Beyond *'After Imperialism'* : A Critique

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More than ten years have passed since Iriye Akira first offered a new framework for understanding American-East Asian relations as an alternative to A. Whitney Griswold's now classic interpretations of the Far Eastern policy of the United States. From his ambitious project appeared *After Imperialism* (1965)[1], *Across the Pacific* (1967)[2], *Pacific Estrangement* (1972)[3], and the *Cold War in Asia* (1974)[4]. American historians have generally extended a wam welcome to Iriye's publications in book reviews.[5]. It is perhaps not only because his work employs multi-archival approach to diplomatic research[6], but also because his lingustic telent enabled him to introduce Japanese, Chinese, and Russian source materials to the American readers.

Admittedly, Iriye's contribution to American diplomatic historiography is great, if not so much to the Japanese counterpart. It can be argued, however, that the crux of his reputation resides in the fact that, amidst mounting so-called New Left historians' criticism of American foreign policy, Iriye presented a challenging non-Marxist or "value-free" interpretation which most of the American liberal scholars could comfortably accept. This does not necessarily mean that American historians received Iriye's *tour de force* without qualification. It is true that some U.S. specialists in Japanese history entertained certain reservations concerning Iriye's treatment of Japanese history, while other American historians criticized part of his presentation of American history. But neither group really challenged Iriye's assumptions and premises.

American scholars are not alone in their reticence.[7] Most Japanese historians also have remained quiet, perhaps for different reasons. It has been almost ten years since Iriye's *After Imperialism* was translated into Japanese.[8] As the publication of the translation attests, there are admirers of Iriye in Japan. But the response of many Japanese historians has been rather cool at best. Their Marxist orientation partly explains why the Japanese did not take trouble engaging in debate with Iriye even in Japanese, much less in English.[9]

This paper is designed, although belatedly, to present a critique of Iriye's approach by examining his premises and assumptions as seen in *After Imperialism.* Instead of picking at random one debatable point or another here and there, I shall address the larger subjects which constitute the main body of Iriye's thought: his concept of diplomatic history, his definition and understanding of imperialism, and his interpretation of the Far East in the 1920's.

Iriye argues that the problem of cardinal importance in diplomatic history is to explain the interaction between images held by policy-makers and international political realities, which he calls "the framework or system of diplomacy." Admonishing previous diplomatic historians for isolating individual nations, Iriye insists that it is the external factors that determine a country's foreign policy:[10]

> ...no nation has complete freedom of action. It has only a given number of alternatives, and this range of possible action is often determined by extranational factors.... Changes in these variables...will often modify the content and expression of a policy. A country's foreign policy will be fully understood only when it is related to such external factors.

This should not, however, lead one to conclude that Iriye is an "external" determinist. On the contrary, he also attaches great importance to the role

that ideas and images play in helping policy-makers decide "whether to continue to observe the existing rules of the game or to seek an alternative scheme of international affairs."[11] In other words, images and external factors have mutually complementary functions.

To put it bluntly, Iriye approaches diplomatic history (or one may prefer to call it the history of international relations) as a story of how nations unilaterally or multilaterally respond to, collide, or cooperate with each other within a given region of the world. What helps shape a foreign policy is the images which are reflections of external realities through the eyes of policy-makers, intellectuals, jounalists, businessmen, and above all, the public mass. Assuming that the role of ideas and images is significant, Iriye warns that true national interests can be warped not only by the biases of top leaders, but also by the prejudices and misconceptions of public opinion which have "found their way into official policy."[12] Thus, Iriye's assumptions have become clear. First, external rather than internal factors are a primary determinant in formulating a foreign policy. Second, images (usually illogical and irrational) are more significant than narrow material interests guided by cold rational calculation. Third, the nation state is generally treated as a whole unit, with little reference to domestic conflicts and pressures.

One can hardly disagree with Iriye when he preaches that "international relations" should not be "seen as a mechanical sum total of isolated national policies,"[13] and also when he calls for a method of correlating diplomatic initiatives which express the national interests of various countries. Nor is there any reason to argue with Ernest R. May when he advocates more systematic use of multi-archival research methods to overcome some of the past parochialism and national biases of our writing. Although few can deny that multi-archival reserach has merits, it must be remembered that

that approach also has its own limitations, unless used wisely. If "multi-archival" historians still view diplomatic history as exhcanges of diplomatic notes between the elites, and consequently deal mainly with personalities of the diplomatic doyen, then that approach does no service but to extend geographic areas for historians to work on. Likewise, historians may still fall into professional traps such as portraying historical figures in black and white or presenting a vulgar theory of conspiracy (by the Japanese military, for instance). Iriye's approach does not really transcend these limitations.

Another major failing in Iriye's book is that he totally ignores the role of internal dynamism (i.e., tension, power struggles, and class conflicts) in helping shape a country's foreign policy. Nor does he address himself, on the international level, to the question of the struggles between oppressors and the oppressed, or to the problem of elucidating the international mechanisms through which the major powers dominate the world by political and financial means.[14]

There should be no misunderstanding here: Domestic factors are not the only consideration. Indeed, external factors could occasionally be a primary, determining element, at a certain historically transforming stage. This does not mean, however, that Clio ever permits historians to totally disregard internal factors. Internal and external factors are not exclusive and isoalted but inclusive and related. Indeed, when dynamic, conflicting forces at play within one country are analyzed, it becomes clear that policy-makers are very sensitive not only to structural changes wrought by industrial and technological revolutions, but also to domestic social and political movements rising from social cleavage. Leaders, more often than not, co-ordinate foreign as well as domestic policies to tide over social crises and upheavals.[15] Moreover, foreign policies are not only the expressions of

each nation's domestic needs, but also are often reflections of contradictions and conflicting national interests among nations conditioned by different developmental stages of capitalism or socialism. Thus, Iriye's disregard of the internal dimension and his reluctance to use such conceptual tools as contradiction and class struggle fail to give the reader a deep appreciation of the truly dynamic complexity in international relations.

We might illustrate this abstract point in a concrete context. Iriye emphasizes that the First World War rendered irreparable damage to the framework of international relations and ushered in a new era in which the "new diplomacy" of the United States and Soviet Union as well as Chinese nationalism asserted themselves. Apart from whether there was such a sharp discontinuity as Iriye claims in the "diplomacy of imperialism" between before and after the First World War, he argues that Japanese leaders such as Hara Kei, Tanaka Giichi, Takahashi Korekiyo, Inouye Junnosuke, and the Military officials faced the problem of deciding the direction of a postwar Japan. Iriye correctly points out that Hara was perceptive enough to recognize the passing of the old order, the rising power of the United States, and the appeal of new diplomacies of Woodrow Wilson and Lenin to the colonized and semi-colonized population.[16] The Hara cabinet responded to the changed international conditions by closely following American diplomatic initiatives.

It is true that external factors were significant such as the breakdown of the old order and the diplomatic initiatives of Wilson and Lenin. But one should not ignore the problem of domestic impacts on Hara's foreign policy, because he inherited and fully recognized problems and contradictions inherent in Japan's late start in imperial ventures. Here it is necessary to discuss briefly the problems Japanese capitalism faced as a latecomer to the international capitalist system.

Following the Meiji Restoration (1867–68), Japan established a modern

nation-state and made efforts to get rid of inequities and injustices imposed on her by Western nations because of her backwardness in capitalist development. To extricate herself from her disadvantageous position and catch up with the more advanced nations, Japan employed every possible means ranging from war, annexation, colonization, and alliance and treaty arrangements, to the exploitation of farmers and industrial laborers and the suppression of labor and radical social movements. The future of Japanese capitalism looked more bleak when Japan realized that for survival she had to import raw materials and depend heavily on foreign markets because of the lack of workers' purchasing power as well as the scarcity of natural resources at home. Furthermore, in order to encourage economic development, Japan had to import capital and machine-making machines. The Japanese government was forced to finance war-making efforts by imposing heavy taxes, extending credits, and floating war bonds in New York and London as well as in Tokyo. This invariably caused infration during and after the wars, increasing the burden on the Japanese workers. With few alternatives left for its survival, Japanese capitalism had no option but to either export capital to underdeveloped areas (although Japan was a capital importing nation), or to establish Japan's exclusive economic bloc, or both.[17]

World War I gave Japan an extraordinarily salutary opportunity to develop her capitalism into maturity, and the war economy brought about structural changes in society. But Japan could never fully catch up with the advanced capitalist nations, nor did she completely solve contradictions inherent in imperialism. After the First World War, these contradictions manifested themselves in various forms at home and abroad, among them: the Rice Riots (August, 1918), the popular opposition to the Siberian expedition (1918), frequent labor strikes and tenant farmers' disputes, the rise of an organized labor movement, and above all, the politicization of the masses

known as "Taisho democracy." Abroad, Japan also faced threats enamating from the Bolsheviks and from the rising tide of nationalism seen in the March First Independent movement in Korea (1919), and in the May Fourth movement in Chian (1919).

Hara Kei became prime minister at this juncture. Hara had no doubt about the ligitimacy of Japanese expansion into the Asian continent, but fully realized that the high-handed tactics the Okuma and Terauchi cabinets had employed during the war would not serve national interest in the face of the awakening of self-conscious nationalism abroad. At home, too, Japanese business leaders as well as liberal politicians understood that policies toward farmers and laborers had to be moderated in response to social upheavals and the politicization of the masses.[18] At the same time, they were cognizant of the fact that the war brought about structural changes which necessitated economic reorganization. Thus, they were committed to the idea of making Japan a 'workshop' of the Orient through industrial consolidation and rationalization, and through the acceleration of industrialization. The reorganization of the postwar economy meant that cooperation and understanding with Western powers was essential, for mechanization and the development of hydro-electric power required the imporation of capital from abroad, mainly from the United States.[19] American as well as Japanese leaders were cognizant of these far-reaching implications of the war for Japan.

These were some of the domestic considerations which confronted Hara when he assumed the premiership. Then what alternative was left except a policy of reaching understanding with the United States? Iriye tells us, however, that Hara "did his best to reassert the policy of understanding with Western powers"[20] primarily in response to the external factors. Furthermore, Hara "responded favorably to this [the new Chinese Consortium]

proporal." Japanese leaders, states Iriye, expected that the United States would agree to the idea of a special Japanese sphere of interest in Manchuria and Inner Mongolia. "Such an attitude revealed that the Japanese policy-makers still regarded Japan and the United States as imperialists."[21] What significance is there in this statement? Is it not necessary, instead, to ask why Premier Hara, a spokesman of a new era, asserted the idea of the sphere of interest at that time? Although Iriye says that "emphasis will be on Japan" in *After Imperialism,* his analysis of Japan's internal factors as well as domestic U.S. considerations is consipicuously absent.

Next, let us turn our attention to Iriye's definition of imperialism and interpretation of the Far East in the 1920's. Iriye calls for a distinction between "the new 'diplomacy of imperialism' " and " 'imperialism' as such which has been traced back to antiquity." The "diplomacy of imperialism" after the 1880's was characterized by a new concept of national security. Technological advances transcended European boundaries, and the power vied for colonies, overseas naval bases, spheres of influence, and particularistic concessions primarily for security reasons. In order to prevent "a radical upset in the status quo," the imperial powers resorted to such means as alliances, entente, and other agreements. In other words, Iriye defines the "diplomacy of imperialism" as a policy pursued by the powers to assure national security. He ignores the causal relationship between imperialism and the development of capitalism, disassociates imperialism from substructural dynamics, and underplays economic factors. By reducing imperialism to only a tactical policy level, Iriye narrowly defines imperialism as colonialism, which he says flourished roughly from 1880's to the First World War.

Such a narrow construction of imperialism has several failings. First, because he loosely defines imperialism as "an attempt by one country to extend its economic and political finfluence over another,"[22] Iriye fails to

grasp the historical international significance of the "age of imperialism." He refuses to see its connection with capitalist development, in which the industrial and technological revolution and the rise of financial capital took place. Likewise, he does not seem to view the First World War as the culmination of imperial struggles in which late-starting capitalist nations such as Germany, Italy, Japan, and the United States challenged the global hegemony enjoyed by Britain and France.

Secondly, by identifying imperialism with colonialism, Iriye limits his criticism to the American imperialism of 1898. In treating the post-1898 American economic as well as moral thrust overseas, he either remains silent or implicitly condones American "open door imperialism." Thus to Iriye, the subjects for criticism become occasional diplomatic blunders and images or misconceptions held by decision-makers. Because he does not analyze forces beneath the tactical differences (i.e., the "diplomacy of imperialism" *vs* "new diplomacy," and independent *vs* cooperative policy), he does not seem to grasp the on-going struggles among the "Washington powers," employing informal as well as formal means after the First World War. Iriye's approach does not explain the conflicting interests of 'imperial' powers as one of the major causes of the Second World War nor the background of anti-American feelings rampant in the so-called Third World into which the Americans have poured so much money and goodwill.

Iriye flatly rejects so-called Marxist-Lenist interpretations as inadequate to explain international relations. And he goes on to state that "international relations are relations between nations," and that "international relations are not rational developments to be postulated by economic laws."[23] It is a truism that international relations are relations among nations. What he misses here is that foreign policies are made by men living in a struggling world both at home and abroad and under constant pressure from within

and without. Seemingly obsessed by an anti-Marxist orientation, Iriye does not give due attention to the domestic conflicting and contradictory forces which may help shape one country's foreign policy. Moreover, he ignores international conflicts and contradictions which, in most part, are economically based. It appears more fruitful to think that foreign relations are the relations of nations whose various aspirations and interests reflect each nation's internal needs and different stages of economic development. By viewing Marxian materialism as cold and rational to the extreme, however, Iriye seems oblivious to dialectical dynamism in history.

Furthermore, Iriye's interpretation of American foreign policy is curious at best. According to him, since the turn of the century the United States participated in the "diplomacy of imperialism." She annexed territories in the Pacific and entered into various arrangements with other powers. But Iriye apologetically reminds the reader that American foreign policy has been chracterized by its moralism, particularly since the Taft administration "resorted to financial tactics" to achieve basically moral ends.[24] Then he especially emphasizes the significance of Wilson's *démarche* of breaking from the practices and concepts of the "old diplomacy." Historians such as Martin Sklar and Charles Vevier have warned that it is neither productive nor useful to compartmentalize Wilson's policy into domestic, foreign, moralistic, legalistic, and realistic units.[25]Theodore Roosevelt, Taft, and Wilson were moralistic all right, but recent scholarship has demonstrated that not only Taft and Wilson but also William McKinley and Theodore Roosevelt were moralistic, but their moralism did not blind them to the social needs of their time. In other words, moralistic and realistic elements are not exclusive. Both constitute part of a comprehensive whole. According to Iriye, Wilson is important because he made a sharp break with the past. Wilson is important, to be sure, but one wonders what *qualitative* difference

there are in Wilson's foreign policy compared with his predecessors' and with his successors' beyond mere tactical differences. On this important point, curiously enough, Iriye remains silent.

Iriye attempts to make sense of "many complicated episodes of the 1920's" by analizing "initiatives," which expressed "various countries' interest in creating a new international order after the passing of the 'diplomacy of imperialism'." Treating initiatives of America, the Soviet Union, China, and Japan, Iriye tells us that the Washington powers wittingly or unwittingly failed to cooperate with each other in creating a new international system. Iriye seems mainly concerned how those countries behaved during the interwar period. But it still remains unclear what the Washington system meant and why the Washington powers behaved as they did.

Another problem is that Iriye assumes that public images, emotions, and prejudices creep into official policy. There is no double that the decision-makers as well as the public are the product of the time and that their perceptions are inevitably colored by the temper of the time. Iriye seems to have failed to demonstrate the direct causal relations between policy-making and images. The burden of a historian is to clarify in what specific way the images exert influence over the decision-making process.

Iriye emphasizes the Washington Conference as a point of departure from the old order, as the book's title, *After Imperialism,* implies. There is no question that the First World War brought a radical shift in the balance of power, but it is questionable whether there was such a sharp discontinuity between the years before and after the Washington Conference as Iriye claims. The trouble is that he employs abstract ideational constructs such as "the passing of old order," "the Washington system," and "the spirit of the Washington Conference," without necessarily correlating them with realities. It can be argued that the cooperative "spirit of the Washington

Conference" predated the Conference itself, and had already been expressed during the war by Britatin, Japan, and the United States for apparently different reasons. This came partly from war exigencies but also from their efforts to plan postwar readjustments to internal and external changes that the war brought about. This was particularly true in the case of the second Chinese Consortium. Through diplomatic exhcanges and negotiations in Paris, Tokyo, and New York, it became clear that leaders of the major countries were committed to the ideas of "economic diplomacy" and cooperation in creating a community of interest. There is no doubt about American initiatives to creat a new international order, as Iriye emphasizes. But the point is that the imperial powers also sought their own version of order to suit and advance their own national interests. What the United States did was take advantage of the Allies' diplomatic initiatives and then transform them into an American formula. The real question which involved American-East Asian relations was whether or not Japan would accept the status of a junior imperial power closely tied financially with the Anglo-American capitalist orbit.

Far Eastern diplomatic scholarship has so far not gone beyond mentioning briefly that during the 1920's the United States had more economic stakes in Japan than in China and that America was more concerned about China because of the myth of the China market and her moral missionary impulse. Few have attempted to clarify what Ameircan economic ties with Japan really meant and to what extent the American capital investments contributed to Japanese industrialization in the 1920's and militarization in the 1930's.

Once Japan accepted her position as America's junior partner, the Japanese-American "economic alliance" defined largely the American-East Asian relations of the 1920's. Strong financial linkages existed between the two

countries. There is a need to pursue serious studies of American-Japanese financial linkage and its ramifications from the viewpoind of the world capitalist order in the 1920's. It seems important to interpret the Japanese-American "economic alliance" as a major nexus to define international relations in the Far East during the interwar period.

Footnotes

1 Iriye Akira, *After Imperialism: The Search for Order in the Far East, 1921–1931* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1965).

2 Iriye, *Across the Pacific: An Inner History of American-East Asian Relations* (New York: Harcout, Brace & World, 1967).

3 Iriye, *Pacific Estrangement: Japanese and American Expansion, 1897–1911* (Cambridge, Mass. : Harvard University Press, 1972).

4 Iriye, *The Cold War in Asia: A Historical Introduction* (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, 1974).

5 For instance, John Fairbank highly commends Iriye's work for tanscending "the nationalistic and parochial concerns." See Iriye Akira, *Across the Pacific,* Introduction, x.

6 Ernest R. May is one of those ardent advocates for systematic use of multi-archival research methods. Ernest R. May, *The World War and American Isolation, 1914–1917* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1959); Thomas J. McCormick, "The State of American Diplomatic History," in Herbert Bass ed., *The State of American History* (Chicago: 1970) pp. 119–141.

7 A notable exception is Herbert Bix, "Imagistic Historiography and the Reinterpretation of Japanese Imperialism," *Bulletin of Concerned*

Asian Scholars (July-September 1975), pp. 51–68.

8 Iriye Akira, *Kyokuto Shin Chitsujo no Mosaku* (Tokyo: Hara Shobo, 1968).

9 There is a tendency that Japanese historians wage most of their historiographical debates within the confine of a Marxian framework.

10 Iriye Akira, *After Imperialism* (1965; rept. New York: Atheneum, 1969), p. 2.

11 Iriye, *ibid.*

12 Iriye, *Across the Pacific,* p. 327

13 Iriye, *After Imperialism,* p. 2.

14 Notable examples are the New China Consortium and the arrangements of the "Washington" powers made at the Washington Conference of 1921–22.

15 For instance, Hara Kei, who was Prime Minister from 29 Septermber 1918 to 5 November 1921, was cautions not to experience the similar fate of his predecessor Terauchi Masatake who had been forced to resign because of the rice riots of 1918. In the spring of 1920 when the Japanese government negotiated with Thomas W. Lamont, representative of the American banking group and of the British and French groups, in Tokyo concerning the conditions of Japan's entry into the new Consortium, Hara insisted that South Manchuria and Inner Eastern Mongolia be reserved as Japan's exclusive granary. Prime Minister Hara also realized Japan's economic vulnerability and its social implications when foreign sources of raw materials such as iron and steel were cut off, which was exactly what had happened during World War I. The Japanese government made its utmost efforts to secure independent sources of those materials in Manchuria and Mogolia during the Consortium negotiations.

16 Arno J. Mayer, *Political Origins of the New Diplomacy, 1917–1918* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959); N. Gordon Levein, Jr., *Woodrow Wilson and World Politics: America's Response to War and Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968).

17 For instance, see Inoue Kiyoshi, *Nihon Teikokushugi no Keisei* (Tokyo: Iwanami, 1968).

18 Shinobu Seizaburo, *Taisho Seijishi* (Tokyo: Kawade, 1954); Inoue Kiyoshi, ed., *Taishoki no Seiji to Shakai* (Tokyo: Iwanami, 1969).

19 *Foreign Capital and Japanese Electric Power Industry, 1923–31*

Year/Month	Japanese Co.	interest	American underwriter
1923. 3	Oriental Development Co.	6 %	National City Co. First National Bank
1924. 8	Daido Electric Co.	7 %	Dillon Read & Co.
1925. 3	Ujigawa Electric Co.	7 %	Lee, Higginson & Co. National City Bank
1925. 3	Toho Electric Co.	7 %	Guaranty Trust Co.
1925. 7	Daido Electric Co.	6.5%	Dillon Read & Co.
1927. 12	Shinetsu Electric Co.	6.5%	Dillon Read & Co.
1928. 1	Nihon Electric Co.	6.5%	Harris Forbes & Co.
1928. 6	Tokyo Dento	6 %	Guaranty Trust Co.
1928. 11	Oriental Development Co.	5.5%	National City Co. First National Bank
1931. 7	Taiwan Electric Co.	5.5%	J.P. Morgan & Co. Kuhn, Loeb & Co. etc.

Japanese Minstry of Finance, *Statistical Yearbook of Finance and Economy of Japan,* (1948).

20 Iriye, *After Imperialism*, p. 9.

21 *ibid.*, p. 15.

22 Iriye, *Across the Pacific*, p. 56.

23 *ibid.*, pp. 56–57.

24 *ibid.*, p. 123.

25 Martin J. Sklar, "Woodrow Wilson and Polotical Economy of Modern United States Liberalism," *Studies on The Left*, vol. I, No.3 (Fall, 1960) pp. 17–45; Charles Vevier, *The United States and China, 1906–1913* (The New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1955).