Take a look at the tag cloud from this journal’s webpage, http://yalejournal.org/. The frequency with which a given word or phrase is tagged in relation to the YJIA’s content is shown by relative size, an indication of that topic’s level of coverage. For example, protracted American military and political engagement in the Middle East is highlighted by the prominence of words like “Afghanistan,” “Pakistan,” “Syria,” “Libya,” “Israel,” and the term “Middle East” itself. The importance of China in global politics and economics is clear as well. The size of thematic keywords such as “development,” “diplomacy,” and “terrorism” is evidence of ongoing concerns with these issues. The list is alphabetical, and easy to scan for topics of reader interest. Recently, I did, and was struck by the feeling that something was missing. Perhaps this is unfair—there are, of course, many topics “missing,” because no journal or news source can cover everything—and it certainly reflects my own biases. But my question remains: where is Japan?

As a historian of Japan and an avid follower of the news on Japan and its international affairs, this omission is mysterious. I am puzzled not just by the conspicuous absence of the world’s third largest economy, but also of the United State’s most important strategic and economic partner in Asia. Take economics. Japan’s importance to the U.S. economy is actually increasing; imports from resurgent Japan were up 18 percent in 2013.1 This alone should put Japan somewhere on our radar. And what of the American-led, twelve-party Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP)? Japan is the second-largest participant in ongoing negotiations toward a regional free trade bloc agreement.

What does the omission of Japan from the word cloud tell us? One might suggest, for example, that it indicates the Obama administration’s “pivot to Asia” was mistaken given the global realpolitik, or that U.S. interest in foreign and international affairs is colored by ideological or economic agendas.2 I do not claim to have an answer in either case. But we should be wary of the transparency of the quotidian. By this I mean that we rarely notice things until they change, until they are threatening—or threatened—or lost. Historians have historically been particularly guilty of this fallacy: we have tended

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to write histories of change, not constancy, histories of impactful events, not states of being. To be sure, a history of wars and coups d’état and economic crashes and natural disasters is more exciting. And to be sure, these dramatic and epoch-shaping events have meaning. But such histories are more the products of exclusion than of inclusion; they often leave out the details of daily life, and exclude women, children, minorities, the elderly, nature, etc.

Leaving Japan out of our thinking on international affairs carries with it the same risk of badly warping our understanding of the world, until it is too late. In addition to long-standing disagreements with South Korea on historical interpretation, the return of Japan’s hawkish prime minister Shinzo Abe escalated a preexisting territorial row with China, with serious implications for U.S. foreign policy. Mr. Abe’s commitment to “active pacifism” includes transforming Japan’s Self-Defense Forces into a National Defense Army, asserting the right of collective self-defense, and accompanying revision of Japan’s “Peace Constitution.” Japan’s neighbors are not amused. Because of American treaty obligations—as well as our containment agenda vis-à-vis China—some observers are concerned about military implications for the United States.

In his Pulitzer-prize winning Embracing Defeat, historian John Dower suggested that the United States and Japan have been locked in an embrace since Douglas McArthur stepped onto the tarmac outside Tokyo, corn cob pipe jutting from his mouth. Japan was the United States’ most intimate and important Asian economic partner, political ally, and military installment throughout the Cold War, and remains so today. We share more core values and interests than not: The United States and Japan are both Pacific nations, developed democracies, economic giants, providers of massive foreign aid, and more. Dower was right, though no one ever said our passionate postwar embrace was an equal partnership. Indeed, the Japanese have a less romantic phrase to describe our relationship: “When America sneezes, Japan catches cold.”

My suggestion here is that America ought to be a bit more concerned about catching a cold from Japan. The problem with contagions is that the most effective ones are so precisely because they are undetectable until it is too late. To put it another way, shark attacks are terrifying, but bee stings kill more people. More vigilant attention to the everyday—and to Japan as neighbor, ally, and trading partner—is key to heading off unpleasant surprises down the road.

— Mads Neumann served as the Lead Editor for this op-ed.

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