



False choices for Tokyo by Brad Glosserman

A gloom is settling over Tokyo. A recent visit revealed deep and deepening frustration and anxiety as Japanese contemplate strategic options. Decision makers in Tokyo have framed their choices in overly simple terms that do not reflect the range of possibilities in foreign and security policy. Worse, Japanese behavior today threatens to limit future choices. While the roots of Japan's insecurity will endure, Japanese can take steps to ease anxieties, create more options, and raise the comfort level.

Political developments in Tokyo and Washington are the primary source of anxiety. The Democratic Party of Japan's (DPJ) victory in Upper House elections in July plunged Japan into uncharted territory. The DPJ is determined to seize the moment and force a general election, fighting the government on every issue. This has resulted in virtual political paralysis.

While some recalibration of priorities after the departures of Prime Ministers Koizumi and Abe was expected, the unblinking focus on domestic politics – the phrase “navel gazing” was used in several conversations – has irritated even friends of the alliance. It is distracting decision-makers and draining the energy from Japanese institutions. To take one example: two countries did not send a head of state or Cabinet-level delegation to the recent Middle East peace conference held in Annapolis, Maryland: Sudan and Japan. Not surprisingly, no one is expecting the domestic political tough decisions that are needed to continue the transformation of the U.S.-Japan security alliance.

Japanese are equally nervous about political developments in the U.S. There is in Tokyo an instinctive distrust of Democrats, who are thought to be soft on security, captive of economic interests, and ready to bash Japan. Memories of Bill Clinton's 1998 trip to China are quick to surface: his failure to stop in Tokyo on either leg gave birth to the term “Japan passing.” I heard frequent reference to candidate Hillary Clinton's recent *Foreign Affairs* article that called U.S.-China relations the most important bilateral relationship and considerable angst about what her victory in November might mean for Japan.

This first false dichotomy – Republicans are good for the U.S.-Japan relationship, Democrats are bad – is based on a false assumption: Japan and China are competing for American attention. There is great concern in Tokyo that Washington and Beijing will make common cause to deal with shared problems and issues; that China with its size, considerable resources (among them, a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council), and newfound confidence, has assets Japan cannot match; and that the U.S. will become frustrated with Japanese inaction. For many Japanese, Beijing's role in the Six-Party Talks and the evolution of U.S.

policy toward North Korea confirm the fragility of the alignment of U.S and Japanese interests and are a harbinger of future developments.

Japan has responded by clinging tighter to the U.S. and searching for ways to differentiate Tokyo from Beijing. The call for “values-based diplomacy,” which aligns Japan with Washington, Australia, India, and Europe, is the most visible manifestation of this effort. This policy echoes those embraced at the outset of the Meiji Restoration when strategists pondered whether to look to Asia or the West. Then, Japan turned its back on Asia, swiftly modernized, and returned to Asia with a vengeance.

While talk of an “East Asian Community” would seem to resurrect that dichotomy, the choice today is a false one. Japan need not pick one or the other. Japan is member of both communities: Asian by geography, but Western by virtue of its postwar political and social evolution. Given its global interests – economic and political – Japan cannot be a purely “Asian” country. The key in this, as in all other “choices” identified here, is in balancing concerns.

That is a constant and difficult process. Policymakers must be vigilant, scanning the horizon (and beyond) for challenges that they must then be prepared to confront. A reactive diplomacy will not serve Japan well.

While adjustments will be ongoing, Japan can devise a framework to guide strategic thinking. It should include:

First, Japan should recognize that its choice is not Asia or the West. Japan is an integral part of both communities and must engage both. Failure to identify with Asia or to participate fully in the development of Asian institutions will marginalize Tokyo within the region. Tokyo will not “speak for” one or the other – as has sometimes been suggested – but it can provide insight into how each sees and is seen by the other.

Second, Japan should seek to build a better and more stable relationship with China. As the two biggest countries in East Asia, positive relations make almost anything possible. At a minimum, they are the foundation of an Asian Community. Fortunately, this process appears to be underway, but it is just beginning and it is still fragile. It must be tended and nurtured.

Third, Tokyo should adopt an inclusive outlook and not feel threatened by improved relations between Washington and Beijing. Just as a positive Japan-China relationship will not threaten Tokyo's ties to Washington, improved U.S.-China relations need not undermine the U.S.-Japan alliance. The key is ensuring that the U.S. sees the value of an alliance with Japan; one asset will be an improved Japan-China relationship. Japan should also reach out to South Korea to ensure that Seoul doesn't feel left out of regional deliberations.

Fourth, and easiest of all, Japan should court more Democrats in the U.S. (or at least stop bad mouthing them). The bilateral security alliance has been resilient because it has enjoyed bipartisan support. Dismissing Democrats' views and the public handwringing about what a Democratic administration would do to the alliance alienates friends and allies. It should stop.

If these suggestions seem simple, they in fact demand a radical change in how Japan sees itself and its place in the world. Most significantly, Japan must see itself as an actor shaping international politics, rather than a country merely reacting to external developments. That does not mean adopting a great power mentality; it does require thinking more clearly about Japanese national interests and acting to protect them. This transformation in Japanese thinking will not be easy, but the stakes could not be higher.

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