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[Doug Bandow](#)

Senior Fellow at the Cato Institute

Posted: September 2, 2009 08:05 PM

Dealing with the New Japan: Washington Won't Take "No" for an Answer

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A political earthquake hit Tokyo on Sunday. The Democratic Party of Japan ousted the Liberal Democratic Party, which has held power for all but 11 months of the last 54 years.

Exactly how policy will change is uncertain: The DPJ is a fractious coalition, ranging from socialist pacifist to renegade LDP and conservative nationalists. But with a nearly two-thirds majority, the DPJ will be able to stamp its will on domestic and foreign policies alike.

That has Washington nervous. Only slightly less unhappy than the LDP dinosaurs who misruled Japan for so long are U.S. policymakers, who have grown used to Tokyo playing the role of pliant ally, backing American priorities and hosting American bases. Washington long has wanted the Japanese government to do more internationally, but only in support of U.S. objectives.

That era may be over. Presumptive Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama wrote in the *New York Times* last week: "As a result of the failure of the Iraq war and the financial crisis, the era of U.S.-led globalism is coming to an end." Tokyo likely is headed on a more independent course.

Of course, there are significant barriers to any dramatic transformation of Japanese policy. Japan always has been a more consensus-oriented society and popular attitudes towards America remain positive.

Hatoyama moved toward the political center during the campaign, indicating his support for the U.S.-Japanese alliance. The DPJ platform dropped its earlier pledge to "do away with the dependent relationship in which Japan ultimately has no alternative but to act in accordance with U.S. wishes, replacing it with a mature alliance based on independence and equality."

Nevertheless, the DPJ possesses a left-wing absent in the LDP. Indeed, the new government is likely to include representatives of the tiny Socialist Party, a strong critic of the status quo. The DPJ vigorously opposed the ousted government's logistical support for U.S. naval operations in the Indian Ocean. Other likely demands include reducing the military presence on Okinawa, renegotiating the relocation of the Marines' Futenma Airfield to Guam at Japanese expense (nearly \$3 billion), cutting so-called host nation support, and amending the Status of Forces Agreement.

Michael Auslin of the American Enterprise Institute talks of "a fear of dramatic change in the U.S.-Japan alliance" in Washington, a time when "No one knows what will happen next, or even who to talk to for answers."

Some Obama administration officials privately acknowledge that adjustments will be necessary. Others, however, appear to be operating more as throwbacks to the Bush administration during its most unilateralist phase. On Monday the State Department spokesman, Ian Kelly, said that there would be no renegotiation of the Okinawa accord. An unnamed official said that the administration hoped the new government would "moderate" its position.

This might seem like a good negotiating tactic, but it didn't go over well in Tokyo. The *Asahi Shinbun* headlined one article "U.S. on Futenma Revisit: Forget It." Washington might have the law on its side, but the LDP had to use its overwhelming majority to ram the unpopular accord through the Diet. And elections inevitably have consequences.

Unfortunately, publicly telling the new government "up yours" is more likely to infuriate than conciliate both incoming ministers and the public. There are reasons some Japanese want to escape dependence on America. Washington's dismissive response gives them one more reason.

Actually, Americans should be as interested as Japanese in transforming the U.S.-Japan alliance. The current relationship remains trapped in a world that no longer exists. The imperial Japanese navy has been rusting away on the bottom of the Pacific for more than six decades; Douglas MacArthur departed as American regent in Tokyo nearly a half century ago; China buried Maoism with Mao Zedong more than three decades ago; the Cold War ended two decades ago; Japan retains the world's second (or third, based on purchasing power parity) largest economy despite "the lost decade."

Yet Japan remains dependent on America for its security, a minor military player despite having global economic and political interests. There are historic reasons for Tokyo's stunted international role, but it is time for East Asian countries to work together to dispel the remaining ghosts of Japanese imperialism past rather than to expect America to continue acting as the defender of last resort.

Since Japan and Asia have changed, so should America's defense strategy. There should be no more troops based on Japanese soil. No more military units tasked for Japan's defense. No more security guarantee for Japan. The U.S. should adopt a strategy of off-shore balancer, expecting friendly states to defend themselves, while being ready to act if an overwhelming, hegemonic threat eventually arises. China is the most, but still not very, plausible candidate for such a role--and even then not for many years.

Washington's job is not to tell Japan, which devotes about one percent of its GDP, one-fourth the U.S level, to the military, to do more. Washington's job is to do less. Tokyo should spend whatever it believes to be necessary on its so-called "Self-Defense Force." Better relations with China would lower that number. So would reform in North Korea. Of course, the former isn't certain while the latter isn't likely: let Japan assess the risks and act accordingly.

In any case, the U.S. should indicate its respect for Japanese democracy and willingness to accommodate itself to Tokyo's changing priorities. Reverse the situation and Americans would expect the Japanese to do likewise.

It's the same strategy that Washington should adopt elsewhere around the globe. The Marine Expeditionary Force stationed on Okinawa is primarily intended to back up America's commitment to South Korea. Yet the South has some 40 times the GDP of North Korea. Seoul should take over responsibility for its own defense. Even more so the Europeans, who possess more than ten times Russia's GDP. If they don't feel at risk, there's no reason for an American defense guarantee. If they do feel at risk, there's no reason for them not to do more--a lot more.

Defending populous and prosperous allies made little sense in good economic times. But with Uncle Sam's current year deficit \$1.6 trillion and another \$10 trillion in red ink likely over the next decade--without counting the impact of any additional financial disasters--current policy is foolish and unsustainable. The U.S. essentially is borrowing money from China to spend defending Japan from China. America does not need to spend roughly as much on the military as the rest of the world combined.

The tremors of Tokyo's political earthquake are being felt in Washington, where officials are rounding the wagons to protect the status quo. But America's alliance with Japan--like most of its defense relationships--is outdated. The Obama administration should take the lead in modernizing a security pact originally designed for a world which disappeared years ago. Both America and Japan would benefit from ending Tokyo's unnatural defense dependence on the U.S.

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Ive advocated for Japan to be free from this status quo alliance.The Japanese have the right to their own military defense force.They have proven to be a stable country and worthy ally.Let them go to pursue their own destiny.Then the heat wont be on us all the time when North Korea rattles its sabres.

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