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## **PRIME MINISTER ABE AND PRESIDENT OBAMA CAN STRENGTHEN THE ALLIANCE**

***Fumiaki Kubo***

It is well known that President Obama named Asia as America's top foreign-policy priority in announcing a major "pivot" or "rebalancing" toward Asia. Japan has naturally welcomed this policy.

*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.*

Reduced US defense spending is an issue of medium- to long-term importance for Japan. Should the compulsory across-the-board spending cuts scheduled for March 1 of this year go into effect, US government expenditures will be reduced by about \$1.2 trillion over ten years, with half of that amount to come from defense spending. There are some who contend there is little need for concern even if these cuts are made (see, for example, Peter Singer, “Separating Sequestration Facts from Fiction,” <http://www.brookings.edu/research/articles/2012/09/23-sequestration-defense-singer>). Nevertheless, Department of Defense officials have admitted that, if sequestration goes ahead, they would be unable to carry out the fiscal measures required for many aspects of the new Asia strategy (*The New York Times*, Nov. 18, 2012). The crux of the matter is whether the US will be able militarily to take the steps required to counter the unmistakable upgrades in Chinese military capabilities.

Japan needs to recognize that severe fiscal restrictions on US defense spending are likely to persist. No matter how the “fiscal cliff” is addressed, the outcome will only be the difference between a cliff and a very steep downhill, so the US military is seeking out of logical necessity to expand cooperative ties with its allies and partners in Asia. The question is whether Japan can act sufficiently in concert with the US.

From the Japanese standpoint, the territorial issues in the South China Sea and the Senkaku Islands pose qualitatively the same challenge, i.e., whether to tolerate an attempt to alter the status quo either by *faits accomplis* or force. The bedrock of the global order established after World War II was the view that such changes would not be tolerated, the fundamental principle being that dissatisfaction and disputes must be resolved peacefully through diplomatic negotiations.

This is also the principle that the US has clearly asserted since Secretary of State Clinton’s statement at the July 2010 ARF meeting. This insistence on peaceful dispute resolution has extremely universal appeal, and Japan can expect to enjoy broad-ranging support as long as it adopts this viewpoint in presenting its claims on the Senkaku issue. Although this view is

shared by the US, Australia, the Philippines, and others, it is not necessarily shared by Europe. From time to time, it seems that even American journalists have an incorrect understanding about the situation of the Senkaku Islands dispute as a result of accepting without question the official explanation of the Chinese government. More public relations activities will be required in this regard not just in Europe or Asia but also in the US (necessitating an increased budget for public relations). Incidentally, Japan has been working to resolve the Northern Territories and Takeshima issues entirely through negotiations, and in this sense Japan has been quite exemplary in its dealings on territorial issues.

The Obama administration initially adopted a softline policy of consultation and negotiation toward China, but eventually it came to embrace a view of China more hardline than those of its predecessors. The turning point was the speech by Secretary Clinton mentioned above. We are not sure how John Kerry, the new Secretary of State, regards China. He might be too prone to negotiation, or he might be too focused on the Middle East. North Korea could pose the first challenge for Secretary Kerry by conducting nuclear testing, but in the longer term China will serve as the test of whether his world view is realistic enough. At some point, President Obama may have to sit him down for a talk to make sure they share the same views on important foreign policy issues.

For the first time since the end of the Second World War, Japan faces the danger of armed clashes over territorial issues (the disputes over Takeshima and the Northern Territories, under South Korean and Russian administration respectively, do not risk sparking armed conflict since Japan is committed to settle these by negotiations, not force). The Abe administration must give careful attention to its policy toward China. Determined efforts to enhance security as well as changes to existing policies will undoubtedly be essential both to directly defend the Senkaku Islands and to counter the rapid improvement in Chinese military capabilities. Broad support and understanding for such steps will likely not be hard to find inside or outside Japan. Building up the Japan Coast Guard, increasing defense spending, bolstering Japan's Security Council, improving confidentiality law, and amending the government's interpretations of the right of

collective defense are among the approaches that should be pursued, approaches that will also be effective in bringing about closer ties with the US.

Particularly effective among these measures from a medium- to long-term perspective would be amending the long-standing interpretations by the Cabinet Legislative Bureau that the Japanese government cannot exercise the right of collective self-defense; this would dramatically expand the scope within which Japan can meaningfully support the US in security matters. Japan should be aware it can make a strong case that it is already a very important ally for the US and a cornerstone for US military deployment in Asia by providing the US the crucially important right to use military bases in Japan not just to defend Japan but also for “the peace and stability of the Far East.” If Japan makes up for the current weak spots in the current alliance by adopting the measures mentioned above, including the amended interpretation of the collective right to self-defense, it could enhance its value as an ally for the US.

There are other things, big and small, that Japan could do with the US. There could be closer cooperation between the Japan Coast Guard and the US Coast Guard, from exchanging expertise to placing American officers on Japanese ships as has been suggested by an American foreign policy expert (<http://www.tokyofoundation.org/en/articles/2013/extended-deterrence-and-security-in-east-asia>). Japan could take a huge step forward by deciding even now to join the Trans-Pacific Partnership. Reflecting on Japan’s post-war success, one cannot help but come to the conclusion that it was mostly an economic success, not a military success, attributable especially to trade in manufactured goods. The times have changed somewhat, but Japan’s future success still rests on engaging the outside world through trade and investment. By joining the TPP, Japan could contribute to the formation of the emerging economic order in the Asia-Pacific region as well as bolster the multilayered alliance in terms of security, politics, economics, culture, and values.

At the same time, the Abe administration risks injecting confusion and distraction into the message that Japan is seeking to convey to the rest of the world if the prime minister leads a headlong charge on the “comfort women” issue and other historical matters. Accurately conveying Japan’s position on the

“comfort women” issue to the rest of the world, while not impossible, is an extensive task that will take tremendous time and effort. Indeed, the topic should be left at least partially to joint research efforts among historians and similar endeavors. Mr. Abe could command the moral high ground by sticking to a message of peaceful solutions, the rule of law, and freedom of navigation that is applicable not just to the East China Sea but also to the South China Sea. His success will rest at least partially on whether he can establish clear priorities in his foreign policy agenda.✳

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