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Why Is Japan So Worried About Obama? by Ayako Doi

Ayako Doi (ayako@japandigest.com) is a freelance journalist. She is also a contributing fellow at Asia Society. This commentary expands upon an earlier op-ed that previously appeared in the Washington Post.

Like millions of Americans, I watched the scene at Grant Park in Chicago on election night as Barack Obama delivered the victory speech as the president-elect, with a real sense of hope that something fundamental was changing. A few hours later, I began receiving excited e-mail from friends in Europe who were overjoyed with the choice American voters had made.

The election of the first African-American president of the United States has been greeted by people outside the country as a stunning breakthrough and a positive development for global relations. Excitement was palpable in news photos and TV images from around the world – with one striking exception.

When I went to Japanese news Web sites to read their commentaries on the Obama victory, I was taken aback by the skeptical, even negative, tone. "Obama Likely to Stress Importance of China," read one headline in the *Yomiuri*, a mass circulation centrist paper, implying that Japan will be relegated to the foreign policy back seat by the new administration. The economic daily *Nihon Keizai* fretted about the likelihood that the Democratic president and Congress would concoct a massive rescue package for troubled U.S. automakers and about the potential fallout for the Japanese car industry.

On defense, everyone seemed to agree that Obama, who had talked about withdrawing U.S. troops from Iraq to concentrate resources on Afghanistan, would be likely to put pressure on Japan to send ground troops to the latter country – something Tokyo doesn't feel prepared to do.

The most astounding article appeared in *Sentaku*, a monthly magazine with a reputation for objectivity and solid analysis. Writing in anticipation of an Obama victory, the magazine raised all the charges John McCain had raised against his Democratic opponent, including Obama's association with former Weather Underground leader William Ayres, the Rev. Jeremiah Wright, "communist and socialist professors" as well as "Islamic and radical politics," and called him "the most dubious character in history to occupy the White House." Criticizing Obama's past foreign policy statements as "abstract" and "strings of empty words such as 'consultation and 'cooperation,' " the article concluded that under Obama, the United States would lose its global leadership position and drag the world into "enormous chaos."

As the realization sank in that Obama will be the most powerful man in the world in two months, Japanese opinion of him seems to have warmed considerably. Newspaper editorials began expressing more hope that he will do well in combating the economic crisis. The first opinion poll since the election, by the left-leaning daily *Asahi* released last week, showed that 79 percent of respondents had favorable feelings about Obama himself. But even so, only 41 percent thought it would lead to an improvement in U.S.-Japanese relations.

Why do the Japanese feel so much less positive about an Obama presidency than the rest of the world?

Japanese media seem concerned that officials there have few contacts with Obama or his advisers, and that Obama doesn't seem to know much about Japan. This is the same anxiety the Japanese go through every time there's a new occupant in the White House, and it's not uncommon in other countries either. Even though Japan, the world's second-largest economy and a close ally of the United States, should have no problem communicating its wishes and concerns to the U.S. government, Japanese strongly believe that only good ties can affect Washington's policies.

Another reason for Japanese anxiety about Obama is simply that he's a Democrat. The last time there was a Democrat in the White House, Japan, with its huge trade surpluses with the United States, became a favorite whipping boy for U.S. politicians. The Clinton administration, having decided that fixing America's economy would be "Job One," demanded that Japan set numerical targets for importing U.S. products. And it tasked its abrasive trade representative, Mickey Kantor, with keeping up the pressure as Tokyo resisted what it perceived to be a demand for managed trade. Tokyo's then-ambassador to Washington, Takakazu Kuriyama, lamented the acrimonious nature of the relationship at the time, saying he had never seen so much distrust between officials of the two governments in his 30-plus years of diplomatic service.

In the last few years, China has replaced Japan as the main target of Washington's ire over trade. In fact, trade hasn't been a major issue of contention between Tokyo and Washington for some time, and no one expects it to rise to the surface even under a Democratic administration. Yet the memory of the Clinton-era "trade war" seems to have stuck in the minds of many Japanese – and may now be floating to the top of their list of concerns because of the latest financial crisis, which the Japanese press always refers to as "U.S.-originated."

Unlike most Americans, who think that Obama is better qualified than McCain to deal with the dire economic situation, the Japanese may see him as a problem because they strongly associate Democrats with protectionism. "Concerns of Resurgent Protectionism," a *Japanese Industrial Daily*

headline proclaimed as it reported Obama's election victory. Japanese manufacturers with plants in the United States also worry about a possible rise in the clout of labor unions because of their ties with Democratic politicians. Many Japanese managers of U.S. subsidiaries "have had a hard time because of their unions' anti-management attitudes," a Japanese business analyst in Washington told me. "It's natural that they think Republicans are easier to deal with."

Beyond trade and the economy, there is also a discernible anti-Americanism in Japanese popular discourse. On a recent trip to Japan, I was stunned by the critical views on U.S. policies that I heard in conversations with friends and on television talk shows. While Japan is seldom a subject of discussion on U.S. news programs, there are, on any given day, dozens of commentators on Japanese TV talking about all sorts of American ills. One media industry insider told me that people who are perceived as pro-American don't get invited to appear on the talk shows these days.

But the main cause of the current round of America-bashing in Japan is no doubt the Bush administration's opening to North Korea. When Washington dropped its policy of no negotiations with Pyongyang and began actively seeking a deal on nuclear weapons development last fall, the Japanese collectively went ballistic. Many feared that if the United States struck a deal without addressing the issue of the 17 Japanese citizens kidnapped by North Korean agents in the '70s and '80s, most of them never to be seen or heard, Pyongyang would never give a credible account of what happened to them, or how many more they had abducted. Japanese bloggers called for the dismissal of Christopher Hill, the U.S. negotiator with North Korea; some of them even refer to him derisively as "Chris Jong-hill."

Tokyo successfully sold the Japanese public on its decision to send Maritime Self Defense Force (MSDF) ships to the Indian Ocean in support of the U.S. war in Afghanistan and ground troops to Iraq by implying that those actions were vital to retaining U.S. protection from North Korea's increasingly capable missiles. So a Japanese sense of having been betrayed by Washington may be understandable. But it is disturbing that no senior politician, journalist, or scholar in Japan has had the courage to tell the public that it is in the country's interest to go along with the Six-Party Talks to put a halt to Pyongyang's nuclear program and integrate North Korea into the community of nations – and that a "solution" to the abduction problem can be found only in that context. During my recent sojourn in Japan, I found out why; it's such an emotional issue for the Japanese that it's impossible to have a rational discussion. At meetings with old friends and dinners with my relatives, I was accused of being an apologist for U.S. policy and naïve about the ruthless nature of Kim Jong-il.

Two days before the U.S. elections, Japan's public television network, NHK, aired a documentary about how diplomats at the Japanese embassy in Washington were cultivating connections with Asia policy experts advising Obama and McCain and trying to influence their views about Japan. Their aim was to find out what the next U.S. president would expect from Japan, as well as to pre-empt a new administration's anticipated 'demands' for fresh military and financial contributions. They set out to suggest what Japan can offer as an active and essential partner in global affairs, such as economic assistance and help in reducing poverty and greenhouse gas emissions. Only by making these efforts, they believed, could Japan avoid becoming irrelevant to U.S. foreign policy in an Asia increasingly dominated by China.

The program was an unusually candid exposé of diplomatic activities in a foreign land, but perhaps more surprising was the reaction from viewers. NHK received numerous comments, the overwhelming majority critical of both the diplomats' actions and their objectives. Typical questions, the program's producer said, included "Why do we have to cuddle up to Washington so much?" and "Why can't we just be happy with ourselves and stop caring about what the U.S. thinks of us?"

For much of the last eight years while President Bush and former Japanese Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro portrayed themselves as best friends, U.S. and Japanese government officials liked to say that the bilateral ties had never been better. But in reality, perception gaps were widening beneath the smiles and handshakes, with few serious discussions to reconcile their differences.

So while the rest of the world may be cheering for the Obama presidency, Japan is definitely ambivalent about yet another "change" in Washington. To be sure, Japanese leaders will do all they can to get along with the new Democratic president and Congress, but they will face an increasingly introverted public at home, whose opinions on America are about as high as President Bush's approval ratings.

Despite the growing Japanese skepticism about America, one thing that's going well for what former U.S. Ambassador to Japan Mike Mansfield famously called "the most important bilateral relationship, bar none," is that unlike the trade war days, no one in responsible positions in Tokyo or Washington thinks there is any alternative to the nearly 60-year-old alliance to protect their interests in East Asia – especially with the erratic behavior of North Korea and a growing shadow of China.

For more on President-elect Obama's pre-election views on U.S.-Japan relations and Asia policy more broadly, please see PacNet *No. 56, "Candidates' Views on Asia" [www.pacforum.org].*

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