In the Meiji Restoration, a Path Forward for Japanese Foreign Policy

150 Years After the Meiji Restoration—Japan’s Global Engagement Then and Now, hosted by the Centre for the Study of Global Japan at the Munk School of Global Affairs, brought together a distinguished group of speakers from Japan and Canada to discuss the continued significance of this historic event.

Professor Randall Hansen (Interim Director, Munk School of Global Affairs) opened the conference by emphasizing its significance as a symbol of the continued success of the Centre for the Study of Global Japan and its strong relationship with both the consulate and embassy of Japan. Turning towards the content of the day’s discussion, Professor Hansen provided three guiding questions asking how the Meiji Restoration might help us understand economic and political issues in the region post-World War II:

- Did Japan’s “tentative” steps toward democratization during this period facilitate its remarkable success as a democratic nation following the Allied occupation?
- To what extent did Japan’s rapid industrialization fuel the tensions that would go on to erupt, catastrophically, in the 1940s?
- How do the ideas born in the Meiji Restoration continue to influence contemporary thought in Japan regarding its role in the global community?

Professor Hansen was followed by the Consul General of Japan in Toronto, Takako Ito. Ms Ito noted the interesting contrast between Japan and Canada, both of which marked significant 150th anniversaries in the past year: the Meji Restoration and Canadian Confederation. The former is a small, island nation with limited resources and, until relatively recently, an aversion to engagement with the outside world. The latter is a large, resource rich nation with a much celebrated history of cultural exchange and diversity. With the two marking 90 years of diplomatic relations, Ms Ito asked how we might look to our respective pasts as a means of building a stronger relationship in the future.

Koko Kato, Special Advisor to the Cabinet Office of the Government of Japan, kicked off the event proper with a survey of the Meiji Industrial Revolution. The presentation was packed with beautiful images of industrial sites—some dating back over 100 years—and their contemporary ruins. There was a profound sense of continuity between past and present; between industrialization as something inextricably bound to the bygone Meiji era, and industrialization as something that has endured, through its haunting remnants, tremendous social and technological upheaval. With the arrival of Commodore Perry, Ms Kato explained, the isolationist Tokugawa Shogunate faced an existential crisis. The government had restricted shipbuilding to smaller vessels incapable of trans-oceanic travel. At this point, Japan faced foreign powers with massive three and four mast warships outfitted with cannons. Naval defense became the primary driver of industrialization. Centuries of isolation had limited Japan’s exposure to the technological innovations that now threatened its sovereignty. Closing this gap would require the exchange of goods and ideas with foreign powers. The Choshu Five, members of the Choshu han of western Japan, travelled to England in 1863 to study at University College London. All five would have an indelible influence on Japan as a polity and economy. Ito Shunsuke, the first prime minister of Japan, was among them, as was Nomura Yakichi, the “father of Japanese railways”. The inflow of new technologies and materials necessary to fuel industrialization were facilitated by a Scottish merchant named Thomas Blake Glover. Glover dealt in ships and mining equipment, and played a key role in outfitting Japan’s first dry dock. He also provided armaments for the overthrow of the Tokugawa, which led to the establishment of the Meiji. His home and office still stand today as historical landmarks.
Professor Tomoko Okagaki (Dokkyo University) argued that the Meiji Restoration was perhaps better understood as the Meiji “Renewal” or “Reform” (ishin). While formally the “restoration” of the Imperial system and a return to the international stage, the change that characterized the Meiji period was distinct from violent, “bottom up” revolutions (as in France in 1789). Rather it was “revolution from above”; a measured transition of power that leaned heavily on existing social infrastructure. The national mission, Professor Okagaki explained, was to “transform Asia in a Western way”. The Meiji “Renewal” took place at the peak of Euro-dominance in the global political sphere. Membership in the international community required participant nations to conform to certain norms, particularly in law and foreign policy. In order to meet these standards and join European and North American powers as a peer, Japan pursued “aggressive learning” from the West (as in the case of the Choshu Five). The new and innovative ideas born from this exchange were used to reform institutions with centuries of history behind them. It is in this sense that the Meiji period was a time of “renewal”. Tradition wasn’t abandoned outright, but rather reinvigorated with new ideas after years of isolation. Professor Okagaki stressed the continuity in infrastructure between the Tokugawa and Meiji periods: high levels of urbanization, a literate population, a monetary system, and the postal service, among many other examples. Japan’s political leadership, “realists” and “pragmatists” invested in long term success over short term gain, would eventually accept unequal treatise with the West in the interest of focusing on development in pursuit of the “standard of civilization and international life”. Professor Okagaki saw similar prudence in Canada’s entry into international society. Like Japan, Canada chose to operate within its means, making measured assertions of independence from the British Empire from 1867 onward. In this sense, these two nations share a philosophical kinship. The subsequent panel discussion, featuring Professor Robert Vipond (University of Toronto) and Deanna Horton, Distinguished Fellow at the Asia Pacific Foundation, delved deeper into these historical connections between Canada and Japan.

Professor Yuichi Hosoya (Keio University) argued that Japan’s history can stand as an example to the world, especially those emerging nations looking to carve out a space in an international community dominated by established economic super powers. The Meiji Restoration is a lesson in harmonizing reform and tradition; the eventual disaster of the subsequent Taisho era is a warning against violently contesting the global order. Japan’s Meiji era slogan, “Rich Nation, Strong Army” (Fukoku Kyohei), drove its expansionist policies and rapid industrialization. As the events of World War II illustrate, having a strong army, especially one built at great expense to the health and stability of the national economy, is not enough to maintain independence and security in and of itself. Following the Allied occupation, Japan is no longer a military power given the limitations imposed by its post-war constitution. While the nation enjoyed unprecedented economic success in the 1970s and 80s, it has never since returned to those lofty heights. The effects of the asset price bubble collapse of the early 90s, which is quickly approaching its 30th anniversary, are still felt today. Japan is no longer a “Rich Nation” in the same sense it once was. What, then, is Japan’s identity today? Perhaps a path forward can be found in the post-war slogan, “A Peace-loving Nation” (Heiwa Kokka). Professor Hosoya believes that Prime Minister Shinzo Abe is positioning Japan as “pro-active contributor to peace”. One form this contribution takes is diplomacy through economic policy. For example, free and open economic cooperation between “The Quad” (The United States, Japan, Indonesia, and Australia) and other regional partners in the Indo-Pacific is the key to security and prosperity for all parties. The Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) has seen development aid as a means of ensuring a nation’s right to self-determination by establishing the conditions necessary for “economic take-off”. To this end, Japan’s official development assistance (ODA) strategy has emphasized investment in infrastructure and human resources. Here,
Professor Hosoya draws a connection to the Meiji Restoration: supporting independence and offering a path to international recognition in developing nations as they navigate the same tension between tradition and reform Japan grappled with 150 years ago.

The closing roundtable discussion, chaired by Professor David Welch (University of Waterloo & University of Toronto), put the three speakers in conversation with Dr. Sarah Taylor, Director General for North Asia and Oceania at Global Affairs Canada. The primary topic of discussion here was trade in the Pacific, returning to Ms Ito’s initial prompt to envision a path towards stronger ties between Canada and Japan. As the event reached its conclusion, the tenor of the conversation was hopeful. In reflecting on the successes and challenges of industrialization and political reform, 150 Years After the Meiji Restoration- Japan’s Global Engagement Then and Now served as a timely reminder not only of Japan’s capacity to tackle national challenges on a grand scale, but of the wealth of experience it has to share with its peers.

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