

## Barack Obama and US-Japan Relations: A Japanese Perspective

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The world is faced with significant changes. Richard Haass, President of the Council on Foreign Relations, argues that international system is now moving from unipolarity to nonpolarity.<sup>1</sup> Also, Fareed Zakaria of *Newsweek* asserts that we are now living in the post-American world, based on the rise of the rest.<sup>2</sup> Both of them point out relative decline of American power. Robert Altman joins them by calling it a “geopolitical setback.”<sup>3</sup> Or, Tanaka Akihiko, University of Tokyo professor, calls a period from the end of the Cold War in 1989 to the current economic crisis in 2009 a “new twenty-year’s crisis.”<sup>4</sup>

Barack Obama’s victory in the US Presidential election in 2008 represented these changes in international politics. And, it was widely and warmly welcomed by the international community. Japan was no exception.

Some of Japanese commentators and decision-makers have some concerns, however, that a Democratic administration may be protectionist and pro-China. As a matter of fact, while Mike Mansfield, former U.S. Ambassador to Tokyo, once called the U.S.-Japan relationship was most important bilateral relationship in the world, during her campaign, Hilary Clinton, former Democratic Presidential candidate and next Secretary of State, clearly said that Sino-U.S. relationship was the most important one, which is probably true.

Yomiuri Shimbun, the largest and centralist newspaper in Japan, for example, noted in its editorial on November 6th that there was a concern of rising protectionism in the United States and that Mr. Obama in person had

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<sup>1</sup> Richard N. Haass, “The Age of Nonpolarity: What Will Follow U.S. Dominance,” *Foreign Affairs*, January/ February 2009.

<sup>2</sup> Fareed Zakaria, *Post-American World* (NY: W.W.Norton, 2008).

<sup>3</sup> Robert C. Altman, “The Great Clash, 2008, A Geopolitical Setback for the West,” *Foreign Affairs*, January/ February 2009.

<sup>4</sup> Tanaka Akihiko, *Post Curaisisu no Sekai* [Post-Crisis World] (Tokyo: Nihon Keizai Shimbunsha, 2009).

not yet mentioned the importance of the U.S.-Japan alliance. Similarly, Sankei Shimbun, more conservative one, in the same day's editorial, urged the coming U.S. administration not to fall into the temptation of protectionism.

While these concerns and comments are mainly based on the experiences of the Clinton years and no longer valid, there may be some psychological distance between Japanese policy-elites and-intellectuals and US Democratic administrations. A former Clinton senior official told me that Japan was considered to be a "Red State" for many Democratic foreign policy specialists. Tokyo and Washington should do their best to shorten this psychological distance.

In this sense, the Obama administration has repeatedly emphasized the importance of U.S.-Japan relations. Secretary of State Clinton chose Tokyo as her first visit abroad, and Prime Minister Aso Taro was invited to Obama' White House as the first foreign leader in February in 2009.

In practice, the U.S.-Japan alliance, once called to be the most important bilateral relationship in the world, is faced with various tasks and challenges. Let me point out them from micro- to macro-levels.

First, the U.S. military realignment in Japan seems to delay. In particular, the transformation of Futenma Air base to the offshore of Henoko area is an overdue homework. This mission was agreed upon between the two governments in 1996 during the Clinton years. The implementation has been delayed mainly because of failed coordination between Tokyo and Okinawa. Those who were involved in this agreement in the Clinton administration are now back to the Obama administration, and be more frustrated by this issue. For the United States, policy toward Okinawa has been bipartisan since the Clinton years. In her visit to Tokyo, Secretary Clinton concluded the executive agreement of confirming the relocation of U.S. Marines from Okinawa to Guam.

Second, North Korea is an extremely difficult and sensitive topic for the U.S.-Japan alliance. In October 2008, President George W. Bush, once called North Korea one of the "axis of the evils," lifted economic sanctions to it as a terrorist supporting nation. This decision was also welcomed by Barack Obama. For Japan, North Korea poses three challenges: nuclear weapons, missiles, and abduction issues. While North Korean

development of nuclear weapons is a common concern for Japan and the United States, the abduction issues are very sensitive mainly on Japanese side. If the Obama administration further promotes negotiations with North Korea over the nuclear issues, Japanese may feel that we are going to be abandoned by the United States over the abduction issues. According to the latest Yomiuri-Gallup joint opinion survey in November 2008, while 77 % of American respondents consider the U.S.-Japan alliance to be useful, only 60 % of Japanese respondents say so, decreasing 5 points compared to the last year's survey. Also, while about 40 % of American respondents believe that the U.S.-Japan relations in future will become better, 25.7 % of Japanese respondents do so. One of the major reasons why Japanese are now more pessimistic about the U.S.-Japan alliance than the Americans may be the U.S. policy shift in North Korea.

In April 2009, North Korea repeated provocative missile and nuclear tests. Now, the United States must pay more attention to Asia, in particular, North Korea, and promote further cooperation with Japan as well as South Korea, China, and Russia. The U.S. extended deterrence to Japan and South Korea is essential, and Japan must be cautious enough not to be provoked by North Korea. Japan's going to nuclear will be never a solution for North Korean Challenges.

Although the United States and Japan need more policy coordination over the North Korean issues, Japanese political leadership must make clear what is the definition of resolving the abduction issues and what kinds of resources and strategy we have for achieving the solution. Otherwise, the abduction issues will become another Northern Territories issues, a deadlock under which no one has pragmatic imaginations, strategies, and solutions. I am afraid that the abduction issues may have already reached to the Pareto optimum. Under the current situation, all kinds of sentiments including patriotic, humanitarian, anti-Chinese, anti-American as well as anti-North Korean are satisfied with condemning the abduction issues. As a consequence, in order to maintain this delicate balance, no one really wants a pragmatic solution. If it is true, political leadership must definitely overcome this nightmare.

Third, the Obama administration will more and more focus on Afghanistan, which may be more dangerous than Iraq. While it may consider to dispatch helicopters and transport planes for rehabilitating Afghanistan, due to Constitutional and domestic political constraints, so far, Tokyo cannot send any troops there. Thus, financial assistance is, so far, the only way for Japan to contribute to the peace and security in Afghanistan, which will be frustrated with both the Americans and the Japanese. For, the Japanese may feel to be entrapped into the U.S. global strategy without being appreciated enough when it is going to be abandoned by the United States over the

abduction issues.

Aside from a policy judgment over Afghanistan, however, Tokyo must proactively reexamine Japan's international contributions as a whole. The number of Self-Defense Forces (SDFs) personnel all over the world under the UN Peace-Keeping Operations (PKO) is only about forty. That of Chinese armed forces including engineering forces is more than 10,000. Also, the Chinese government recently announced to dispatch its navy to the Indian Ocean for anti-piracy activities. Even in terms of Official Development Aid (ODA), Japan, who was the top donor in the early 1990s, is just the fifth largest donor country in the world. Unfortunately, Japanese ODA budget is getting tighter. Under these conditions, it is extremely difficult for Japan to obtain a permanent membership in the UN Security Council. Tokyo should not forget that G-8 Summit is going to be expanded to G-20 Summit including China.

As mentioned above, the U.S.-Japan alliance is faced with various difficult challenges. At the same time, however, it has opportunities for strengthening its ties over global issues such as environment, energy, and nuclear disarmament.

In particular, future U.S. initiative in promoting substantial nuclear disarmament among nuclear powers will be more than welcomed by Japan. Such an action will help stabilize the U.S.-Russian strategic relations and East Asian security environment, and increase international legitimacy and pressures for asking Iran and North Korea not to develop nuclear weapons.

As Martin Luther King told in 1963, I have a dream. In September 2008, U.S. Speaker of House Nancy Pelosi visited Hiroshima for attending the G-8 Speakers of House meeting. Why not President Obama next? If he delivers an eloquent policy speech as usual for promoting nuclear disarmament in Hiroshima, it would certainly provide great moral power to American diplomacy and strengthen the U.S.-Japan relations further.

On April 5<sup>th</sup>, 2009, a day on which North Korea launched a long-range missile over the Japanese Islands, in Prague, President Obama announced his willingness of achieving a "Nuclear Free World." While the way to the "Nuclear Free World" is far away, and we still need the U.S. extended deterrence to its non-nuclear allies and friends, the U.S. and Japanese views on nuclear disarmament are now going to more and more congruent. Further, Chinese cooperation for promoting nuclear disarmament is essentially important.

So, we have various opportunities as well as challenges for our future relations. The fundamental problem lies in fragile Japanese domestic politics, however. "Yes, we can" – Can we really say so for changing Japanese politics? That is the problem.