

Breaking point for the alliance? By Brad Glosserman

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Now I'm worried. In November, amateurism and confusion from the new Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) government were to be expected. The first opposition party win in 50 years was bound to produce a messy transition. But five months later, those initial glitches should have been worked out – or at least identified and minimized. A recent visit to Japan highlighted the continuing drift in Tokyo. The US-Japan alliance may be in trouble, but not for the reasons most people suspect. The real risk is from the US: It looks like the new Japanese government is taking the alliance for granted and that could trigger a backlash.

The mood in Tokyo is grim: disappointment, disillusionment, and dismay are the colors this spring. The new broom hasn't done much cleaning, with scandal reaching Prime Minister Hatoyama Yukio, DPJ Secretary General Ozawa Ichiro, and other party members (who, like their LDP predecessors, refused to resign from the Diet). The public spat over Japan Post privatization highlighted the disarray in the Cabinet – if the controversy over US base relocation plans hadn't made that point clear enough. The result has been plummeting support for the Cabinet: after taking office with a 77 percent approval rating last fall, public support has fallen by more than half, to 32 percent according to one March poll.

That trend is likely to continue as long as politics dominates every decision in Tokyo – and there is no indication that is about to change. In every conversation in Tokyo, I was told that policy coherence will have to wait until after this summer's Upper House election. The DPJ's chief objective is winning an outright majority in that ballot and then booting its coalition partners. Its performance since taking office renders that increasingly unlikely. The LDP's implosion means that it isn't a credible contender, however. It is already self-destructing. Contrary to estimates (and DPJ aspirations) only a few months ago, no one now believes the DPJ will win an outright majority. There is consensus, however, that the party will stay in power for 3-5 years but this will require continued compromise, if not with the Socialists, then with someone else. (My crystal ball says the summer ballot is likely to produce a new coalition, with the DPJ pulling disaffected/opportunistic LDP politicians into its orbit. The next phase in Japan's long-awaited political realignment will begin in earnest after the vote.)

The DPJ's problem is that the party has no center of gravity. No one – not even party members – could tell me what it stood for. They argued that “the old order” was so strong that the opposition had to accommodate all forces to knock it down. The result is not just a spectrum of views, but a mix that extends in every direction imaginable.

That “big tent” approach has compounded a host of other problems: inexperience with governing, lack of familiarity with the issues (which is magnified by the bureaucrat bashing that was a pillar of the DPJ electoral platform), an overloaded decision-making process (to be expected when bureaucrats are isolated), a fickle prime minister, and a crowded electoral calendar. Even DPJ members winced when asked about their government's performance.

The inability of politicians to look beyond the next election is troubling (even if not unique to Japan). Even more worrisome is a similar tendency on the part of the business community and ordinary Japanese to shorten their horizons as well. The country is increasingly inward looking and absorbed with its own problems – which heightens the perception that Japan is marginalizing itself.

If there is a bright lining to this grim cloud, it is the fact that there is no indication that this government is anti-American. Fears that it will jettison its ally, align with China, or go it alone are misplaced. The rhetorical flourishes – that the US-Japan partnership is the cornerstone of Japanese foreign policy – are not empty words.

Nevertheless, this government's thinking about the US-Japan relationship is different from that of its predecessors. As one long-time Japan watcher explained, “the alliance is not in the DPJ's DNA.”

Worse than being anti-US – which would rally opposition in support of the alliance – is an alarming tendency in the DPJ government's thinking to take the alliance for granted. There is a sense that the US will defend Japan no matter what Tokyo does, or that the credibility of the US defense commitment will be maintained even if US forces are sent home. Ozawa's earlier comment that “all we need is the Seventh Fleet” undercuts both the operational and psychological value of US boots on the ground in Okinawa. The assumption of a US commitment in any and all circumstances allows national security discussions to be overtaken by politics – and thus far, the debate over Futenma is more about politics than strategic realities. There is little indication of a debate about the Marines' mission; rather, their mere presence is the issue. A refusal to implement the base relocation agreement is a problem, but it can be handled with adroit diplomacy. That task will become immeasurably harder if that decision is followed by a scaling back of the funds needed to move US forces to Guam or for host nation support. There are already alarmingly high levels of frustration among US alliance managers.

In this environment, the real danger is Japanese behavior triggering a backlash in the US. While there appears to be strong support for the alliance among the general public – a recent Pew survey ranks Japan third in favorability ratings, trailing only Canada and Britain – elite opinion is changing for

the worse. In October 2005, 32 percent of elites (Council of Foreign Relations members) said Japan will be a more important US ally in the future; by November 2009, that number had dropped to 16 percent, trailing even Russia. Conversely, in 2005, only 7 percent thought Japan would be less important; by 2009, that number had more than doubled to 16 percent.

Expect those numbers to climb as long as public discussions focus on issues that divide the two nations, rather than unite them. That trend must be changed. Supporters of the US-Japan partnership must regain the initiative and write a new and compelling narrative.

That requires first, and foremost, a new approach in Japan. The government in Tokyo must stop procrastinating and outline a vision for the country that commands a public consensus. From there, it should craft a national security strategy that explains Japanese national interests, the country's role in the region and the world, and how the alliance with the US helps realize those interests and seize that role. The new government had the opportunity to begin with a fresh canvas to "reimagine" and reorient the relationship. That window is closing and the continuing refusal to take the initiative – to wait until after the Upper House election – may close it for good.

Second, the government in Tokyo should outline all the ways that our two countries can and do work together. When it comes to bilateral cooperation, the story – not necessarily the reality – is "all Futenma, all the time." The base issue is sucking all the air out of the room. Alliance managers insist that isn't the case, but you couldn't tell from reading the papers. A new narrative must be written. There is an extraordinary range of activities that our countries are already undertaking. They need to be publicized and our publics reminded of all the good that our partnership can do. Sheila Smith's recent commentary – "Japan's Moment to Shine," *PacNet* 18, April, 9, 2010) identifies an obvious starting point – nuclear weapons policy. The list should be much longer. An upcoming *PacNet* by Yamamoto Aiichiro, "How to win the peace in Afghanistan," outlining Japan's contributions in Afghanistan provides another case in point.

A key element of our partnership should be the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum. Japan hosts APEC this year and the US hosts it in 2011. Our two governments should be laying out a two-year program that reinvigorates an initiative that has lost a great deal of its energy.

Last November in Tokyo, Japanese interlocutors in every conversation at some point drew a parallel between the DPJ government and that of former South Korean President Roh Moo-hyun. They highlighted the seeming antagonism between the leadership in the allied capital and the US alliance. I was inclined to dismiss the comparison; after all, for all the bad press, in many ways Roh strengthened the US-ROK alliance. Today, however, the parallel seems more apt: not because our partner devalues the partnership, but because its actions may encourage those of us in the US to do so.