

Interview – Hirotugu Aida

Written by E-International Relations

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Hirotugu “Hiro” Aida is a journalist and scholar, currently a visiting professor at Kansai University in Osaka. He is set to retire this March. Aida specializes in teaching journalism and American intellectual history. In addition to his academic role, he contributes as a writer for the Kyodo news agency. He holds a research associate position at the Center for Interdisciplinary Study of Monotheistic Religions (CISMOR) at Doshisha University in Kyoto. Aida’s extensive career includes a tenure as a full professor at the School of Global Studies and Collaboration (GSC) at Aoyama Gakuin University in Tokyo from 2015 to 2020. He has also been actively involved in various editorial capacities, serving as an editorial board member for *The American Purpose* online magazine in Washington, D.C.

Aida is an author with several notable works in Japanese, including *My Special Japan: Told by World Intellectuals* (*Sekai-no Chisei ga Kataru “Tokubetsu-na Nippon”*). His other works include *America in Disarray*, *Trump Phenomenon and American Conservative Thought*. Aida’s contributions extend beyond his native language, as he has translated works by prominent authors such as Francis Fukuyama and Russell Kirk into Japanese. His translations include Fukuyama’s *Political Order and Political Decay* (2018), *The Origins of Political Order* (2013), and *America at the Crossroads* (2006), as well as Russell Kirk’s *The Conservative Mind* (2018). Throughout his career, Aida has also written numerous articles for major Japanese magazines, including *Chuokoron*, *Foresight*, *Sekai*, and *Toyo Keizai Weekly*, showcasing his expertise and engagement with global issues.

Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?

I have been closely monitoring the evolving intellectual landscape in the United States, aiming to nurture a mutually beneficial relationship between the US and Japan. My interest in this field traces back to the 1990s when I engaged with right-leaning intellectuals and their perspectives. The rise of personalities like Trump can be interpreted as a reaction to perceived failures in US politics, economics, and society over several decades. These failures have spurred significant disruptions and transformations within the intellectual community, challenging the traditional principles of US liberalism.

A group of post-liberal thinkers, exemplified by Patrick Deneen and his influential work *Why Liberalism Failed*, has emerged. These thinkers advocate for a departure from the individualism and property rights inherent in US-style liberalism, instead proposing a more communitarian society. However, their vision often lacks a concrete blueprint. Simultaneously, socialist ideologies have experienced a resurgence, as seen through Senator Sanders’ prominence as a self-proclaimed democratic socialist contender in the Democratic presidential primaries of 2016 and 2020.

Amidst this shifting landscape, there has been a notable but little-known reevaluation of the legacy of James Burnham (1905-1987), a significant intellectual in US Trotskyism before World War II. While Burnham later became a leading anti-Communist personality during the Cold War, traces of his Trotskyist roots, particularly his anti-bureaucratic stance, persist throughout his intellectual journey. Early 20th-century Italian Machiavellian thinkers, such as Vilfredo Pareto and Gaetano Mosca, also influenced his later ideological development. Exploring the interaction between Trotskyist principles and Italian political thought provides valuable insights into Burnham’s evolving worldview and its relevance in contemporary US history.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most

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significant shifts in your thinking?

Throughout my career as a journalist and scholar spanning Tokyo, Washington, and Geneva, I witnessed the conclusion of the Cold War, particularly on the European front, the subsequent collapse of the Soviet Union, and a fleeting period of harmonious international cooperation. The profound impact of Francis Fukuyama's seminal essay *The End of History?* in 1989 spurred me to adopt a perspective that considers broader historical trends and currents of thought. During these years, I first had the opportunity to meet Francis Fukuyama.

As I delved deeper into contemporary US political thought, especially its conservative currents that persisted beyond the Cold War, I was introduced by a close American associate involved in disarmament negotiations between the US and the Soviet Union to George Nash's *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945*. Discovering Nash's work was a revelation for me, given its relative obscurity in Japan, where Marxist influences predominated within the intellectual sphere. Subsequently, I had the privilege of getting acquainted with Dr. Nash and have maintained contact with him ever since.

A transformative moment in my intellectual journey came when I had the opportunity to visit Russell Kirk, a foundational figure of the postwar conservative intellectual movement described by Nash, at his secluded Michigan home in 1991. Over several days, engaging in extensive discussions with Kirk left a profound imprint on my perspective. He represented the essence of the contemporary introspective United States, drawing inspiration from the 19th century and the interwar periods when the nation was more introverted. I translated his seminal work, *The Conservative Mind*, into Japanese and forged a lasting bond with his family.

Following my tours in Geneva and Tokyo, I returned to the US after the 9/11 terrorist attacks to assume a news agency's bureau chief role. This position facilitated frequent exchanges of ideas with Fukuyama, who was beginning to distance himself from the neoconservative movement. Our discussions primarily revolved around intellectual history and international affairs. Since then, my professional trajectory has evolved in tandem with my writing endeavors, alongside a commitment to translating and spreading Fukuyama's ideas in Japan.

What are the central issues of the upcoming US presidential elections likely to be? What impact might the recent indictment of Donald Trump have on the result?

Donald Trump himself is the central issue of this year's US presidential election. Despite contenders like Nikki Haley vying for the Republican presidential candidacy and ongoing indictments against Trump, their impact appears negligible, with their efforts only seeming to bolster support for Trump. While polls emphasize economic and social issues as primary election concerns, this framing may primarily serve the polling industry's convenience. The crux of the matter lies in understanding the logical or illogical rationale behind people's support for Trump, reflecting the United States' transformation into a society marked by stark class divisions and extreme inequality.

Beyond Trump, the upheaval within the media landscape emerges as a crucial factor in the electoral dynamics. How economic and social issues contribute to augmenting support for Trump is of paramount importance. The link between issue debates and candidate support may not necessarily align with the logic perceived by political scientists and the media, underscoring the increasing significance of analyzing social media dynamics. Moreover, should Trump secure a second term as president, his erratic behavior may prove challenging for the Republican establishment, potentially leading to a fundamental reshaping of the United States into a semi-authoritarian state, signaling a major turning point for all the Western liberal democracies.

In light of these developments, the efforts of some East Asian democracies may offer insights for navigating the current crisis. While Western scrutiny has sometimes cast doubt on these countries' commitment to liberal democracy, their ability to avoid the pitfalls of populism and maintain stability presents a potential model for addressing the West's challenges.

What changes and challenges have the Japanese conservative party (LDP) faced recently?

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Japan is grappling with challenges like a declining birthrate, an aging and shrinking population, and economic stagnation. These complex issues pose formidable obstacles that won't yield quick fixes. The governing coalition, led by the LDP and its junior partner, the Kōmeitō Buddhist party, faces the daunting task of addressing these issues while navigating the legacy of Shinzo Abe's administration.

Under Abe's long tenure, Japan witnessed a concentration of power in the hands of the prime minister and his inner circle, reminiscent of a presidential system. This centralized authority facilitated politically driven reforms, including controversial changes in security policy, such as allowing the exercise of the right to collective self-defense. However, this shift in power dynamics weakened the traditional bureaucratic leadership that had been instrumental in Japan's early modernization, postwar reconstruction, and economic boom.

Consequently, the allure of joining the national civil service has waned among Japan's talented youth, exacerbating the leadership vacuum within the LDP. Unlike past eras, where strong bureaucracies could bolster weak political leadership, Japan now finds itself in uncharted territory with both weak leaders and a weakened bureaucracy. As the US and Japan approach pivotal moments – the former with its upcoming elections and the latter with the departure of Abe – conservative forces in Japan are at a crossroads. The current Prime Minister, Fumio Kishida, lacks his predecessors' visionary leadership and political acumen, leaving Japan yearning for a new transformative leader to emerge in the 2020s.

How do you view the current relationship between the US and Japan?

While the US-Japan alliance has long served as the bedrock of Japan's security and diplomacy, its significance has evolved in recent decades, particularly during the challenging Trump administration. The emergence of multiple and overlapping multilateral frameworks signals a shift away from US hegemony in the region. The American public's wariness of foreign interventions, heightened by the failures in Afghanistan and Iraq, has led successive administrations to adopt a more inward-looking stance, starting with Obama and continuing through both Trump and Biden administrations.

Japan has increasingly assumed a more proactive role in Asia in this changing landscape, stepping into voids left by US disengagement. Japan spearheaded the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) after the US withdrawal, demonstrating its willingness to lead free-trade initiatives. Additionally, revisions to the US-Japan Security Treaty have fostered greater cooperation, exemplified by Japan's shift towards allowing collective self-defense. The Abe administration's initial proposal of a security diamond comprising Japan, the US, Australia, and India has materialized into the Quad within the framework of the "Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP)" concept.

Within the Quad framework, Japan and Australia have forged a quasi-alliance, bolstering security cooperation, while India pursues its strategic initiatives in the Indian Ocean region. This evolving dynamic suggests a partial realignment where traditional US allies step up in the face of US retrenchment. However, this shift should not be misconstrued solely as containment of China. Each Quad member maintains its national interests and recognizes the importance of engaging with China economically and culturally. The Quad should not impede ongoing exchanges to promote China's democratization and liberalization, even as previous attempts at such inducement through trade and investment have fallen short.

You worked for several years (1993-1997, 1999-2000) as Geneva Bureau Chief for Kyodo News agency. The years following the end of the Cold War are often remembered as full of optimism. How do you think the perception of the world has changed in recent decades, especially regarding international politics?

From the fall of the Berlin Wall to the launch of the WTO and China's accession to it, the years spanning 1989 to 2001 were marked by optimism, with Geneva serving as a focal point for global affairs. I was a journalist based in Washington, D.C., Geneva, and Tokyo, witnessing pivotal events firsthand during this period. The Chemical Weapons Convention 1992, negotiated and agreed to in Geneva, represented a milestone in multilateral disarmament efforts, boasting effective verification mechanisms.

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This achievement was followed by significant agreements such as the re-extension of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and the negotiation of the Nuclear Test Ban Treaty (CTBT), both of which were arduous endeavors culminating in Geneva. Meanwhile, the conclusion of the Uruguay Round negotiations in Geneva in 1995 marked the establishment of the WTO, encapsulating the global optimism that followed the end of the Cold War. Notably, during this period, the iconic Windows 95 was released, marking the dawn of the Internet age, with the invention of the World Wide Web at CERN near Geneva.

However, new challenges emerged amidst this euphoria in the post-Cold War landscape. The conflict in Yugoslavia exposed the rise of nationalism and religious tensions, supplanting the ideological divides of the past. Additionally, the struggles surrounding nuclear proliferation, exemplified by the CTBT negotiations and the nuclear ambitions of states like India, Pakistan, North Korea, and Iran, underscored enduring global security concerns. Despite the inauguration of the WTO heralding an era of economic globalization, discontent with its consequences began to brew, culminating in violent protests at the WTO Ministerial Conference in Seattle in 1999 and the G7 Summit in Genoa in 2001.

The aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, steered by the neoconservative ideology, proved disastrous, further complicating global dynamics. The subsequent Lehman crisis of 2008 dealt a blow to the neoliberal order that had dominated the post-Cold War era, reshaping the trajectory of the 2010s. Europe, too, grappled with its challenges as the contradictions inherent in market and currency integration came to the fore, exacerbated by the influx of refugees stemming from US policy mistakes in the Middle East. The optimism of the 1990s gave way to a more pessimistic outlook in the 2010s, characterized by ideological confusion and a fundamental challenge to Fukuyama's notion of "The End of History." The shifting global landscape underscored the complexities and uncertainties of the modern era, marking a stark departure from the euphoria of decades past.