



## Cracks in the U.S.-Japan Alliance by Peter Ennis

Reports of impending U.S. protectionism against Japan may be exaggerated, but all is not well between Washington and Tokyo. Indeed, the economic crisis in East Asia has exposed some significant fault lines in the U.S.-Japan alliance.

Just two years ago, Bill Clinton and Ryutaro Hashimoto met in Tokyo to reaffirm the U.S.-Japan security relationship, and officials from both governments made a commitment to align the strategic policies of the two countries.

It turned out that the first major problem to develop in Asia was economic, not military, and cooperation between Washington and Tokyo has been less than smooth.

American officials are convinced that the economic crisis in East Asia amounts to a major strategic problem, with potentially far-reaching consequences for stability in the region. They are equally convinced that Japan does not understand this. "The Asian currency crisis has rendered Japan's economic policies over the next year a fundamental test of the depth of the U.S.-Japan strategic partnership, and no one in Japan seems to get it," says Michael Green, a close advisor to the Pentagon on Japan issues. "The Old Guard in the LDP simply cannot fathom the larger strategic challenge at hand."

Washington is pressuring Tokyo to boost its domestic economy not so much to help U.S. exports to Japan -- though that is important. The bigger consideration is to get Japan to act as an 'importer of last resort' -- a recipient of products from East Asian nations so that they can stabilize their economies.

Japanese officials point out that Tokyo has provided more financial assistance to East Asia since the crisis began than any other country. U.S. officials say this amounts to more 'check-book diplomacy' rather than genuine strategic action.

As a result, many American opinion leaders who usually defend Japan are today sharply critical.

The frustration with Tokyo has exacerbated a recent tendency in the Clinton Administration to tilt toward China in dealings with East Asia. White House and State Department officials argue that the U.S. has spent sufficient time upgrading security ties with Japan, and that priority should now be placed on cultivating a strategic relationship with Beijing. Those officials who argue that Japan should remain the cornerstone of U.S. policy in East Asia are having a hard time being heard.

President Clinton has moved up to June his planned visit to Beijing. His aides have backed away from their tough stance on human rights in China, and are pointedly praising Beijing for acting responsibly during the regional economic crisis.

Clinton almost surely will not stop in Tokyo either before or after his Beijing visit. This is not intended as a deliberate snub of Tokyo. But the White House is not particularly concerned that Japanese officials might see it that way. Clinton's Beijing trip will come just weeks before the July Upper House elections in Japan, and the administration is in no mood to help Hashimoto and the LDP with a stopover in Japan. Moreover, given the intense disagreement between the two governments, it is not even clear what the public message from the two leaders would be if they were to get together.

There is nothing wrong with cultivating better relations between the U.S. and China. But the Clinton Administration seems to have forgotten that America's strategic ally in East Asia is Japan, not China. Unfortunately, Japanese leaders have made it all too easy for the Americans to forget.

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