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Suri: On this Pearl Harbor anniversary, our relationship with Japan is changing again

By **Jeremi Suri** | December 6, 2014

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Pool

After the war ended in 1945, Japan became an anchor of capitalism in Asia and exercised economic influence in the U.S. Now, the tables have shifted.

Seventy-three years ago today marked the beginning of a new era in world history.

After what President Franklin Roosevelt called a "dastardly attack" on our naval fleet at Pearl Harbor, the United States went to war with Japan. For the next four years, young Americans fought some of the most brutal air, sea and land battles in the nation's history against a hardened and vicious enemy. Young Americans had to push Japanese soldiers off of the islands they had occupied from Wake Island and Midway to the Philippines and Iwo Jima. In

Okinawa alone, more than 50,000 Americans were killed and wounded. Japanese casualties were more than twice that.

Fast forward 73 years and the future of the American relationship with Japan is again entering a new era.

Once the war ended after the emperor's surrender in August 1945, the enemies in war became allies in building a new East Asia. The Japanese recognized that their effort to dominate the region had failed, and they turned to the United States for assistance in rebuilding their country. Americans recognized that a vibrant and democratic Japan was crucial for world peace and the containment of communism, promoted by the Soviet Union.

Japan became the anchor for capitalism in Asia. American investments financed new factories for automobiles, electronics and computers. The American military ensured Japan's security and its access to food and industrial materials mostly acquired from neighboring Asian countries. Oil and other energy resources came from all over including Texas, Indonesia and the Middle East.

By the 1970s and 1980s, Japan emerged as the first "Asian tiger." Its citizens were highly educated, productive and peaceful. They exported more to the United States



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and Western Europe than they imported, and they used their balance of payments surplus to invest abroad. In fact in the 1980s, many Americans worried that Japan was buying too much New York real estate. There were also concerns that they were unfairly "dumping" their electronic products on the American market, undercutting U.S. companies such as Texas Instruments.

For all these economic tensions, however, American and Japanese citizens entered the new millennium as close partners, committed to joint prosperity through increased trade and cooperation.

That partnership has now changed radically.

With the opening of China to the international economy coupled with the precipitous decline of Japan, China has become the largest producer and consumer in all of Asia at breakneck speeds. Japan has fallen behind because of poor investment choices, corrupt government and population decline. Japan's population is aging rapidly, and its closed immigration policies prevent the arrival of young and innovative people from abroad. Simply put, the center of Asian entrepreneurship has shifted to China.

Because of this, our relationship is markedly different from how it was during the decades after the Pearl Harbor attack. So what does the future hold?

Japan will remain a major producer of automobiles and high-end electronic items for the United States, and Japanese citizens will continue to purchase American products. But future growth for American businessmen is not in Japan. Nor does the security of Asia revolve



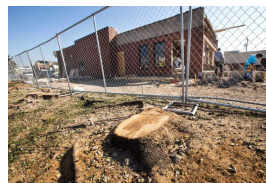
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around Japan. U.S. economic interests in China, along with India and Vietnam, will continue to grow, and Japan will get less American attention. The Japanese know this, and their government's greater military assertiveness in recent years is an effort to become more self-reliant.

That does not mean the relations between the two former World War II adversaries will worsen. Americans will continue to trade with Japan and visit that country in large numbers, but more of these activities will include China and South Korea too. The special bilateral partnership between the United States and Japan will become a looser regional relationship with neighboring countries involved. There will be more independence, more compromise and tougher bargaining for all business and security deals between the U.S. and Japan.

If the 73 years of U.S.-Japanese relations since Pearl Harbor have been intensely close, the next few decades will be more distant and multilateral. That should still be good for business and democracy not only in Asia, but in the wider world.

Jeremi Suri is the Mack Brown Distinguished Chair for Leadership in Global Affairs and holds a joint appointment in the Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs and the Department of History at The University of Texas at Austin.

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