

## **Disturbing disconnects in the US-Japan alliance**

by Brad Glosserman

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President Barack Obama won a second term and the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) has returned to power in Tokyo, with former Prime Minister Abe Shinzo reclaiming the Prime Minister's Office. All should be right in the alliance as familiar faces and capable hands retain or regain the reins of government, right? Not exactly.

Recent conversations, in conferences and in Tokyo, with officials and analysts from both countries, have highlighted troubling divergences in thinking. The US-Japan alliance remains popular in both countries, but a convergence of strategic and security concerns belies an undercurrent of emotion and uncertainty in Japan that must be acknowledged and addressed.

Some Japanese complaints – and they're heard elsewhere in Asia – indicate a failure of strategic communications by the US. A common charge is that the US "rebalance" is amorphous, that Americans are quick to say what the rebalance isn't – it isn't just about the military, it isn't aimed at China, it isn't a containment strategy, and it isn't abandonment of other regions – but unclear about what it is. The abundant detail in speeches and articles by senior US officials, such as then Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, National Security Advisor Tom Donilon, or Deputy Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter is dismissed.

The claim that the rebalance is primarily military is especially problematic. While every description of the rebalance identifies the military as the third of its three pillars and emphasizes its diplomatic and economic components, there is precious little detail about those nonmilitary elements. There is no diplomatic or economic equivalent to the 60-40 split of military assets between the Atlantic and Pacific, or the list of deployments outlined by Carter in his speeches. The US must better explain and sell the rebalance to the region.

A second problem concerns China. The perennial Japanese complaint about "Japan passing" has been muted, although it still bubbles up when the US-China Strategic & Economic Dialogue convenes. Invariably some Japanese friend asks why there isn't a similar US-Japan meeting that includes half of each Cabinet. Nowadays, the complaint is that US policy toward China is too variable, swinging between the poles of engagement and confrontation. Americans push back, arguing that US policy toward China has been fixed since 1972, with only a shift in emphasis between cooperation and hedging. Where Americans see adjustment to circumstances and signaling, Asian observers see volatility and

inconsistency. It is only a short jump from there to fears of abandonment.

Those criticisms are heard throughout Asia. Other complaints are uniquely Japanese.

Japanese complain that the image of Prime Minister Abe that has appeared in the media is a caricature. He isn't a knuckle-dragging nationalist, hell bent on restoring Japan to its imperial glory or unleashing a newly empowered military on the region. Rather, they insist that he is a patriot, determined to cure the economic ills that have crippled Japan and prevent it from making regional and international contributions that a country its size should be making. He is also a pragmatist who wants to be a better ally and partner of the United States, and seeks to reinforce the global order that allowed Japan to prosper. The constitutional changes he seeks target absurd restrictions on Japanese participation in international peacekeeping, not the resurrection of a once defeated dream.

Japanese interlocutors argue that singling Japan out for its nationalism is unfair and inaccurate. Every country in the region shares similar sentiments and the popular manifestations of those feelings are often more violent and vehement than those in Japan. They rightly note that most textbooks in Northeast Asia promote nationalism, and the distortions found in Japanese texts are matched by similarly "peculiar" versions of history among its neighbors. They also urge outsiders to fight the tendency to use the brush of history to tar every dispute Japan has with its neighbors. They concede that Japan committed misdeeds in the past, but that does not mean that Japan is wrong in every case.

Finally, while most Japanese I speak to acknowledge the US commitment to Japan's defense – and unlike the past, few doubt the credibility of that commitment – they want the US to go further, particularly when it comes to the Senkaku/Daiyotai dispute. They seek a US declaration that recognizes Japanese sovereignty, arguing it would send an unmistakable signal to China and to other Japanese about the special relationship between the two countries (precisely because the US has refrained from making such statements). The US counter – that such a statement is not in the US interest, nor in Japan's if Washington is then obliged to make similar statements that might challenge Tokyo, as could prove to be the case in the Dokdo/Takeshima dispute -- is usually dismissed. After all, Japan seeks affirmation of its status as a special partner.

Some Americans argue that Senkakus have little strategic value. They insist that the US will defend Japan and its territory according to its treaty commitments, but the trigger will be Japanese casualties, not an attack on unoccupied Japanese territory. (This implies that Japan will be leading the fight. In one positive development, we no longer hear that

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Japan expects the US to do the fighting for it. Prime Minister Abe was clear on this point in his speech at CSIS during his recent trip to Washington.) Moreover, Americans note that if the islands are so important, then Japan should better prepare for their defense – in other words, Tokyo has to do more to push for base realignment in Okinawa. “Read a map,” growled a former US official at a recent conference.

Here, the two most important divergences become clear. Americans are told they should be pleased that Abe and the LDP are back in office, ending three years of DPJ incompetence. In the next breath, Americans are told to be patient: the prime minister is biding his time until this summer’s House of Councilors election. Once that victory is in hand, the LDP will move forward with its agenda and the alliance will be stronger.

Americans challenge the Abe government’s assessment of its predecessor. The hapless Hatoyama administration isn’t the proper benchmark for alliance relations: most Americans thought the alliance had regained its footing and was doing well under Prime Minister Noda Yoshihiko. An ABM – “anything but Minshuto” – policy risks losing the momentum that had been gathering throughout the Noda administration. The new government can’t raise expectations, brag about how it isn’t the DPJ and then ask for a timeout while it plays electoral politics – all the while pushing the US to step up its commitment to Japan’s defense. (To his credit, the decision to join the Trans-Pacific Partnership shows that Prime Minister Abe understands the need to move forward quickly, at least on this issue.)

But if Japanese misread the US response to the change in government in Tokyo, Americans are missing the powerful emotions lurking beneath the surface in Japan. The cool US assessment of the strategic value of the Senkakus misses a fundamental point: Japanese feel their territory is physically threatened for the first time since the end of World War II. The perception of US indifference to Japanese insecurity is compounded by repetition of the US warning to “not go there” – don’t reopen the controversy surrounding the 1993 Kono Statement apologizing for the treatment of sex slaves during World War II. Don’t get me wrong: Japan shouldn’t revisit that statement. But publicly and repeatedly hectoring Japan risks opening wounds of its own. The point has been made and the consequences made clear. We have reached the point of diminishing returns and now risk antagonizing allies and friends.

In each case, the US position has its merits but seems insensitive to deep-rooted Japanese concerns. The US shouldn’t indulge Japan but we do have to acknowledge and better respond to those fears and insecurities. There are often rumblings of discontent among allies; we shouldn’t be amplifying them.

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