

**Woolley, Peter. *Geography and Japan's Strategic Choices: From Seclusion to Internationalization*. Dulles, VA: Potomac Books, 2005.**

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Woolley, Peter. *Geography and Japan's Strategic Choices: From Seclusion to Internationalization*. Dulles, VA: Potomac Books, 2005.

Asia is in the middle of a profound process of change. At a high pace the political giant, China, is transforming into an economic superpower. Through its location, Japan will be one of the most deeply affected countries by this phenomenon. Japan has always been highly influenced by external events. This is demonstrated by Peter Woolley in *Geography and Japan's Strategic Choices: From Seclusion to Internationalization*. In an easily readable framework, he makes the Japanese mystery accessible for a broader public so that its political decisions over the centuries become understandable for the Western mind. Woolley departs from the geopolitical idea that geography has always shaped Japan's strategic choices. He assumes the best option for Japan is reflected by its isolated location so that Japan's fate is to balance its mighty neighbors, China, Russia, and the US. However, Woolley explains that Japan was not always able to pursue this policy during the last centuries due to external influence.

Woolley simplifies the history of Japan to the strategic choices made vis-à-vis the external world. Each chapter deals with a dilemma that it confronted from the sixteenth century onwards and explains why Tokyo opted for certain policies. According to Woolley, Japan was obliged to reconsider its strategy repeatedly in response to changed geopolitical circumstances. The arrival of the first foreigners on its territory forced Japan to abandon its unconscious isolation. But after a short period of expansion, the Tokugawa regime (1603-1868) was convinced that only a renewed isolation would consolidate its power. The banning of firearms, Christianity, and European politics in conjunction with the marginalization of European trade would safeguard Japan's independence. Woolley emphasizes that this was a political decision taken because isolation was among Japan's arsenal of strategic possibilities.

The context changed in the nineteenth century when the extension of the US into the Pacific resulted in new commercial interests in Japan. Advances in technology narrowed the benefits of seclusion. As a result, Japan opted for opening up and became exposed to external products. The goal of the Meiji restoration of 1868 was not coincidentally to catch up with Western modernization. Woolley argues that in order to keep Japan independent expansion was a necessity. Initial victories over Korea and against China and Russia led to an ambivalent sentiment among the Western powers. While the actions of Japan were appreciated during the First World War, fear and contempt for its rise led the Allies to neglect Japan's desires at the peace process. The author points to this feeling of disappointment as a result of deteriorating relations with the outside world.

The strategic choice of Japan to seize the opportunities to reshape the geopolitical contours of Asia in the chaotic aftermath of the First World War was,

according to Woolley, its biggest mistake in history. Based on its geographic location, Japan could be a maritime power like the UK. But, against all odds, it absolutely wanted to be a land power with the idea that this would safeguard its world position. The war against China had priority and resulted in an overestimation of Japan's powers and an underestimation of its silent neighbor at the other end of the ocean, the US. Eventually, expansion led directly to the disastrous defeat of Japan.

In the geopolitical turmoil following 1945, Japan made a strategic choice that endures until today, an alliance with the US. Woolley points to the popularity of the peace clause in the new constitution among the Japanese and perceives it to be a realistic strategy. The fear of rearmament flows out of the internal recognition of the need for isolation. However, the question of Japanese rearmament would always be brought up by consequent international events. The author divides the search for a renewed position in the international system into two periods. First, under the Cold War, a slow modification of the strict interpretation of the clause could be witnessed under the Japan-US Security Treaty. Still, no extensive participation in outside conflicts could be found despite its dependency on oil and outside pressure. Secondly, Woolley argues that after 1990 Japan was forced to reconsider its policy. He describes carefully the reluctance within the Japanese government to abandon this "checkbook diplomacy," even after 9/11.

For Woolley, the future will have to answer the following question: will Japan's place in the world again be defined by its geostrategic position? Nowadays, the focus is on the unpredictable danger of North Korea, which will pressure Japan to reconsider its strategy once again. This may eventually result in a new interpretation of what constitutes self-defense and put an end to a decade-long indecisiveness. Japan has the choice to rely continuously on the US or to prepare itself for its defense, with the risk of opposition by the population. To understand the current dilemma Japan is in at the moment, one needs to have an internal comprehension of the Japanese political behavior. Reading this book is important in order to witness the changes on the global level from a different perspective.

**Gudrun Van Pottlebergh** completed a Masters in history at the Vrije Universiteit Brussels and is now completing a Joint European Masters in Humanitarian Action (NOHA).