



“Yes, We Can, Japan – Yes, We Can” by Sheila A. Smith

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For many citizens around the globe, the decision Americans made Nov. 4, 2008 was as important as their own leadership choices. So today, we find the tremendous expectations of President-elect Barack Obama are not just American expectations. They are German, Kenyan, and yes, even Japanese expectations.

Recently, journalist Ayako Doi suggested (in PacNet #61) that Japanese were not very enthusiastic about Obama, causing many here to wonder about Japan’s cool reaction to our next president.

I have a different impression. My sense was that there is just as much popular excitement with America’s 44th president-elect in Japan as elsewhere. Visions of Obama City residents dancing the hula brought smiles to the faces of many Japan hands.

But more mixed is the elite discourse over what a new U.S. administration means for the U.S.-Japan alliance. When Obama won the Democratic Party’s nomination, interest in him intensified, and many Japanese asked: does Sen. Obama know Japan/Asia? Does he understand the importance of the U.S.-Japan alliance? Who will be the point person on Japan policy in an Obama administration?

Most of us also began to hear a more pointed subtext: “oh, no – a Democrat might win the White House?” The assumption was that a Democrat would inevitably realize Japan’s nightmares: the U.S. would embrace China as its preeminent partner in Asia (what the Japanese refer to as “Japan passing”) and would turn away from free trade and toward protectionism (we all remember the era of “Japan bashing”).

We have had some difficult moments in our half-century relationship with Japan. Republicans and Democrats alike have had to adapt to Cold War crises and broader strategic shifts, including the rise of Japanese economic power. Both have also tried to manage our trade conflicts, and to coordinate our macroeconomic policy adjustments.

But it is this bipartisan experience with, and commitment to, the U.S.-Japan alliance that has produced the strong partnership we have today.

Democrats have amply proven their capacity to be good stewards of the U.S.-Japan alliance. Amb. Mike Mansfield’s sponsorship of the “most important bilateral relationship bar none” and the highly successful Clinton administration’s attention to correcting the disarray in the alliance after the end

of the Cold War easily come to mind. So too does Secretary of Defense William Perry’s deft handling of the U.S. base problems in Okinawa, and his subsequent coordination with Tokyo and Seoul to cope with the North Korean nuclear gambit.

And I should not have to remind many in the Asia policy community that the Armitage-Nye report was just that – a bipartisan effort to devise a blueprint for the alliance. It was designed so that either a Republican or Democratic administration could preside over the implementation of its recommendations.

There is abundant evidence that a future Obama administration will care deeply about Japan. Our president-elect is convinced that the common interests and shared values of the American and Japanese people make this one of America’s strongest partnerships. And he believes “our alliance is fundamental to a peaceful and prosperous Asia-Pacific region.” President-elect Obama has sought counsel from two of the Democratic Party’s elder statesmen with strong knowledge of, and affection for, Japan – former U.S. Ambassadors to Japan Thomas Foley and Walter Mondale, who co-chaired his Japan advisory team.

Finally, on an issue of paramount importance to Japan, Obama has already made it quite clear that he expects North Korea to “resolve all questions about the abduction of Japanese and South Korean citizens,” and I expect his administration will continue to use, in his words “all diplomatic and economic leverage to press North Korea to cooperate fully with Tokyo, Seoul, and Washington on these matters.”

Obama’s temperament and decision-making style will likely endear him most to the Japanese people. He is pragmatic rather than dogmatic. He focuses on problem-solving, and on building consensus and coalitions. His style is to find the best mix of ideas and practices, and then the best people to implement them. I expect that this will carry through his foreign policy team selections, including those who will work on Asia and on U.S.-Japan relations.

The agenda for the next administration in its Asia policy is fairly clear. Our core interest in an effective deterrent capability for the alliance will be reaffirmed. We will have the opportunity to talk with the Japanese government on our planning priorities in the context of the nuclear force posture review and in our long-term strategic planning for the Asia-Pacific region.

I expect that there will be a policy review of the six-party process, and close consultations with Tokyo and Seoul as to how best to proceed. Pyongyang has failed to agree to a reliable verification process for its nuclear weapons programs.

That will be of as much concern to the Obama administration as it is to Tokyo.

There are other relationships that deserve our attention, and a full agenda for regional diplomacy. A fuller conversation with our allies and friends on the future of Northeast Asia itself should be expected, and this will bring greater focus on the form and function of U.S. engagement with East Asian and Northeast Asian regionalism.

The aspirations of many in Northeast Asia for greater attention to regional institutions and a shared vision for the region's peace and prosperity deserve our attention. I anticipate renewed interest in regional institutions will be part of an Obama administration's agenda in Asia. In no way will such interest diminish the centrality of the U.S.-Japan alliance in U.S. calculations of its interests in the Asia-Pacific region.

Yet, I do not expect that the Obama administration will move quickly or unthinkingly with regard to multilateralism. The agenda before us will most likely suggest that Washington may best start by exploring a trilateral dialogue with Japan and China. Broad functional issues such as climate change and energy security, as well as the various impacts of the financial meltdown, would be an obvious agenda for these three countries. So too would "softer" issues such as food security and disaster relief. We shall be watching the progress of the Japan, China, and South Korean meeting in Fukuoka for insights into our own diplomatic priorities for broadening our regional engagement.

The Obama administration will want to look forward with Japan and will be paying close attention to events within Japan. Japan's own elections are the starting point to working out an effective alliance management relationship. Until the Lower House elections are behind us, it will be difficult for the U.S. to understand Japan's own priorities and policy course.

Japan's nervousness about the next U.S. administration is natural – the upheaval and uncertainty associated with a transition in U.S. government is lamentable, even for Americans.

Yet we have a choice here, as do our Japanese friends. We can allow short-term anxiety to undermine long-term interests. We can – if we are not careful – become committed to this fretting about our relationship. Or, we can make the commitment to strengthening our partnership and developing our agenda for cooperation.

We can and should see our relationship as a problem-solving partnership and the current challenges as opportunities to demonstrate how effectively we can work alongside each other on shared global and regional challenges.

At a time when the U.S. faces incredible hurdles, the Obama administration will need all of the help it can get from America's friends abroad.

We need our Japanese friends to consider concrete ideas and actions they might offer at this moment of significant global transformation. The events in Mumbai last month amply demonstrate that our people's security cannot be protected solely by old patterns of cooperation.

We need to craft a policy agenda that takes into account the realities of Northeast Asia, of the Middle East, and the new policy challenges presented by climate change and an intense global competition for energy. We absolutely must have Japan's expertise, as well as its resources, to stabilize the global financial system.

Most of all, we need a Japan that still believes in the possibilities of this partnership. Americans – of all political persuasions – believe firmly in the value of the U.S.-Japan alliance partnership.

On Jan. 20, 2009, Obama and his new foreign policy team would be greatly fortified to find one of America's closest allies offering ideas and energy, and most importantly, asking "how can we help?" Better yet would be to say "here is how we can help," followed by a list of actions Tokyo is prepared to take if asked.