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The Evolution of the U.S.-Japan Alliance

by Richard Mereand

A new day in Japanese politics

On 30 August 2009, Japan's Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) lost the general election.¹ In most democracies, such an event would produce familiar political postmortems and speculation about what the winners will change. In Japan, it represented a seismic change in national politics; the LDP had not a lost general election in its 54-year history. For decades, the Liberal Democrats had held onto power by lavishing jobs and money on their districts. Dozens of opposition parties have come and gone, but none had been able to break the LDP's hold on the ballot box—until now.

The Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) seems to have finally tapped into voters' anger and disappointment after nearly two decades of economic stagnation. Some analysts suggested that people voted against the LDP more than they voted for the DPJ.² However, the Democrats worked hard during the campaign to draw distinctions between themselves and the incumbent party, suggesting that they will substantively change the way Japan is governed. DPJ leaders argued for greater openness and transparency, vowing to wrest power away from the unelected bureaucrats who control government ministries and to allow greater public scrutiny of decision making processes. The DPJ took a populist tone on foreign policy, promising to stand up for Japan's interests abroad and pay more attention to public opinion. The week before the election, Yukio Hatoyama, who is now the prime minister, said, "Japan-U.S. relations should be on an equal footing so that our side can strongly assert Japan's will."³

“[A] cornerstone of American policy in Asia”⁴

The alliance with Japan has long been a cornerstone of U.S. policy in East Asia. After the Second World War, the United States occupied Japan for seven years and has retained a large military presence in the country since. Article 9 of the 1947 Japanese constitution prohibits the maintenance of military forces, making the Japanese dependent on U.S. forces for their defense. The United States has used bases in Japan to maintain a forward presence in Asia and remain engaged in the region. And the two countries have closely coordinated their foreign policies, especially during the Cold War, promoting free trade and democracy. However, the relationship has not been without tension.

Pacifists, leftists, nationalists and local interests have all opposed Japan's close ties to the United States. Many Japanese were disgusted by the rampant militarism of their nation's leadership in the 1930s and '40s, and their shame and guilt after the Second World War led them to reject force as an instrument of policy. Article 9 encapsulates this sentiment, and much of the population is very pacifist in outlook. Pacifist groups overlap with many leftist groups, and during the Cold War, leftists sympathetic to communism generally advocated disassociation from the United States. And as time and distance dim memories of World War II, opposition has also arisen from the right. Nationalists resent the presence of foreign troops on Japanese soil and argue for a more independent, assertive Japanese foreign and defense policy. And those most directly affected by the U.S. presence, the residents of the Ryukyu Islands—Okinawa in

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particular—have long resented the U.S. military forces based there. The size and influence of the U.S. presence have been steadily scaled back, but many on Okinawa continue to argue for complete withdrawal.

For decades, cooler heads have prevailed in Tokyo. Cognizant of Japan's defense needs, conservative LDP prime ministers and professionals in the foreign and defense ministries have resisted public pressure and assiduously maintained the U.S. alliance. Even the trade disputes of the 1980s and '90s, which raised the specter of a trade war, could not shake the foundation of the alliance. But the political winds in Tokyo had been changing even before the August 2009 election.

Junichiro Koizumi, Japanese maverick

In April 2001, the LDP held leadership elections to replace the unpopular Yoshiro Mori as prime minister. In a surprise upset, former Prime Minister Ryutaro Hashimoto was soundly defeated by Junichiro Koizumi, often described by the media as a reformer and a maverick. In a nation long ruled by quiet, unassuming politicians, Koizumi stood out as much for his long, wavy hair and love of rock music as for his calls to change the way Tokyo did business. He would go on to become Japan's longest-serving prime minister in 30 years, and his tenure would change the way the Japanese thought about foreign and military policy.

After four months in office, Koizumi made the first of six controversial visits to Yasukuni, a Shinto memorial shrine that honors those who died in service to their nation. Because the shrine includes World War II war criminals among its honorees, many, especially in Korea and China, condemned Koizumi's visits. Koizumi tried to downplay his visits as personal and religious rather than political. But it seems more likely that they were part of a quiet campaign to rehabilitate Japan's military legacy.

In January 2004, a battalion-sized contingent of Japanese troops deployed to Iraq to assist in postwar reconstruction activities. Although the Japanese Self-Defense Forces⁵ (JSDF) had participated in several United Nations missions, this marked the first time they had deployed into an active conflict or without a UN mandate. The implicit endorsement of the U.S. intervention in Iraq was decidedly controversial, with the opposition DPJ firmly against. And yet the Koizumi government passed the authorization bill without difficulty, and the deployment went forward without a problem. The JSDF has continued to deploy abroad, including the dispatch of a destroyer to combat piracy off the Horn of Africa and the recent announcement that they will participate in the UN mission to Sudan.

Koizumi also introduced a bill that, once passed by his successor, upgraded the Japanese Defense Agency to a Cabinet-level Ministry of Defense. And he proposed amending the constitution to lift the prohibition against the maintenance of armed forces—though he would have left intact the prohibition of the use of force in international affairs. The amendment effort was abandoned due to public opposition, but the terms of debate in Japan had definitely changed. JSDF deployments abroad had become routine, and proposing changes to Article 9 would have been political suicide for mainstream politicians in the not-so-distant past.

Enter the DPJ

In keeping with party rules, Koizumi gave up the premiership in 2006. He was succeeded by a series of hapless prime ministers, each of whom resigned in scandal after just a year in office, squandering their charismatic predecessor's popularity. The 2009 elections were held on schedule, and during the campaign the DPJ, which had already won control of the upper house in 2007, staked out positions at odds with those of the ruling party. They signaled a desire to revisit an intricate, laboriously negotiated agreement regarding the realignment of U.S. military bases on Okinawa, and said they would end an eight-year-old mission that had supported coalition forces operating in Afghanistan. Since the election, Hatoyama's government has stuck to these positions⁶ and has also signaled its intention to make public old secret agreements regarding nuclear weapons that may embarrass the United States.

These positions, and the general tone of the Democratic Party of Japan's foreign policy rhetoric, have raised concern in Washington. Department of Defense officials have objected to revisiting the Okinawa agreement, as the previous government had accepted the relocation of Marine Corps Air Station Futenma and committed to paying for the relocation of other facilities to Guam. U.S. officials are concerned that if the agreement is revisited, it could unravel completely, discarding the results of a decade of complex negotiations.⁷

American media coverage of the U.S.-Japan relationship has changed markedly in tone since the election. Initially, U.S. officials predicted little change if the DPJ won, and even spoke optimistically about Japan taking on greater responsibility in the security realm.⁸ They seem to be disappointed in the reality, however, as the Japanese look for greater independence and influence to accompany their increased share of the burden.⁹ Partly, this reflects simple miscues between the two capitals. Because the DPJ has always been in the opposition, the members of the new government are both new to diplomacy and unknown to their American counterparts. But Americans should not be surprised by the overall tone of the DPJ—although the details are different, the shift is a continuation of the trend started by Koizumi in the early part of the decade.

Japan's proper role in the region

Northeast Asia is dominated by three countries: China, Japan and the Republic of Korea. Taiwan and North Korea are too isolated to be of much influence, Russia and Mongolia too weak in the region. However, there is a clear mismatch between Japan's economic power and diplomatic influence and its military capability; the Japanese Self-Defense Forces are very small for a nation with the world's second-highest gross domestic product and tenth largest population. Japan's military weakness leaves a power vacuum currently filled by a nation from outside the region. U.S. forces have long compensated for Japanese weakness and provided military weight to match America's considerable economic and diplomatic presence in the region.

After Japan's violent conquest of East Asia in the early part of the 20th century, strict limits on Japanese military strength were amply justified. But two generations have passed since 1945. The Japanese have absorbed the lesson of their defeat, and sensitivities should have faded along with the memories of past atrocities. The legacy of World War II cannot shape the region forever. China has emerged from the self-imposed isolation of its early communist years; the Korean Peninsula seems to be groping toward an end to its 60-year-old division. Perhaps Japan, too, should move past the punitive (self-imposed and otherwise) limitations of the latter half of the 20th century.

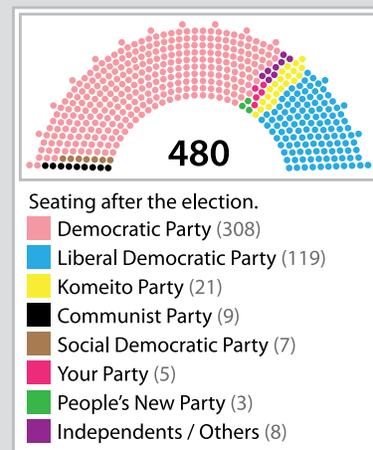
An evolving relationship

For 65 years, the U.S.-Japan alliance has been inherently unequal. Defeated, wracked with guilt and dependent on the United States, Japan has played the role of junior partner, which made sense in the early years. But in recent decades, as Japan has become an economic competitor and diplomatic heavyweight, the military imbalance has bred resentment. The United States expects compensation for providing Japan's security, but many Japanese are decreasingly satisfied with paying the fee. Instead, more and more mainstream thinkers in Japan are suggesting that they move out of the shadow of the past and take on more responsibility for their own security.¹⁰

It would be a logical next step for Japan to take on a larger, more responsible role in the region's security. It will take a significant

The August 2009 election win by the Democratic Party of Japan represented a huge upset in Japanese politics. The Liberal Democratic Party had controlled the government almost continuously since its founding in 1955. The party lost control of the government for eleven months in 1993 and 1994, after its worst general election showing—but it was still the top vote-winner in that election, and it regained control of the government after the opposition coalition fractured. But this time, the opposition Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) trounced the LDP, winning 47 percent of the candidate votes and 42 percent the party votes.

2009 Election Results



In Japan's parallel voting system, voters vote for a candidate and a party separately. Two-thirds of the seats in the House of Representatives are decided by the candidate votes in each district; the rest of the seats are divided proportionally according to the national party vote. LDP candidates managed 39 percent of the candidate votes, but in a clear signal of the electorate's deep disillusionment with the ruling party, the LDP won only 27 percent of the party vote.

The DPJ had taken control of the upper house, the House of Councilors, in the 2007 elections. The general election win gave them control of the government and both houses of the legislature.

amount of work to ease lingering concerns, among both the Japanese and their World War II-era victims. But the United States should encourage this trend. Further reducing the American footprint in Japan will ease the relationship, making it easier to maintain close, cooperative ties. And the evolution of the U.S.-Japan alliance may provide lessons for the future of the U.S.-Korean relationship, which is also changing.

American forces will still maintain a strong presence in the region from bases on Guam. The Japanese should accept the cost of relocations as the price for 65 years of American defense of their country. But keeping the relationship frozen, on terms set decades ago, is not realistic. The new government in Tokyo and the changing debate on defense policy clearly indicate that the relationship is evolving.

There will be misunderstandings, even setbacks for the United States. The agreement regarding U.S. forces in Okinawa will probably have to be revised to satisfy the new government. The Futenma Air Station may need to be moved elsewhere. But overall, the close relationship between Japan and the United States is strong and beneficial to both nations. U.S. policymakers should work with the Japanese to ensure that the relationship remains fundamentally sound as it evolves.

Endnotes

- ¹ Elections for the upper and lower houses of the legislature are held separately; the lower house elections are considered general elections because they determine control of the government.
- ² Blaine Harden, "Ruling Party is Routed in Japan," *Washington Post*, 31 August 2009, p. 1.
- ³ *Ibid.*
- ⁴ Quote is from the description of the U.S. alliance with Japan offered by Hillary Rodham Clinton in her 13 January 2009 Statement before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, during her nomination hearing to be Secretary of State, <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2009a/01/115196.htm>.
- ⁵ Although their constitution prohibits the maintenance of military forces, the Japanese maintain modest, but highly professional, defense forces. Because they are not suitable for offensive action, they are generally accepted as in keeping with the Article 9 prohibition.
- ⁶ Martin Fackler, "Japan Delays Decision on Moving U.S. Marine Base," *New York Times*, 16 December 2009, p. A16.
- ⁷ John Pomfret and Blaine Harden, "U.S. Pressures Japan on Military Package," *Washington Post*, 22 October 2009, p. 1.
- ⁸ Associated Press, "PaCom Boss Expects Little to Change in Japan," *ArmyTimes.com*, 2 September 2009, http://www.armytimes.com/news/2009/09/ap_military_pacific_command_japan_090209/; Jacob M. Schlesinger, "U.S. Poised for Change as Tokyo Leadership Shifts," *Wall Street Journal*, 31 August 2009, p. 6.
- ⁹ Mark Landler and Martin Fackler, "U.S. is Seeing Policy Thorns in Japan Shift," *New York Times*, 2 September 2009, p. A8.
- ¹⁰ Jim Frederick, Toko Sekiguchi and Jamie Miyazaki, "Standing their Ground," *Time Asia*, 2 May 2005, p. 30.

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