



Time for Leadership for the US-Japan Relationship

by Sheila A. Smith

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In their first meeting in late June, President Barack Obama and Prime Minister Kan Naoto set a positive tone for the US-Japan alliance. Coming off a difficult interlude in the bilateral relationship, there was reason to be reassured as to the commitment of our two countries' leaders to working together. Since then, Japan's Upper House election has raised questions about Kan's staying power and produced some desultory commentary on the prospects for alliance policymaking.

The intensely fluctuating sentiments regarding politics in Tokyo raise questions about how to sustain US-Japan alliance cooperation. Politically, we are in new territory; we are not in uncharted territory when thinking of how to find common ground for the US-Japan alliance agenda.

The foundation of this relationship remains our core strategic bargain: a relationship of security cooperation that dates over half a century, cooperation that reassures our publics and grounds our diplomacy in Asia. Nowhere in Japan do we hear calls for ending that relationship. Likewise, nowhere in Washington today do I hear calls for abandoning Japan as an ally. Our governments work together every day on issues where reaching out to find ideas and expertise has become second nature.

What is really at stake is whether we can reassure Japanese and Americans alike that we can continue to work together effectively. Many focus on the disarray in Japanese politics, but this process of change has been with us for some time. But we should not wait for Japan's politics to "stabilize." Rather we should be talking about how to work on alliance issues with a Japan that is governed in coalition (a reality that we have faced since the LDP split in 1993), or with a Japanese ruling party that seeks to advance policy via legislative alliances much like those built regularly in the US Congress or in other parliamentary democracies. Effective management of this relationship cannot rely on the old playbook as Japan's policy making processes change. We should be seeking out new opportunities to reach across Japan's political spectrum, and to deepen our understanding and familiarity with rising leaders of Japan's ruling and opposition parties.

Japan's political leaders – of all persuasions – must also learn how to play well together when it comes to alliance issues. We should remember that some of the broader alliance initiatives in the post-Cold War era have coincided with shifting political alignments, and the building of a viable second political party in Japan. The task is developing a

consensus on core strategic interests represented in this alliance, and devising a set of priority positions that will guide policy over the short- and medium-term.

Thus, in Washington and in Tokyo, the goal is adapting this relationship so that it can address contemporary and future challenges. As much as we may like to have this tidied up by the summit in November, we must not under-estimate the substantive challenges that we face.

Several levels of activity are in order.

First, and perhaps most difficult at the moment, is to build a common agenda for cooperation that can produce *visible results* over the next three to five years. Globally, Japan and the United States share an interest in contending with climate change and exploring mechanisms for energy conservation as well as developing alternative sources of energy supply. Additionally, our two societies depend deeply on the development of stable global rules for commerce and mechanisms for dispute resolution amongst a growing number of globally competitive economies. National economic growth will depend on US-Japan leadership in the global effort to stabilize the economy and in our respective efforts to restore fiscal responsibility in the years ahead. The trick will be to find a good match of priorities.

The true security challenges lie within Northeast Asia, and here our priorities ought to be clear. Japan and the US must contend head on with the potential for instability on the Korean Peninsula, and must continue to work closely with the South Korean government in the global effort to condemn Pyongyang's use of force, and to forestall future provocations. The US and Japan must focus on an effective crisis management plan should North Korean provocations increase, or should events within North Korea lead to instability or a collapse of governance.

Important here will be persuading Beijing that its interests in managing instability on the Korean Peninsula, as well as in developing an Asia-Pacific approach to ensuring maritime stability, make regional security cooperation imperative. Diplomatically, Tokyo and Washington can each work through the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), and we can work effectively through bilateral relationships in the region, including our bilateral dialogues with Beijing. The US and Japan ought to be clear with each other on the issues that concern us most deeply, and devise a plan as to how to communicate this most effectively to Beijing. Moreover, we ought to coordinate our respective positions on what types of mechanisms might be developed regionwide to ensure that maritime traffic remains unrestricted, and what sort of rules of the road will be needed as China's maritime capabilities increase.

Second, we must create greater opportunity to integrate our strategic planning processes. We would be remiss if we did not develop a US-Japan game plan for coping with “what ifs” in Northeast Asia. The US and Japan must start with a careful review of how to communicate effectively and quickly in the face of future North Korean provocations, and thus build on our militaries’ experiences to cope with nuclear and missile tests as well as the *Cheonan* sinking. Close coordination with Seoul is essential. Likewise, we ought to make sure that we understand each other’s perspectives on the Chinese role in maritime Asia, and to have a clear sense of how our interests diverge as well as overlap. This will help us get a better sense of how to develop a broader regional approach to working with China on developing stable maritime relations in Asia.

This should help inform areas where our strategic planning goals need to be better articulated. The US strategic review, represented by the Quadriennial Defense Review and the Nuclear Posture Review and to be completed with a Global Force Posture Review later this year, outlines our national priorities for the next four years at least. Japan will be completing its National Defense Program Guidelines by the end of this year, and crafting a new defense planning vision that will inform budgets for the next five years. Over the next several months, therefore, the US and Japanese planning communities ought to have focused conversations on what this means for the overall aims for an alliance force posture.

Third, decision making on Futenma relocation is reaching a crucial moment as the Okinawa gubernatorial election approaches. Japan’s government will need to make its own way forward on this, but the US government also has choices that it has resisted thus far. It is time to end the corrosive effect this haggling over Futenma has had on our alliance. Fourteen years ago, predecessors of President Obama and Prime Minister Kan made a promise to the people of Okinawa to close Futenma; 10 prime ministers and three presidents later that promise remains unfulfilled. Our publics are increasingly frustrated with a lack of resolution, and until Futenma is closed, the alliance risks being held hostage to the inequity of concentrating so many US military bases on Okinawa.

Our two governments have worked for years on a plan that will decrease the number of US Marines on Okinawa and close bases in the central region. Building a new runway in Henoko remains central to that conception. Modifications made in that agreement in late May attempt to go further toward answering some of the concerns raised by the Okinawa governor. But it is also true that the political mood in Okinawa makes the fate of this agreement uncertain as a result of the Hatoyama Cabinet’s unsuccessful efforts to reconsider the plan. Moreover, unsavory aspects of the deal making have been publicized by now disgraced bureaucrats, further poisoning efforts to rebuild trust between the central government and political leaders in Okinawa.

Instead of viewing the November election with concern, it as an opportunity to put an end to this crippling influence on our bilateral relationship. Let the gubernatorial election be a referendum on the base relocation plan. If the current plan is rejected by the people of Okinawa in November, then we should accept that as their final answer. No extraordinary legal actions to try to force the issue should be pursued, and no

behind the scenes “deals” should be brokered that will ultimately incur the wrath of those who ought to have a voice in the outcome. If on the other hand the people of Okinawa accept the current plan to move 8,000 Marines and their families to Guam and to construct a new runway within Camp Schwab, then that plan ought to be implemented immediately and within the 2014 deadline. No matter what the outcome, the US and Japanese governments should be ready to invest fully in the economic and social well-being of Okinawa society, and encourage joint US-Japan initiatives that recognize the impact of hosting the bulk of the US military in Japan for over half a century.

Finally, we have an opportunity in November to restore confidence in our relationship with Japan. While some aspects of this alliance require scrutiny and adaptation, our task is greater than simply compiling a “to do” list for our militaries.

We need a brave and forward-looking vision that speaks to the needs of our two societies in a rapidly changing world. This vision must speak to the concerns the Japanese public have about the future of their country and to their nervousness about political change. The US-Japan alliance can and should be reviewed, but the alliance will not suffer because Japanese voters opt for set of politics. The US-Japan relationship – broadly conceived – should be seen as a source of constancy and purpose at a time of political upheaval in Japan.

This vision should come from our two highest elected political leaders. In November, President Obama should spend his time in Japan out and about with the Japanese people – in town hall meetings, in TV or radio discussions, and yes, even in visits to historically significant sites that many worry are too politically contentious. The Japanese people should hear from our president first-hand that he believes in the resilience and in the promise of our bilateral partnership.

In the months between now and November, Japan’s prime minister should convey his commitment to transform our partnership into a vehicle for peace and prosperity in Asia, and to working with Washington on the region’s most delicate security challenges. He should come to Washington as soon as his party’s leadership election is complete, and he should work forcefully within Japan to forge the much-needed political energy and cross-party consensus on the issues that should populate a US-Japan alliance policy review.

Together, the US president and the Japanese prime minister should also remind their publics that we can resolve our differences with respect and with conviction, and if necessary – correct our mistakes. But most importantly, their goal should be to demonstrate the value of this relationship to the next generation of Japanese and Americans.