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Is Japan Tilting towards China?

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Some media have recently suggested Japan is tilting towards China under the Hatoyama administration. Whilst Sino-Japanese relations have improved, the US will continue to remain the core of Japanese foreign policy.

A DOMINANT pattern of Japan's international relations has been its tendency to ally with a great power, usually the strongest power in the international system - China during the Sinocentric Order, Great Britain during the imperial period, Germany during World War II, and the United States in the post-war period. The current debates centred around the future of Japan-US and Japan-China relations. Gideon Rachman, a columnist with the *Financial Times*, raised the proposition that Japan is beginning to edge towards China, suggesting a weakening of its special relationship with the US. I do not think so. But what are the implications of the recent warming of Japan-China relations and the concomitant deterioration of Japan-US relations under the new Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) government?

DPJ's Approach to China and US

Since its electoral victory over the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) in August 2009, the DPJ, under the leadership of Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama, has reaffirmed its traditional pro-China policy platform. It has endeavoured to not only strengthen the existing strong Sino-Japanese economic relationship but also its political links. Ichiro Ozawa, DPJ's Secretary-General, led a 650-strong delegation including 143 DPJ lawmakers to Beijing. Not only were they met by the Chinese authorities with warm hospitality, the Japanese were also given access to the top leadership in China with Ozawa meeting President Hu Jintou. Sino-Japanese relationship received a further boost during the Chinese Vice-President Xi Jinping's visit to Japan in December 2009. His meeting with the Japanese Emperor was reportedly pushed by the top Japanese leadership even though the arrangements broke standard Japanese protocol. This move was met with severe criticism within Japan; some accusing Japan of 'kowtowing' to China.

In contrast to China, the Japan-US relationship under the DPJ is in a stalemate. Since coming to

power, the DPJ government announced that it favoured a foreign policy with a stronger Asia focus with less dependence on the US. To this end, Hatoyama pushed for the creation of an East Asian Community – a proposal based on the *yuai* or fraternity concept. Whilst the concept calls for the strengthening of relations between the East Asian states, it remains vague about US participation. Both Hatoyama and Foreign Minister Katsuya Okada have expressed conflicting views on this arrangement, creating a perception that Japan is distancing itself from the US. This is further fuelled by Japan's perceived confusion towards the transfer of the Futenma Base in Okinawa. The tussle between the governments has resulted in an exchange of firm statements; both sides indicating their respective rigid positions. Though the Japanese government is expected to announce their final proposal by May this year, it would be safe to argue that this proposal will differ from the 2006 bilateral agreement. This could extend the deadlock on the issue and further aggravate the stalemate in the relationship.

Is Japan tilting towards China?

Despite the recent stalemate in the US-Japan relationship, Japan is not tilting towards China. The US-Japan relationship is still very strong politically, economically and, increasingly, in strategic terms as well. On this 50th anniversary of the revision of the US-Japan Security Treaty, the relationship continues to display strong shared objectives and interests which are institutionalised in many ways. All relationships suffer from ups and downs -- the US-Japan relationship is no different. The nature of the relationship is strong enough to weather occasional disagreements, which are necessary to recalibrate the way the relationship functions. The important point to note here is that strategic-military issues will increasingly become sources of tension, as the bilateral security relationship matures.

Japan sees the value of a strong bilateral relationship with the US. The US has successfully provided security cover for Japan since the onset of the post-war period. This function has become even more pronounced in light of Japan's main security challenges today – North Korea's nuclear and ballistic missile programme and China's economic, political and military rise. Moreover, Japan has made significant strides towards assuming a more active security role in international affairs; and much of this development has materialised through the active support of the US. The continued support of the US for Japan's further security role is absolutely essential for Tokyo, as well as its neighbours who harbour a strong sense of suspicion and mistrust against Japan stemming from their colonial history.

Finally, even China would not support the weakening or unravelling of the US-Japan security relationship. A strong US-Japan relationship serves China in many important ways. For example, the presence of the US ensures the peace and stability of East Asia – a condition that is essential for China's priority of achieving continued economic growth and development. In addition, the presence of the US also serves to deter Japan's military rise – an outcome China would like to prevent.

Managing US-Japan Relations

How to then explain Japan's present behaviour? The DPJ government is still finding its feet. Since displacing LDP last year, the DPJ is struggling with issues of governance; balancing interests between various groups at home and overseas; and advancing its own political, economic and security agenda. At the same time, the DPJ government is attempting to distance itself from the previous LDP governments, as demonstrated by the Futenma base issue; the uncovering of the LDP's secret nuclear pact with the US; the withdrawal of the Japanese military mission from Afghanistan; as well as the push for stronger foreign relations with China and East Asia.

The DPJ government has repeatedly asserted its commitment to maintaining a strong partnership with the US. However, it is clear that the DPJ lacks experience managing this partnership – an experience the LDP governments cultivated for the past 60 years. After the present difficulties are overcome, both Japan and the US will learn to manage the relationship in the post-LDP era. Its importance to the US,

Japan and the rest of East Asia will also be reinforced. Indeed, the US will remain the core of Japanese foreign policy for many years to come.

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