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The Japan-US Alliance Is in Danger of Drifting Apart

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Akira Kato, Visiting Scholar at the East-West Center in Washington, explains that “The fact is that the alliance is not as close as many think and there are three core reasons why: namely, the incompatibility of values, a differing world view and alternative versions of history.”

There is a serious danger that the current drift in the Japan-US alliance could evolve into a crisis. Gone are the days of the Cold War and the shared common enemy of the former Soviet Union. US-Japan alliance experts Richard Armitage and Joseph Nye published *The US-Japan Alliance: Anchoring Stability in Asia* report in August 2012 warning that Japan is at a crossroads. The road ahead is uncertain. In one scenario, Japan remains a tier-one nation making positive contributions to global governance and norms, and is a full and active partner with the United States. In another scenario, Japan turns inwards and shies away from its leadership role on the international stage.

The counterargument to this second scenario is the unprecedented Japan-US military cooperation during “Operation *Tomodachi*” in the aftermath of the March 2011 earthquake and tsunami. While not demeaning the value of this joint relief effort, the point should not be overlooked that the Japan-US alliance is not designed for disaster relief operations and cannot be cited as the only evidence of the close nature of the alliance. Since the US “rebalance” towards Asia, the United States is increasingly looking to Japan to contribute more militarily as a full-partner in upholding global governance and norms at a time when Japan appears to be grappling with serious domestic fiscal, political and regional challenges. The fact is that the alliance is not as close as many think and there are three core reasons why: namely, the incompatibility of values, a differing world view and alternative versions of history.

Incompatibility of Values

The first reason for the drift is the incompatibility of values, primarily pacifism in Japan and hawkish liberalism in the United States. The preamble of the 1960 Japan-US Security Treaty states that both countries will “uphold the principles of democracy, individual liberty, and the rule of law.” While post-WWII Japan has clearly accepted the principles of liberal market capitalism and democracy, the Japanese public has also created a pacifist viewpoint within the realm of international relations, in part because of the US-imposed peace constitution in the aftermath of WWII.

The problem is that every time the United States is engaged in a major military action, the Japan-US Security Treaty has been redefined in a direction for Japan to share more of the global burden of upholding this paradigm of liberal democracy in the Japan-US global partnership. For its part, Japan has always—without fail—fully

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cooperated with the United States to this end. The only exception is in the military domain. This is because of the pacifist doctrine enshrined by the United States within the Japanese constitution and now firmly embedded in the Japanese public mindset. Even if Japan did amend Article 9 of its constitution, the Japanese public will undoubtedly continue to embrace the doctrine of pacifism. Thus, a clash over Japanese dovish pacifism and American hawkish military engagement will continue to exist within the alliance well into the future.

Different Views of the World

The second difficulty in the Japan-US relationship concerns their alternative views of the world. The current prevailing view of an emerging world order dominated by US-China cooperation continues to gather momentum, at a time when Japan is perceived to be in decline. This view of a new world order as “a quasi US-China alliance” is outlined in Henry Kissinger’s recent book, *On China*. For the United States, such a quasi alliance means that it will still be able to maintain influence in Asia even if the Japan-US alliance dissolves. For Japan, it implies that it would be controlled jointly by the United States and China, or worse still, that it would be subject to Chinese dictatorship. For Japan, neither scenario is acceptable.

This quasi alliance scenario reminds Japan of the “Nixon Shock” nightmare of July 1971 when the Nixon administration suddenly announced US-China diplomatic normalization without any advance notice or consultation with Japan. To say that Japan was astounded is an understatement. The United States not only neglected to consult with its ally, but more importantly, Washington dumped the above-mentioned foundations of the Japan-US Security Treaty to shake hands with communist China—an enemy of Japan—and only for US interests.

The current security environment in Asia is very similar to the one in the 1970s, when China was beginning to emerge as a potential geopolitical power and the United States was bogged down in Vietnam amidst talk of a decline in US military and economic power. Today, the United States is extracting itself from two prolonged wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and a grim domestic economic slowdown, at a time when China’s rising military and economic power is perceived to be a challenge to US superiority in Asia. While China might not be an enemy, or a friend, of the United States, at best it is a “frenemy.” This fact worries Japan, with some believing that it is only a matter of time before there is another “Nixon Shock” and again at Japan’s expense.

Different Views of History

The third challenge to the Japan-US relationship is a disconnect on historical interpretations. The issue of the Japanese Imperial Army’s exploitation of “comfort women” or “sex slaves” during WWII is just one example, and this painful and highly emotive subject is extremely difficult for all sides. Many Japanese are of the opinion that Resolution 121 passed by the US House of Representatives in 2007 calling for the Japanese government to “formally acknowledge, apologize, and accept historical responsibility” for comfort women is not based on all the facts. There are also other historical issues between Japan and United States—the detonation of atom weapons over Hiroshima and Nagasaki, along with the fire bombings of Tokyo, Osaka and other major cities—that continue to resonate latent anti-American sentiments in Japan to this day.

Putting the Japan-US Alliance Back on the Right Track

The United States and Japan both need to remind themselves of the importance of their bilateral alliance and how well it has benefited the two countries over the past 60 years, both in the region and beyond. Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and US President Barack Obama are not communicating with each other on this issue, and as a result, are losing clarity on the future direction of the alliance. Not only is Japan at a crossroads on this issue, so too is the United States.

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