U.S.-Japanese Relations in Transition: The Case of Fukushima[1]

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Introduction

It may appear odd to subtitle a presentation on United States-Japan relations with a locale associated with natural disaster. In fact, I was somewhat taken aback when I first saw it in print. After all, what do the 2011 Great Eastern Japan earthquake and tsunami and the subsequent nuclear power disaster at Fukushima have to do with Japan's foreign policy? But, when I reflected upon the title I realized that it includes all of the elements of an old alliance: perennial issues, medium-term changes, and acute incidents. Newly-elected Japanese Prime Minister Noda Yasuhiko's state visit to the United Nations and his discussions with President Obama in early September, and we might add Foreign Minister Genba's discussions with Secretary of State Clinton just before, also demonstrate those elements. So, it is in those terms, the perennial, the medium-term, and the acute, that I would like to frame today's discussion about Japan's relationship with the United States.

Perennial Issues

It is perhaps best to begin a discussion of that relationship by pointing out what scholars of international relations have known for some time: U.S. America's Cold War alliances are surprisingly sturdy (Calder, 2009). If an alliance survived the Cold War

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–not all of them did–, then it is likely to persist well into the twenty-first century despite the fact that the reason for they were formed has disappeared and that alliances with hegemons are likely to unequally distribute security burdens. Japan's alliance with the United States is a case in point. Indeed, it is the most structurally unequal of any Cold War alliance because of the circumstances in which it was created (Pyle, 2011: 382-383). Article 9 of the 1947 Constitution and subsequent interpretations of it greatly hobbled Japan's ability to look after its own security even when asked to do so by its sole ally. According to the terms of the 1951 and 1960 bilateral security treaties, the United States is obliged to defend Japan in the event of attack by another country, but Japan is neither obliged to defend the United States, nor is it obliged to aid the United States in the defense of another ally (Potter, 2008: 236).[2] Moreover, the alliance was always seen in different ways by each party. For Japan the alliance is primarily about its own defense, preferably on Japanese terms. For the United States, the alliance affords forward military power projection in the Western Pacific, which allows it to act as the offshore balancer in Asia and to support U.S. military operations as far away as the Indian Ocean. This far-reaching capability includes the defense of Japan. Concretely, the alliance has provided U.S. security guarantees for Japan in exchange for military base rights on Japanese territory. Japan faced a classic dilemma of a client state. There was always a fear that the alliance would drag it into a conflict in Asia not of its choosing; that was matched by a fear that the United States might abandon the alliance if its strategic doctrines changed. Over time, the economic relationship between the two countries equalized, with the result that successive trade disputes led many U.S. American policy makers to argue that Japan was free-riding and should share more of the burden of its own defense and maintenance of the security of an international system from which it had profited handsomely.

The end of the Cold War temporarily called the alliance into question (Funabashi, 1999). By the end of the 1990s, however, new calculations of common interest rejuvenated it (Vogel and Giarra, 2002). First, Northeast Asia remains a difficult region in which security stability is maintained by U.S. offshore balancing. Second, the collapse of Japan's bubble economy in 1990 and subsequent long-term recession coupled with mounting public debt have made pursuit of a Japanese defense policy independent of the alliance economically difficult despite a national debate that has included calls for greater autonomy. In fact, Japan has increased its military capability and participated in limited ways in international peacekeeping within the framework of the alliance (Samuels, 2007). For its part, despite the articulation of the Rumsfeld Doctrine in the early 2000s, the United States continues to see the value of base facilities in Japan (Samuels, 2009).

[2] The defense of Taiwan has always been the question mark on this last point.

The last 20 years, however, have made clear a number of stresses within the bilateral relationship. One has been the shift in economic power toward Asia, resulting in the relative decline in the United States' position. Japan now trades more with Asia than with all three countries of North America. In 2009, China surpassed the United States as Japan's largest trade partner. Second, the rise of China has complicated the bilateral relationship because China is a major economic partner for both countries, while at the same time its economic growth and military modernization cause increasing concern about whether it will dominate East Asia politically and economically. For Japan, this is of particular concern because deepening economic relations with China have not offset worsening political relations over the past decade. It also presents the United States with the possibility –or, may I say dilemma?– of deciding whether to emphasize relations with Japan or with China in its future Asia policy. For its part, Japan is faced with the choice of hedging against growing Chinese power (which it has done through its relations with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations [ASEAN], Australia, and India) or accommodating China as a regional hegemon. All of this was largely ignored by the Bush administration, intent as it was on the war on terror and two real wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Third, important changes have taken place in Japan. The Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), which dominated Japanese politics from 1955 on, lost the ability to govern the country effectively (Krauss and Pekkanen, 2010). It proved unable to articulate a new political vision for Japan, including an alternative to continued junior status in the alliance with the United States. Its most effective recent prime minister, Koizumi Junichiro, governed despite –rather than because of– the party (Shinoda, 2007). His foreign policies cleaved to greater cooperation with the United States, but also worsened Japan's relationship with China. His economic reforms did not gain the momentum necessary to solve critical economic and demographic problems, in part because his successors either stopped them or proved incapable of carrying reform forward.

Recent Changes in Japanese Politics

The LDP's loss of political legitimacy paved the way for the landslide victory of the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) in the August 2009 general election. This victory almost immediately complicated the relationship with the United States. The party's foreign policy platform included a call for a "close but equal" relationship with the United States in which Japan would play an active role in dividing responsibilities within the alliance. It called for the negotiation of a free trade agreement with the United

States, but one that would guarantee food safety and protect domestic agriculture. It also spelled out the party's desire to reduce the U.S. military footprint in Japan. At the same time, the platform called for stronger relations with Asia, including economic and political ties. This formulation seeks to balance dependence on U.S. security by creating off-setting robust relations with Asian countries, a formulation identified with the DPJ's first prime minister, Hatoyama Yukio; in fact the use of Asian diplomacy to balance the relationship with the United States is part of Hatoyama's patrimony, as his grandfather, Hatoyama Ichiro, was an early postwar advocate of precisely this formula.

Yet Hatoyama's pursuit of this balance was inept at best. He snubbed newly-elected President Obama in October, who was on his way to the same Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) meeting Hatoyama was, and then pushed his plan for an East Asian Caucus at that meeting, an idea long associated with regional economic integration that would not include the United States. Hatoyama's statement on the fiftieth anniversary of the security treaty in January 2010 made the usual references to the importance of the alliance for bilateral and regional security, but his final comment that he would like to present to the Japanese people the results of deepening bilateral cooperation "before the end of this year" hinted at problems his government faced in putting close but equal relations into practice (Hatoyama, 2010).

One major problem was the promise to reduce the U.S. military footprint, especially in Okinawa. That prefecture, with less than one percent of Japan's land area, hosts three-quarters of the land area of U.S. military facilities in the country, and about half of the 47 000 U.S. American military personnel. The size of the bases, the status of naval, air force, and marine personnel stationed at them, and friction between military personnel and local residents have been a long-term issue in bilateral defense relations. In order to address opposition from local residents and governments to the continued presence of U.S. forces, following lengthy negotiations based on the 1996 Japan-U.S. Joint Declaration on Security: Alliance for the 21st Century, in 2006, the two countries agreed on a plan to reduce the U.S. military footprint by 2014. The agreement contained two key provisions: first, the United States would redeploy 8 000 Marines from Japanese territory to Guam. Second, the Futenma Marine Air Station, located in the middle of the City of Ginowan, Okinawa, would be replaced by a new facility added to Camp Schwab in the city of Henoko, in the less densely populated northern part of Okinawa (Hashimoto, Mochizuki, and Takara, 2005; Yoshida, 2008).

The Hatoyama government's announcement that it would review the 2006 agreement caused predictable consternation in the Clinton administration. Local residents and politicians were emboldened to take an anywhere-but-Japan stance on the

Futenma air base issue –it is political suicide in Okinawa to take an openly pro-bases position. The mayor of Henoko announced he would not accept the construction of a new airstrip in the waters off of Camp Schwab. The governor of Okinawa, re-elected this year, argued for removal of the Air Station to Guam, to be followed by the rest of the U.S. forces within his prefecture. Personal visits by Foreign Minister Maehara and Hatoyama himself failed to sway local government leaders and the organizations that support them. Hatoyama's government had entered into a coalition with the Social Democrats, one of the last remaining outposts of the pacifist Old Left in the National Assembly, who threatened to leave the coalition, and ultimately did, over the bases issue. In the United States, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates reiterated the U.S. government position that the Marine presence in Okinawa was vital to U.S. strategy and that Japan should abide the 2006 agreement. In early 2010, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, visiting Japan to discuss the issue, stated that failure to move forward on the relocation of the Futenma facility would result in the United States reconsidering the planned removal of 8 000 marines to Guam.

By the time he left office in June 2010, less than a year after leading his party to a landslide election victory, Hatoyama had found himself trapped between classic NIMBY local politics and the requirements of "equal" partnership in the alliance. By that point, Washington opinion was openly derisive of his policies and personal style.

Hatoyama's successor and rival, Kan Naoto, proved equally unable to counter local opposition to the Futenma move. Worse, better relations with China, a key foreign policy for the Democratic Party, failed to materialize. Disintegrating diplomatic relations were highlighted by the renewal of a territorial dispute between the two countries over the Senkaku Islands, a rocky outcrop west of Okinawa variously claimed by Japan, China, and Taiwan. The dispute reached its nadir in September when, following repeated intrusions by Chinese vessels, a Japan Coast Guard patrol boat was rammed by a Chinese fishing trawler in the vicinity of the islands. The captain was arrested. The incident inflamed public opinion in both countries. The Chinese government demanded the release of the captain, and when the Kan government complied, the captain was treated to a hero's welcome upon his return home. The Chinese government also arrested four Japanese and applied an embargo on exports to Japan of rare earth, critical in the manufacture of electronics, a classic example of economic warfare.[3] By late 2010, Japan's new diplomacy, including its vision of an alliance more to Japan's liking, was in tatters (Rosenbluth, 2011).

[3] The incident was followed in late October by the visit of Russian President Medvedev to the Kurile Islands, another disputed territory, marking the first time a Russian head of state had ever visited them.

Acute Issues: the Great Eastern Japan Earthquake and Tsunami

This brings me to the subtitle of today's talk, the Tohoku earthquake and tsunami and the subsequent nuclear power disaster in Fukushima. I think you are all aware of the main points of the so-called triple disaster. On the afternoon of March 11 this year, an earthquake measuring 9.0 on the Richter scale occurred off the Pacific coast of Northeastern Japan, which in turn produced a tidal wave that devastated coastal communities. The combined effects damaged communities from Iwate in the north to Chiba Prefecture, just east of Tokyo. Some coastal communities closest to the epicenter were obliterated, and many northeastern communities were so heavily damaged as to call into question their long-term viability. Industrial output in the Northeast and the populated areas of the Kanto Plain surrounding Tokyo was disrupted. As of July, more than 15 000 people were confirmed dead and nearly 5 000 were still missing. Moreover, the Fukushima 1 and 2 nuclear reactors, built right next to the ocean, were damaged to the point that Fukushima 1's reactors melted down. Prime Minister Kan ordered not only the closure of that plant but of other nuclear power plants in key coastal areas of the country, all but 15 of 54 plants, a move that has provoked a serious review of the nuclear power industries around the world.

Let me focus here on the consequences of this disaster for relations between the two countries. First, let me point out that the international community responded with an outpouring of sympathy and support. According to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 253 nations, regions, and organizations have made expressions of sympathy; 163 regions and countries and 43 international organizations made offers of financial or in-kind assistance (Japan Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2011). Mexico, of course, was among the nations that did both. At a public lecture at my university this June, a foreign ministry official observed that in 2011, Japan was likely to be the second-largest aid recipient in the world, after the Sudan (Azuma, 2011).

The United States played a quiet but leading role in all aspects of the international relief effort. Within hours of the earthquake and tsunami then-Foreign Minister Matsumoto made a formal request to ambassador John Roos for assistance by U.S. forces in Japan. Under the name Operation Tomodachi (Friend), all branches of the United States armed services in Japan were involved in rescue and relief activities. At the peak of operations, 20 U.S. ships, 160 aircraft, and more than 20 000 personnel were involved. The Air Force accepted diverted flights from Narita and Sendai airports to Yokota Airfield, south of Tokyo, and accepted international medical and search and rescue teams at Misawa Airfield in Aomori, north of the disaster area. The United States and the Japan Self-Defense Forces closely cooperated in airlifting relief supplies and cleaning up areas inundated by the tsunami. Early airlift support by the Air Force,

Navy, and Marines was critical because key Self-Defense Force facilities in the area, such as the Air Self-Defense Force facility adjacent to Sendai Airport, were temporarily put out of action, with personnel among the injured and dead as well. The repair and reopening of that airport were critical to the rescue and reconstruction of affected areas in the Northeast (Japan Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2011).

The disaster had other consequences as well. First, it revealed the limitations of political leadership in Japan. Compared to the 1995 Kobe earthquake, when it took a week for the national government to authorize an official response, Prime Minister Kan quickly ordered the mobilization of 100 000 Self Defense Force personnel to assist in disaster relief. He also ordered the shutdown of nuclear reactors in coastal areas once the scale of the Fukushima crisis became clear. Beyond that, however, his government was unable to formulate policies for long-term reconstruction, the costs of which are understood to be enormous. He also lacked the political instincts to demonstrate sustained, public concern for the victims of the disaster, preferring to work through his cabinet: he did not tour the devastated areas –the emperor and empress did– and daily progress reports were made through his chief cabinet secretary, Edano Yukio. Media coverage reinforced the image that he was out of touch. What was worse, his political rivals seized on the perception of his weakness. In June, beset by rivals within his own party, Kan narrowly defeated a vote of no confidence by making a deal that he would resign by the fall. To a public waiting for concrete action, especially those citizens living in emergency shelters and waiting for promised financial assistance, parliamentary infighting in the midst of what was termed the worst national crisis since defeat in World War II eroded support for the government. In late August, the Kan government did not fall so much as it slunk, too slowly for many, out of office in disgrace.

Back to the Medium Term

Prime Minister Noda Yasuhiko's visit to the United Nations last week[4] and his meetings with President Obama illustrate some key changes in Japanese foreign policy since the March disaster and the change in government. Noda had indicated that he wanted to meet with the president "as soon as possible" following his election in early September. Meeting with the president, Noda, who had been finance minister during the Kan administration, laid out his government's priorities thus: reconstruction after the disaster, the alliance in all its aspects, and the need for the United States and Japan to work to avoid another recession (clearly U.S. economic performance and the European debt crisis are of concern here). In his official comments on September 21,

[4] September 21-23, 2011.

released by the White House, he acknowledged United States support during Operation Tomodachi. He further noted talks between Foreign Minister Gemba and Secretary of State Clinton that had confirmed the relocation of Futenma Air Station to Camp Schwab, as agreed in 2006 (White House Office of the Press Secretary, 2011). Noda's government had also indicated its support for the Trans-Pacific Partnership proposal, from which the Kan government had backed away due to opposition by domestic agricultural interests. Along with South Korea, Japan also agreed with the U.S. position on North Korea, that it is not time to reopen the Six Party Talks.[5] In general, the new government is signaling its intention to repair the damage to the bilateral relationship wrought by the Hatoyama and Kan governments.

The reason for this is straightforward. The enormous cost of reconstruction is going to require Japan to restrain costs elsewhere. Abandonment or significant realignment of the alliance would force Japan to spend a great deal more than it does now on defense. While the alliance confers budgetary burdens on Japan, the alternatives are more costly. Japan now spends about one percent of its GNP on defense, in line with most of its neighbors in maintaining relatively modest levels of military spending relatively to economic growth (Smith, 2009: 73-75). An unstable alliance relationship, however, might tempt China to test Japan's resolve on a number of issues, leading to worse relations between the two countries. Japan's military modernization since 2000 has taken place largely to allow it to respond to threats from its neighbors (Hughes, 2009: 86-88). Noda's sensible emphasis on reconstruction and economic cooperation with the United States to promote economic growth means stimulating the U.S. recovery and controlling the value of the yen. All of this requires that security relations not interfere with those priorities.

That may be easier said than done. Foreign Minister Gemba reportedly cautioned Secretary of State Clinton that convincing Okinawans to fall in line with national level policy would be "tough" (*Japan Times*, 2011). In fact, at just about the time that the two governments' leaders were reaffirming the importance of the security relationship, the governor of Okinawa was delivering a keynote speech to the Council on Foreign Relations on the political difficulties of any option but inviting the Marines to locate their air base in Guam. And here is the rub. The prime minister was correct in telling the president that Japan appreciates U.S. help following the disaster in the Northeast. Public opinion polls show that. But Okinawa is at the other end of Japan and is administered by local officials who can get away with espousing parochial positions that take no account of strategic threat, national policy, public opinion in general, or what the United States has done for the country lately. They can do so

[5] North Korean leader Kim Jong Il recently made a state visit to Russia and two to China, so the trilateral agreement is not just aimed at North Korea.

because they have been doing it for years, and the current governing party is fractious and therefore weak.

The danger for Noda's government is clear. In his prepared comments in New York, President Obama stated, "I know that he, like all of us, has some extraordinary challenges that we have to address. . . . At the same time, obviously, we have important work to do together. As the two largest economies in the world, we have to continue to promote growth that can help put our people to work and improve standards of living. We have to modernize our alliance to meet the needs of the twenty-first century" (White House Office of the Press Secretary, 2011). On this last point, the *Guam Buildup News* quoted Kurt Campbell, U.S. assistant secretary of state for East Asia and the Pacific: "Both sides understand we are approaching a period where you need to see results. . . . That was made very clear by the president" (Montvel-Cohen, 2011). In other words, it is time to move on from Fukushima. This is the specter of abandonment that haunts Japanese defense policy makers.

In fact, of course, the burden is on Japan. The current configuration of United States forces in Japan, which includes US$4 billion in host nation support, is less expensive than any other option considered tactically and strategically viable. The current budget fights between the Congress and the administration have highlighted issues of cost, and key congresspersons have recently criticized the 2006 agreement as too expensive. The default option for the United States, then, is the status quo: no removal of Marines to Guam[6] and continued use of Futenma pending any agreement between central and local governments in Okinawa.

It is not clear, moreover, how much relocation would lessen the military footprint in Okinawa. China is increasing its presence in the waters around East and Southeast Asia and modernizing its navy. The Self-Defense Forces have been reassigned from Cold War era northern positions to southwestern Japan, a move that demonstrates the growing security concerns China poses for Japan. Incidentally, some weeks ago a newspaper report indicated that Ministry of Defense attempts to purchase land in Okinawa for an observation facility were met with the same kind of local opposition that confronts the government over U.S. bases.

The months following the March 11 tragedy in eastern Japan demonstrated the continuing relevance of strong relations between the United States and Japan. U.S. facilities in Japan made it easier for the allies to cooperate in rescue and reconstruction. But those efforts cannot address other serious issues in the bilateral economic and security relationship. Those other issues may well scuttle the goodwill generated between the two countries in the future.

[6] In July, the 2014 deadline was postponed and both sides agreed that Japan would use host-nation support funds to help finance the transfer.

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