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Can US-Japanese Ties Change?

By Doug Bandow

The Liberal Democratic Party has ruled Japan for most of the last 54 years. During that time the U.S.-Japan alliance has been a mainstay for both countries. But the Democratic Party's overwhelming victory could transform Japanese foreign policy. Such a change is long overdue.

In August 1945 Japan was disarmed and occupied. Gen. Douglas MacArthur acted as regent, writing Article 9 into Japan's constitution: "Land, sea, and air forces, as well as other war potential, will never be maintained."

The unstated political corollary was that Washington would be responsible for Japan's defense. This arrangement seemed logical until the Cold War deepened, especially after the triumph of Mao Zedong's Communist Party in China.

Moreover, some Japanese also grew dissatisfied with the "peace constitution," bristling at the assumption that the Japanese people possessed a double dose of original sin.



Tokyo established a "Self-Defense Force" and some academics and politicians debated moving further. But the establishment view, embodied in the LDP, was to leave the heavy lifting in security policy to Washington.

The United States eventually asked Japan to do more militarily, but only in following America's lead. In Japan the government resisted Washington's entreaties as pacifists and nationalists battled over even modest augmentation of Tokyo's international role.

Japan has edged toward greater activism in response to China's more assertive foreign policy and North Korea's provocative weapons tests. Yet, Japanese military spending remains anemic and proposals to revise Article 9 have gone nowhere.

What now with a new government taking control in Tokyo? Incoming Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama ran toward the center, terming the U.S.-Japan alliance a "top priority."

Nevertheless, the DPJ reaches much further left than does the LDP. The party opposed refueling U.S. ships in the Indian Ocean.

The 2005 party platform promised 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." There is



broad support for amending the Status of Forces Agreement, cutting host nation support, and reducing America's military presence on Okinawa.

Washington is nervous, but it is long past time to adjust the U.S.-Japan relationship.

Some on the right point out that Tokyo cannot demand equality unless it does more. Bruce Klingner of the Heritage Foundation observed, "Neither country is well served by endlessly repeated bromides of the strength of the alliance as it becomes increasingly apparent that Japan will not fulfill the security role required to address increasing global security threats."

But the biggest problem is that the United States does too much, which enables Japan's security dependence on America. Protecting war-torn allied states, such as Japan, made sense in the aftermath of World War II. Not so today, when those same allied states have prospered and hegemonic communism has disappeared.

Washington should return responsibility for Japan's defense to Japan. With the world's second largest economy, Japan could do much more. For instance, doubling its defense effort, at 2 percent of GDP, would still be half of America's burden while roughly matching Chinese military outlays.

Whether the Japanese people believe they need to do more is, of course, up to them. However, they should pay the cost of and take responsibility for their decision.

Particularly important is the issue of so-called extended deterrence. As Beijing develops its own strategic nuclear deterrent against America, the question will arise: should the United States risk Los Angeles for Tokyo?

The increasing unpredictability of North Korean behavior has led to more discussion in Japan about the possibility of developing a countervailing weapon.

The potential for further proliferation in the region is worrisome, but less so than the possibility of a confrontation between the United States and nuclear-armed China over the interests of other nations. After all, deterrence can fail.

In any case, there would be less cause for the U.S. to rely on nuclear deterrence for Japan if that nation possessed an adequate conventional defense.

With the rise of prosperous and/or populous allied states (Japan, South Korea, Australia and several ASEAN nations) as well as other friendly powers (India and Indonesia, most notably), Washington is in the position to act as an offshore balancer, prepared to act against an aggressive hegemonic power should one arise, while avoiding being entangled in daily geopolitical controversies.

America's overwhelming power and geographic isolation offer important security advantages.

Expecting Tokyo to protect itself doesn't mean severing bilateral security relationships. The United States and Japan should continue to cooperate on issues ranging from intelligence sharing to emergency base access. But Washington should end Japan's unnatural security dependence.

The DPJ intends to change Tokyo's relationship with the United States. Washington should take the lead, turning defense responsibilities over to Japan, benefiting both countries.

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