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Mike Mansfield 1903-2001

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An Interview with U.S. Ambassador to Japan, Mike Mansfield

Shortly after President Ronald Reagan took office, he made a telephone call to the U.S. Embassy in Tokyo. There, Ambassador Mike Mansfield, the Democrats' former Senate Majority Leader, and his wife, were packing for their anticipated return home to retirement. To the Ambassador's surprise, the Republican President asked Mansfield to remain as his representative in Japan.

Japanese and Japan's American residents have welcomed the President's bipartisan gesture. The 78-year-old is known as an omono taishi ("big-name ambassador") to the Japanese, who believe their country benefits from the access he enjoys to a wide range of U.S. opinion-makers. To mark the start of his new assignment and the 35th anniversary (eds.: June 1981) of publication of our Japanese edition, Ambassador Mansfield granted an interview to Ko Shioya, the Japanese Digest's editor-in-chief, and Anthony Paul, our Hong Kong-based roving editor assigned to the Asia-Pacific region.

Q. For many years now, U.S.-Japan trade figures have been grossly out of balance. In both nations, the press reports continuing U.S. demands on Japan for higher levels of defense spending. And yet, you've been quoted as saying that U.S.-Japan relations have never been better. In the face of such fundamental policy conflicts, Mr. Ambassador, how can you justify such a view?

A. I think you have to look at the picture as a whole. For a while, we had the trade surplus with Japan and only in recent years has the situation been reversed. This past year, our deficit with Japan came out to about $9.9 billion. But at the same time, our surplus with the West European Community is $17.7 billion. Japan's total surplus worldwide was $2.1 billion -- not much in the way of surplus if you look at the situation as a whole.

So, I do think that when we don't break the picture into parts, we find we have the makings of a sound relationship. Of course, we've had difficulties on occasion. We're bound to, as the world two biggest industrial democracies. Time and again, though, Japanese and Americans have responded to what a friend of mine has described as "incalculable opportunities disguised as insoluble problems." We have taken such problems and made them opportunities to talk
rationally, to consult, to understand and build the machinery to solve similar problems that may occur in the future.

Q. Will U.S. policies toward Japan take new directions under President Reagan?

A. I don't think so. The course has been set; the policy by and large will remain the same. Now and again, there'll be emphasis on various factors -- on the disparity in automobiles, on defense -- but hopefully in a private manner.

Q. It seems that for almost all this century, the U.S. and Japan, when we are not fighting each other on the battlefield, are fighting in the marketplace. Are our two nations always going to be on such collision courses, or is there some hope for future trade "peace"?

A. There are bound to be difficulties from time to time, and I think we have to expect them and prepare for them and keep them from becoming political issues. It's impossible to anticipate a peaceful relationship in the sense that you've expressed it. But by and large I think our two nations have been able to cope effectively with past trade wars.

I think there were times when we've probably gone too far -- for example, at the time of the Textile Agreement seven years ago. But we've learned from that and the Japanese have learned something about us from that. Since that time, in facing up to difficulties over such things as T.V. and steel exports and now autos we've been able by and large, to arrive at mutually satisfactory solutions.

During the 34 years I spent in Congress, what concerned me was that most of the time I was almost alone in showing an interest in this part of the world. But that's changing now. The European bias still is maintained but much more interest is being shown about the Pacific and East Asia. This region is far more important to the future than Western Europe. I'm convinced, for example, that the next big oil area which will be uncovered and exploited lies off the East Asian and Southeast Asian coast. You've got everything out here and we better take advantage of it while we have the chance.

Q. What of China trade? Japanese and American firms seem to be scrambling at the moment for the best possible position in a revitalized Chinese marketplace. Do you foresee any future U.S.-Japan problems there?

A. No, I anticipate friendly competition. The Chinese market is turning out not to be what many people thought it would be, and I would anticipate a good trade relationship on the part of Japan and the U.S. with China in the years ahead.
In pursuing modernization and a climate of security in which modernization can succeed, China is likely to turn outward -- toward Japan, the U.S. and Europe -- for technology and trade and, to a degree, for tacit political support. It clearly behooves us to be judiciously responsive. For we all have a profound interest in a stable, peaceful China engaged productively in the international system.

Of course, despite normalization of U.S. relations with China, the first and most important partner and ally of the U.S. in Asia and the Pacific is Japan. But both Japan and the U.S. benefit from the fact that China is, in a sense, an Asian NATO holding down 47 first-rate modern Soviet divisions and 26 percent of the Soviet air force at no cost to us.

Q. Mr. Ambassador, let's talk for a moment about Japan in Asia. Do you foresee any changes in the economic and political role Japan will have to play in our own part of the world?

A. Yes, and I think that's becoming apparent. Beginning with former Prime Minister Takeo Fukuda's trip to the ASEAN area in 1977, there has been a gradual expansion in Japan's relations with the rest of Asia and especially with East Asia. I think that is a good procedure. Japan has had to move very carefully because of memories of the Pacific War but she had done quite well. The promises made by Mr. Fukuda in 1977 and the latest visit by Prime Minister Zenko Suzuki in January have all strengthened that relationship, have broadened Japan's outlook and have created a satisfactory situation between ASEAN and the Japanese economically and otherwise.

Q. Japan has been called "an economic giant, a military midget." And yet history teaches us that economically powerful countries have always felt obliged to have strong armed forces. In your view, Mr. Ambassador, will the Japanese be compelled to spend more on our defense?

A. That's something which the Japanese themselves must decide. I think it ought to be kept in mind, however, that the Japanese, during the full decade of the 1970s, increased their defense expenditures at the rate of eight percent a year. NATO increased its defense expenditures during the same period at two percent a year and the U.S. decreased its defense expenditures in real dollars during that period by two percent a year.

Since then, the Japanese have added further to their defense budget increases. They have done so in spite of the fact that article 9 of their Constitution forbids the
creation of armed forces and in spite of the Japanese people's anti-militarist feeling, a carryover from the Pacific War.

The people, however, have come to accept the U.S.-Japan Mutual Security Treaty. At the time of the Treaty's inauguration in 1960, there were violent riots and demonstrations. By last year, the 20th anniversary, the treaty was accepted.

They are in the process now of modernizing their Self-Defense Forces, especially their navy and air force. They're beginning to take up some of the slack created by the shifting of elements of the U.S. Seventh Fleet from the Pacific to the Western Indian Ocean. In looking outward more, they've even gone so far as to engage last year in RIMPAC '80 maneuvers, along with naval elements from the U.S., Canada, Australia and New Zealand. And I believe they will participate in the next exercise in 1982.

But their defense is their responsibility. They will make the decisions and I feel certain those will be in the right direction.

Q. Are you saying, Mr. Ambassador, that, you're in favor of Japanese rearmament?

A. No, I am not, because Article 9 of the Japanese Constitution and the feeling of the Japanese people and reaction on the part of some Asian and Pacific nations would preclude that. What the Japanese do is their own responsibility, but what we want them to do is to take on as much of that responsibility as possible for the defense of their home islands and their territorial waters.

Q. Would you favor, then the removal of that "non-war clause" from the Constitution?

A. That is a Japanese responsibility.

Q. Mr. Ambassador, the Japanese are, as you know, often curious -- and, at the moment, concerned -- about how the rest of the world views Japan. How has the U.S. image of Japan changed since the Pacific War?

A. These days the American people know a great deal more about Japan than they used to, though not anywhere near enough. The Japanese know much more about us. They understand us better and are more aware of the difficulties which arise from time to time.

The visit by Commodore Perry in 1853 began what became a series of ups and downs in U.S.-Japan relations. Unlike in our ties with Great Britain, language and cultural
differences have been obstacles to mutual understanding. Trust doesn't come easy under these circumstances. Extraordinary efforts by both sides are necessary.

Nevertheless, I would say that today the interchange between the Diet and Congress is excellent. The interchange between labor, business and tourist groups and the like has furthered understanding. And out of all this has developed a recognition that our two nations are involved in the world's most important nation-to-nation relationship. Important, because the peace, prosperity and stability of the Pacific and East Asia depend upon the U.S.-Japan relationship to a far greater extent than many people realize.

The Japanese are finally coming out of their cocoon. The first real indication of that was Prime Minister Fukuda's 1977 ASEAN visit. Since then, Japan's prime ministers and foreign ministers and other cabinet members have been traveling to all five continents. There's been a shift from Japan's omni-directional, equidistant foreign policy to one of making choices. This was caused in large part by what happened in Iran and especially in Afghanistan, by Russia's reoccupation, in effect, of the Northern islands and other factors.

Q. Sir, for the past 36 years, since the end of the war, Japan really has made a remarkable recovery and we see a confident Japan today. Overall Japan's accomplishments have been termed very successful. What do you think has contributed to this "success"?

A. I would say that Japan is very confident and rightly so, that among all the industrial nations it stands out. Yet I think that Japanese deep down realize how vulnerable their nation is.

If I may become parochial...Montana, my home state, is 3000 square miles larger than Japan. We have just 787,000 people. We have all kinds of resources: oil and gas, beef, timber, copper, manganese, zinc, tungsten, all kinds of coal. The Japanese, in comparison, have approximately 116 million people and no resources.

The result is that, to survive, the Japanese have to import raw material and process and export it. Deep down, the people are aware of their nation's vulnerability, so they get in there and they work. They are very productive. They are very quality-conscious. When the yen gets too much out of line, they get in and work that much harder. They have pride in what they do.

And if some people accuse you of being "workaholics," well, I consider that a compliment. I wish we could get back to that condition in the U.S. It built our country and it is building Japan.
Q. In comparison, U.S. industry does indeed seem to be ailing to some extent. There have been voices calling for American to learn from Japan or the Japanese experience. Do you share this view?

A. We can learn from each other. After all, the Japanese have learned a great deal from us and they've put it to good use and improved on what they were taught. Now, in many instances, they are turning out to be the professor and we're the students. Consider, for example, the Quality Control councils (worker groups credited with making major contributions to Japanese productivity). That idea was an American innovation which we let fall into disuse. The Japanese have adopted it, improved on it and made it work.

In Japan, the assumption that labor or consumers must lose if business gains don't prevail. It's fairly well documented that the Japanese consumer, by paying high prices, subsidized investment by big corporations during Japan's post-war recovery period. Nonetheless, the whole country benefited. Per capita Gross National Product went from about $200 in the early 1950s to about $6000 now in real terms. The Japanese experience has proved false the notion that the gain of business is necessarily a loss for someone else.

Moreover, Japan has very good relationships between industry and labor and between industry and government and among all three. You have a sort of semi-partnership which is beneficial to the country as a whole. Whereas in our country, we have to contend with the adversarial relationships between labor and industry and between industry and government. We can learn from the Japanese by developing a semi-partnership.

Q. Mr. Ambassador, the U.S. appears to have an interest in frictions continuing between the Soviet Union and China. Do you think that Japan has a similar stake? Or do you foresee possible differences between Tokyo's and Washington's attitudes toward Sino-Soviet relations?

A. No, I think Japan and the U.S. have the same feeling about the Sino-Soviet relationship. A change in the relationship between these two communist countries dates back to 1955. The result has been a shift on the part of the People's Republic of China toward Japan, Western Europe and the U.S., in that order. And out of that shift has come a betterment, I think, of conditions in China, which has resulted in more hope for its people and better prospects. So I would say that there will be no change in that picture in the immediate future.
Q. Mr. Ambassador, some personal questions. At some point in your life, U.S. Marine Corps service in Asia was converted into a lasting intellectual interest. Are you able to indentify the point at which this change occurred?

A. Well, I came out to Asia in '21 and '22 with the Marines, and I spent most of my time in the Philippines. In 1922, while there were lots of civil wars going on, we went to Tientsin, China. I had a chance to observe the Chinese there and developed an interest in them. I had always been interested in the Philippines and out of that dual interest, in China and the Philippines, developed an interest in East Asia.

I read all I could about the Far East. Finally, I went back to school and did my master's thesis on Korean-U.S. relations, 1866-1910. When I went to Congress, I maintained that interest, often times alone, in both the House and the Senate.

I was impressed with the importance of this area, an impression which has become stronger with time. And I'm glad to know that more interest -- though still not enough -- is being taken in this part of the world by our people.

These days there's a recognition of the fact that we've been placing too much emphasis on the Atlantic and Western Europe, where most of us came from. Emotionally, the pull has been toward Europe. But the push is in this direction -- across the North American continent and the Pacific.

American businessmen are beginning to realize that this is the area where they achieve the highest returns on their investments. But they've been slow about it. I'm disturbed that even though the returns are the highest in Japan and East Asia, only some $27 or $28 billion of the $200 billion-plus invested overseas by American business has been placed in this region.

As far as two-way trade is concerned, the trend is up. In 1975 it amounted to $42 billion; last year it exceeded $100 billion. You have out here friendly governments, the resources, the markets, the people. To put it briefly: this is where it all is; this is what it's all about; this is the future.

Q. If you were asked to give the greatest strengths of the Japanese people, what would you nominate?

A. Pride and productivity.

Q. And the greatest weakness?

A. I couldn't say.
Q. That answer is consistent with your reputation as one of the best diplomats the U.S. has ever sent to Japan. What are the secrets?

A. Well, when I was in the Senate, I tried to operate under the Christian concept of the Golden Rule or the Confucian concept known as the Silver Rule: That was to do unto others as you would have them to unto you. Or, as the Confucianists put it in the negative, to not do unto others as you would not have done unto you. And that applied to Republicans as well as Democrats.

I've tried to follow the same concept out here. I've never held with the definition of a diplomat as a man sent abroad to lie for his country. I've been frank. I've always laid the cards on the table with the Japanese. I feel that if you will just lay it all out and tell it as it is, not only will it be appreciated by them once they get to know that you're doing that, but it will also be beneficial to the person concerned -- in this instance, myself.

If you operate on that basis, you're never caught short. You don't have to think six months later of what you've said before. You don't have to look for excuses. A feeling of mutual trust develops.

And the effort is worth it. While it may not yet be the best of all possible worlds that the philosophers speak of, it is the best of all possible times to work toward that world.

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リーダーズ・ダイジェスト
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