



## 75 Years On: How Lessons from the Pacific Theater Impact American Foreign Policy Today

By Jane Harman

"To defeat an enemy as tough and dedicated as the Japanese, we had to be just as tough. We had to be just as dedicated to America as they were to their emperor. I think this was the essence of Marine Corps doctrine in World War II," wrote Eugene Sledge, whose memoir *With the Old Breed* describes his experience as an American mortarman, fighting at Peleliu and Okinawa in the Pacific theater.

Like those who experienced the Pacific War first hand, Asia and the United States continue to grapple with the Pacific War's ' legacy. To better understand

how the War continues to shape geopolitics in Asia and U.S. strategy toward the region 75 years on, the Wilson Center has assembled a remarkable group of scholars and former policymakers from the United States and across Asia to better understand how we continue to live in the shadow of the Pacific War, and what lessons may be learned to avoid similar catastrophes in the future.

Through these perspectives, a complex context emerges in which the United States again finds itself competing with great powers that seek to re-write the international balance of power.

Remembering the hard-won lessons from World War II, including differences of opinion with our competitors over the lessons learned, will be critical to successful American foreign and military policy in the next decade.

Today, the United States has an upper hand: we have the advantage of three-quarters of a century on the ground, building a robust liberal international order, and working closely with allies and partners across the region who saw their future as intertwined with the United States. While conflict with adversaries in Asia would certainly be different today than it was in the last century, it is important to remember another of Eugene Sledge's insights about the role of innovation in warfare: "The technology that developed the rifle barrel, the machine gun and high explosive shells has turned war into prolonged, subhuman slaughter. [We] must be trained realistically... to survive it without breaking, mentally, and physically."

As the United States considers the implications of gray zone competition and potential conflict on the high seas, in space, and in the digital domain, as well as on land, it is critical for our country to remember that lesson of confidence and resolve. Combined with our capabilities and physical presence in the region, America hopes that we can prevent simmering tensions and burgeoning competition from escalating into another catastrophic conflict in Asia.

Our competitors are always innovating, always investing in their own power, and remain focused on what it will take for them to gain competitive advantages. We must too.

Several Wilson Center experts contributed essays to this initiative, including:

- **Robert Daly**—Director of the Kissinger Institute on China and the United States—offers a compelling review of the Pacific War from China's perspective.
- **Abe Denmark**—Director of the Asia Program and a Senior Fellow in the Kissinger Institute on China and the United States—discusses the promise and perils of historical analogies, and uses multiple examples from American foreign policymaking to argue that history can be a powerful tool, but its misuse can convince policymakers to embrace disastrous options.
- **Shihoko Goto**—Deputy Director for Geoeconomics in the Asia Program—reviews Japan's postwar economic vision, arguing that the model for growth developed by Tokyo lifted the nation rapidly out of ruinous defeat and provided a model that other countries across the region—including its former adversaries—adopted as well.
- **Lucas Myers**—Program Associate in the Asia Program—examines the role of Pacific Islands in Imperial Japan's military strategy, and considers their significance for today's military competition between China and the United States.
- **Toshihiro Nakayama**—Former Japan Scholar at the Wilson Center and a professor at Keio University in Japan—considers the Pacific War's legacy on Japan's approach to national security.
- **Diana Negroponte**—Public Policy scholar at the Wilson Center—traces the roots of the U.S.-Philippines alliance to its experiences during and immediately after the Pacific War.



- **Marvin Ott**—Asia Fellow at the Wilson Center—examines the legacy of the Pacific War in Southeast Asia, and how the Cold War catalyzed a renewed relationship between the region and Japan.
- **Gwen Young**—Distinguished Fellow at the Wilson Center—reviews how the Pacific War impacted society’s views on the role of women across Asia.
- **Joe Nye**—my dear friend and Professor Emeritus at Harvard University—examines the legacy of the Pacific War on U.S. alliances in the region and strategies to manage the rise of great powers.
- **Kenneth Pyle**—Professor at the University of Washington—discusses how the United States imposed a constitution on Japan that continues to shape Japan’s approach to foreign affairs and national security.

Several experts from outside the Wilson Center also contributed analysis, including:

- **Rear Admiral Samuel J. Cox (USN, Ret.)**—Director of the Naval History and Heritage Command and Curator of the Navy—offers insights into how the Pacific War shaped the U.S. Navy’s strategy and investments toward the Indo-Pacific.
- **Cheol Hee Park**—Professor at the Graduate School of International Studies at Seoul National University—identifies three ways the Pacific War continues to play a significant role in defining the geopolitics of the Korean peninsula and East Asia.
- **Zheng Wang**—Director of the Center for Peace and Conflict Studies and Professor in the School of Diplomacy and International Relations at Seton Hall University—notes that countries across East Asia have come to use the Pacific War as central to their national identity and state mobilization initiatives, and discusses China’s approach to foreign affairs and national security is shaped by memories of the Pacific War.
- **Martin Sherwin**—Professor at George Mason University and winner of the Pulitzer Prize—discusses the legacy of the use of atomic weapons on Hiroshima and Nagasaki for deterrence, arms control, and nuclear disarmament.
- **Bob Work**—former Deputy Secretary of Defense—assesses the role that military technology played in the Pacific War and how it parallels U.S. efforts to sustain its military advantages today.

And in addition to these essays, Abe Denmark conducted [four video interviews](#) with prominent experts:

