In *Overcoming Isolationism: Japan’s Leadership in East Asian Multilateralism*, Paul Midford examines why Japan became a leader of regional security multilateralism in the early 1990s after having been a regional security isolationist since the end of World War II. Midford argues that the driving force of Japan’s foreign policy change is Japan’s need to reassure its neighbors that—despite its wartime atrocities—Japan is and will continue to be a benign great power. While arguing that the reassurance imperative is the primary motivation for Japan’s emergent leadership and continued participation, Midford also notes that Japan uses regional security institutions to manage the abandonment-entrapment dilemma vis-à-vis the United States, as well as to provide nontraditional security benefits that cannot be provided unilaterally by Japan or bilaterally by the US-Japan alliance. Once the various regional multilateral security institutions were established, Japan remained engaged in order to balance and isolate rivals and to prevent anti-Japan balancing and Japan’s isolation within these institutions.

“Reassurance” is a key concept in Midford’s argument. What he means by this is that states reassure other states through words and actions that signal their benign intent toward said other states to discourage those other states from balancing against it. Reassurance is based on states having a “security dilemma sensibility,” or “the ability to understand the role that fear might play” in others’ “attitudes and behavior, including crucially, the role that one’s own actions may play in provoking that fear” (p. 18).[1] Reassurance is particularly important in a former aggressor’s relationship with its former victim. Depending on the regional and international circumstances, reassurance can either take the form of regional security multilateralism or regional security isolationism. Security multilateralism is defined as “institutions comprising three or more states that are established for the purpose of facilitating the exchange of security-relevant information or for the purpose of coordinating the security policies of members states” (p. 13). Leadership and participation in security multilateralism signal a state’s benign intentions by “potentially [offering] a means for efficiently providing information about the state’s security policies and force structure, thereby making it easier for the state to demonstrate its benign intentions to others” and providing “an opportunity to contain and channel the state’s contributions to regional and global security.” By leading and
participating in multilateral security institutions, “the state avoids using its military unilaterally, and rather uses it only in consultation and cooperation with others,” and “through iterated contributions to regional security that benefit others, the state can become the recipient of beneficial attributions by others” (p. 20). Regional security isolationism signals the state’s benign intentions by forswearing regional military activities altogether.

In Midford’s argument, postwar Japan’s foreign policy is driven by a perennial need to reassure neighboring states, that is, its World War II victims, that it will never again be an aggressive great power. This general need to reassure remains a constant in Japan’s foreign policymaking throughout the postwar period. Yet how exactly Japan reassures at any specific moment fluctuates in response to events abroad that showcase just how low the region’s trust in Japan still is (e.g., 1974 Tanaka riots) and trends that indicate to regional states that Japan is returning to great power status (e.g., Japan’s postwar economic recovery). How the reassurance imperative is acted on also depends on leaders having the policy ingenuity to respond to these events and trends appropriately and creatively (e.g., Satoh Yukio).

With a powerful ally in the United States and facing a low threat environment, Japan was uniquely positioned to be able to reassure its neighbors through regional security isolationism through the Cold War. Japan could afford to forswear regional military activities, as it did when it promised to never become a military power in the 1977 Fukuda Doctrine. But when the Cold War ended, Japan needed to reassure its neighbors through regional security multilateralism. The collapse of the Soviet Union created a regional power vacuum in East Asia, which Japan’s neighbors feared Japan would fill aggressively. It also meant that Japan’s neighbors were concerned about whether the United States would still be committed to containing Japanese militarism and about greater US expectations for Japan to contribute to international security (e.g., the Gulf War), which regional states also opposed. Regional security isolationism was no longer sufficiently reassuring.

Midford argues that “a diffusion of new ideas about common security and confidence building, a resurgence of the reassurance imperative, growing fear of US abandonment, and an emerging regional leadership competition” pushed Japan toward regional security multilateralism in the early 1990s (p. 47). Satoh Yukio, “a career diplomat who was appointed director general of the Research and Analysis Bureau in January 1990,” played an instrumental role in creatively and proactively rethinking Japan’s position on multilateral security institutions and crafting the Nakayama proposal (p. 59). Satoh developed the “idea of establishing a like-minded security forum where Japan could reassure its neighbors about its disposition as a military power even as it began playing a direct security role beyond its borders for the first time. In so doing, Satoh turned the Fukuda Doctrine on its head, turning mistrust of Japan as a military power from a reason not to discuss regional security with East Asian neighbors into a reason to establish just such a dialogue” (p. 169). The 1991 Nakayama proposal called for the creation of a regional multilateral political dialogue among Post-Ministerial Conference (PMC) members and for the use of this political dialogue as a tool for Japan to reassure its neighbors. The Nakayama proposal achieved a partial victory in January 1992 when ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) states agreed to add a regional security dialogue to the PMC. However, this was never institutionalized. Instead, in May 1993, ASEAN created the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) as a security dialogue. Despite some setbacks since, Japan has continued to engage with and lead in regional security institutions.

Midford tests the reassurance hypothesis against competing hypotheses through interviews and analysis of primary documents. The book’s historical narrative begins with the rejection of
the Pacific Pact and goes up to the US president Donald Trump’s administration, but the heart of the book is the time period from the Nakayama proposal (1991) to the creation of ARF (1993). This seems to be a sweet spot in terms of interviewee availability, as many of the direct participants from Japan, the United States, and several ASEAN countries are still alive but removed enough from the events to speak candidly, including Nakayama Taro and Satoh. Midford was also able to interview individuals close to late prime minister Fukuda Takeo to get a clearer picture of the origins of the Fukuda Doctrine and late prime minister Miyazawa Kiichi in April 2005 to understand the Miyazawa initiatives between the Nakayama proposal and the creation of ARF. Despite having an impressive array of interviews from the diplomatic corps and security intelligentsia to cover the time period from the Fukuda Doctrine to the present-day, Midford is careful in contextualizing the insights he received from his interviewees, in particular cross-referencing one person’s account with either another participant’s account or written documentation whenever possible to correct for personal biases.

In addition to interviews, the book also analyzes declassified Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) documents, including “never-published details of the early draft of the Fukuda Doctrine speech,” as well as declassified documents from Miyazawa’s advisory panel (pp. 6-7). To obtain and analyze “an even wider array of previously classified documents from MOFA and the Cabinet Office, including early drafts of the Nakayama proposal,” Midford used Japan’s National Information Disclosure Laws to great effect (p. 6). Midford’s close attention to earlier drafts and catching minute changes over subsequent iterations illuminates the policymaking process itself and helps rule out alternative explanations. The conclusion provides an overview of which hypotheses were supported and which were not by the evidence he found, but since much of Midford’s argument rests on the presence or absence of certain motivations in the policymaking process, it would have been helpful if the book had more specifically pointed out the absence of alternative motivations throughout.

Given the contemporary significance of the book, there are three issues that could have been engaged with further to the benefit of readers. First, how might Japan address the root cause of its neighbors’ dispositional distrust of it, namely, its aggression in World War II? Midford draws a distinction between historical and military reassurance: military reassurance “includes measures to convince another about a nation’s nonaggressive intentions, its military doctrine, the character of its military institutions, and the character and quality of the state’s control of its military. Historical reassurance, by contrast, entails convincing another that one’s view of history is not fundamentally different from its own, especially in ways that could justify future acts of aggression” (p. 18). This distinction is helpful to focus the scope of the book on military reassurance, and perhaps even a useful corrective to Western commentaries that overemphasize Japan’s lack of historical reassurance.

However, in the real world, Japan’s neighbors (either genuinely or strategically) see a connection between historical and military reassurances. Questions remain: First, how much trust can military reassurance restore if it is not complemented with historical reassurance? Why are leaders who are so astute about military reassurance not also concerned about historical reassurance? Are they instrumentally avoiding historical reassurance because they believe it is politically infeasible, or do they ideologically believe Japan has already done all the historical reassurance it has to do?

Second, did these multilateral security institutions work to reassure the states that Japan wanted to reassure? Midford provides ample evidence that Japanese policymakers wanted to reassure neighboring states and that they believed they could do so through multilateral security in-
stitutions. Were they right? Have these multilateral security institutions improved neighboring states’ trust in Japan? Midford believes that “Japan’s post-1990 regional reassurance strategy has been successful,” yet at the time the book was published “even in Southeast Asia ... growing trust and security cooperation have not led to invitations for direct SDF [Japanese Self-Defense Forces] military involvement or deployments in the region” (p. 171). More evidence could have been provided to support the point that reassurance has been successful. Perhaps it is too soon to know the answer to this question, but one naturally wonders whether such a dramatic change in Japan’s regional foreign policy caused or will cause equally dramatic changes in the regional security landscape.

Third, where does the “security dilemma sensibility”—the intellectual source of reassurance policies—come from? Does it come from individual leaders’ lived experiences or from classrooms or from international exchanges? As Japan’s wartime atrocities become ever-distant memories, should we expect generational change in how Japanese leaders prioritize military reassurance? Or should we expect Japanese leaders to continue to prioritize military reassurance as it is passed down in institutionalized doctrine that does not fade over time? Though such an individual-level analysis would have been methodologically outside the scope of this book, it would be illuminating to hear Midford’s thoughts on this matter. Midford concludes the book by noting that the reassurance imperative “certainly does not matter as much as it did in the beginning of the 1990s,” but “for Japan, reassurance still matters for several reasons” (pp. 170, 171, emphasis added). Will Japanese leaders continue to prioritize military reassurance as Midford advises? The answer to this question depends at least partly on where the “security dilemma sensibility” comes from.

Overall, the book achieves its objective: “to understand an intrinsically important case” (p. 7). It is “the first book-length study of this critical turning point in Japanese security strategy, and one of very few studies that examine this case at any length” (p. 4). This book is recommended for anyone interested in understanding Japan’s post-war foreign policy shift, ASEAN and regional security developments, and the reasons Japan is likely to remain a proactive player in this realm. It is also useful for any theorists who are looking for cases of how individual agency (i.e., policy entrepreneurs) and international structure (i.e., end of the Cold War) interact to produce policy transformations.

Note

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