

## **With Clinton in Japan, a Chance to Show the Alliance's Strength**

by Abraham M. Denmark & Daniel Kliman

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Secretary of State Hilary Clinton's trip through Tokyo comes at an auspicious moment in the US-Japan alliance. Hope remains that an agreement on basing is within reach, though it is clear that Okinawan officials remain opposed to any continued US military presence in the prefecture. At best, the alliance will probably be left with an agreement largely similar to that finalized in 2006 – one that is acceptable to Washington and Tokyo, but cannot be implemented due to local-level opposition. The festering disagreement about basing, and disappointment about the behavior of both sides, has left several analysts wondering if the alliance is in drift or, worse, in decline.

These concerns are overblown. The basing issue, while important, is not the foundation of the alliance. Mutual democratic values, shared interests in regional stability and prosperity, and close personal bonds are the alliance's bedrock, and these have not changed.

The strategic environment in the Asia-Pacific region is evolving too quickly for the US and Japan to focus on basing alone. The challenges we face today call for a robust and enduring alliance that can adjust to evolving regional and global challenges and overcome specific issues of disagreement. While it may not appear so at first glance, Secretary Clinton's visit represents a historic opportunity for the US and Japan to move beyond disagreements on basing and demonstrate the enduring strength of the alliance by pursuing a broad agenda for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Secretary Clinton's visit to Tokyo, and the agenda she will pursue, is a testament to the resilience and enduring importance of the alliance. While she will address the basing issue, issues of substance will consume most of the visit. The United States and Japan must discuss a common approach toward Iran, and a coordinated engagement of China. Most pressingly, both sides will seek to solidify a unified reaction to the recently concluded investigation of the sinking of the South Korean cruiser *Cheonan*, which clearly lays the blame for the death of 46 sailors at Pyongyang's doorstep. The breadth and depth of the issues we face is a clear sign that, despite disagreements on basing, the alliance remains strong.

Mutual regional and global interests will also help ensure the alliance remains strong. Both the United States and Japan have a significant stake in ensuring the stability and openness

of the world's commons spaces (the high seas, air, space, and cyberspace), and the alliance will be an essential element of both country's efforts. The alliance also has an important role to play in addressing global natural security challenges, such as resource scarcity and climate change. Past experience has also demonstrated that the alliance can be effective in bringing stability to failed and failing states, which will likely be a major challenge in the coming years and decades.

Yet Washington and Tokyo must keep in mind that mutual interests, in themselves, are insufficient to maintain the alliance's utility. Officials from the Obama administration have shown an untiring will to travel to Tokyo and engage their Japanese counterparts, despite disagreements and disappointments on basing. While some officials in Tokyo have shown an equal will to visit Washington and engage their US counterparts, enthusiasm is not uniform. Hopefully, Secretary Clinton's visit and a renewed declaration of the alliance's enduring strength will help catalyze a greater sense of enthusiasm for the alliance in Tokyo.

Washington can also do more to strengthen the foundations of the alliance, primarily via direct engagement of the people of Okinawa. It is time for the United States to revive long-dormant efforts to revitalize Okinawa's economy with foreign investment, educational aid and exchanges, and infrastructure improvements. Okinawa is Japan's poorest prefecture, and its resentment of its disproportional basing burden should not be a surprise. Further, a major public diplomacy effort in Okinawa – one that explains the purpose of US bases, listens to local concerns, and can be effective in addressing them – is in order. With a more robust and forthright engagement of Okinawa, the US can begin to address some of the local challenges that has made a basing agreement so difficult to conclude.

Much work remains to be done, and disagreements persist. But with Secretary Clinton's visit, Washington and Tokyo have a historic opportunity to move beyond the disagreements and disappointments of the past nine months, and demonstrate that the US-Japan alliance remains strong and is ready to face the complex challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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