

The China challenge and the US-Japan alliance

by Brad Glosserman

Brad Glosserman (brad@pacforum.org) is executive director of the Pacific Forum CSIS.

The biggest issue for the US-Japan alliance is China. Washington and Tokyo must address the direct challenges that Beijing poses to regional security as well as manage the impact of China's rise on their bilateral relationship. The latter is the more difficult of the two assignments: while there is considerable common ground in the two countries' assessment of China, there is a growing gap between Americans and Japanese on how to respond to Chinese behavior.

On paper, the two countries are in lockstep when it comes to China. The language of the last Security Consultative Committee meeting (the SCC, usually called the "2+2") is explicit: The US and Japan "continue to encourage China to play a responsible and constructive role in regional stability and prosperity, to adhere to international norms of behavior, as well as to improve openness and transparency in its military modernization with its rapid expanding military investments." It sounds like boilerplate, but it hits the right notes, identifying concerns and telling Beijing what they expect it to do.

But beneath this concord, there is discord. When it comes to China, Japan is channeling the spirit of Margaret Thatcher, who once warned President George HW Bush to "not go wobbly" when dealing with the Soviets. Japanese experts and officials voice two concerns. The first is a fear of "decoupling" the US and Japan, a worry since President Bill Clinton overflowed Tokyo twice on his way to and from Beijing. Japanese worry that they have been eclipsed by China as the US's preferred partner in Asia. There is teeth gnashing in Tokyo every time the US-China Strategic & Economic Dialogue convenes, and Prime Minister Abe Shinzo is still waiting for his shirt-sleeves Sunnylands summit with President Obama.

Fears of decoupling have receded – but haven't vanished – and Tokyo now frets over "mutual vulnerability" (sometimes called "strategic stability"), a world in which China's nuclear arsenal makes Washington hesitant to respond to Chinese aggression. This leads to a "stability-instability paradox": a situation in which the prospect of mutual pain creates stability at the strategic level (MAD provided this during the Cold War) but invites small-scale provocations or aggression locally.

The geographic focus of this particular fear is the Senkaku Islands, uninhabited islets in the East China Sea that are held by Japan and claimed by China (and called the *Daiyou* in Chinese), that have become the locus of tensions in the Japan-China relationship. Even though the US has insisted for years that the islands are covered under the US-Japan Security

Treaty, Japanese are not mollified. The standard US response is that the "US takes no stand on the claims to disputed territory, but the Senkakus are covered under Article 5 of the treaty as 'territory administered by Japan.'" Japanese experts and officials urge the US to be more forward leaning, actually backing Japan's claim to the islands as well as chastising China for threatening instability in the region. They prefer language from the Trilateral Security Dialogue (which includes the US, Japan and Australia), released a day after the SCC statement, which decries "coercive or unilateral actions that could change the status quo in the East China Sea," wording more explicit than that in the 2+2 declaration.

What accounts for the gap in perspectives? One difference is obvious: Japan feels threatened *now* by Chinese actions. As a Japanese scholar explained, "this is the first occasion in which the Japanese people really sense the possibility that Japanese territory under control of their government may be menaced by an external enemy." The US is also worried by Chinese behavior, but the threat is more distant, both in terms of geography and time, and more abstract (typically framed in regard to a shifting balance of power).

This reflects a second difference: how each country ranks security threats. China tops Japan's list, while the US identifies North Korea as its immediate regional concern. The US may be dragged into conflict in both cases, but Pyongyang is considered a more belligerent and unpredictable force than Beijing. Third, there is the context in which each country frames relations with China. China is among both countries' top trading partners and the destination of considerable investment from both. But Washington sees relations with Beijing more broadly, engaging it as a partner across a range of endeavors, while Japan's perspective is narrower – it sees China primarily as a threat. US references to a strategic partnership, or sometimes even cooperation, with China raise temperatures in Tokyo.

Other factors tug on the alliance. The bitter, bloody history of Japan-China relations during the 20th century distinguishes regional analysis in Tokyo and Washington, creating expectations and obstacles for Japan that the US doesn't face. (Ironically, in the 1980s, this history pushed Tokyo closer to Beijing than the US liked.) Beijing is quick to widen perceived gaps in thinking between Washington and Tokyo, playing up the image of an irresponsible US or an irresolute Japan.

Some Japanese hawk a China threat because it supports their political agenda, whether increasing military spending or loosening constitutional restrictions on the Self-Defense Forces. Highlighting a China threat also reinforces the message that Tokyo is a serious ally, ready to pull its weight on regional security concerns. Unfortunately, while many in the US back these moves, Japanese messaging has been ham

fisted, arguing that Tokyo must change the interpretation of the right of collective self-defense because in some cases Japan might not be able to defend its own territory, an argument that inadvertently plays up the image of an irresponsible ally.

Some insist that problems in the US-Japan relationship spring from Japanese insecurities. That is true – up to a point. But those insecurities, real or imagined, are a problem for the alliance and need to be deflated. As a start, while pursuing cooperation with China, and urging Tokyo to do the same, Americans must push back against the notion that there is an equilateral triangle among Washington, Tokyo, and Beijing. Our alliance fundamentally distinguishes the US-Japan relationship from that of the US and China.

Second, it is time for President Obama and Prime Minister Abe to have their own shirt-sleeves summit, one that erases any doubt about the state of the alliance and US confidence in the prime minister. They could meet in Hawaii: photos of them walking the beach would go a long way toward changing the framing of the bilateral relationship, and sessions at Pacific Command would signal their shared commitment to security cooperation.

Third, the two countries' security communities should double down on regional conversations and bilateral contingency planning. There has been great progress in these areas in recent years, but an evolving security environment demands still more discussions, at both the official and nonofficial levels. Both countries need a better grasp of our expectations of the other. We need to better align understanding of the forces at work in the Asia-Pacific region, moving beyond the easy answers to grasp the mechanics and the dynamics shaping security policy in Washington and Tokyo.

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