoritarian aspects of Japan are not well known in the United States, although its protectionism is. Perhaps the oft repeated “democracies do not fight each other” argument has worked to gloss over such political differences. As Johnson states,

*Japan’s performance . . . challenges the Anglo-American “free enterprise” economies because it calls into question their theory that governmental intervention into the economy is inevitably inefficient and distorting, and it also suggests that their faith in the market mechanism without explicit political direction is misplaced.*<sup>26</sup>

The developmental state works to protect struggling, new and/or promising industries in Japan,<sup>27</sup> but Japanese political parties remain cozy with bureaucratic and business interests.<sup>28</sup> Political corruption is often a concern.

Meanwhile, when it comes to the U.S.-Japan trade deficit, “The facts are not in serious dispute, [but] their explanation and interpretation are among the most controversial issues in the field of comparative political economy.”<sup>29</sup> It is generally agreed, for example, that Japan is protectionist.<sup>30</sup> Also, most analysts agree that the hard work and high savings rate of the Japanese people, artificially-low yen, selective import restrictions, and protection during the Cold War by the United States all permitted Japan to grow quickly.<sup>31</sup> Moreover, experts note “the amazingly swift emergence of Japan as the world’s leading creditor nation;”<sup>32</sup> whereas, the U.S. became the world’s biggest borrower.<sup>33</sup> Lastly, there is general agreement about the significance of the American trade deficit with Japan.<sup>34</sup>

Some theorists believe that, especially in the 1980s, Japanese concessions were more symbolic than actual, focusing on single rather than structural issues.<sup>35</sup> Furthermore, Stephen Cohen notes that other countries, both European and Asian, have had similar difficulties with entering the Japanese market.<sup>36</sup> Some argue that such examples as the American share of the Japanese semiconductor market from 1970 to 1986 demonstrate the extent of Japanese market impermeability.

*During that period almost every part of the “process” changed. The yen rose and fell against the dollar. American companies set up sales offices in Tokyo. Prime Ministers promised to open the market. Sanctions and action plans were announced. At the beginning of the period the American makers held nine percent of the market. At the end of the period they held 9 percent.*<sup>37</sup>

In the past, Japanese-American trade rivalries were downplayed due to the significance of the strategic relationship.<sup>38</sup> However, with the end of the Cold War, much of the attention has turned from military concerns to the economic rivalry. Lincoln is representative of the current American viewpoint: Japan has let the U.S. down by not playing fair. The entire question is framed from an American perspective, thus managing to avoid collaborative thinking. This powerful mingling of disappointment, irritation, and distrust may also be related to lack of attention to socio-cultural differences. Such a perspective would help explain, for example, why it is probable that Japanese society simply prefers its own style of policymaking and governance.

One American concern has lessened -- that of Japan buying up significant portions of the United States.<sup>39</sup> However, this change has received little attention. Instead, Japan is receiving negative press because it has been accused of not reforming monetarily in the way the United States approves.<sup>40</sup>

There is general agreement that American generosity after World War II allowed the “Japanese miracle” to take place as Japan could concentrate on its economic development and export strategy.<sup>41</sup> Green indicates that the Japan-U.S. defense alliance has eroded since the end of the Cold War, and now resembles trade negotiations.<sup>42</sup>

A lot of the change is due to the damage done to U.S.-Japanese relations by the Gulf War. Japan’s slow response to the United States’ request for support, due mostly to the nature of its consensus-building style of governance, was met with disgust although Japan contributed significant monetary support.<sup>43</sup>

Partially in response to the Gulf War debacle, Japan changed its policy in 1992 by sending troops abroad for international peacekeeping.<sup>44</sup> However, significant controversy has continued to exist regarding this decision.<sup>45</sup> It is widely known that any perceived rise in Japanese militarism would provoke a negative reaction in neighboring Asian countries.<sup>46</sup> Thus, uncertainty over China and North Korea necessitates some American presence in Japan as a protective buffer.<sup>47</sup>

However, there are those, such as former Prime Minister Morihiro Hosokawa, who would like to change the current nature of the U.S.-Japan alliance.<sup>48</sup> While he wants Japan to maintain its close ties with the United States in terms of security, Hosokawa would prefer the American bases to reduce their troop numbers. In fact, Hosokawa believes that Japan should not renew the military alliance in 2000.<sup>49</sup> Although he does not agree with Hosokawa’s plan, even Mochizuki, from the Brookings Institution, is in favor of continuing the alliance. Accommodating Japanese concerns about the presence of U.S. troops on Okinawa should be acceptable so long as American strategic needs are also taken into consideration.<sup>50</sup>

Actually, the security element is perhaps of less concern than trade at the moment, although one would not know that to read such theorists as Friedman and Lebard, who foresee a re-militarized Japan as a threat to the United States in the near future.<sup>51</sup> More typical are the concerns discussed by Green regarding technology transfer. For one, some American business leaders have recalled with anxiety that American consumer electronics died because of Japanese competition and innovation. The fear is that the same process will take place with intricate military technology.<sup>52</sup>

The notable FSX controversy was based, in part, on fears that American technological achievements would fall into Japanese hands without technological “flowback.”<sup>53</sup> Americans want to make technology-transfer agreements that also ensure Japanese compliance. However, care is being taken to make this policy universal so that Japan will not be singled out.<sup>54</sup>

Other concerns relate to Japan’s indigenous military weapons production. Policy makers fear that the United States military could become too dependent on Japanese technology.<sup>55</sup> Of course, it should be noted that these concerns are mirrored by the Japanese in regards to American technology.<sup>56</sup> Lastly, the damage done to the relationship when Toshiba sold advanced submarine propeller technology to the Soviet Union is well remembered,<sup>57</sup> so security concerns also are

present.

### **Misunderstandings Based on Negotiation Style/Cultural Differences**

One of the keys to discerning what is “Japan bashing” may be tactics. Most American theorists advocate using “unrelenting pressure” against Japan,<sup>58</sup> including those who indicate that some sensitivity toward the Japanese is necessary. For example:

*It is time for the United States to send less-than-subtle signals in other areas of its relationship with Japan. The bilateral relationship includes broad consultative arrangements, within which American officials could simply stop consulting. Through canceled meetings, unreturned phone calls, and a lack of advance notice of American policy moves, the United States can send the message that it no longer regards Japan as a global partner. This may seem like a heavy-handed way to treat the world's second-largest economy, but under present circumstances it may be the only way to move Japan off a path that is destructive for us all.<sup>59</sup>*

Lincoln's words demonstrate the tendency for Americans to focus on specific, instrumental -- or superficially goal-oriented -- tasks. This unsubtle strategy cannot be effective for long in the Japanese cultural context.

Indeed, the tendency to adopt this strategy was summarized by Carla Hills. When she said that she had come “with a crowbar” to bargain with Japan.<sup>60</sup> Similarly, the first words of advice to the U.S. in a *Newsweek* cover issue on Japan, were that the United States should “push harder on trade.”<sup>61</sup> Meanwhile, Fallows suggests that the Japanese and Americans should “face it directly” and deal with their trade problem rather than “pretend it doesn't exist.” Of course, Fallows' definition of the conflict is that it “arises from Japan's inability or unwillingness to restrain the one-sided and destructive expansion of its economic power.”<sup>62</sup>

It should be noted that efforts have been made to adapt negotiation strategy to Japanese culture. However, it seems that American negotiators such as Mickey Kantor have merely found a Japanese form of frontal assault strategy.<sup>63</sup> By their discovery of *gaiatsu*, or “external pressure forcing the Japanese to adopt policies really in their own domestic interest,” Americans found some justification for the pressure strategy on the Japanese.<sup>64</sup> However, little changed by bullying, and after initial *gaiatsu* successes the strategy fell apart.

In fact, the Japanese have come to view American complaints as ill-informed and selfish,<sup>65</sup> and have tired of the repetitive cycle of trade tensions. Moreover, some reform-minded Japanese have warned their American counterparts that Japanese efforts to change should be praised rather than criticized for not going far enough.

Perhaps this is why some describe “the American approach to bargaining as the “John Wayne Style”<sup>66</sup> American negotiators tend to favor competition and short-term gain, whereas the Japanese favor long-term and prefer to persuade behind the scenes.<sup>67</sup>

These examples demonstrate how much may be done to ameliorate the U.S.-Japan relationship if policy makers paid more attention to the significant cultural differences between the two countries. In particular, an appreciation of the more complex, “high-context” (communal as opposed to individualistic) culture of Japan and key Japanese negotiating concepts might bring forth a more sensitive and adept American bargaining style.

As Tenhover notes, “most cultural differences lie hidden beneath the surface of our awareness.”<sup>68</sup> Often, American and Japanese negotiators have talked past each other in terms of their true needs and interests.<sup>69</sup> As a result, little has been accomplished other than temporary solutions to larger problems.

### ***Japan Bashing Has Lessened But Has Not Vanished: Implications for the Future***

Several changes have occurred that have turned attention away from the tensions between Japan and the United States. For one, symbolic concessions have been made which have pacified most Americans, such as opening the Japanese market to American rice. Moreover, Japan’s “bubble economy” burst in 1992, forcing Japanese investors to sell some of their more controversial purchases in the United States.

Lastly, the People’s Republic of China has emerged in recent years as a more likely spoiler to American national interests.<sup>70</sup> It is important to note that as “the 1990s draw to a close, little of the tension that suffused relations between Japan and the United States throughout the decade has been resolved.”<sup>71</sup>

For Japan, the phenomenon of “Japan bashing” should be a warning that serious attention needs to be paid to public relations, particularly with the United States. In the long term, amiable relations with the United States are essential to Japan’s place in the world, and visa versa.

An important step toward understanding is to view potential actions and statements from the other’s perspective, so that the other’s actions take on more coherence. Both sides should think in terms of mutual benefit and collaborative projects that promote interdependence.

However, an unfortunate aspect of the American perception of the U.S.-Japan relationship is that “good news is no news when it comes to Japan.”<sup>72</sup> This dynamic justifiably causes the Japanese some distress, especially given the cultural importance given to loyalty in the *amae* relationship.<sup>73</sup> One example of this lack of concern came in the summer of 1998 when the “stabilizing importance of the U.S.-Japan alliance in Asia” was not affirmed by Clinton in his warm talks with

Jiang Zemin, leader of the People's Republic of China -- a country far less apt to follow American requests than Japan.<sup>74</sup>

Indeed, some Japanese theorists believe that "Japan bashing" has come back.<sup>75</sup> The slow Japanese response to the Gulf War still is problematic to the relationship, as American policymakers remain dismissive of Japanese efforts. For example:

*Hosokawa should not make too much of Japan's checkbook diplomacy. Although generous in dollars, it pales next to the military contributions of allies like Great Britain and South Korea, who are willing to fight shoulder to shoulder with the United States.*<sup>76</sup>

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

It should be noted that, in terms of U.S.-Japan negotiations in past years:

*Both sides essentially got what they were seeking. The United States got free-market purity, served the interests of its consumers, and politically defused the anger of import-impacted industrial sectors; Japan got trade purity (exports maximized relative to imports), served the interests of its producers, and politically defused the anger of its most important trading partner. . . The process repeatedly defused dangerous situations while preserving the basic friendship of the two countries. Neither side suffered costs that it truly found intolerable.*<sup>77</sup>

Some theorists such as Campbell glibly agree that such "games" work,<sup>78</sup> although it should be noted that his specialty is in diplomacy rather than inter-cultural communication.

However, the current system of the U.S. and Japan "negotiating in circles"<sup>79</sup> will not be sufficient in the long term. While the public ritual may satisfy American onlookers, it cannot address the deep-rooted aspects of the problem. For example, a confidence-building suggestion would include an agreement to enact the policies requested of each other in the Structural Impediments Initiative negotiations.<sup>80</sup>

Another possibility is for Japanese leadership to enlist U.S. diplomats and others as intermediaries to familiarize Americans with the Japanese style of negotiating. According to Miyoshi, this step has already been attempted.<sup>81</sup> Explaining the motivation behind what appears to be an opaque negotiating style and lesser respect for binding, legalistic commitments may help reframe matters for American officials.

American leaders need to work toward a more reasoned, less "political" way of approaching trade issues with Japan.<sup>82</sup> It is important to note that Japan has had positive relations with the United

States in the past. Thus, Lincoln's suggestion that calls not be returned to Japanese officials as a sign of American displeasure<sup>83</sup> is not the way to go.

The U.S.-Japan relationship is double-edged. An awareness of cultural differences probably will not end the conflict completely, but it may help prevent either side from taking differences negatively. Thus, when it comes to this crucial relationship, the process of negotiating may itself be as important as pursuing stated foreign policy goals.

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