

# The United States and Japan in a Turbulent Asia

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Let me begin with some overall comments on the US-Japan alliance and Japan's security policy and follow that with some of my concerns about the impact on East Asia's geopolitics of the US presidential campaign, developments in North Korea, and China's economy and foreign security policy.

In thinking about the future of the US and Japan in Asia it is helpful at the outset to remind ourselves about something we all know: that the US-Japan alliance was forged in the crucible of the cold war as part of a global US containment strategy against the Soviet Union, and that that is no longer the world we live in. The stability of a bipolar world order in which American economic, military, political, and soft power reined supreme is becoming a distant memory. The US remains the most powerful country in East Asia and globally and it will continue to be so for years to come. But it no longer is the dominant economic power in Asia and it no longer enjoys a position of unchallengeable supremacy; China does not have to match American military power to make the cost of using that power very high, and that cost will continue to increase as China's military power grows stronger.

Bipolarity offered countries clarity about the strategic choices they faced in positioning themselves in the world system; they could calculate the costs and benefits of one against another. East Asia now is evolving a multipolar system that is inherently unstable, one in which policy options are less clearcut, and where every country worries about its security and is trying to craft a strategy to provide for it.

Japan is no exception. Prime Minister Abe has been a forceful leader in pushing for a strengthening of the Japanese military's roles, missions, and capabilities. But the driving force behind change in Japan's security policy is not Prime Minister Abe. It is the structural changes that have occurred in the international system. If the Prime Minister were to leave office tomorrow there would not be fundamental change in Japan's security policy. It is hard to believe that the DPJ is serious about repealing the national security legislation passed by the Diet last summer and reversing the cabinet decision to reinterpret Article nine with regard to collective defense. That would create a crisis in Japan's relations with the United States and it would be an invitation to China to increase its pressure on Japan over the Senkaku islands and other issues.

The end of bipolarity, the rise of China, and the complex and fluid power balance that is emerging in East Asia are changing the dynamics of the US Japan alliance in important ways. Just think back to what Japanese concerns about the alliance were during the Cold War. The Japanese worry was not that the US might not come to its defense if threatened by the Soviet Union or Soviet bloc countries China and North Korea. Japanese could be and were confident that a Soviet threat against their country would be perceived in Washington as a threat against the United States. What Japanese did worry about was the danger of getting drawn into a conflict that they wanted no part of. And it was not only the left, let us not forget, that feared entanglement. The LDP adopted a large number of self imposed constraints on the government's security policy to reduce precisely that danger -- the ban on collective defense and on the export of weapons and weapons technology, the one percent ceiling on defense spending, the prohibition of acquisition of offensive weaponry, and a doctrine of minimal homeland defense.

Now the entanglement - abandonment dynamic is very different. During the Cold War the US complained about Japan's free ride but lived with it. Japan now cannot have quite the same

degree of confidence that the US will necessarily come to its defense regardless of the level of Japan's contribution to the alliance. The reinterpretation of the Constitution to allow for limited collective defense and the new defense guidelines are realistic, limited efforts by Japan to sustain the security alliance.

Moreover, and importantly, it is not only Japan that now worries about the danger of entanglement. The US has entanglement concerns of its own. The US government's public expression of disappointment about Prime Minister Abe's visit to the Yasukuni Shrine in December 2013, unlike the criticisms that came from China and South Korea, was not about his paying respects at a shrine that honors war criminals; it was disappointment that Abe took an action that increased tensions in East Asia. The American concern was that in doing so he complicated US relations with China and also with Korea and threatened to ensnare the United States in a conflict between Japan and China.

The US-Japan alliance is as important as it has ever been but its management needs to be brought into better sync with the new realities of the power dynamics in the East Asian international system. There needs to be more power sharing with allies as well as more burden sharing. And there needs to be a better appreciation of the political crosscurrents that impact on US relations with countries in the region. The US pivot to Asia is not a strategy that does that. The pivot or rebalancing is not about adjusting to the new realities of the East Asian international environment. It reflects a belief that if the US devotes sufficient attention and resources to East Asia it can reassert its predominance in the region as it used to exercise it. But wishing to restore a system that brought stability for so long is not going to make it happen. East Asia has irrevocably changed.

The Abe Administration's national security strategy is a response to Japan's changed security environment that builds upon and accelerates policy trends that have been evolving over the past half century and especially since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. It is a three prong strategy that is well described in the 2014 national defense program outline. One prong is for Japan to do more for itself; the second is to do more to strengthen the alliance with the United States; and the third is to develop security relationships with other countries in the region and elsewhere. Like any good strategy it is simple in conception and complex and multifaceted in implementation.

The next US President, whoever she or he may be, needs to recognize that alliance with Japan, the anchor for American policy in East Asia, requires sustained attention from the topmost levels of government. But whether the next President will be able to provide the foreign policy leadership the world needs is questionable given the political situation in the United States.

The presidential election campaign is a depressing spectacle. The only candidates the Democrats could come up with are a former President's wife who has been in public life for decades and who lost the nomination for President eight years ago, and a self styled 74 year old Democratic Socialist whose campaign is an Alice in wonderland call for a political revolution to remedy economic inequality. I have little doubt that Hillary Clinton will win the nomination, but that Bernie Sanders has garnered as much support as he has is a sign of public dissatisfaction with establishment politics, a reflection of Clinton's lack of appeal among large numbers of Democratic voters, and an indicator of her vulnerability in the general election.

The Republican contest for the nomination for President is being dominated by a blowhard real estate tycoon and demagogue who seeks voters' support by playing upon people's fears and frustrations and by broadcasting a message of intolerance and bigotry. Donald Trump and many of the other Republicans who hoped to become their party's presidential candidate have launched verbal attacks on President Obama that have gone beyond the bounds of civility, and attacks on each other that exceeded the bounds of common decency. Their stance on health care reform, immigration, abortion, gun control and other issues, so diametrically opposed to the positions advocated by Hillary Clinton, Bernie Sanders, and the Democratic Party show how deeply divided our country has become not only on important policy issues but on basic values.

All of the candidates are engaged in a dumbing down of the foreign policy debate, thumping their chests about how they would strengthen what is already by far the strongest military in the world, turning their back on the TPP and free trade (including Hillary Clinton who supported the

TPP when she was Secretary of State), and in the case of Trump at least throwing Japan into the same basket with China as a currency manipulator and unfair trading partner.

Some minor comfort can be taken in knowing that the American system of choosing candidates through party caucuses and primaries exaggerates the extent of political polarization. To win these nomination contests, candidates emphasize the issues that matter to party activists rather than to the country as a whole. And the media, more interested in stoking excitement and controversy than in dispassionate analysis, plays right into their hands. Once the nomination process is completed, the candidates chosen and the general election campaign begins, we will see the candidates move more to the center as they try to capture the support of independents and dissatisfied voters in the other party's camp.

The chances are better than not that the party that wins the presidency will not win a majority in both houses of the Congress; the US in all likelihood will continue to have divided government. That is not all bad since the Congress can then act as a brake on the President's powers. But it is sad to reflect that optimism that the next Administration will not do something crazy depends on the expectation of divided government and political paralysis. There is a strong possibility that given the political environment in the US that the TPP will not be approved by Congress. All the presidential hopefuls have come out against it. What will a failure to approve TPP do to the world's already shaken confidence in US global leadership? The question answers itself.

I don't mean to paint too dark a picture, though admittedly it is difficult to see much light in it. In the end the President will rule from the center right or from the center left and will have to compromise with a fractious Congress. But the question is whether, with the sharp political divisions and the political dysfunction in Washington, the next President will be able to provide the foreign policy leadership that is so sorely needed. There is a view popular in some Japanese circles that if only an allegedly weak Obama is replaced with a stronger leader that the US then will reassert its previous position of predominance. This is not realistic. What the US needs is a leader who takes seriously the need for a new strategic vision for building a stable world order, one who believes that military power is a deterrent to be used when diplomacy has failed and not as a primary instrument of foreign policy, and who is honest enough to tell the American people that America cannot have a strong foreign policy if it is not strong domestically, that building new roads and bridges and other infrastructure and investing in education are more important to the national defense than another expensive weapons system.

Let me move on to say a few words about North Korea.

There are situations in international relations as there are in life in which there are no good options, in which nothing works. That is the history of efforts to get North Korea to abandon nuclear weapons and its program to develop missiles to carry them.

Inducements to get the North to give up nuclear weapons have been unavailing and have provided the DPRK regime with funds to invest in its WMD programs. Sanctions have not worked either because they have been undercut by the Chinese government's preference to keep an odious and dangerous regime in place rather than deal with the possibility of regime collapse, chaos and unification under a Korean government that has a military alliance with the United States.

The Obama Administration's policy of "strategic patience" is in a sense recognition of this reality. But there is nothing strategic about it and is better described as a posture of disregard rather than patience. Nonstrategic disregard is neither a policy nor a strategy.

So what to do about North Korea? I see no alternative to a stringent containment policy and sanctions that focus on stemming the flow of money to the Kim regime. President Park in her February 17 speech to the National Assembly and her decision to close the Kaesong industrial complex put the final nail in the coffin of the sunshine policy. That combined with unilateral US and Japan sanctions, the initiation of US-South Korean consultations to deploy the THAAD anti-missile defense system, and the improvement of Japan-ROK relations thanks to the December agreement on resolving the comfort women controversy will create a much direr situation for North Korea than it has faced heretofore. The approach being adopted by the US, Korea, and Japan is dangerous because North Korea's response is unpredictable and may be very

provocative. But doing less than this would be more risky inasmuch as it would only give North Korea the encouragement and the resources to further develop its nuclear weapons and delivery systems capabilities.

The route to finding a way to bring about change in the policies of the North Korean regime goes through Beijing, as it always has. China has good reason to be concerned about the US, Japanese and South Korean response to North Korea's latest provocation. Deployment in South Korea of the THAAD anti-ballistic missile system would mean that its sophisticated high altitude radar would provide coverage not only over North Korea but over China as well. A tougher sanctions regime is going to increase the cost to China of keeping North Korea on economic life support. And China's reluctance to support tough sanctions hurts his image internationally. So the question is whether the US and South Korea can work with China to change the behavior of the North Korean regime.

There is every reason to try to make diplomacy work but I see no reason for optimism. It strains the imagination to come up with any combination of carrots and sticks that would induce North Korea to give up its nuclear weapons. The recent feeler Pyongyang put out to Washington about initiating discussions looking toward negotiating a formal peace treaty went nowhere because North Korea rejected out of hand the US demand that a goal of the negotiations must be the elimination of North Korea's nuclear program. North Korea insists on being recognized as a nuclear weapons state, something the United States cannot countenance. The Chinese are opposed to North Korea's nuclear weapons program but there is no reason to believe that China would give priority to a policy of forcing North Korea to abandon nuclear weapons over supporting North Korean regime stability

The only long term solution to the North Korean problem is the collapse of the regime and eventual unification under the ROK, though various interim arrangements are conceivable. The US and China should be talking about how to manage a transition when, as will surely happen one day, the North Korean regime falls. In the meantime containment is the only realistic option.

There are two things to worry about with regard to China. One is that it becomes too strong too fast and becomes more aggressive in seeking to project its power in the region. The other is that China becomes too weak too fast, triggers havoc in global markets, uses harsh measures to suppress dissent, and seeks to deflect public anger by becoming more aggressive in seeking to project its power in the region. Either alternative will produce a similar foreign policy outcome though the consequences of weakness are more dangerous than the consequences of strength. A strong China will have the self confidence to prudently evaluate costs and benefits; the actions of a weak China and of a Communist Party leadership concerned about its ability to retain control will be much less predictable.

US strategy in East Asia has to involve a commitment, and have it be perceived by countries in the region as being an unshakable commitment, to maintain a regional balance of power. Given the realities of China's growing capabilities and ambitions, this means balancing against China. But balancing is not containment. The strategic objective of US policy should not be to contain China but to encourage China to assume a larger role in managing and upholding the international system.

The Obama Administration has been inconsistent in its balancing strategy. On the one hand the President when he visited Tokyo in April 2014 reiterated in no uncertain terms American policy that the Senkaku islands are covered by the US-Japan security treaty. In doing so he sent a strong and needed message to China that actions that worsen relations with Japan would have an adverse effect on China's relations with the United States. On the other hand, he hesitated far too long in ordering a freedom of navigation operation near the Zhubi reef in the South China Sea, thereby turning what should have been portrayed as a routine maritime exercise into a high profile political issue.

The Obama Administration's engagement strategy has been confused as well. China, quite naturally enough considering its economic clout and its political weight, is determined to play a leadership role in international affairs. Avoiding the Thucydides trap, that is the danger of conflict arising when a rising power challenges the status quo, requires adjustments not only by the challenger but by the countries being challenged. It is not realistic to urge China to be a

responsible stakeholder in the international system and then not provide space for it to exercise leadership. The knee jerk reaction in Tokyo and Washington to reject membership in the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank was both shortsighted and ill-advised, especially once it became clear that every other country invited to join including America's closest allies in Europe had decided to do so. The Presidency of the World Bank belongs to the United States. The President of the International Monetary Fund is a European usually from France. The President of the Asian Development Bank is Japanese. If the so-called liberal international order is not redefined to make room for China to be a leader in existing important international organizations it will create its own.

Let me make two other observations about China. One is about China - Taiwan relations and Taiwan's relations with Japan. The Chinese reaction to the victory of the DPP and Tsai Ing Wen has been cautious and measured. Tsai for her part has not accepted the 1992 Consensus on there being only one China but she has emphasized her support for the status quo even though she has not said exactly what she means by the status quo.

The US government has made it clear to Tsai that it opposes actions by her government that would raise tensions with the mainland. In Japan however there is a strong pro-Taiwan group that would like to see Japan develop security relations with Taiwan. It would be a grave mistake for Japan to do so. Any moves in that direction would have a strong negative impact on Japan-China relations. It would elicit an unfavorable reaction in Washington as well.

My other comment is about Sino-Japanese relations. That relationship is much better today than it was a year ago. Prime Minister Abe for his part has avoided actions and statements that would heighten tensions. He has not gone back to Yasukuni and his statement on the 70th anniversary of the end of the war expressed considerable sympathy for Chinese who suffered as a result of Japan's wartime actions in China.

The positive turn in the relationship, however, has been mostly due to change in China's approach to dealing with Japan. It tried and failed to drive a wedge between Japan and the United States, only driving the two closer together; it is concerned over the sharp decline in Japanese investment in the Chinese economy and over anti-Chinese sentiment in Japanese public opinion; and it no doubt is well aware that its threatening posture toward Japan only strengthens the Japanese public's support for a stronger defense posture.

But the change in China's approach to Japan is tactical, not strategic. For Japan and for the United States and indeed for all the countries in East Asia managing relations with China and avoiding military conflict is the challenge that is going to dominate international relations in East Asia for decades to come.

We should not underestimate the potential dangers that lie ahead. To find our way to a peaceful future in Asia requires that the United States and Japan work more closely together than ever before. Together we need to welcome China to play a leadership role in the management of international institutions. We need to maintain a balance of power in East Asia and try to do so in a manner that does not result in exacerbating a security dilemma-driven arms race. There is a need for leadership in Washington (and in Japan as well) that understands that it is not weakness or a lack of sufficient will that prevents the United States from reasserting the kind of dominance it had previously. There is a new multipolar system developing in East Asia; there is a need for new strategic thinking to help shape it to secure regional peace and prosperity.