

Policy Forum 08-044: Unsustainable Inequities: Saving the Japan-U.S. Alliance from Drift

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By Tobias Harris and Douglas Turner

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I. Introduction

Tobias Harris, a freelance journalist and author of *Observing Japan*, a blog that focuses on Japanese politics and East Asian international relations, and Douglas Turner, Founder and CEO of DW Turner, Inc, write, "The United States... must transform its thinking on the alliance. The framework wherein the United States delegates more tasks to Japan without giving Japan a greater share in determining the purpose of the alliance will ensure mounting Japanese resentment that will ultimately explode in a crisis."

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II. Article by Tobias Harris and Douglas Turner

- "Unsustainable Inequities: Saving the Japan-U.S. Alliance from Drift"

By Tobias Harris and Douglas Turner

The U.S.-Japan relationship is at a crossroads. Despite the bonhomie between President Bush and former Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi, recent events suggest that the relationship is fundamentally unhealthy. In truth, Japan has become marginalized, its value to the United States measured largely in terms of token contributions to operations in the Middle East.

The alliance is on the brink of a more uncertain era, though both nations have referred to it as an indispensable foundation for Japan's security and for peace and stability in the Asia-Pacific region. Japan's role in American policy toward Asia has been neglected during the 2008 election campaign. Although NAFTA, Iraq, and immigration hit closer to home than the future of the U.S. role in Asia, the next U.S. president now has an opportunity to create a more dynamic, equitable U.S.-Japan relationship that can serve as the foundation for U.S. policy in a changing region.

The U.S. presidential election and the Japanese general election, which many expect will be held in the fall, provide an opportunity for both governments to discard the alliance's stale mantras and bring about desperately needed change in the relationship. Left unchanged, the alliance will drift into irrelevance, and the United States will lose an important component of its Asia policy just as the region becomes the world's most important.

Signs of Stress

On the evening of November 15, 2007, Yasuo Fukuda, suffering from a cold, arrived in Washington, D.C. for his first foreign trip since taking office as Japan's prime minister in late September. Lasting just 26 hours, Fukuda's visit to Washington featured none of the frills extended to his predecessors on their visits to the United States (or to recently visiting European leaders): no weekend retreat to Camp David or the Bush ranch in Crawford, no White House dinner, no speech to a joint session of Congress, not even a joint press conference. President Bush and Prime Minister Fukuda talked at the White House, read individual statements to the press, and then, together with Defense Secretary Robert Gates, had lunch. That afternoon, Fukuda met with policy experts and educators to discuss U.S.-Japan intellectual exchanges. By Friday evening he was headed back to Tokyo.

While it would be a mistake to read too much into the businesslike nature of the Bush-Fukuda meeting, the lack of pomp suggests the seriousness of the issues on the bilateral agenda.

The immediate causes of the tension in the alliance are clear. In the aftermath of the July election,

the victorious Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) opposed the extension of the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Forces (MSDF) refueling mission that has supported coalition activities in Afghanistan since 2001. Then-Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and Fukuda promised continued support to the United States. But the governing coalition only was able to prevail thanks to its two-thirds majority in the lower house of the Japanese Diet and only after the MSDF vessels came home while the government waited for the chance to revote.

The MSDF brouhaha prompted vociferous criticism from the United States, including from U.S. Ambassador to Japan Thomas Schieffer, who said that Japan "was opting out of the war on terror." In berating the DPJ and constantly reminding Japanese officials of the U.S. desire for Japan to continue its mission, Schieffer has treated Japan more like a vassal than an ally.

Even more serious is the yawning gap between the U.S. and Japanese positions in the six-party talks. While American and North Korean representatives reached an agreement in February that restarted the six-party talks, Japan declared its de facto noninvolvement in the talks until "progress" was made on the dispute over Japanese citizens abducted by North Korea.

Although the Bush Administration promised support to the Japanese government as it pressured Pyongyang on the abductions, the abductees are not a priority for the Americans. In the latest round of meetings, North Korea agreed to declare all of its nuclear facilities and disable those at Yongbyon by the end of 2007, with the U.S. government apparently dangling the prospect of removing the designation of North Korea as a state sponsor of terrorism, a carrot Japan wanted linked to resolution of the abductions issue.

In October, Japan's adviser on the abductions said, "If the U.S. moves while completely ignoring the abduction issue, you can expect that relations between Japan and the United States will not improve." Today, there is no timeline for the United States to remove North Korea from this list of terrorist nations, but it is unlikely that its policy will change course to assuage Japan.

While North Korea's recent noncompliance with last summer's joint statement has removed some of the urgency from this issue, tension between the United States and Japanese bargaining positions remains. The hopeful turn in the six-party talks exposed structural problems in the U.S.-Japan relationship.

Problems Run Deep

The alliance's structural problems are familiar to both governments. Despite efforts undertaken since the mid-1990s to "redefine" the alliance, Tokyo and Washington have been happy to let the fundamental flaws be. For Japan, the United States has provided a cheap substitute for its own defense spending and enabled Japan to avoid tackling the thorny question of acquiring a nuclear arsenal of its own. The alliance has allowed it to opt out of power politics and has saved Japan from having to think about its national interests. For the United States, Japan has been a reliable ally and provided low-cost bases for power projection throughout Eurasia.

Japan's Yoshida Doctrine continues to apply: Japan will do as much as necessary, but as little as possible. Today, it gladly pockets the U.S. security guarantee and all the benefits that accrue from it, while making token contributions to distant U.S. operations and tolerating the presence of U.S. forces in Japan. The amount of support the United States considers "necessary" and the amount of support some Japanese politicians are willing to give have increased, but the basic formula remains.

That formula has become bankrupt. The United States has pushed for the alliance to become global and for Japan to contribute to operations related to the war on terror, but, as demonstrated by

Schieffer's reaction to Japan's debate over the MSDF refueling mission, the United States wants an ally to be seen but not heard. Despite asking more of Japan, the United States has not paid greater attention to its partner's concerns.

Meanwhile, Japan has come to expect that its support for operations in the Middle East implies that the United States will support Japan in whatever area Tokyo deems a critical interest, the most prominent examples being the dispute with North Korea over the abductees and Japan's quixotic campaign for a permanent seat on the UN Security Council.

Thanks to initiatives undertaken since the late 1990s, the U.S. military and the Japanese Self-Defense Forces work more closely than ever. Indeed, they are so close that some Japanese have expressed fears of the "unification" of the two militaries.

The problem now is to determine the political purpose of the alliance to match the enhanced relationship between militaries. The allies, even as they continue strengthen the military relationship so that is ready to respond to crises, must develop a political strategy for preserving order and stability in East Asia-which necessarily means figuring out how to build trust and develop shared institutions with China.

Both nations must consider what kind of relationship they want and what burdens they are willing to bear. Washington must realize that it cannot simply ask Japan to cough up more and more support for its wars and expect Japan to follow along. A "normal" Japan will be a Japan that can and will say no. There must be a genuine consensus, rather than a partnership of equals in which the United States is "more equal."

The View from Tokyo

Before the United States and Japan can forge a new bilateral consensus, Japan needs to forge a new foreign policy vision. It should reflect the views of the Japanese public, not just the wishes of a handful of conservative, Washington-friendly politicians who are advancing their vision of an assertive Japan in a vacuum.

It is unclear whether Japan is ready to have this debate. While polls show that a plurality of the Japanese public continues to support Japan's participation in the Indian Ocean refueling mission, poll after poll reveals that participation in the war on terror and foreign policy in general are at the bottom of the public's list of priorities. There is little enthusiasm for participation in what are seen as America's wars or in veering from Japan's postwar pacifist constitution that has deeply influenced more than two generations of Japanese.

As documented by Richard Samuels in his new book *Securing Japan*, there is no question that Japan has been lurching toward a new understanding of its security since the end of the Cold War. The phrase "national interest" crops up in political discourse more frequently. Japanese Self-Defense Forces personnel are now respected by the public. The Japan Defense Agency, the JSDF's civilian overseer, was finally upgraded to a full ministry under Prime Minister Abe, at the same time that the Abe cabinet studied both the creation of an American-style national security council and the reinterpretation of the Japanese constitution to permit limited exercise of the right of collective self-defense, long desired by the United States. Under Koizumi and Abe, Japan professed a greater interest in playing a global political role than ever before, for example by proclaiming its support for regional democratization in what Foreign Minister Taro Aso called the "arc of freedom and prosperity."

For all these changes, the political debate over Japan's role in Afghanistan was shortsighted and

devoid of larger questions about Japan's international role. Under Fukuda, the LDP has been bound to support the continuation of the refueling mission, not least because of the link between this issue and the demise of the Abe cabinet.

But if the LDP and the government have been timid on this issue, the DPJ has been weak and vacillating. Ichiro Ozawa, head of the DPJ, has attempted to leverage ambivalent Japanese public opinion and Japan's simultaneous fears of entrapment and abandonment by the United States to disrupt the LDP's support for the alliance. Questioning the mission's constitutional basis and the supposed lack of UN backing, the DPJ rejected the extension of the prevailing enabling law and refused to compromise on the government's new enabling bill. In a bid to avoid being tarred as a pacifist, Mr. Ozawa suggested he would be willing to support an armed role for the JSDF in cooperation with the UN-sanctioned International Security Assistance Force, a proposal he backed away from in the face of harsh criticism from fellow DPJ executives and DPJ supporters.

But Ozawa has not elevated the DPJ's opposition to this measure into a coherent strategy. Judging from Ozawa's pronouncements, the DPJ "strategy" is an eclectic mishmash of UN-centrism, constitutional fundamentalism, and greater deference to China.

In the wake of the resolution of the refueling mission debate, the Fukuda government's attention has turned away from international problems. While Fukuda made a surprise appearance in Davos, where he spoke of the need for a new post-Kyoto environmental initiative, these symbolic gestures illustrate not Japan's global significance but the lack thereof.

Part of the problem is a broken foreign policy establishment. The Foreign Ministry suffered a string of scandals in recent years, and now the Defense Ministry's reputation has been tarnished by scandals of its own. The debate over the refueling mission unearthed a major corruption scandal that exposed gross abuses in the procurement process and led to the arrest of the recently resigned administrative vice minister, the ministry's ranking bureaucrat. In February, the government's crisis management capabilities were found lacking when an MSDF Aegis destroyer rammed a fishing boat.

In the face of mounting domestic problems—a crumbling welfare state, a shrinking population, and stagnation in the countryside—the Fukuda government has been unable to focus on fixing Japan's foreign policy institutions. It has also abandoned efforts to reformulate the constraints on Japan's security policy, most prominently initiatives on creating a national security council and reinterpreting Japan's constitution to allow the limited exercise of the right of collective self-defense. Finally, as a result of institutional deficiencies and the understandable need to focus on domestic concerns, the Fukuda government has made little progress on articulating a grand strategy for the twenty-first century.

Japan's grand strategy must strike a balance between a healthy relationship with the United States and a constructive relationship with China and its other Asian neighbors—two courses that need not clash but will require a wider debate in Japan about national interests.

Presidential Challenges

The United States, meanwhile, must transform its thinking on the alliance. The framework wherein the United States delegates more tasks to Japan without giving Japan a greater share in determining the purpose of the alliance will ensure mounting Japanese resentment that will ultimately explode in a crisis. Flaws in this framework have been exacerbated by the Bush Administration's push to transform the partnership into a "global alliance." Despite the enthusiasm of Japanese advocates of a more assertive security policy, it is clear that there is unease about the shift away from Asia among Japan's political class and public.

The next president must refocus the alliance on Asia. Without a new regional vision, a global U.S.-Japan alliance is an increasingly irrelevant partnership, in which Japan will do little more than stand and deliver token support when asked. Bringing the alliance back to East Asia will give it power to shape the regional political and security environment, thus making the alliance more relevant to the Japanese people. But the United States will be forced to rethink its Asia policy on the order of the 1995 Nye Initiative that looked at how the U.S.-Japan alliance should change in light of the post-Cold War Asian security environment.

Some questions about the alliance that remain include: If the alliance is to be regional, will it be a de facto balancing coalition against China? Will the alliance come to the defense of Taiwan? Will it be a force for promoting democracy in Asia?

As China rises and U.S. priorities change, the next president must lead in redefining security cooperation, building a new framework that acknowledges that the United States, a global power, and Japan, a regional power, view the world from different perspectives. Japan will not become the Great Britain of the East, a military power with global capabilities and interests ready to fight alongside the U.S. in remote corners of the world.

Whether in response to domestic political pressure or to the realities of Japan's need to play a strong leadership role in regional security, Prime Minister Fukuda has begun communicating this message.

In his prepared remarks after meetings with Bush, Fukuda was clear on his view of the kind of alliance Japan prefers when he said, "I explained to the President that the solid Japan-U.S. alliance will provide the foundation for Asia's peace and prosperity. And realizing a stable and open Asia that advances in prosperity by further deepening our relations with Asian countries on the basis of Japan-U.S. alliance will be in our mutual interests. And I told the President I'm convinced that such active diplomacy vis-à-vis Asia in turn will further strengthen our alliance."

Presidential leadership will be essential. Left to the alliance managers, the status quo will prevail.

Next Steps

Just as Bush and Koizumi established a more cooperative tone for the alliance in 2001, the next president can lay the groundwork for structural change by changing the tone in U.S. Japan policy. He or she should emphasize the importance of the alliance for U.S. Asia policy, consulting with Japan especially on issues on which Tokyo's position might be different.

The most significant step the next president can take to transform the relationship is offering to renegotiate the 2006 Roadmap for Realignment Implementation and free Japan from its commitment to provide \$6.9 billion for the construction of facilities in Guam in preparation for the relocation of the III Marine Expeditionary Force (MEF) from Okinawa.

The question of Japan's financial contributions to readying Guam for an influx of Marines—approximately 8,000 Marines plus 9,000 dependents—is problematic.

First, from Washington's perspective, Japan's contributions mean that there will be an extra, foreign layer of oversight for an already unwieldy construction project. With the DPJ in control of the upper house for at least the next three years and eager to transform the alliance relationship, every yen allocated by the Japanese government for construction on Guam will be scrutinized. As a result of the Japanese government's role in financing improvements on Guam, the realignment process will be delayed, making it unlikely that the III MEF will be relocated by 2014 as called for in the road map.

Second, it is politically difficult for the Japanese government, already the most indebted in the OECD

in terms of central government debt as a percentage of GDP, to justify paying for U.S. forces to leave Japan. Tokyo is trapped between the need to restore fiscal health and its growing obligations to provide social security and healthcare for its aging population. Japan's spending needs are not limited to social concerns: The development of a ballistic missile defense is consuming a greater portion of Japan's defense budget, making it difficult to pay for other defense programs.

Releasing Japan from its obligation to fund Guam construction would go a long way to instilling a new tone in the alliance.

The anger that greeted the latest alleged rape by a U.S. marine of an Okinawan adolescent shows how perilous the status quo is for the long-term stability of the alliance. The Bush Administration acknowledged this danger by consenting to the 2006 agreement. Any delay in the realignment process will jeopardize the security relationship.

The emergence of the U.S. relationship with China as, in Hillary Clinton's words, "the most important bilateral relationship in the world in this century" does not mean the end of the U.S.-Japan relationship. On the contrary, China presents an opportunity for the allies to work together to moderate Chinese behavior and create an open order in East Asia. But for the alliance to play a dynamic political role in the region, the allies will have to return to basics and consider why the alliance exists in the first place.

III. Nautilus invites your responses

The Northeast Asia Peace and Security Network invites your responses to this essay. Please send responses to: napsnet-reply@nautilus.org . Responses will be considered for redistribution to the network only if they include the author's name, affiliation, and explicit consent.

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