CHAPTER 8

KOREA AND JAPAN

'I . . . began to phrase a little pun about
Kim Jong-il being the "Oh Dear Leader",
but it died on my lips.'

Christopher Hitchens,
Love, Poverty and War: Journeys and Essays

HOW DO YOU SOLVE A PROBLEM LIKE KOREA? YOU DON'T, you just manage it; after all, there's a lot of other stuff going on around the world that needs immediate attention – as true now as at any time.

The whole of the region, from Malaysia up to the Russian port of Vladivostok, eyes the Korean problem nervously. All the neighbours know it has the potential to blow up in their faces, dragging in other countries and damaging economies. The Chinese don't want to fight on behalf of North Korea, but nor do they want a united Korea containing American bases close to their border. The Americans don't really want to fight for the South Koreans, but nor can they afford to be seen to be giving up on a friend. The Japanese, with their long history of involvement in the Korean Peninsula, must tread lightly, knowing that whatever happens will probably involve them.

The solution is compromise, but there is limited appetite for that in South Korea, and none at all displayed by the leadership of the North. The way forward is not at all clear; it seems as if it is always just out of sight over the horizon.

Examples of rapprochement prove it's possible: for several years the USA and Cuba danced quietly around each other, dropping hints that they would like to tango without tangling, leading to the breakthrough in re-establishing diplomatic relations in July 2015. Since then they've blown hot and cold, but they are not at daggers drawn. North Korea, on the other hand, glares at any requests from would-be suitors to take the floor, occasionally pulling faces. Sure, its leader, Kim Jong Un, shook hands with Donald Trump in 2019, but they exchanged the following pleasantries in the same year: Trump called Kim 'Little Rocket Man' and Kim called Trump a '*neulg-dali-michigwang-i*', which as you may know can be translated as 'old lunatic'.

North Korea is a poverty-stricken country of an estimated 26 million people, led by a basket case of a morally corrupt, bankrupt communist monarchy and supported by China, partly out of a fear of millions of refugees flooding north across the Yalu River. The USA, anxious that a military withdrawal would send out the wrong signal and embolden North Korean adventurism, continues to station approximately 28,000 troops in South Korea, and the South, with mixed feelings about risking its prosperity, continues to do little to advance reunification.

All the actors in this East Asian drama know that if they try to force an answer to the question at the wrong time they risk making things worse. A lot worse. It is not unreasonable to fear that you would end up with two capital cities in smoking ruins, a civil war, a humanitarian catastrophe, missiles landing in and around Tokyo and another Chinese–American military face-off on a divided peninsula in which one of the Koreas has nuclear weapons. If North Korea implodes it might well also explode, projecting instability across the borders in the form of war, terrorism and/or a flood of refugees, and so the actors are stuck. And the solution is left to the next generation of leaders, and then the next one.

If world leaders even speak openly about preparing for the day when North Korea collapses, they risk hastening that day. And as no one has planned for it – best keep quiet. Catch-22.

North Korea continues to play the crazed, powerful weakling to good effect. Its foreign policy consists, essentially, of being suspicious of everyone except the Chinese; and even Beijing is not to be fully trusted, despite accounting for more than 90 per cent of North Korea's

imports and exports. North Korea puts a lot of effort into playing all outsiders off against each other, including the Chinese, in order to block a united front against it.

To its captive population it says it is a strong, munificent, magnificent state standing up against all the odds and against the evil foreigners, calling itself the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK). It has a unique political philosophy of *Juche*, which blends fierce nationalism with communism and self-reliance.

In reality it is the least democratic state in the world: it is not run for the people and it is not a republic. It is a dynasty shared by one family and one party. It also ticks every box in the dictatorship test: extrajudicial murder, arbitrary arrest, torture, show trials, internment camps, censorship, rule of fear, corruption and oppression on a nationwide and industrial scale. Satellite images and witness testimonies suggest that well over 100,000 political prisoners are held in giant work and 're-education' camps. North Korea is a stain on the world's conscience, and yet few people know the full scale of the atrocities taking place there.

News stories about purged members of the elite being executed with an anti-aircraft gun or fed to a pack of starving dogs have never been confirmed. However, true or not, there is little doubt about the litany of horrors perpetrated by the dictatorship against the people.

Such is the self-imposed isolation of North Korea, and the state's almost total control of knowledge, that we can only guess at what the people may feel about their country, system and leaders, and whether they support the regime. Analysing what is going on politically, and why, is akin to looking through an opaque window while wearing sunglasses. A former ambassador to Pyongyang once told me: 'It's like you are on one side of the glass, and you try to prise it open, but there's nothing to get a grip on to peer inside.'

The founding story of Korea is that it was created in 2333 BCE by heavenly design. The Lord of Heaven sent his son Hwanung down to Earth, where he descended on the Paektu (Baekdu) Mountain and married a woman who used to be a bear. Their son, Dangun, went on to engage in an early example of nation-building.

The earliest recorded version of this creation legend dates from the thirteenth century. It may in some ways explain why a communist state has a leadership that is passed down through one family and given divine status. For example, Kim Jong-il was described by the Pyongyang propaganda machine as 'Dear Leader, who is a perfect incarnation of the appearance that a leader should have', 'Guiding Sun Ray', 'Shining Star of Paektu Mountain', 'World Leader of the Twenty-first Century' and 'Great Man Who Descended from Heaven', as well as 'Eternal Bosom of Hot Love'. His father had very similar titles, as does his son.

How does the general population feel about such statements? Even the experts are left guessing. If you look at footage of the mass hysteria of North Koreans mourning Kim Jong-il, who died in 2011, note that behind the first few rows of sobbing, shrieking people the level of grief appears to diminish. Is this because those at the front know the camera is on them and thus for their own safety they must do what is required? Or have the Party faithful been put at the front? Or are they ordinary people who are genuinely grief-stricken, a North Korean magnification of the sort of emotional outbursts we saw in the UK after the death of Princess Diana?

Either way, the DPRK is still pulling off the crazy-dangerous, weak-dangerous act. It's quite a trick, and its roots lie partially in Korea's location and history, trapped as it is between the giants of China and Japan.

The name 'The Hermit Kingdom' was earned by Korea in the eighteenth century after it attempted to isolate itself following centuries of being a target for domination, occupation and plunder, or occasionally simply a route on the way to somewhere else. If you come from the

north, then once you are over the Yalu River there are few major natural defensive lines all the way down to the sea, and if you can land from the sea the reverse is true. The Mongols came and went, as did the Chinese Qing dynasty and the Japanese several times. So for a while the country preferred not to engage with the outside world, cutting many of its trade links in the hope that it would be left alone.

It was not successful. In the twentieth century the Japanese were back, annexing the whole country in 1910, and later set about destroying its culture. The Korean language was banned, as was the teaching of Korean history, and worship at Shinto shrines became compulsory. The decades of repression have left a legacy that even today impacts relations between Japan and both the Korean states.

The defeat of Japan in 1945 left Korea divided along the 38th parallel. North of it was a communist regime overseen first by the Soviets and later by communist China, south of the line was a pro-American dictatorship called the Republic of Korea (ROK). This was the very beginning of the Cold War era, when every inch of land was contested and each side was looking to establish influence or control around the world, unwilling to let the other maintain a sole presence.

The choice of the 38th parallel as the line of division was unfortunate in many ways and, according to the American historian Don Oberdorfer, arbitrary. He says that Washington was so focused on the Japanese surrender on 10 August 1945 that it had no real strategy for Korea. With Soviet troops on the move in the north of the peninsula and the White House convening an all-night emergency meeting, two junior officers, armed only with a *National Geographic* map, chose the 38th parallel as a place to suggest to the Soviets that they halt, on the grounds that it was halfway down the country. One of those officers was Dean Rusk, who would go on to be secretary of state during the Vietnam War.

No Koreans were present, nor any Korea experts. If they had been, they could have told President Truman and his then secretary of state, James Francis Byrnes, that the line was the same one the Russians and Japanese had discussed for spheres of influence half a century earlier, following the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–5. Moscow, not knowing that the Americans were making up policy on the hoof, could be forgiven for thinking this was the USA's de facto recognition of that suggestion and therefore acceptance of division and a communist North. The deal was done, the nation divided and the die cast.

The Soviets pulled their troops out of the North in 1948 and the Americans followed suit in the South in 1949. In June 1950 an emboldened North Korean military fatally underestimated America's Cold War geopolitical strategy and crossed the 38th parallel, intent on reuniting the peninsula under one communist government. The Northern forces raced down the country almost to the tip of the southern coast, sounding the alarm bells in Washington.

The North Korean leadership, and its Chinese backers, had correctly worked out that, in a strictly military sense, Korea was not vital to the USA; but what they failed to understand was that the Americans knew if they didn't stand up for their South Korean ally, other countries around the world would lose confidence in them. If America's allies, at the height of the Cold War, began to hedge their bets or go over to the communist side, then its entire global strategy would be in trouble. There are parallels here with the USA's policy in modern East Asia and Eastern Europe. Countries such as Poland, the Baltic states, Japan and the Philippines need to be confident that America has their back when it comes to their relations with Russia and China.

In September 1950 the USA, leading a UN force, surged into Korea, pushing the Northern troops back across the 38th parallel and then up almost to the Yalu River and the border with China.

Now it was Beijing's turn to make a decision. It was one thing to have US forces on the peninsula, quite another when they were north of the parallel – indeed north of the mountains above Hamhung – and within striking distance of China itself. Chinese troops poured across the Yalu and thirty-six months of fierce fighting ensued, with massive casualties on all sides, before they ground to a halt along the current border and agreed a truce, but not a treaty. There they were, stuck on the 38th parallel, and stuck they remain.

The geography of the peninsula is fairly uncomplicated and a reminder of how artificial the division is between North and South. The real (broad-brush) split is west to east. The east side has the Hamgyong mountain range in the north and lower ranges in the south. The west of the peninsula, where the majority of people live, is much flatter. The demilitarised zone (DMZ), which cuts the peninsula in half, in parts follows the path of the Imjin-gang River, but this was never a natural barrier between two entities, just a river within a unified geographical space all too frequently entered by foreigners.

The two Koreas are still technically at war, and given the hair-trigger tensions between them a major conflict is never more than a few artillery rounds away.

Japan, the USA and South Korea all worry about North Korea's nuclear weapons, but South Korea in particular has another threat hanging over it. North Korea's ability to successfully miniaturise its nuclear technology and create warheads that could be launched is uncertain, but it is definitely capable, as it showed in 1950, of a surprise, first-strike conventional attack.

South Korea's capital, the mega-city of Seoul, lies just 35 miles south of the 38th parallel and the DMZ. A little over half of South Korea's 51 million people live in the greater Seoul region, which is home to much of its industry and financial centres. In the hills above the 148-mile-long DMZ the North Korean military has an estimated 6,000 artillery pieces. They are well dug in, some in fortified bunkers and caves. Not all of them could reach the centre of Seoul, but some could, and all are able to reach the greater Seoul region. There's little doubt that within two or three days the combined might of the South Korean and US air forces would have destroyed many of them, but by that time Seoul would be in flames. Imagine the effect of just one salvo of shells from 6,000 artillery weapons landing in urban and semi-urban areas, then multiply it dozens of times.

In 2020 the RAND Corporation think tank published five scenarios of a no-warning conventional artillery attack. None are reassuring. By the time we get to Scenario Five, 14,000 rounds have fallen on Seoul in one hour (less than could be fired), and RAND estimates the dead and wounded figure to be 130,000. And that's just the first hour.

A major concern for South Korea is how close Seoul and the surrounding urban areas are to the border with North Korea. Seoul's position makes it vulnerable to surprise attacks from its neighbour, whose capital is much further away and partially protected by mountainous terrain.

By the second hour, the South Korean government would find itself fighting a major war while simultaneously attempting to manage the chaos of millions of people fleeing south as it tried to reinforce the border with troops stationed below the capital.

The hills above the DMZ are not high and there is a lot of flat ground between them and Seoul. In a surprise attack the North Korean army could push forwards quite quickly, aided by Special Forces who would enter via underground tunnels, which the South Koreans believe have already been built. North Korea's battle plans are thought to include submarines landing shock troops south of Seoul, and the activation of sleeper cells placed in the South's population. The US Defense Intelligence Agency estimates that the DPRK has 200,000 personnel it regards as Special Forces. How good are they? Let's hope we never find out.

The North has also already proved it can reach Tokyo with ballistic missiles by firing several of them over the Sea of Japan (known in Korea as the East Sea) and into the Pacific, a route that takes them directly over Japanese territory. Its armed forces are approximately 1.3 million-strong, one of the biggest militaries in the world, and even if large numbers of them are not highly trained they would be useful to Pyongyang as cannon fodder while it sought to widen the conflict.

The Americans would be fighting alongside South Korea, the Chinese military would be on full alert and approaching the Yalu, and the Russians and Japanese would be looking on nervously.

These scenarios are – at the time of writing – what has restrained successive American presidents from taking sustained military action to cripple the North's nuclear programme. The 2017 test launches of intercontinental ballistic missiles by North Korea, its potential to

miniaturise a nuclear weapon and its continuing work on submarines mean that we are approaching the endgame: either it becomes a fully fledged nuclear-armed power capable of launching long-range nuclear missiles or the Americans step in to prevent it.

In the summer of 2018, when President Trump brought about what his predecessors had not – a meeting with a North Korean leader – he was widely criticised. Previous presidents had looked at the idea of such a meeting and thought twice, not wanting to 'honour' the dictatorship with a propaganda coup. Trump's opposite number, Kim Jong Un, bathed in the global limelight. The TV coverage back in North Korea was something to behold, showing the 'Great Leader' swanning about on equal terms with the US president while hinting that in fact the stronger figure was Kim.

However, a case can be made that it was not a softer approach but Trump threatening 'fire and fury' that allowed the summit to happen – that and positioning some serious extra US firepower closer to the Korean Peninsula. At the beginning of the year, the potential for a US attack was thought to be serious. The summit helped to build a bridge between the two nations, creating a possible route away from confrontation, and for a significant period tensions were greatly reduced, leading to a second meeting early in 2019. However, little diplomatic headway was made and the subsequent Biden presidency also failed to make progress.

Neither side trusts the other – a situation that keeps a lot of people awake at night. The USA's allies in the region fear the military option but also worry that one day the Americans might leave them to their fate. On the other side of the divide, the Chinese don't want a nuclear-armed North Korea, but neither do they want the prospect of the USA going to war to prevent it and sending US troops back up towards the Yalu River on the China–North Korea border as they did in the 1950s. The world worries about the global impact on trade if such a conflict should break out.

It is not in anyone's interest for there to be another major war in Korea, as both sides would be devastated, but that has not prevented wars in the past. In 1950, when North Korea crossed the 38th parallel, it had not foreseen a three-year war with up to 4 million deaths, ending in stalemate. A full-scale conflict now might be even more catastrophic. South Korea's economy is more than fifty times bigger than the North's, its population is nearly twice the size, and the combined South Korean and US armed forces would almost certainly overwhelm North Korea eventually, assuming China did not decide to join in again.

And then what? There has been limited serious planning for such an eventuality. The South is thought to have done some computer modelling on what might be required, but it is generally accepted that the situation would be chaotic. The problems that would be created by Korea imploding or exploding would be multiplied if it happened as a result of warfare. Many countries would be affected and they would have decisions to make. Even if China did not want to intervene during the fighting, it might decide that it had to cross the border and secure the North to retain the buffer zone between it and the US forces. It might decide that a unified Korea, allied to the USA, which is allied to Japan, would be too much of a potential threat to allow.

The USA would have to decide how far across the DMZ it would push and whether it should seek to secure all North Korean sites containing nuclear and other weapons of mass destruction material. China would have similar concerns, especially as some of the nuclear facilities are only 35 miles from its border.

On the political front Japan would have to decide if it wanted a powerful, united Korea across the Sea of Japan. Given the brittle relations between Tokyo and Seoul, Japan has

reasons to be nervous about such a thing, but as it has far greater concerns about China, Japan would be likely to support reunification, despite the probable scenario that it would be asked to assist financially due to its long occupation of the peninsula in the last century. Besides, it knows what Seoul knows: that most of the economic costs of reunification will be borne by South Korea, and they will dwarf those of German reunification. East Germany may have been lagging far behind West Germany, but it had a history of development, an industrial base and an educated population. Developing the north of Korea would be building from ground zero and the costs would hold back the economy of a united peninsula for a decade. After that the benefits of the rich natural resources of the north, such as coal, zinc, copper, iron and rare earth elements, and the modernisation programme would be expected to kick in; but there are mixed feelings about risking the prosperity of one of the world's most advanced nations in the meantime.

Those decisions are for the future. For now each side continues to prepare for a war; as with Pakistan and India, they are locked in a mutual embrace of fear and suspicion.

South Korea is now a vibrant, integrated member of the nations of the world, with a foreign policy to match. With open water to its west, east and south, and with few natural resources, it has taken care to build a modern navy over the past four decades that can get into the Sea of Japan and the East China Sea to safeguard its interests. Like Japan it is dependent on foreign sources for its energy needs, and so keeps a close eye on the sea lanes of the whole region. It has spent time hedging its bets, investing diplomatic capital in closer relations with China, much to Pyongyang's annoyance.

Seoul tried the same strategy with Moscow, but following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 that relationship has cooled, perhaps even become frosty. South Korea enforced US-led sanctions against Moscow and in retaliation Russia put South Korea on the list of 'Unfriendly States' – the diplomatic equivalent of the naughty step. The following year South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol (of 2024 martial-law-fiasco fame) visited Kyiv. After touring the site of mass killings in Bucha he said Ukraine's experience reminded him of South Korea's invasion by North Korea in 1950 and announced a package of security, humanitarian and reconstruction assistance.

Revenge was swift. Two months later, President Putin hosted Kim in Moscow and within weeks North Korea began shipping millions of artillery shells to Russia for use in Ukraine. This was followed up in 2024 when Putin showed up in Pyongyang for the first time in twenty-four years to sign a mutual defence pact. The text published by North Korea's official news agency says that if either is pushed into a state of war, the other must deploy 'all means at its disposal without delay' and provide 'military and other assistance'.

A few months later footage emerged of North Korean Special Forces troops in Russia's Far East being kitted out en route to the front lines in Ukraine. South Korean intelligence said 1,500 men had been sent to Russia, with several thousand being readied for deployment. By year's end more than 11,000 had arrived. They were sent straight into the front lines in the Kursk region and suffered terrible losses. Many had been trained for urban combat and small-scale infiltration operations but were thrown against the Ukrainian defences in full frontal assaults with little support. They also appeared completely unprepared for drone warfare – hundreds were killed in kamikaze drone strikes that smashed into their positions.

China watched with concern. Beijing worried that the Russian–North Korean pact might both embolden Kim to destabilise the peninsula and lead him to consider Russia as an alternative ally. Other countries in the region and beyond are worried that in return for North Korean munitions, Russia gives Pyongyang sophisticated military technology denied to it

through sanctions. This would boost its nuclear weapons programme and its ability to launch intercontinental ballistic missiles and satellites.

In 2023 the two Koreas abandoned their joint Comprehensive Military Agreement, which had established a no-fly zone on the border and banned live-fire exercises near the DMZ. North Korea had launched a satellite in another contravention of UN resolutions and in response South Korea pulled out of the no-fly zone part of the pact. North Korea then said it was quitting the agreement completely. Both sides subsequently re-enforced the DMZ and restored disused guard posts. Kim followed up by saying that unification of the two Koreas, an aim of both sides, was now 'impossible', and announced further plans to speed up the production of nuclear warheads and launch of surveillance satellites.

Now, once again a miscalculation by either side could lead to a war that, as well as having devastating effects on the people of the peninsula, could wreck the economies of the region, with massive knock-on effects for that of the USA. What started with the USA defending its Cold War stance against Russia has developed into an issue of strategic importance to its economy and those of several other countries.

South Korea still has issues with Tokyo relating back to the Japanese occupation, and until the present decade the relationship was at best only cordial. There was a breakthrough in 2024, when bilateral defence ties were re-established after a six-year hiatus due to a confrontation between a South Korean Navy ship and a Japanese patrol aircraft. It wasn't just the agreement that showed how relations had warmed – it was the tone. A joint communiqué talked of 'shared values and common strategic interests of the two countries'. This fed into the Biden administration's vision of 'a new convergence' in the region based on shared principles.

The two countries still have a territorial dispute over what South Korea calls the Dokdo ('solitary') Islands and the Japanese know as the Takeshima ('bamboo') Islands that lie between them. The South Koreans currently control the rocky outcrops, which are in good fishing grounds, and there may be gas reserves in the region. Despite this thorn in their sides, and the still-fresh memories of occupation, both have reasons to co-operate and leave behind their troubled past.

Japan's history is very different from that of Korea, and the reason for this is partly due to its geography.

The Japanese are an island race, with the majority of the 124 million population living on the four large islands that face Korea and Russia across the Sea of Japan, and a minority inhabiting some of the 6,848 smaller islands. The largest of the main islands is Honshu, which comprises about 60 per cent of the country and houses Tokyo, the biggest mega-city in the world, and its 37 million people. The island also has the country's largest plain suitable for agriculture, which explains why the main population centres originated there.

Honshu is also home to the myth of how Japan was created, and why the emperor is the emperor. It is worth a quick detour as it's a story that might have been written by the Greeks and then set to music by Wagner. If they were all on drugs.

In short, two deities, Izanami and Izanagi, get together and Izanami gives birth to the islands of Japan. Other deities are born to populate the islands, but the birth of the fire deity is a little traumatic, perhaps for obvious reasons, and poor Izanami dies. A grieving Izanagi slays the fire deity, seeks out Izanami in the underworld, but has a row with her and seals her off underground. Understandably a bit miffed, she says she's going to strangle 1,000 Japanese people a day, but he replies that he'll cause 1,500 a day to be born. Given the current rapidly

declining birth rate in Japan, this bit of the story must be called into doubt. The first emperor is then sent down to Honshu and marries beautiful Princess Brilliant Blossoms, but refuses her dad's offer to also marry her not-so-beautiful sister, Princess Long As The Rocks.

And that is why Japanese emperors die. Their father had explained that Long As The Rocks' children would live eternally, but Brilliant Blossoms' children would be mortal. If you doubt this, it's in *The Kojiki*, the Japanese 'Record of Ancient Matters'. It was compiled *c*.712 CE from sources circulated over previous centuries and is Japan's oldest book. By no coincidence, it was put together after the Yamato people became dominant in Honshu as it establishes that hereditary emperors come from their clan and have a gods-given right to rule. The present incumbent, Emperor Naruhito, ascended to the Chrysanthemum Throne in 2019 and is from the longest-ruling family in the world.

Back to geography: at its closest point the Japanese archipelago is 120 miles from the Eurasian land mass, which is among the reasons why it has never been successfully invaded and why it is so ethnically homogeneous. It's more than 2,000 years since there was a major influx of people from elsewhere.

The Chinese are some 500 miles away across the East China Sea; and although in the north there is Russian territory much nearer, the Russian forces are usually far away because of the extremely inhospitable climate and sparse population located across the Sea of Okhotsk.

In the 1300s the Mongols tried to invade Japan after sweeping down through China, Manchuria and Korea. On the first occasion they were beaten back and on the second a storm wrecked their fleet. The seas in the Korean Strait were whipped up by what the Japanese said was a 'Divine Wind', which they called a *kamikaze*.

So the threat from the west and north-west was limited, and to the south-east and east there was nothing but the Pacific. This last perspective is why the Japanese gave themselves the name 'Nippon' or 'Sun Origin': looking east there was nothing between them and the horizon, and each morning, rising on that horizon, was the sun – represented on the Japanese flag by the red circle. Apart from sporadic invasions of Korea they mostly kept themselves to themselves until the modern world arrived, and when it did, after first pushing it away, they went out to meet it.

Opinions differ about when the islands became Japan, but there is a famous letter sent from what we know as Japan to the emperor of China in 617 CE in which a leading Japanese nobleman writes: 'Here I the emperor of the country where the sun rises send a letter to the emperor of the country where the sun sets. Are you healthy?' History records that the Chinese emperor took a dim view of such perceived impertinence. His empire was vast, while the main Japanese islands were still only loosely united, a situation that would not change until approximately the sixteenth century.

The territory of the Japanese islands makes up a country that is bigger than the two Koreas combined, or in European terms larger than Germany. However, three-quarters of the land is not conducive to human habitation, especially the mountainous regions, and only 13 per cent is suitable for intensive cultivation. This leaves the Japanese living in close proximity to each other along the coastal plains and in restricted inland areas, where some stepped rice fields exist in the hills. Its mountains mean that Japan has plenty of water, but the lack of flat land makes its rivers unsuited to navigation and therefore trade, a problem exacerbated by the fact that few of the rivers join each other.

So the Japanese became a maritime people, connecting and trading along the coasts of their myriad islands, making forays into Korea and, after centuries of isolation, modernising and pushing out to dominate the whole region.

The catalyst for this was the 'visit' to Tokyo Bay in 1853 by US Navy Commodore Matthew Perry at a time when Japan had watched China being colonised. He was armed with a letter and a big stick. The letter was from President Fillmore, the stick was in the shape of four ships armed with seventy-three cannons. In his letter, while noting that Japan did not allow foreign trade, Fillmore suggested that 'it seems to be wise, from time to time, to make new laws'.

Japan had no navy; a trade treaty followed. The shogunate had been shown to be weak and the humiliation led to its overthrow. In 1868 the Meiji Restoration reinstated the emperor, moved the capital from Kyoto to Tokyo and began to industrialise the country.

However, having industrialised, the very same island geography that had allowed it to remain isolated gave it no choice but to engage with the world. The problem was that it chose to engage militarily.

By the beginning of the twentieth century Japan was a modern power with the third-largest navy in the world. It had already won the Sino-Japanese War (1894–5), and in 1905 defeated the Russians in a war fought on land and at sea. Both conflicts were intended to thwart Chinese and Russian influence in Korea. Japan considered Korea to be, in the words of its Prussian military advisor, Major Klemens Meckel, 'a dagger pointed at the heart of Japan'. Controlling the peninsula removed the threat, and controlling Manchuria made sure the hand of China, and to a lesser extent that of Russia, could not get near the dagger's hilt. Korea's coal and iron ore would also come in handy.

Japan had few of the natural resources required to become an industrialised nation. It had limited and poor-quality supplies of coal, very little oil, scant quantities of natural gas, not much rubber and a shortage of many metals. This is as true now as it was 100 years ago, although offshore gas fields are being explored along with undersea deposits of precious metals. Nevertheless, it remains the world's largest importer of natural gas and a major importer of oil.

It was the thirst for these products that caused Japan to rampage across China in the 1930s and South-East Asia in the early 1940s. Japan occupied Manchuria in 1932, then conducted a full-scale invasion of China in 1937. As each domino fell, the expanding empire and the growing Japanese population required more oil, more coal, more metal, more rubber and more food.

With the European powers preoccupied with war in Europe, Japan went on to invade northern Indo-China. Eventually the Americans, who by then were supplying most of Japan's oil needs, delivered an ultimatum: withdraw – or face an oil embargo. The Japanese responded with the attack on Pearl Harbor and then swept across South-East Asia, capturing Myanmar, Singapore and the Philippines, among other territories.

This was a massive overstretch – not just taking on the USA, but grabbing the very resources – rubber for example – that the USA required for its own industry. The giant of the twentieth century mobilised for total war. Japan's geography then played a role in its greatest catastrophe – Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

The Americans had fought their way across the Pacific, island to island, at great cost. By the time they took Okinawa, which sits in the Ryukyu Island chain between Taiwan and Japan' s major islands, they were faced with a still-fanatical enemy prepared to defend the four big islands from amphibious invasion. Massive US losses were predicted. If the terrain had been easier the American choice may have been different – they might have pressed on to Tokyo –

but they chose the nuclear option, unleashing upon Japan, and the collective conscience of the world, the terror of a new age.

After the radioactive dust had settled on a complete Japanese surrender, the Americans helped them rebuild, partially as a hedge against communist China. The new Japan showed its old inventiveness and within three decades became a global economic powerhouse.

However, its previous belligerence and militarism were not entirely gone: they had just been buried beneath the rubble of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and a shattered national psyche. The country still had the same problems as before the war: with limited resources it depended on imports supplied by sea, including for its energy needs. National defence had to begin not on the shores of its numerous islands but hundreds of miles out.

Japan's post-war constitution did not allow for it to have an army, air force or navy, only 'Self-Defence Forces', which for decades were a pale shadow of the pre-war military. The post-war agreement imposed by the USA left tens of thousands of American troops on Japanese territory, with some 50,000 currently stationed there.

Article 9 of Japan's post-war constitution reads: 'The Japanese people forever renounce war as a sovereign right of the nation . . . land, sea and air forces, as well as other war potential, will never be maintained.' But by the early 1980s the faint stirrings of nationalism could again be detected. There were sections of the older generation who had never accepted the enormity of Japan's war crimes, and sections of the younger who were not prepared to accept guilt for the sins of their fathers. Many of the children of the Land of the Rising Sun wanted their 'natural' place under the sun of the post-war world.

After years of impassioned debate, the perception of a growing threat from China began to influence policy. The 2013 National Security Strategy document was the first to name a potential enemy (China), and in 2014 Prime Minister Shinzo Abe forced through legislation reinterpreting Article 9 to allow for 'collective self-defence'. The country could now assist allies if they were attacked. A flexible view of the constitution has become the norm, and the Japan Self-Defence Forces have been turned into a formidable modern fighting military. The Americans, aware that they needed strong military allies in the Pacific region, were prepared to accept a fully re-militarised Japan.

A series of agreements with other nations followed. In 2023 Japan signed a Reciprocal Access Agreement (RAA) with the UK allowing the armed forces of each country to be positioned in the other. As a headline, 'UK Forces Allowed in Japan' may lack the impact of 'The Russians Are Coming!', but it does show how serious Tokyo is about building alliances to meet the challenges of the twenty-first century. It also ties in with the concept that in this century the notion of 'the West' is morphing into the idea of shared values among industrialised democracies around the world. Permanent bases in each other's countries are not envisioned, but the RAA allows joint exercises to take place on land and sea.

In 2024 Japan signed a similar RAA with the Philippines, and in the same year President Biden hosted a White House summit with the leaders of both countries – Prime Minister Fumio Kishida and President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. All three are now co-operating at a high military level in their approach to the China/Taiwan question.

Japan has provided the Philippines with coastal radar systems so that Manila can share information about Chinese military manoeuvres. Page 14 of the Philippines National Security Policy 2023–28 states: 'Any military conflict in the Taiwan Strait would inevitably affect the Philippines given the geographic proximity of Taiwan to the Philippine archipelago and the presence of over 150,000 Filipinos in Taiwan.' Manila and Beijing have overlapping claims in the South China Sea and have frequently clashed over the former's missions to resupply troops

stationed on a beached vessel on a contested reef. The Luzon Strait, between Taiwan and the Philippines, is only 200 miles wide and has a Philippine-controlled island in the middle. This is a chokepoint that, in the event of a conflict, could be used to prevent the Chinese Navy from coming round the back of Taiwan.

An all-out assault on Taiwan, which lies between the Philippines and Japan, would involve the Chinese Navy operating very close to the territorial waters of both countries and therefore in proximity to US forces. In 2023 Manila granted the USA access to four military bases in addition to the five it already uses, and the main bulk of the US presence in Japan is based in Okinawa, the closest island to Taiwan.

Many military analysts believe that a Chinese invasion would begin with an attack on US bases in the region. If so, Japan, as both a sovereign nation and a treaty ally, would immediately be pulled into the war and Washington and Manila have a version of NATO's famous 'All for one' pact.

Currently Japan has few long-range missiles that could give it a counter-strike capability if attacked. It is buying hundreds of US Tomahawk missiles with a 1,000-mile range, and a $3 billion contract has been signed with Mitsubishi to produce long-range missiles.

Japan's self-imposed 1 per cent of GDP limit for defence spending has been scrapped, and every year since 2015 the budget has increased to a new record level. Japan aims to reach 2 per cent by 2027, and given how wealthy the country is that equals a lot of money. In 2024 the budget was $55.9 billion. It is being spent on big-ticket items such as the home-built Taigei-class (Big Whale) diesel electric submarines, sixth-generation jet fighters (expected in 2035), Aegis radar-equipped destroyers and Patriot missile defence systems.

In 2015, when Tokyo unveiled what it called a 'helicopter-carrying destroyer', it didn't take a military expert to notice that the vessel was as big as the Japanese aircraft carriers of the Second World War, which were forbidden by the surrender terms of 1945. The ship could be adapted for fixed-wing aircraft, but the defence minister issued a statement saying that he was 'not thinking of using it as an aircraft carrier'. This was akin to buying a motorbike, then saying that because you were not going to use it as a motorbike it was a pushbike. The Japanese now had an aircraft carrier, and quickly launched a second.

In 2021 a US Marine Corps F-35B 'jump jet' took off from one, the first time a fixed-wing aircraft has launched from a Japanese carrier since the Second World War. Tokyo has already bought dozens of F-35s, with the intention of acquiring dozens more. It can't keep pace with Chinese warships and so is investing in Uncrewed Surface Vessels (USVs), which can conduct intelligence-gathering, minesweeping operations and anti-submarine warfare to take pressure off crewed ships. In 2024, Japan's defence White Paper highlighted their importance and noted that co-operation with the USA on the new technology was vital. In the same year it began testing its first USV.

The money spent on them and other shiny new kit is a clear statement of intent, as is much of its positioning. The military infrastructure at Okinawa, which guards the approaches to the main islands and keeps an eye on nearby Taiwan, is being upgraded. This allows Japan greater flexibility to patrol its Air Defence Zone, part of which overlaps with China's equivalent zone after an expansion was announced by Beijing in 2013.

Both zones cover the islands called Senkaku or Diaoyu (in Japanese and Chinese), which Japan controls but are claimed by China. They also form part of the Ryukyu Island chain, which is sensitive because a hostile power approaching through the South China Sea must pass

them en route to the Japanese heartlands. They give Japan a lot of territorial sea space where there might be underwater gas and oilfields, thus Tokyo intends to hold on to them by all means necessary.

China's expanded 'Air Defence Identification Zone' in the East China Sea covers territory claimed by China, Japan, Taiwan and South Korea. When Beijing said that any plane flying through the zone must identify itself or 'face defensive measures', Japan, South Korea and the USA responded by flying through it without doing so. There was no hostile response from China, but this is an issue that can be turned into an ultimatum at a time of Beijing's choosing.

Japan also claims sovereignty over the Kuril Islands in its far north, off Hokkaido, which it lost to the Soviet Union in the Second World War and which are still under Russian control. Russia prefers not to discuss the matter, but the debate isn't in the same league as Japan's disputes with China. There are only approximately 20,000 inhabitants, and although the islands sit in fertile fishing grounds the territory is not one of particular strategic importance. The issue ensures that Russia and Japan maintain a frosty relationship, but they have pretty much frozen the question of the islands.

It is China that keeps Japanese leaders awake at night and ties them closely to the USA, diplomatically and militarily. Many Japanese, especially on Okinawa, resent the US military presence, but the might of China, added to the decline in the Japanese population, is likely to ensure that the post-war USA–Japan relationship continues, albeit on a more equal basis.

This population decline is considered a serious threat to Japan. Japanese statisticians fear that the population could shrink to under 100 million by the middle of the century, with too few working people to fund pensions and healthcare in a country with, as of 2024, the world's longest life expectancy. If the current birth rate continues, it is even possible that by 2110 the population will have fallen below the 50 million it was in 1910. Japanese governments are trying a variety of measures to reverse the decline. A recent example is using millions of dollars of taxpayers' money to fund a matchmaking service for young people. Subsidised *konkatsu* parties are arranged for single men and women to meet, eat, drink and – eventually – have babies. Immigration is another possible solution, but Japan remains a relatively insular society and this option is not favoured by the population.

Japan can try to counter this problem by using its technological brilliance to build a high-tech economy that sustains or even increases production of goods the world wants, despite declining consumption at home. This would contribute to funding robotics and AI devices, which help with care for the elderly. Japan is the sort of country that may be able to pioneer a successful society for an ageing population. It's a tough assignment.

Whether it can or cannot, Japan still requires friends in the neighbourhood. So the Americans are staying, both there and in Korea. There is now a triangular relationship between them, as there is between Japan, the Philippines and the USA. Japan and South Korea have plenty to argue about but agree that their shared anxiety concerning China and North Korea will overcome this. Japan is a member of the Quad, along with the USA, Australia and India, which is aimed at boxing in China. In 2023 it signed up to the American-led Chip 4 semiconductor group along with South Korea and Taiwan to keep the latest chip technology out of Chinese hands. In 2024 Tokyo opened discussions with AUKUS countries (Australia, UK, USA) about participation in the second phase of what is another partnership aimed at deterring Chinese regional assertiveness. AUKUS plans to deliver nuclear-powered attack submarines to Australia in the 2030s. Negotiations with Japan are not about help to build the subs; instead Japan would contribute to anti-submarine warfare, quantum computing and artificial intelligence. The talks will be long and difficult: despite Japan's high-tech prowess

there are concerns about its cyber defences, as AUKUS deals in some of the most closely guarded military secrets the other three countries have.

It remains unlikely that anyone will solve a problem like Korea. This and the growth of Chinese power means the US 7th Fleet will remain in the Bay of Tokyo and US Marines will stay in Okinawa, guarding the paths in and out of the Pacific and the China seas. The waters can be expected to be rough, but Japan brings a lot to the table. What was 'the sleeping giant' is now wide awake and militarised. This does not signify a militaristic and aggressive Japan, but a Japan more at ease in being what it is: a major economic and military power.

It did this in partnership with the Americans. The British enjoy a particularly close relationship with the USA for several reasons, one of them being geography. As British military power wanes, and as America's focus drifts elsewhere, we are reminded that there is another country with a similar connection.

Special relationship? Yes! Or in Japanese: *Tokubetsuna Kankei? Hai!*