

AJISS-Commentary

The Association of Japanese Institutes of Strategic Studies

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Institute for International
Policy Studies



The Japan Forum on
International Relations

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The Japan Institute of
International Affairs
(Secretariat)

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Research Institute for
Peace and Security

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Online Publisher:

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No.48. 21 October 2008

MANAGING CRISIS AND EXPECTATIONS IN THE ALLIANCE

Koji Murata

On October 11, the Bush Administration finally removed North Korea from its list of state sponsors of terrorism. This pre-planned move reflects the frustration of the Bush Administration in its efforts to achieve a diplomatic success before it completely loses influence following the November 4 presidential election. The fact that it was only 30 minutes before the official announcement that US President George W. Bush actually picked up the phone to notify Japanese Prime Minister Taro Aso reminds me of how Richard Nixon let Prime Minister Eisaku Sato know about his visit to Beijing

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37 years ago (the latter notification was made only three minutes before the official announcement).

Let me repeat that this US move was long anticipated. Much more important now is the next administration's policy toward North Korea. For the time being, Barack Obama or John McCain, whichever is elected, will be preoccupied with handling the financial crisis. There is a simple dichotomy in Japan in which Republicans are seen as pro-Japanese while the Democrats are regarded as pro-China. However, given McCain's age – even if elected, he could be a one-term president – a McCain administration would have less time to develop a robust North Korea policy and could have its time eaten up by Pyongyang's continuous bluff-calling.


On Afghanistan, improving stability will remain an important foreign policy and security agenda item for the next administration. Japan, however, is unable to send troops to the troubled country. Donor countries have already pledged US\$20 billion in aid to Afghanistan. Given that many of the countries providing troops there are suffering from the financial crisis, Japan may well face a request for further economic assistance.

Such a development could result in a deeper sense of abandonment among the Japanese over America's North Korea policy on the one hand, and heightened fear that they have become "entrapped" in America's global strategy on the other. This is certainly a crisis for the Japan-US alliance. It is symbolic that Junichiro Koizumi, the former prime minister who oversaw the "golden age" of the alliance, recently made an abrupt announcement that he would retire from politics.

It has been a long time since crisis management of the Japan-US alliance first came up in discussions among the policymakers of both countries. The way Washington notified Japan of the delisting of North Korea made me want to ask the Americans once again to pay more attention to the sensitivity of alliance diplomacy. Meanwhile, both countries will have to manage their expectations of the alliance. America's "sticks and carrots" alone will not be sufficient to make Pyongyang abandon its nuclear programs and release the Japanese citizens it abducted. Japan must seriously consider what it can do

through its own diplomatic efforts rather than seek salvation from others. There is no clear consensus among the Japanese on how to resolve the abduction issue yet.

Japan has made UN-centered diplomacy one of the pillars of its foreign policy. However, the number of Self-Defense Force personnel currently working for UN peacekeeping operations remains at 36. This stands no comparison with China's four-digit figure. In addition, Japan's budget for official development assistance (ODA) has been continuously declining. How can Japan expect to compete with China on the international stage and be granted a permanent seat on the UN Security Council?

An effective alliance presupposes self-help among the allies. In this sense, the next half-year or so – a period during which both Tokyo and Washington will face major political changes — will present a perfect opportunity for Japan to reexamine how to manage a crisis in the alliance (crisis management) as well as to restrain excessive expectations for the alliance (expectation management). 

Koji Murata is Professor of Political Science at Doshisha University.