

# ***A Most Important Relationship***

*Nao Matsukata*



## A Most Important Relationship

**Thursday Morning, October 23, 2048**

*The Winder Building, Washington DC*

Special Envoy Robert Robertson took off his reading glasses and looked across the table at his interlocutor, Ambassador Jun Nishioka.

Feeling impatient, he watched Nishioka review the draft text for the U.S.- Japan Treaty of 2048. The treaty, as proposed, relinquished Japanese sovereignty to the United States and would have Japan join the United States as the 51<sup>st</sup> state of the Union.

So much had gone right with the talks, but he sensed something was going wrong at that moment. He desperately hoped that Nishioka would accept the new language. Time was running out.

Robertson feared that a collapse of the talks would propel Japan to autarky and further destabilize the region. Japan lost its footing after the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020. Global economic recession in the years that followed hit Japan especially hard. In addition, the stubbornly strong dollar accelerated an already shrinking Japanese economy caught between the superpower rivalry between China and the United States.

His hands flat on the polished mahogany table, he leaned forward, anxious to get a hint from Japan's lead negotiator.

In Tokyo, political and social chaos reigned as the Japanese Diet considered a no-confidence motion against the prime minister. Political opponents of the government felt betrayed. The draft treaty language conceded too much on immigration and the status of the imperial family in a post-independent Japan.

Motionless, Nishioka kept reading. "He's his own worst enemy," thought Nishioka. "He knows I can't concede on anything and can't negotiate without direction from Tokyo. Getting this done right now would be like threading a needle with my eyes closed, impossible."

His back aching, Robertson pulled back and slouched over the table's edge. He felt overwhelmed and consumed by self-doubt; dissolving the imperial family's status and increasing immigration to Japan were sticking points, but had they become non-negotiable for the Japanese? He needed Nishioka to concede. Otherwise, U.S. Congressional support for the treaty would vanish.

"Nishioka will give in, won't he?" he questioned, "They need this more than we do."

From his government perch, Robertson had watched as China's repeated attempts to invade Taiwan take a toll on Japan and the region more generally. Helping the United States defend Taiwan forced Japan to increase defense expenditures and imposed a protracted political debate about its defense posture. In the end, Japan's moderate-right government took the extraordinary step of revising the Japanese constitution to allow for the build-up of offensive weaponry in Japan's military arsenal, prompting a doubling of the defense budget.

Robertson remembered that day well. He could still hear the Japanese nationalists blaring propaganda from their dark blue military-like trucks celebrating the event. They blasted, "At last, we have offensive and defensive capabilities!" For Japan's far right, it was a new beginning. For others, they were only left with unanswered questions about Japan's future.

The days of the "U.S.-Japan relationship being the most important in the world, bar none," as proclaimed by Senator Mike Mansfield and later as the U.S. Ambassador to Japan during Japan's meteoric economic rise to superpower status at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, were gone. Still, both Robertson and Nishioka knew that this most important relationship had to be salvaged in some form. If not, they feared that Japan might choose to go it alone, as it did a little over a century ago, resulting in fanatical support for the emperor and war.

Nishioka looked up for a moment and then buried his head again in the draft treaty text. His staff, well over ten men in dark suits, sat behind him, attentive and waiting for an order.

\*\*\*

Robertson and Nishioka had been classmates in graduate school. Nishioka, a 5th-generation Japanese diplomat, was unusual for a Japanese bureaucrat. He had excelled in math at Tokyo University and captained the American football team as a middle linebacker. He stood well over six feet tall, and even 25 years after graduation, his shoulders were broad, and his appearance was very fit: a formidable opponent for any running back.

Robertson, for his part, was much more of an accidental diplomat. He and Nishioka spent time together at Harvard studying history. An American diplomatic history specialist, Robertson first met Nishioka in a graduate-level seminar. He had been impressed right from the get-go. Nishioka spoke English like a native speaker, but even more impressive was his manner and confidence, something Robertson did not often see in Japanese foreign ministry students studying abroad. Finding a shared interest in history and Japan, he and Nishioka became quick friends.

Robertson was precocious from birth. His appreciation for history started in grade school when he read college-level history journals for fun. He also liked to reenact famous battles in his sandbox and film them with his iPhone. When he met Nishioka, he realized diplomacy was a marriage of his bookish interest in history and his passion for acting out historical events. He

saw in Nishioka someone who was living his dream. He thought, one day, I want to be sitting across from Nishioka negotiating for the United States.

That day had come.

\*\*\*

"Should we break?" suggested Robertson convinced that the Japanese delegation was waiting for instruction from its political leadership in Tokyo.

"Yes, perhaps we should; we could reconvene this afternoon?" Nishioka responded, knowing full well that the ruling party would continue to drag its feet. The prime minister and his cabinet were meeting to assess the deteriorating political situation. The anti-treaty sentiment was growing at a faster clip than they had expected. Nishioka knew that only a few days remained to reach an agreement; otherwise, the window would close.

Robertson knew a little more. His intel brief from earlier in the morning reported that the Japanese Diet had scheduled a no-confidence vote for tomorrow.

As Robertson pulled away from the table, his aide de camp came running over with a message that Vice President Susan Honda wanted to speak with him ASAP.

He nodded acknowledgment and sighed.

Vice President Honda was the older sister of Hawaii's governor, who strongly supported Japan's incorporation under Hawaii's jurisdiction instead of granting Japan full status as the 51<sup>st</sup> state of the Union. The idea was initially hatched by the governor and subsequently elevated to the national level by Vice President Honda.

For years, Frank Honda, the governor of Hawaii, had advocated that Japan would be better off as part of Hawaii than as an independent state. He argued that Japan would benefit from entering the Union as part of an operating state government rather than learning the ropes of Washington politics as a new state.

More importantly for Honda, and something not lost to other governors and the Japanese was the opportunity for Hawaii to increase its economic and political leverage. Overnight, Hawaii would transform into the most significant state economy in the Union and the most populous.

Robertson and United States President Evelyn Smith knew better. They had agreed that bringing Japan into the Union under Hawaii was a terrible idea but potentially a political problem to go against the wishes of Vice President Honda, who was the darling of their party and the heir apparent to the White House.

Robertson asked his assistant to request an immediate meeting with President Smith to discuss the state of the negotiations and how to handle Honda. If granted, he could easily walk over to her.

The Winder Building stood across 17<sup>th</sup> street from the Old Executive Office Building and just a three-minute walk from the West Wing of the White House. Four stories tall, the building was one of the tallest in Washington when built-in 1854. For years it had housed the United States Trade Representative and staff. Twenty years ago, the building was repurposed for meetings and negotiations. Robertson had a special affection for the building and all that had happened there. The historian in him often left him overly nostalgic about the most mundane things.

Robertson got a nod yes from his assistant, and he was off to see the President.

Robertson trundled down the steps of the building and dashed across the congested street to reach the guard station for entering the White House grounds. Then, with a quick flash of his badge, he walked towards the West Wing's entrance. Never much a political partisan, Robertson nevertheless always felt his heart race when he was about to enter the West Wing and even more so when he was headed to the Oval.

\*\*\*

Robertson got up from the seminar table and immediately felt the cold winter air funnel through the poorly insulated windows of Sever Hall. He smiled and figured that he still had it better than the 14th-century monks working on illuminated manuscripts up in the hills of Tuscany.

He slid his shoulder through his backpack strap and walked out of class into the second-floor hallway. He was ready to get some dinner after spending two hours discussing the contrasting worldviews of Ted Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson.

Nishioka, already standing at the top of the stairs, let slip, "Robert, Japan will never survive as an independent country."

The look in his eyes was not of despair but of hope.

The seminar had ended well after dark, and as they passed through the doors out into Harvard Yard, they both felt the damp chill of a New England winter cut right through them.

"It just cannot; too much threatens its existence. Our population is on the decline. More people die than are born by half a million people every year. Our economy is slowly dying, making us vulnerable to a takeover. There is a distinct possibility that Japan will be overrun by the PRC and becomes China's crown jewel. A tragedy for America and the rest of civilization."

Robertson did not respond to his good friend. He could hardly get his head around the idea of Japan not being an independent country.

"So, what exactly do you mean? What does it mean not to survive?" Robertson cautiously asked back as they passed Boylston Hall on their way out of the Yard.

"Think about it, Robert, ever since the end of WWII, Japan has essentially existed as a puppet of the United States. Even after the Cold War, the United States effectively controlled Japan through military support and the nuclear umbrella."

"The de facto opposition party to the ruling LDP has always been the United States."

On that point, he agreed. The only check on the center-right Liberal Democratic Party was American diplomacy in the way of military support and access to the United States commercial market. The LDP dominated Japanese politics, with little opposition from the Japan Socialist Party since its formation in 1955.

"We can go back even further. We have never successfully navigated a path for ourselves in world politics. First, China created a world order for us to follow in the 7<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries, and then it was the United States in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The only time we tried to forge our path led to the disaster of WWII and the atomic bombs of Hiroshima and Nagasaki."

"So, what does the world look like with Japan off the map?" Robertson intellectually pushed his good friend as they found their way across Mass Avenue and onto JFK street.

Nishioka stopped, looked at Robertson, and said, "As America's 51<sup>st</sup> state of the union."

Incomprehensible but brilliant at the same time, thought Robertson.

\*\*\*

## **Thursday Noon, October 23, 2048**

### *The Oval Office*

President Smith invited Robertson to take a seat next to her.

"Are we close?" She asked rhetorically.

Evelyn Smith, a supreme intellect, had been captain of her college ice hockey team, a Rhodes scholar, and the first female President of Cal Tech. Not surprisingly, she skated the blueline, always controlling the pace of play with an eye on the bigger picture.

Nothing intellectually, politically, or in sports got past her. A political savant, she shattered the presidential glass ceiling two years ago, nearly three decades after Hilary Clinton had been the first female presidential candidate for a major party.

Robertson liked working for Smith. She always made it clear where he stood with her.

"We are close with the Japanese but not so close with the Asian-American Caucus in Congress. They want too much. We'll never be able to deliver." Robertson responded, knowing that even this assessment was overly optimistic.

Asian Americans had made significant political inroads over the past 25 years. The Supreme Court's 2023 decision to overrule affirmative action accelerated their rise to political influence despite only being 10 percent of the population. In response, universities rewrote admissions policies, leading to Asians making up over 40 percent of incoming classes at some of the most competitive universities.

At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, no Asian had ever served as the President's National Security Advisor or as the top economic advisor, despite Asia's geopolitical significance. Two decades later, the Treasury Secretary was a third-generation Vietnamese American. The National Security Advisor was a first-generation Singapore immigrant and an international relations expert from the University of Texas.

Just as the Executive Branch was beginning to reflect the growing clout of Asian Americans, Congress was also developing a more substantial presence of Asian Americans. The 50-plus bicameral Asian-American Caucus had become one of the most powerful groups on Capitol Hill and in all of Washington. It had pressed for and successfully seated two Asian Americans as Justices of the Supreme Court and had one of its own as the Vice President of the United States. The Caucus viewed the integration of Japan into the Union as a crowning achievement of their climb to influence in American politics.

The President knew that if the administration were to have any chance of treaty ratification, the Japanese would have to bend on immigration.

Robertson delivered a frank assessment to the President, "The Japanese have already conceded to a fairly aggressive schedule and balanced it against what they believe to be civil society concerns."

"Yes, I agree that Japan is unlikely to agree to a faster process. I'll speak to the Caucus and see what I can do. That will not change the dynamic with Vice President Honda, who seems to have her agenda with this."

Smith sighed, thinking the star player is always the problem, on the ice or in politics.

"Yes, to succeed you as President."

President Smith's body language made it clear that the meeting was over. "Just keep trying, and most of all, get it done as soon as you can."

Robertson got up and shook hands with the President. Hers was a firm, confident handshake developed through a lifetime of wielding a hockey stick.

\*\*\*

Robertson and Nishioka reached the entrance of the Kennedy School.

Amused and not surprised by his Japanese friend's imagination, Robertson said under his breath, "Japan joins the Union as the 51<sup>st</sup> state."

"Sorry, my friend, but I have to go now and meet some colleagues visiting from Japan. See you tomorrow."

As Nishioka walked away, Robertson turned and bumped straight into his roommate from college, who now was the youngest tenured professor in the economics department at Harvard.

Frank Winters and Robertson were freshman-year roommates and continued to room for the next three years. Frank was simply brilliant. He finished his undergraduate coursework in three years and was on his way to a Ph.D. in economics by the time the two had graduated college.

Frank was never shy about letting people know he thought of himself as the most brilliant guy in the room. Despite Frank's self-confidence and arrogance, Robertson considered him one of his closest friends. He loved him for his imagination and ability to think through almost any problem or situation.

"Hey, buddy, what brings you to the Kennedy school? I thought you pure economists wouldn't be seen here in the land of public policy nerds." Robertson loved to poke fun at the disheveled economist.

"Somebody has to spoil the idealism of policy wonks." Winters shot back.

"You're just the person I want to see. Have a few minutes?"

"Sure, but can we walk and talk? I need to finish up a journal article before midnight."

"Have you ever imagined a scenario where a sovereign country would give up its independence and join the United States as a state in the Union?"



Frank picked up his pace giving Robertson the feeling that he had just asked a stupid question.

"Sure, I have."

Better late than missing the party, thought Robertson.

"In fact, Japan is the perfect candidate to be part of the United States. Think about Japan as a distressed asset with much latent value. If you are a strategic leader in the same sector, would you rather see it go to a competitor, in this case, China, or go bankrupt and lose everything of value?"

Frank continued, "Japan has so much value well beyond the obvious. Sure, we are economically tied to Japan in manufacturing, finance, and basic scientific research, but that is not Japan's real value to us. Japan shares our view of regulation and standards, which are the engines of the world economy."

"Back in the day, for example, the people who determined the gauge of railway tracks controlled economic development for generations to come. Go to Manchuria today, and you'll find that the economic infrastructure is based on what the Japanese decided over 150 years ago. The same could be said today about environmental, finance, and privacy regulations. Thankfully, we and the Japanese share similar views, unlike our so-called European friends who take a different view of these issues."

"Hey Bobby, have to go. Sorry, but best of luck to you."

"So, Japan joining the United States was a win-win for both the United States and Japan," concluded Robertson. Shielding his face from the freshening wind, he walked straight for the library.

\*\*\*

Robertson climbed into his car, waiting for him under the West Wing portico. He wasn't much for getting driven around, but security and protocol called for him to have a driver and security detail. As the car pulled away, Robertson checked his phone. "Japanese Diet set for a no-confidence vote tomorrow morning," was the message from his intel officer.

Wavy black hair was always the giveaway that Robertson might not be entirely Japanese. He was taller than the average Japanese male at a little under 6 feet and had a lanky build. Whenever he went back to Japan to visit his cousins in Tokyo, they marveled at his flawless Japanese and his good looks that only a "half" could have.

The Japanese were obsessed with the exotic from their first contact with the blue-eyed and red-haired barbarians in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. So, even now, they were equally fascinated if a fair-

skinned, tall blonde human spoke fluent Japanese. Their reaction would be the same as if their pet dog asked in plain English for a seat at the dinner table.

Robertson's mother, Mari, came from a wealthy and prominent Japanese family that had made a name for itself by moving among the elites in Japan and the United States. Mari's grandfather arrived in the United States in 1876, one of the first Japanese to settle in New York City. Ichiro Matsumoto built a successful export-import business and settled his family in Greenwich, Connecticut. From there, Matsumoto's son attended elite schools and returned to run the family business. At the same time, his daughter married a son of a prominent Japanese politician in Tokyo whose lineage extended back to Japan's ruling class. Robertson's mother was directly descended from Matsumoto's daughter, who never returned to the United States after marriage, but raised all her children bilingually and bi-culturally in Tokyo.

Raised in New York City in the shadow of his father's WASP family, Robertson found summers in Japan with his cousins refreshing and joyful. During his time in Japan, he mastered Japanese, and before heading to college, he spent a year teaching English at a Japanese high school in northern Japan.

Robertson looked to Japan's extended periods of peace and political stability, left alone from outside influences during the 16<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, as the root reasons for Japan's productive modern economy and its rich and colorful culture. At the same time, these periods of isolation had led to a ruinous sense of national uniqueness and a tin ear for world politics.

He believed Japan's best hope in the 21<sup>st</sup> century was to be a part of the United States.

\*\*\*

As his car passed through the White House gates, Robertson received a call from Vice President Honda.

"Good afternoon, madame Vice President. What can I do for you?"

"You can start by telling me that you've gotten the Japanese to concede on the immigration issue. I don't think I can get the treaty through without it."

President Smith appointed Honda as her point person for getting the treaty through Congress. Honda knew that without generous terms on immigration, the treaty would be dead on arrival. She respected Robertson but had serious doubts about his ability to get the Japanese to concede on this issue.

Susan Honda, who served as Hawaii's senior Senator for over 20 years before she was plucked by then Presidential Candidate Smith to be her Vice-Presidential running mate, was a shrewd

political hack. And her instincts told her that the treaty was doomed without immigration concessions.

"Yes, madame Vice President, we'll do our best, and I'll be sure to consult with you before we agree to any language on immigration."

Honda had never married. Robertson could never really understand why. She was brilliant, attractive, and had a radiant smile that could instantly turn a political opponent into an ally. She was extremely close to her family and always put the interests of Hawaii before anything else. Robertson always thought that her dedication to her constituents instilled great loyalty to those around her.

In her West Wing office, Honda leaned over her desk and smiled. She was fighting her impatience.

"I know you will, Robert."

Robertson could only shake his head as the call ended. The two didn't need an extended conversation to know what each other was thinking. He had spent the better part of his 20 years in Washington working directly for Susan Honda.

\*\*\*

"What do you think, Ken? Will this secure a political base for us?"

"It should go a long way towards it," answered Susan Honda's Chief of Staff, Ken Ogawa.

Ken Ogawa was from New York and had served as Honda's campaign manager during her run as the Vice-Presidential candidate for Evelyn Smith.

Honda smiled. She trusted Ogawa's judgment implicitly.

Born and raised in New York, Kenichi Ogawa was the son of a senior Japanese diplomat who had served as Japan's New York Consul General and as Japan's Ambassador to the United Nations. Ken had gone to all the right schools, the Buckley School for Boys, Phillips Academy Exeter, and Stanford.

Out of college, he joined an investment bank before returning east to New York for business school. Between an elite life afforded by his Japanese family and the schools he attended, he had rarely crossed paths with Japanese Americans or with Asian Americans more generally. He couldn't have been a sharper contrast to Susan Honda, the granddaughter of internment camp survivors.

But it was his anything but Asian American background that Honda valued most about Ogawa. She used him as a check against her California-honed political instincts. To Honda, Ogawa was her white advisor disguised as an Asian American.

“Agree, it will be an important base of support for us,” Honda acknowledged.

Susan Honda was convinced that Japan's integration into the Union would be a significant development for American politics. Since she was a college student in California, she had watched both political parties pay lip service to African Americans, Hispanic Americans, and Asian Americans. Permanently changing the balance of American politics was her goal.

Susan Honda's vision for America was within reach.

\*\*\*

### **Thursday Early Afternoon, October 23, 2048**

*The Japanese Embassy, Washington DC*

Nishioka splashed some water on his face and stared into the mirror. News from Tokyo was not encouraging. The Prime Minister's opponents were coalescing to push forward the no-confidence motion. “I'm out of time,” he conceded.

He and the Japanese delegation had returned to the Japanese embassy on Massachusetts Avenue for lunch and to regroup. Nishioka looked out the window to see the fall colors of Washington; disappointing, he thought. They never compare to the bright pop of colors that he experienced when he was in Cambridge.

Nevertheless, the yellows and reds of maple trees in October always took him back to his days in Massachusetts. Spending an academic year in the United States, Great Britain, or some other major ally of Japan was an essential step in the career of an ambitious diplomat.

For as long as Nishioka wanted to be a diplomat, he wanted to experience some part of his education at Harvard. When he got the opportunity, he wasted no time immersing himself in all the school offered and spent his free time meeting as many students and professors as he could.

Nishioka arrived in Cambridge with an impressive resume. A product of Japanese public schools, he worked his way through the most elite middle and secondary schools before testing into Tokyo University, Japan's most prestigious school. Instead of joining the Law Faculty, as many students headed for government careers did, he chose to study math.

His decision did not sit well with his conservative and proud family. Each generation of his family before him chose the Law Faculty before entering the Foreign Ministry. All four generations that had preceded him at Tokyo University had successful careers as diplomats. One served as Ambassador to the United States, while one other served as Ambassador to the People's Republic of China.

In stark contrast to Robertson's mother's side, Nishioka's family had no ties to Japan's ruling class. Instead, Nishioka's family traced their roots back to a local fishing village in Kyushu, the westernmost island of the major four that make up the archipelago. After the United States opened Japan to the West in 1854, a newly created merit-based university examination system set the course for Japanese social mobility, regardless of background. In the first year Tokyo Imperial University administered admission tests; a Nishioka gained admission, graduated in four years, and then joined the Imperial Foreign Ministry.

Almost two hundred years later, Jun Nishioka was leading Japan's most critical negotiation.

\*\*\*

Nishioka took his place in the Ambassador's private dining room for lunch. The room was stately, windowed ceiling to floor on three sides with views of Rock Creek Park, and elegantly appointed. The dining table was over thirty feet long and five feet wide. Nishioka and the Ambassador sat in the middle, with the rest of the table stretching empty to each side.

Two men served them in heavily starched white jackets with napkins draped over their forearms. Not surprisingly, the meal was traditionally Japanese and served on the embassy's best lacquer and China service.

Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of Japan Ryu Tanaka was through and through a Japanese bureaucrat. A graduate of Tokyo University's Law Faculty, he had skillfully navigated the politics of a bureaucracy to reach the top. He was intelligent, cultured, and a huge fan of baseball. There were rumors that when he retired, he would be appointed as the Commissioner of Japanese Major League Baseball.

The two hardly touched the food in front of them and instead concentrated on the conversation to review the state of negotiations with the United States. Tanaka, probably more than any other Japanese leader, bureaucrat, or elected official, understood the gravity of the moment and the need to close the agreement as soon as possible.

"Nishioka, I assume you are standing strong on the immigration issue? We can't possibly allow for unfettered immigration into Japan."

"Yes, sir, we are holding our ground, but I'm afraid we're up against a powerful group in Congress who would like to see us open our borders more quickly and allow more immigrants."

"I'll do my best with my contacts in Congress. The Asian-American Caucus has invited me to the Hill for a briefing tomorrow morning. From what I can gather, they already know that a second no-confidence vote has been scheduled."

"Thank you. We'll need all the help we can get. The United States Congress might end up being the least of our problems if our government falls."

"Yes, something we have little control over."

They knew that the nationalists were on the march. The Japanese Diet was a wildcard. The ruling party was barely in control, and the Prime Minister was politically weak. Nishioka had complete confidence that Tanaka could appease the Asian-American Caucus but had little faith in Tanaka's ability to buy more time with the Japanese Diet.

As Nishioka thanked the Ambassador for lunch, he left convinced that it was up to him to close the negotiations as soon as possible or risk a collapse in U.S.-Japan relations.

\*\*\*

Riding down Massachusetts Avenue toward Sheridan Circle, Nishioka considered Japan's long and rich history.

He thought of Nara and Kyoto, the beautiful ancient capital cities of the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> centuries styled after Imperial China, the extended time of peace and prosperity during Tokugawa family rule from the 17<sup>th</sup> century to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and Japan's post-WWII economic miracle as proud moments of not just Japan's history, but of world history. He committed to himself that Japan's contributions to the world must not be forgotten.

He also acknowledged the darker moments in Japan's history. Japan's colonial history in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and the brutal period of militarism in the 1930s and 1940s were particularly shameful. He vowed to make sure those, too, were not forgotten. Getting the terms of the treaty right was the opportunity to do just that. Resolved and determined, he straightened his back and looked past his reflection in the car window to take in the historical monuments along his route back to the negotiating table.

His car passed through Dupont Circle and turned onto Connecticut Avenue.

\*\*\*

## Thursday Early Evening, October 23, 2055

### *The Winder Building*

Robertson stood, arms crossed, looking out the conference room window. He could see through the early evening drizzle the Old Executive Office Building to his right and the outlines of the White House just past it. Right below him, at the entrance to the Winder building, he recognized Nishioka getting out of his car. He was unmistakable. On each step, Nishioka's left leg ever so slightly trailed behind.

Robertson looked away. It was the end of a chilly and wet fall day. Not too different from the day he met Nishioka in Harvard Square.

But so much had changed.

Fifteen years ago, right after Russia's second invasion of Ukraine, Nishioka barely escaped a terrorist attack in front of the Japanese embassy in Taipei, Taiwan. While sitting in his car, waiting for the compound's front gate to open, a suicide bomb went off, killing Nishioka's driver and his aide sitting to his left in the back seat. Stunned but lucky, Nishioka escaped with injuries to his leg and loss of hearing in his left ear.

Nishioka's younger brother was not so lucky. One week later, a Chinese missile attack that opened the first invasion of Taiwan killed Ken Nishioka, a junior foreign ministry officer in the Taipei embassy. Thousands of lives were lost before a coalition of forces from Japan, the United States, and other countries repelled China's military advance across the Taiwan Strait.

Robertson moved away from the window and walked to the negotiating table. He would never forget his good friend's anguish when they met in Tokyo a few days later. They both felt so helpless.

\*\*\*

Robertson was already seated when Nishioka entered the conference room. He got up from his seat and leaned over to shake his hand.

"Shall we get started?"

"Of course, my friend," replied Nishioka. Smiling, he sensed an unexpected message from Robertson.

"It seems that President Smith and our Ambassador in Tokyo persuaded the Diet to reconsider the no-confidence vote. The Prime Minister's opponents are willing to see what we negotiate first." For the first time in days, Nishioka's eyes brightened with hope.

“Well, can’t be better news, Robert! “

“Yes, indeed, Jun. Please take a seat, and we’ll get started.”

Robertson waited for Nishioka to take his seat before he said, “Jun, you were right all along. There is a path to a new beginning for Japan and America. It still can be a most important relationship.”

\*\*\*