

# EAST ASIA INSIGHTS

## TOWARD COMMUNITY BUILDING

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## A New Vision for the US-Japan Alliance

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Nearly six decades after its creation, the US-Japan alliance once again stands at a crossroads. The relative decline of US global influence, the gradual redistribution of power in East Asia, and the global economic crisis have led pundits on both sides of the Pacific to question the alliance's continued viability and relevance. It is incumbent upon Japanese leaders to sit down with the Obama administration to discuss how the US-Japan partnership should evolve to tackle existing challenges and map out a long-term vision for the alliance's future.

Going forward, the broad objectives of the alliance should be to maximize opportunities for economic and security cooperation among states in the region and to minimize the risk that existing traditional and nontraditional security threats could upset regional stability and economic growth. The two states must reinvigorate the bilateral security alliance, lead efforts to reform and strengthen global governance, and work with regional partners to actively ensure the peace, stability, and prosperity of East Asia. The partnership between Japan and the United States must evolve into a more inclusive and comprehensive force for peace, stability, cooperation, and prosperity throughout the Asia Pacific region and the world.

### Concerns about Japanese Political Leadership

One prerequisite for proactive Japanese diplomacy is greater stability in Japanese domestic politics. Ever since the opposition Democratic Party of Japan took control of the House of Councillors in July 2007, Diet politics have reached an impasse. In the two and a half years since former Prime Minister Koizumi stepped down at the end of his term as Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) president, the ruling coalition has anointed a series of ineffectual prime ministers. Unfortunately, high turnover among Japanese prime ministers is not merely a recent trend. Former US President George W. Bush interacted with five Japanese prime ministers over the course of his eight-year administration (2001–2009). His predecessor, Bill Clinton (1993–2001), interacted with seven.

In the past, such high turnover was not seen as a serious problem. After all, although the prime minister changed often, the party in power—the LDP—was a constant. Additionally, the Japanese bureaucracy was very powerful, particularly the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Together, these two factors ensured relative stability in Japanese foreign policy. However, circumstances have changed

over the past several years. Not only must the LDP now deal with an opposition-controlled House of Councillors, but public discontent with its leadership has reached a boiling point, and it is increasingly likely that it will lose the upcoming general election. Furthermore, the bureaucracy is under constant attack, and it is unlikely that it will ever exercise as much influence over foreign policy as it once did.

It is abundantly clear that the time has come for political realignment and reform. Without stable leadership and a prime minister who has received a strong policy mandate from the voters, Japan will be unable to make a proactive contribution to its alliance with the United States.

### **Concerns about Tightening US-China Relations**

At the same time, there has been a sharp increase over the past few years in the number of Japanese analysts who are concerned about the future of US-Japan relations in the face of stronger US-China relations. Many fear that the Obama administration will downgrade bilateral relations and begin to treat China—rather than Japan—as the United States’ most important partner in Asia. Despite the fact that there is little ground for such concern, the Obama administration has nevertheless made a concerted effort to mitigate Japanese fears. Secretary Clinton’s first stop during her trip to East Asia was in Tokyo, during which time she extended an invitation to Prime Minister Aso to be the first head of government to call upon President Obama at the White House. Such actions, coupled with President Obama’s nomination and appointment of several seasoned East Asia experts to important foreign policy posts, have reaffirmed the importance that the Obama administration places on US relations with Japan and East Asia.

Japanese fears that the United States will eschew cooperation with Japan and embrace China are unwarranted. Rather than being feared, healthy and stable relations between the United States and China should be encouraged. By engaging China and encouraging it to play a constructive role in global affairs, the United States is pursuing a policy line that suits not only its own interests but also those of Japan and the rest of the world. This

strategy is already paying dividends, and there are signs that Beijing is gradually adopting the mantle of a responsible global stakeholder.

### **Redefining the Role of the US-Japan Alliance**

The reaffirmation of the US-Japan alliance in the mid-1990s made significant progress toward creating a more balanced relationship, yet the process remains incomplete. Until the United States treats Japan as a fully independent partner, the consolidation of a healthier and more productive relationship will be impossible.

The past two decades have seen a remarkable expansion in Japan’s contributions to the international community through official development assistance (ODA), humanitarian aid such as tsunami relief and Iraq reconstruction, and Japan Self-Defense Forces (JSDF) involvement in UN peacekeeping operations. Japan has also taken a leadership role in maritime security in the region: it has been the primary force behind a multi-national Coast Guard forum, is an active contributor to the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI), and has the JSDF currently supporting maritime interdiction operations in the Indian Ocean. Furthermore, on March 14 of this year, two JSDF escort ships were dispatched to the coast of Somalia on an antipiracy mission.

Although substantial progress has been made in recent years, there is no doubt that severe constraints on Japanese security policy remain a concern. Perhaps none of these constraints has received more attention over the years than Article 9 of the Japanese constitution, a clause which renounces war and the threat or use of force as a sovereign right of the nation. The Japanese government’s official interpretation of Article 9 is not only inconsistent with contemporary global norms but is also somewhat at odds with the UN Charter, which affords the right of collective self-defense to all nations. Under the current interpretation, the JSDF is forbidden from participating in any missions that may involve combat, including even those operations that have received explicit sanction from the UN Security Council (UNSC). A more flexible interpretation of Article 9 would set the stage for the JSDF to adopt a role in multilateral security

operations that transcends humanitarian aid and logistical support and make a greater contribution to both the US-Japan alliance and the peace and stability of the international community.

The Japanese government must also work to establish a permanent legal foundation to govern JSDF dispatch. The exigency of this legislation became manifest in winter 2008 when inter-party bickering over the JSDF's participation in US-led operations in the Indian Ocean led to months of legislative gridlock in the Diet. The passage of a general law to provide clear guidelines for JSDF activities overseas is thus necessary.

At the same time, leaders in Washington must understand that the JSDF will not be able to engage in the same range of operations as the US military. The time has therefore come for Japan and the United States to intensify discussions about the nature of each nation's contribution to the alliance.

In recent years, several influential Japanese politicians have begun to discuss a proposition that would see the US military presence in Japan decrease as Japan's defense capability increases. While this proposition basically makes sense, it is important to realize that the two nations' militaries have different roles and missions; not all US forces in Japan are easily replaced by JSDF equivalents. The JSDF is primarily defensive in nature, and Japan lacks serious offensive or power-projection capabilities. For example, Japan is incapable of a preemptive missile strike against North Korea, and in order to send forces to Iraq, the SDF had to make refueling stopovers in other countries. It is also clear that Japan will continue to depend on the US nuclear umbrella for the foreseeable future.

Nevertheless, there are certainly areas in which Japan is capable of gradually taking over responsibility from US forces. For example, a primary function of the US Marine presence in Japan is crisis management. As Japan improves its ability to respond to a regional contingency by enacting various legal frameworks and as ever-advancing technologies enable rapid global deployment of US troops, a reduction of the Marine presence will become increasingly practical. The two nations should thus explore possibilities for a more flexible arrangement regarding US forces in Japan.

The Obama administration has advocated the end of US unilateralism and an embrace of multilateralism and international institutions. A key component of Japan and the United States' contributions to regional and global peace and stability should be their joint effort to champion the reform of global governance.

Arguably the biggest question mark regarding the future of global governance concerns the United Nations. Japan and the United States should push for comprehensive reform of the UNSC. They must see to it that Japan, Germany, Brazil, and India are made permanent members—although the specifics of the permanent seats, including issues concerning veto rights, should be negotiable—and make sure that the UNSC is transformed into an institution capable of quickly sanctioning joint security operations whenever global stability comes under threat.

Other key global governance-related issues for the two nations to discuss include reform of the "Bretton Woods" institutions to more accurately reflect current global realities and the future roles of the G8 and G20. A growing chorus of voices has begun to claim that the expanding influence of the developing world has rendered the G8 an anachronistic institution. In order to stay relevant, they argue, the G8 must be expanded to include China, India, Brazil, Mexico, South Africa, and possibly a Middle Eastern state. Meanwhile, others argue that—at least as far as economic matters are concerned—the G20, not the G8, should be the central global policy coordination body.

As discussions between Japan and the United States on these issues move forward, the two allies must be sure to take two key criteria into account when exploring the best way to reform global institutions. The first criterion is effectiveness. Institutions must be adaptable to the vicissitudes of global affairs and capable of taking quick and proactive action in response to new challenges. Institutions must also have inclusive membership and reflect the changes that have taken place in the global system since the 1940s (the decade in which many currently existing global institutions were established). The second criterion relates to values: although the makeup of global institutions may change as their memberships becomes

more inclusive, it is nevertheless imperative that these institutions continue to treat the creation of a rules-based and democratic system as their primary objective. For example, at the time of its establishment, the G7's core identity was that of "we, advanced industrial democracies." Over the past several decades, it is these advanced industrial democracies that have taken responsibility for global peace and prosperity, serving as leaders on trade liberalization, ODA expansion, and efforts to curtail CO<sub>2</sub> emissions.

It is possible that these two criteria are somewhat incompatible. In order to prevent this issue from becoming a major obstacle to reform, the system of global institutions should be conceptualized as concentric circles. For example, at the same time that the G7/G8 should be strengthened as a core entity (the inner circle), more inclusive groupings—such as the G20—should exist as complementary institutions (the outer circle).

### **A New Approach to East Asia**

Threats to regional stability increasingly come from nontraditional areas such as WMD proliferation, human and drug trafficking, natural disasters, energy security, environmental degradation, maritime piracy, and infectious disease. All of these challenges will require multilateral and cooperative solutions. The scope of the US-Japan alliance must expand beyond bilateral military deterrence. It must become more inclusive and place greater emphasis on functioning more as a public good.

Although Japan and the United States should lead this initiative, efforts will not make much progress without the support of other advanced democracies in the region such as South Korea, Australia, and New Zealand. The two allies should move to strengthen and expand existing trilateral strategic consultations (e.g. US-Japan-South Korea and US-Japan-Australia). It should be stressed, however, that the objective is neither to unilaterally impose western values upon East Asian nations nor to exclude non-democratic nations from reaping the benefits of regional stability and economic prosperity. Rather, the objective is for Japan and the United States to engage states in the region in rules-based communities through inclusive multilateralism. As states adopt standardized rules and

norms of behavior, the transaction costs of interaction will decrease, which will in turn deepen trust, interdependence, and stability throughout East Asia.

At the same time that Japan and the United States actively engage China in regional and global rules-based communities and bring it into multilateral dialogue on issues ranging from macroeconomic policy to talks on energy and the environment, they must also work with other US allies to hedge against the uncertainty surrounding China's future. Concerns abound about several aspects of China's foreign policy—including issues related to rapidly rising defense expenditures, military transparency, and its aggressive approach to energy security—and domestic policy—such as CO<sub>2</sub> emissions and environmental damage, treatment of minorities, and income disparities. Japan and the United States should place priority on encouraging China to pursue economic policies that will make a constructive contribution to efforts to address the global economic crisis, make its military affairs more transparent, and agree to fully participate in the successor to the Kyoto Protocol.

With respect to security issues, Japan and the United States should initiate and institutionalize regular trilateral security dialogue with China involving civilian and military personnel. This would provide a forum through which to advocate increased transparency, reduce mutual suspicions, and consolidate trust between the region's three great powers. Stable security ties among these three nations are a prerequisite for long-term peace and stability in the region.

In recent years, the Six-Party Talks format has emerged as an effective sub-regional security forum for addressing the North Korean nuclear issue, but we still have, unfortunately, a lengthy and bumpy ride ahead of us before the nuclear issue is resolved. This forum, which has succeeded in bringing together the five most powerful states in the region to openly discuss and cooperate in resolving a security issue of common concern, should remain active even after the nuclear issue is settled and be used to address remaining issues on the Korean Peninsula.

Emerging nontraditional security issues pose an increasingly serious threat to regional stability.

Building on the existing network of US security partners in the region, Japan and the United States should work with states in the region to establish an East Asia Security Forum to proactively address such security issues as human and drug trafficking, natural disasters, infectious disease, resource scarcity, maritime piracy, terrorism, and WMD proliferation. With ASEAN+6 member nations and the United States working in concert, this forum would adopt an action-oriented and functional approach to addressing these threats and carry out operations in a manner similar to the PSI.

## **Conclusion**

The time has come for Japanese and US leaders to engage in earnest discussions over how the US-Japan partnership should best evolve to meet the numerous challenges brought on by a transformed global system. In addition to strengthening bilateral ties, the alliance partners must also champion major reform of global governance and proactively engage regional partners in joint efforts to guarantee peace and prosperity in the Asia Pacific region.

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## ***East Asia Insights***

*East Asia Insights* is an occasional newsletter focusing on East Asia community building from a Japanese perspective.

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