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HAVE CLOSER CONSULTATIONS WITH JAPAN, PLEASE!

What to Expect from the New US Administration #4

Masashi Nishihara

When he takes office on January 20, President Barack Obama will inherit many critical security issues, one of which is the peace and security of Asia, which is being challenged by China's fast growing military power, North Korea's nuclear program, inherently tense relations between Beijing and Taipei, rivalry between India and Pakistan, the Taliban in Afghanistan, and so forth. For the last six decades, the United States has based its diplomacy

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in the Northeast Asia-Western Pacific region on its unwavering alliance with Japan. How, then, will the Obama administration use the Tokyo-Washington alliance for its diplomacy beyond Northeast Asia and the Western Pacific, to meet these security challenges?

Japan's View on President Bush's Asian Diplomacy

Many American experts argue that the Bush administration had many diplomatic successes in Asia, such as a stronger Japanese-U.S. alliance, a stronger partnership with China, and an improved strategic alignment, if not yet an alliance, with India. But many Japanese, including myself, are inclined to disagree.

Certainly, under the Koizumi-Bush partnership, the Japanese-American alliance was strengthened. Yet most Japanese were disappointed when in October last year the Bush administration removed North Korea from its list of terrorist-supporting states. Japan's position was that North Korea should be removed only after it had released Japanese abductees and demonstrated its willingness to disable its nuclear programs. Indeed, the Tokyo government based its participation in the U.S.-led security-building operations in Iraq partly on the belief that the U.S. would reciprocate by joining Japan in trying to resolve some of these issues in Northeast Asia.

Many Japanese also believe that the United States has become too dependent upon China's financial and trading power and thus has reduced its strategic options. With its huge dollar reserve, China now has the United States in a bind, as it now would have difficulty confronting China's military power, helping defend Taiwan, or imposing sanction on Beijing in response to its poor record on human rights and treatment of minorities. Japan, too, is in a similar situation, since China is the largest trading partner. Nonetheless, it would like Washington to have a wider array of strategic options for Japan's and its own security.

After extensive debate within the government, Japan reluctantly joined the other 44 nations of the Nuclear Suppliers Group in acquiescing to the U.S.-Indian civilian nuclear cooperation agreement in October 2008. Although


the agreement helped forge strategic ties between the U.S. and India, many Japanese fear that it has weakened the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty regime, since Washington dismissed the fact that India had refused to sign it. Not surprisingly, Washington's dismissal had a significant impact on Pakistan, which has moved closer to China for civilian nuclear power development, which in turn may lead to reinforcing its nuclear weapons program. And as Indo-Pakistani relations have deteriorated over the recent terrorist attacks on Mumbai, which were instigated at least in part by Islamabad, the situation in the Subcontinent has become more precarious.

Japan and the U.S. Need Closer Consultations

President Obama's Asian foreign policy team is known to want Japan, the United States, and China to hold a summit meeting, reasoning that the peace and security of Asia depends upon stable trilateral relations. This may be a good first step, but it does not recognize the basic differences among the three powers: two are nuclear powers and one is a nonnuclear power; two are permanent members and one is a nonpermanent member of the UN Security Council; and two have democratic governments and one has an authoritarian government. In addition, China's expected strategy will be to drive a wedge between the two Pacific powers. To test China, a lower level of trilateral meetings should take place first before the summit meeting does. Also, an expansion of the six-party talks should be given due consideration. The talks should eventually include Mongolia, thereby making them a true Northeast Asian security forum. Likewise, the 16-member East Asia Summit should include the United States.

The Bush administration has achieved a good working relationship with Indonesia, strengthened by the U.S. Seventh Fleet's help in late 2004 when it was devastated by the tsunami. Close relations with Indonesia, a Muslim democracy of two million people, are strategically very important to the U.S. Japan, too, has had good relations with Indonesia since the 1950's. Both countries, then, are in a good position to help Indonesia overcome the current financial crisis; a politically stable and economically viable Indonesia is essential

for the peace and security of Southeast Asia.

All these challenges suggest that the two large democracies in the Pacific should consult more closely with each other. I hope that in his first speech on Asia and on his first trip to Asia, Obama will underscore the importance of the United States' alliance with Japan. 

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