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## AJISS-Commentary

# US-Japan Relations from Heisei to Reiwa--Huge Progress Made, But Challenges Remain

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### End of the Cold War and Perception of Japan as a Threat

The trajectory of the United States-Japan relations from Heisei era, which started in 1989 and continued through the Trump administration, is full of tensions; although both countries have been in alliance and cooperated fairly strongly. Overall, impressive progress has been made in this period, but the alliance

Simply put, the sources of the bilateral tensions have been twofold: trade imbalance and unwillingness to fight for the US or the US-led coalition. For Japan, one of the problems was hosting US troops and bases, especially in Okinawa. The difference with the US over how to handle these issues has been another source of frustration for Japan from time to time.

When the period of Cold War was ending, Japan and the US had terrible trade wars on issues ranging from autos to semiconductors. Even the purchase of the Rockefeller Center by a Japanese company was an emotional issue in the US. A book titled *Coming War with Japan* was published in 1991. W

countries discussed how to deal with Iraq after Saddam Hussein-led country annexed Kuwait. The opinion and the attitude of leading politicians in the US were almost universally negative. Japan was regarded as a free rider of the world security system with no contribution from its soldiers. James Baker III, the Secretary of State of the George H.W. Bush administration, called Japan's foreign policy "a free rider of the world security system with no contribution from its soldiers." In various public polls conducted in the US, Japan was now perceived to have become as the most serious threat to the US.

These phenomena were still moderate compared with what happened in the early years of the Clinton presidency. Economy, rather than the alliance, was clearly the priority for President Clinton. Incumbent President Bush by focusing on economic issues in a "razor-thin" manner. His administration and Americans were now more concerned about economic rather than national security issues. Clinton's result-oriented approach, demanding that Japan promise to import a certain volume of American cars, which Japan resisted strongly. In the end, the two countries struck a deal, but it was only because the US had pressured it with a threat of stopping a security guarantee. A British paper carried the news as follows on May 16, 1995.

In words whose meaning was only thinly veiled by the leaden diplomatic phrasing, the British Ambassador to Washington, Mike McCurry declared that "an impediment" in one area of Washington's comprehensive trade policy will prevent the full benefit ... from developing across the broad spectrum of the bilateral relationship. Mr. McCurry was saying that if steps were not taken to reduce Japan's \$ 66bn annual trade surplus with the US, then America might reconsider its nuclear guarantees and the 1960 Mutual Security Treaty. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/car-war-calls-us-japan-alliance-into-questio>

In Okinawa, an embarrassing incident took place in 1995: Three US soldiers raped a twelve-year-old girl, following which a massive protest ensued. In part, as a response to this incident, the two governments agreed in 1996 to relocate the Futenma Air Station and other bases to some other area. The concentration of the bases in a crowded area could be eased. It was a dramatic agreement, but it has not been implemented till now.

It was a positive development for both countries to issue the US-Japan Joint Declaration on Security in 1996, a continuation of the alliance. Bill Clinton's shift to China in his second term, however, became a challenge for the alliance, although it is Japan that first initiated a soft approach to China after the Tiananmen incident. One can see that the US was fascinated by China due to its growing economy at a time when Japan was stagnating in the 1990s and in the later years. Moreover, after the onset of the twenty-first century, China's economic prowess had grown rapidly and the country had increasingly become a national security threat for the US. Since 2008, when Chinese vessels entered the territorial waters of Japan surrounding the Senkaku Islands, the relations between the two leading East Asian countries had reached its nadir. While for the President Barack Obama, in 2014, made it clear that Article 5 of the US-Japan Security Treaty applied to the disputed islands, his stand against China was not as tough as the position Japan would like to see. This became a source of irritation on the part of Japan.

## A Great Turnaround

Though fraught with problems, US-Japan relations took a dramatically positive turn in the late 1990s. After the September 11 terror attacks on the US in 2001, Japan started a refueling mission to help the US in its war against terrorism and sent troops to Iraq; although it did not participate in the war in Afghanistan in 2001 or against Iraq in 2003. The relation between US President George W. Bush and Japanese Prime Minister Jun'ichiro Koizumi was excellent, which was set by these concrete measures. Japanese relations were often regarded as being in the best shape in history. Although it was not for the sake of reconstruction, it was still an epoch-making act from Japan to send troops of the Self Defense Force to Iraq, it being in unstable conditions. Furthermore, it was a great political gift from Japan to President Bush, who was criticized relentlessly within the US for failing to secure the support of the international community.

When Japan's government was replaced by a new one led by the Democratic Party of Japan in 2006, Japanese relations sank to an abyss. The new Prime Minister, Yukio Hatoyama, pledged that the controversial US military base at Futenma, would be relocated at least outside Okinawa Prefecture; however he had neither the authority nor the place for relocation. Katsuya Okada, the then Foreign Minister of Japan, stated that Japan would not join the East Asian Community (EAC) without including the US. These actions and remarks angered Washington.

Then happened the Great East Japan Earthquake and Tsunami on March 11, 2011. In Japan, the government and military launched massive relief operations named "Operation Tomodachi." Huge contributions totaling at least \$737 million, poured in from US citizens, companies, and philanthropic groups, which demonstrated the Japanese response to any overseas disaster and the fifth most generous in the US history of giving. For the Japanese, especially those who were directly helped by the US troops, would never forget the kindness of the American people.

When Prime Minister Abe visited the controversial Yasukuni Shrine at the end of 2013, it drew a strong reaction not just from China and South Korea but also from the United States. However, his visit was to some extent successful in reversing the headwinds by appealing to the members of the US Congress. He also addressed Americans in his address before the Congress in 2015, and by his statement on August 15, 2015, on the occasion of the 70th anniversary of the end of the World War II, by stressing his feelings of regret and a desire for reconciliation.

While shedding the image of a nationalistic hawk to some degrees, Prime Minister Abe has had been on the agenda for decades to promote the defense cooperation between Japan and the US. These issues included the legislation related to the Government Secrecy Law, the strengthening and empowerment of the National Security Council, and above all, the passing of the Peace and Security Legislation enabling the Japanese government for the first time to exercise the collective right to self-defense. The new Guidelines for Japan-US Defense Cooperation were approved by both governments in 2015, and the alliance was dramatically strengthened in its most essential and substantive part under the leadership of Prime Minister Abe.

## Into Uncertainty Again?

During the Obama presidency, there was frustration in Japan at US attitudes toward Japan. The issues that had built up this frustration were the US criticism of Prime Minister Abe's visit of the Yasukuni Shrine, the soft US approach to China, and the US tendency to regard China as an important partner.

The election of Donald J. Trump gave an even acuter sense of crisis because he had said

Japan and South Korea should defend themselves, even with the nuclear weapons, and the stationing of the US troops in Japan. Moreover, he had remained silent when asked about Japan's claim on Senkaku Islands as US president.

Trump captured the Republican nomination by taking a different stand from other candidates on issues. Trump's stand on illegal immigrants and trade made a stark difference. His isolation made him a rare "commodity" among Republican presidential hopefuls, not to mention of former presidents.

What is somewhat ominous to the US allies, including Japan, is that Trump proved in 2020 to the party nomination on these policy lines in the Republican Party, notwithstanding the seventeen candidates in the party. Although his nomination may have been just a fluke, there is a possibility that another candidate who has similar policy views on illegal immigrants and foreign policy, in 2024, 2028, or 2032, and who might be more principled and in better control of the situation. The mere thought of these possibilities gives Japan a concern of a long-term nature.

Therefore, the challenges before Japan were twofold: (1) to deal successfully with President Trump, which was full of unpredictability; and (2) to prepare quietly for the future direction of US national security, and trade; and its implications for Japan.

Prime Minister Abe got along well with President Trump personally, and the alliance seemed to take shape. However, President Trump is reported to have suggested discarding the US-Japan alliance. Japan was not obligated to defend the US when the US is attacked. Trade conflicts are such threats that suggest a linkage with security guarantees.

There are several positive aspects in the US-Japan relations under President Trump. The US-China relationship is one of them. Though Japan does not welcome unilateral sanctions on itself by the US, it has to see the US confronting with, instead of accommodating, China, thus forming a united front. The US is sharing its "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" vision. Furthermore, there is less emphasis on the US perspective on Japan, which basically gratifies the Abe administration. At the cabinet-level, the two countries are having robust relations based on trust.

There was a time when Prime Minister Zenko Suzuki had said there was no military aspect to the US-Japan alliance. There was also a time when it seemed that it would be decades away into the future before the US would say that it could exercise its right to collective self-defense for the US.

On the one hand, there has been enormous progress in the defense cooperation between the two countries in these contexts. However, on the other hand, the rise of China's military might and some Chinese military intention are destabilizing and threatening the progress in the defense capabilities of Japan. Deepening cooperation between the two countries.

This is clearly one of the challenges for Japan and the US in the coming decades.

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