

Japan and the Pacific world: another world...

military-Earth thinking notebook

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In 2019, Japan will have a new emperor.

Professor Françoise Thibault details the necessary and expected changes in traditions and specifies the challenges that Japan must take up in the coming decades, whether military or economic, in the face of "powerful" neighbours that prefigure another "Pacific" world.

It's done: after a long consultation with the stars, gods and kamis, the kind emperor Akihito, an eminent symbol of the "era of peace", will take his leave on April 30, 2019.

His eldest son Naruhito will succeed him the next day (at the age of 57), becoming the 126th emperor and ^{opening a} new era. Three days of holidays and festivities are planned. Such a procedure had not occurred since 1817 when Emperor Kokaku retired. The Meiji constitution did not provide for this possibility, but, replaced in 1947 by a westernized constitution in which the emperor lost his status of "god", it is possible, albeit with many precautions (authorization of the imperial council and parliamentary vote). Moreover, as the future Emperor Nahurito had only one daughter, it is quite possible that the sceptre would then pass to his nephew - son of his younger brother Akishino - as only the male succession is possible for the time being.

Finally, Akihito, who turns 85 in 2018, is negotiating a simplification of his funeral ritual: the current one, which is far too complicated and long (1 to 3 months), seems to him to be completely out of step with the times and, according to him, risks unnecessarily paralysing the economic and social life of his beloved country. Imperial symbolism remains strong in Japan and is the cement of social and national cohesion, even if the younger generations are less attached to it.

For his part, the very intelligent and conservative Prime Minister Shinzo Abe supervised

this procedure (without, however, adhering to it in a personal capacity) and, by a majority comfortable majority, likely to last until 2022, is trying to put Japan - still rich and one of the top 5 economic powers - back on the road to prosperity, but socially weakened and competing in its most successful fields.

As the champion leader of ASEAN since its creation, and of all the other economic, banking and social organizations in Asia, Japan is in fact in a delicate domestic situation: the Abenomics[1] are no longer enough: the social weight is heavy and the wealthy middle class is melting away at a glance. Even though the 2018 budget promises a 5% tax cut for companies that have agreed to wage increases, poverty is taking hold at both ends of the social spectrum: the elderly and the young, in particular due to the high cost of education, which parents can no longer afford. Young people are becoming scarce or fleeing, and the generational demographic succession is not assured. Recourse to compensatory immigration - even selective - remains very low and rarely envisaged (Japan is classified by the UN as the "least welcoming" country in Asia).

Finally, Shinzo Abe hopes to obtain the abrogation or modification of the famous article 9 of the 1947 (vengeful) constitution forbidding Japan any militarization other than "defensive", which still depends largely on North American goodwill.

Under the North Korean threat, the overall diplomatic context of the Pacific zone is being changed and it is almost certain that the military apparatus will also be changed. To what extent and under what conditions? This remains to be defined, with the United States remaining largely in control, but Japan technically has the capacity to do so. On December 10, Defence Minister Itsunori Onodera announced the purchase of new defensive missiles capable of reaching North Korea, intended to relay North American defensive interference. This is a move that certainly goes beyond the complex legal procedures of the past and is designed to deal with the realities of a highly fragile area. Itsunori also clarified his government's position at the end of January, highlighting its "great and remarkable agreement" with the United States.

Beyond security concerns and to solidify its economic stability, Shinzo Abe's government has finalized, after laborious negotiations, its free trade agreement with the European Union, thus thwarting Donald Trump's ultra-protectionist tendency. The agreement will enter into force in July 2018: the economic zone thus forged will cover a market of more than 600 million people. Finally, unimaginable a few years ago, a solid cooperation agreement with India has gradually taken shape within ASEAN, strongly promoted by Japan and Australia, creating a new economic area for the European Union. It creates a "unified Indo-Pacific market" designed to counteract or at least limit the growing influence on the "Chinese octopus" markets.

Indeed, the situation of Japan - caught between two powerful external influences - is very representative of the general situation in the Pacific area as a whole. It was rather calm and relatively balanced for decades, but freed from post-colonialism, it evolved very quickly and became dangerously complex in less than ten years.

We are now in a delicate balancing act between economic, commercial, cultural and security necessities, with often conflicting interests:

- Uncertainties weigh on North American diplomacy, although they have calmed somewhat since Davos, causing great turmoil: although the Pacific zone is very Americanized, it often feels this heavy influence, which is not always well experienced. Donald Trump's freezing of the trans-Pacific agreement negotiated

by Barack Obama, which satisfied everyone and unified almost the entire area, is weakening entire economic sectors. Moreover, the famous US "umbrella" of protection seems more random, although in fact the United States has strengthened its military arsenal in the zone. It is the contradictions between words and deeds that give cause for concern.

- The North Korean threat is taken very seriously because of its virulent nationalist ambition in a unique (militaro/communist) power scheme, which cannot be assimilated to other systems. There is deep unease and even limited confrontation remains possible, as well as local conflicts sparked by fear. Almost all the states around the Pacific Rim are arming themselves to the teeth, with tens of thousands of tanks, missiles, planes and submarines, activated by huge budgets. Eight of the world's twenty largest military forces are in Asia. To give just one example, at the beginning of 2017 China and Russia had 67 and 55 submarines respectively, the United States 72, South Korea 13, Japan 16 and Australia 7 (several are on order). Even Taiwan and Indonesia have 4 and 2 submarines respectively.
- It is also necessary to take into account the natural and climatic "hotspots" experienced by all states over the last decade: the dramatic rise in ocean waters, abnormal floods or droughts and, on another level, the toxicity of the air (China/India), earthquakes followed by typhoons, with risks for nuclear installations.civil areas as happened in Fukushima, and many other local or more general scourges due to excessive human, mining, urban, or tourist activity.
- Finally, and perhaps most worryingly in the immediate term, States and populations are caught in a pincer movement between two competing and divergent powers: on the one hand, the United States, which for 70 years has been responsible for a large part of the security of the area and a significant contribution to its economic and financial stability, and on the other hand, the United States, which for the last 70 years has been responsible for the security of the area and a significant contribution to its economic and financial stability. On the one hand, there is the United States, which for 70 years has been responsible for a large part of the security of the area and has played a significant role in its economic and financial stability, and, on the other hand, the growing, staggering and uncontrollable intrusion of China, which, by penetrating markets of all kinds on a massive scale, is arrogating increasing influence to itself. The Australian government - in particular - is becoming aware of China's hold not only on its economy (1st partnerⁱⁿ import and export), but also, since its progressive opening to Asians since 1977, on its media, universities and way of life, on the shaping of minds through aesthetic, domestic, food, clothing, artistic and philosophical habits. This is perhaps even more significant than the American influence of the 1950s-90s. A revolt of opinion has recently arisen from the discovery of links with the Chinese regime within the Labour Party (apologies from Sam Dastyari in September 2016).

Singapore now dares to talk about the "Chinese octopus" invading most of its activities, especially since the 2007-2008 crisis. Indonesia is facing continued penetration through air, commercial and tourist channels. Hong Kong is rather brutally "recovered" and Taiwan fears for its independence. Territorial ambitions, and also maritime ambitions - by extension of the spaces claimed or even occupied - seem unlimited...

In the longer term - up to 2050 - a major change is looming which is likely to put an end to, or profoundly alter, the fine maritime and commercial prosperity of the richest states in the Pacific zone. China has embarked on the "New Land Silk Road"; the OBOR (One

BeltOne Road) project, starting from the centre of its territory - from the city of Xian in Shanxi, which has become a mushrooming city even larger than Shanghai or Beijing - crosses Chinese and Russian Siberia, Central Asia and south-eastern Russia: an uninterrupted two-lane (sometimes three-lane) motorway with Duisburg in Germany, then Hamburg and Rotterdam as its terminus, with two diverging junctions, one to Moscow and the other to Tehran. Journey time for goods by truck: 11 days, compared with five to six weeks for cargo ships. It is planned to twin this motorway with a high-speed railway line and to connect this overland network with the various ports in the Indian Ocean, then the Middle East and even as far as the Baltic ports. In short, a vast network that will completely change the usual routes of international trade and create what President Xi calls "real globalisation": this network will be of interest to almost five billion people and will open up a large part of the Euro-Asian continent, which is still almost completely unexploited. So far, the project has reached Uzbekistan (cities of Urumqi and Almaty), so we are halfway there. In this undertaking, the protection of the environment and people does not seem to be dominant.

Although the investment is colossal, it will be very profitable in the long term and will ensure China's development, firstly in the interior of its own territory, which is its dominant concern for the moment, and secondly as a precondition for the development of its own economy.commercial eminence, which can destroy or radically transform the maritime, technological, banking and commercial fortunes of Busan (Korea), Yokohama and Singapore, the famous maritime "golden belt" through Panama and Suez.

Perhaps that is the future: another world...

1) Abenomics ("Abenomics") is a suitcase word made up of Abe and economics ("economy"). It refers to the economic policy advocated by Shinzo Abe, the Prime Minister of Japan since December 26, 2012.

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