



Toward a revitalization of the U.S.-Japan Alliance: Can Japan meet great expectation?

by Yuki Tatsumi

As George W. Bush becomes president, the debate in Japan on what the new U.S. administration's policy toward Japan will be - and how to respond to it - is heightening. With familiar Asia hands such as Richard Armitage, James Kelly, and Paul Wolfowitz making significant contributions to the formulation of Asia policy, it seems clear that the Bush administration will put a higher priority on U.S. relations with Japan.

This, in general, is good news for Japan. But when one thinks more deeply about the implications of the new administration's enhanced interest in the U.S.-Japan alliance, Bush's inauguration also poses a great challenge to Japan.

For example, the October 11 "Armitage-Nye Report" published by the Institute for National Strategic Studies contains a set of policy recommendations for the next administration's Japan policy. Although formally reflecting bipartisan views, the prominent participation of Armitage, Kelly, and Wolfowitz suggests that the view expressed in the report likely foreshadows policies to be adopted by the Bush administration.

The report identifies six areas needing significant adjustment to create a mature partnership and enduring U.S.-Japan alliance: politics, security, intelligence, Okinawa, economic relations, and diplomacy. Issues such as the right of collective self-defense, removal of the restraints on full participation in peacekeeping and humanitarian relief missions, and economic reform are identified for Japanese initiative, but they obviously reflect the hopes and expectations that the U.S. has for Japan. In other words, the Bush administration will expect Japan to make progress on these issues. Bilateral relations could suffer if Japan fails to meet such expectations.

In the abstract, the issues identified in the Armitage-Nye Report are neither unrealistic nor unreasonable. But they depend on domestic reform to restore the economy as a necessary underpinning for Tokyo's envisioned more active role. These issues demand a political solution, and cannot be addressed without strong political leadership. The almost record-low level of public support for the current government, the Liberal Democratic Party's continuous failure to revitalize itself, and the lack of a credible opposition force all make the emergence of strong political leadership in the near future very unlikely. Indeed, as pointed out in the Armitage-Nye Report, the current Japanese political situation is one with a government and ruling coalition "stuck in neutral, incapable of more than muddling through."

During the previous Bush administration, Japan missed its first opportunity to prove itself as a credible U.S. ally when it failed to respond appropriately during the Gulf War. Americans were frustrated with Japan's unwillingness to play a meaningful role in the multinational force, including rear-area support, and criticized Japan for limiting itself to "checkbook diplomacy" (even though this financial support was substantial). Those in the U.S. government understood the constraints on Japan's ability to make meaningful contributions that involved risk-sharing and thus did not expect much from Japan, but they were frustrated nonetheless. Still this episode did not seriously damage U.S.-Japan relations because the U.S., while emphasizing Japan as a trusted ally in the Asia-Pacific region, very much regarded Tokyo as its junior partner in the alliance.

If the Bush administration genuinely hopes for a mature partnership with Japan under which they not only share burdens but also responsibilities, it is imperative that Japan prove itself a credible and reliable ally. Japan's tardy response to the East Timor situation showed that, even with the removal of some of the procedural obstacles that had existed in 1990, Japan was not able to make meaningful contributions to peacekeeping operations due to a risk-averse political leadership.

There are some encouraging signs that Japan might make progress toward meeting Bush administration expectations. The Democratic Party of Japan may finally be more willing to consider lifting the freeze on Japan Self-Defense Forces' participation in peacekeeping operations. However, recent political developments (including Kato Koichi's failure to follow up on his demand for reform) suggest that Japan will not in the near future see the kind of leadership necessary to make hard decisions on issues such as collective self-defense.

As the Armitage-Nye Report acknowledges, the issues are all difficult, and will probably take a long time to completely address. Still, Japan's political leadership must show its willingness to respond to American calls for change by dealing with these issues in transparent and tangible ways if it wants to prove itself a credible and reliable ally. This is not merely because the United States seeks change, but because it is in Japan's interest. That said, the great expectations posed by the new Bush administration will present Japan with a second - and perhaps last - opportunity.

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