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Postwar Japan at 80: 10 factors that changed the nation forever

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Simon Avenell

Professor in Modern Japanese History, Australian National University

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This year marks 80 years since Japan's catastrophic defeat in the Asia-Pacific War. In 1945, the country lay in ruins. Millions had died in battle or in the devastating Allied bombings of Tokyo, Hiroshima, Nagasaki, and other cities. Across Asia and the Pacific, Japan's bid to create a Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere left millions violated, impoverished, or dead.

Backed into a corner, in August 1945 Emperor Hirohito defied his generals and accepted unconditional surrender under the Potsdam Declaration.

In his unprecedented radio broadcast on August 15, he urged the Japanese to bear the unbearable and endure the unendurable. With defeat, Japan's empire dissolved, its "divine" emperor became mortal, and a nation that had pursued autonomy through conquest now faced a humbling occupation led by its former archenemy, *Amerika*.

SURRENDER OF JAPAN - SOUND



Standing in the burnt-out fields of 1945, survivors could scarcely have imagined the Japan of today. The country has changed dramatically. In my [research](#), I identify ten key factors that define this “postwar” era — a term that in Japan still refers to the entire period since surrender. The “post” of the postwar speaks to the drive to transcend the past, while the “war” to the enduring shadow of that past in memory, politics, and diplomacy.

1: Post-empire Japan. While Japan’s empire vanished in 1945, former colonies and violated regions could not and would not forget the past. Postwar leaders and their American backers promoted an image of a peaceful and ethnically homogeneous island nation, but wartime memories have repeatedly [strained relations](#) with South Korea, China, and others. In this sense, Japan has been as much “post-empire” as it has been “postwar” since 1945.

2: Ambiguous demilitarisation. After defeat, Japan’s wartime military —responsible for a trail of misery and havoc across Asia and the Pacific — was dismantled. The American-authored [constitution](#) renounced war and the maintenance of a military.

But with the Cold War, Washington backtracked, pushing Japan to create its Self-Defense Forces in the mid-1950s. Today Japan has a sophisticated military and it [exports military equipment](#), but constitutional constraints constantly force leaders to make [incremental reinterpretations](#) over the legal status of the Self-Defense Forces and the scope of its activities. [Some have claimed](#) this constraint inhibits postwar Japan from being a [normal country](#).

3: Bastion of democracy in the far east. Although democracy had prewar roots, it was consistently subject to oppression. The postwar constitution finally institutionalised freedoms of speech, assembly, and political participation, while codifying rights for women and others. The Japanese embraced these rights, flocking to polling booths, and organising political parties, unions, and countless civic movements. Long-term conservative rule repeatedly undercut democracy, but it became part of everyday life and survives to the present.

Since the second world war, Japan has become a bastion of democracy in the far east. Kimimasa Mayama/EPA/AAP

4: America's embrace. The United States-led occupation ended in 1952, but Japan's economy, security, and culture remain bound to America. Feelings towards the former archenemy are complex.

The American dream in brands such as Levis, Coca Cola, McDonalds, and Disney, have symbolised a bright and affluent future. But the continued US military presence and memories of the atomic bombings are constant reminders of Japan's subservience. Nonetheless, the Japanese have never seriously considered breaking from their powerful trans-Pacific patron.

5: One party to rule them all? Politically, postwar Japan is an unusual democracy, with the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) ruling almost continuously since forming in 1955. The LDP offered political stability, but this was accompanied by recurrent scandal and corruption.

Opposition parties essentially gave up on winning government, remaining fractured and powerless. In fact, the larger story of postwar Japanese politics is one of increasing public disillusionment. Many Japanese see politicians as increasingly out of touch and, as was apparent in its most recent elections, search for radical alternatives.

Read more: *Young Japanese voters embrace right-wing populist parties, leaving the prime minister on the brink*

6: Economic rollercoaster. Following defeat, the Japanese built an economy that stunned the world. By the 1970s, Japan was the second largest capitalist economy, powered by exports of cars, electronics, and steel. Rising incomes fuelled mass consumption and international travel, and observers spoke of "Japan as Number One."

But the economic meltdown in the 1990s triggered an era of stagnation. The economy struggled to keep up with new competitors and technologies. The myth of shared prosperity gave way to widening generational and gender disparity. Ironically, there is a risk Japanese today may end up less well off than their parents.

7: Homogenisation and its discontents. Economic growth drew millions into a culture of mass consumption and standardised life, giving rise to a popular vision of Japan as a totally middle-class society. But this rose-colored vision was as much myth as reality. Homogenisation tended to mask differences while encouraging discrimination based on gender, age, ethnicity, and location. Since the 1990s, the myth of a middle-class nation has collapsed, with no compelling replacement on the horizon.

Postwar homogeneity led to the rise of the myth of Japan as an entirely middle-class society. Jae C. Hong/AP/AAP

8: The demographic tsunami. The silent, yet perhaps most profound, factor of postwar Japan is demographic change. The era witnessed three great shifts here.

First, rural-to-urban migration in the late 1950s transformed Japan from an agrarian nation into one of the world's most urbanised. Second, the fertility rate fell steadily, apart from brief baby booms in the late 1940s and early 1970s. Third, longevity rose to among the world's highest.

Today, an ageing, shrinking population strains public finances and welfare, while youth face economic insecurity. Indeed, Japan may be the "canary in the coal mine" for other ageing societies.

9: Japan's return to the world. Unable to project military power, after 1945 Japan used its economic, cultural, and diplomatic influence internationally. Even at the height of the Cold War, it maintained trade with China. Economic strength also helped Japan to restore ties in Asia and secure a respected place in global institutions.

But Japan's return to the postwar world has been complicated. Leaders must juggle nationalist rumblings, American demands, and the responsibilities of global citizenship. As economic fortunes change and regional geopolitics transform, Japan must rethink its international posture.

10: Environmental laboratory. Economic growth brought prosperity, but also caused severe environmental damage. In the 1960s and 1970s, Japan experienced shocking cases of industrial pollution from methylmercury and other neurotoxins.

Japan is highly vulnerable to natural disasters such as earthquakes and tsunamis. Franck Robichon/AP/AAP

Earthquakes and tsunamis killed tens of thousands and, at Fukushima, bequeathed a nuclear catastrophe of generational proportions. Every year, climate change intensifies typhoons, floods, and heatwaves, but energy-vulnerable Japan still struggles to chart a low-emissions pathway to the future.

A universal story

For a country that has long been touted as exceptional, I am struck by the global resonances in this history, like grappling with the past, managing economic highs and lows, navigating demographic change, and confronting environmental crisis.

Japan's postwar era certainly offers a portrait of one nation's revival, but it may also represent a microcosm for tackling our own challenges.