

# *AJISS-Commentary*

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## **JAPAN-US RELATIONS UNDER THE OBAMA ADMINISTRATION**

*What to Expect from the New US Administration #5*

*Fumiaki Kubo*

### **Democrats vs. Republicans?**

When I talked about the 2008 US presidential election and the Japan-US relationship, I often got questions from the audience asking which administration, Democratic or Republican, would be better for Japan. At the same time, I often heard many Japanese say that Japan would get into trouble if the Republicans lost office.

*The views expressed in this piece are the author's own and should not be attributed to The Association of Japanese Institutes of Strategic Studies.*

These questions were asked by those who apparently had never thought about desirable Japan-US relations on their own, hoping to get an easy answer, while the anti-Democratic opinion was expressed by people within business and government circles or close to the government. In addition, I got the impression that the Japanese public in general favored a defeat of the Republican administration represented by President George W. Bush, hoping to see Republicans fall from power. Some media reports apparently held such a view.

Those who asked the “Democrats vs. Republicans” question need to be aware that Japan-US relations can be significantly affected by how Japan approaches the United States. Those who fear Democrats need to be aware that US policy towards Japan is one of the most bipartisan aspects of American politics despite some general differences between the two parties (for example, Democrats are under strong union influence and Republicans tend to take a hawkish position on national security).

To be sure, Japan-US relations during the Bush administration were hailed as the best in history. From its start, the administration emphasized the importance of the alliance with Japan and declared its intent to strengthen it. Yet what really solidified the bilateral alliance was Japan’s support for US operations in Afghanistan and Iraq, which went beyond the boundaries of traditional Japanese security policy. The Bush administration particularly appreciated Japan’s assistance in Iraq. The sound Japan-US relationship is a product of such Japanese efforts as well. This is not to say that Tokyo should support all the wars waged by Washington. The point is that the Japan-US relationship is shaped by Japanese policies as well as those of the US.

### **Obama’s Priorities and Japan-US Relations**

The incoming Obama administration has given top priority in its foreign policy to the fight against terrorism in Afghanistan. The fight is expected to be a very tough one. If Japan can extend its support there, that would help strengthen the Japan-US alliance. Very critical arguments are often heard in Japan with regard to the US operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, as represented by an oft-used phrase in Japanese media: “US unilateral military action (or war) in Iraq

and Afghanistan.” If one considers the reasons for US military intervention, however, one would notice how different the operations in these two countries are. Afghan operations remain popular among Americans, and NATO countries are exhibiting a strong cooperative stance by fighting alongside US troops. As an American ally, Japan should offer assistance wherever possible.


Needless to say, Japan’s security measures are constrained by the Constitution and the interpretations thereof. However, Washington is reportedly considering a strategy that involves non-military measures such as the use of economic incentives, cooperation with neighboring countries, and negotiations with some of the Taliban forces. If such a strategy is adopted, which might presuppose the improvement of security by expanding forces as planned by the next administration, this will create room for Japan to make further contributions. Japan might be able to contribute to the fight against terrorism from the medium- to long-term perspective. What is important is for Japan to continue proposing and implementing measures. Japan should continue the refueling mission by the Maritime Self-Defense Force in the Indian Ocean, but this is not enough. Consideration should not stop there.

There are many other areas in which Tokyo and Washington can cooperate. They include finance, the global environment, poverty and the control of infectious disease in the Third World. The Democratic Party will be more favorable to these measures than the Republican Party, and these are also the areas into which Japanese foreign policy has put much energy. If Japan decides that maintaining sound relations with the US serves its interests, especially in terms of ensuring its national security, it must come up with concrete measures in various policy fields.

### **Structural Transformation after 9/11**

The 9/11 incident created a new situation for the Japan-US relationship that is very different from that of the Cold War era. Japan’s ally was actually exposed to attacks, something that never happened during the Cold War. Under such circumstances, the logic of alliance would require Japan to fight with the US. However, the Japan-US security treaty does not require this; Japan’s only duty is

to let US troops use bases in Japanese territory. As is well known, the Japanese government's interpretation of the right to collective self-defense - that the Constitution prohibits Japan from exercising that right – means that Japan has no right to fight to defend the US.

I hope no incident like 9/11 occurs in the future. However, should such an incident occur, Japan will be forced to consider how and to what degree it can assist the US again. Meanwhile Japan relies on US assistance in the event that it comes under foreign attack because this is the duty of the United States under the bilateral security treaty. The political burdens of the Japan-US alliance have significantly increased in the age of terrorism. The Afghan problem lies in such a context. 

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