

Japan's new government seeks to refashion US alliance

John Chan**4 November 2009**

In the lead-up to US President Barack Obama's first visit to Japan on November 12-13, Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama has signalled that his government is seeking to readjust the country's longstanding alliance with the US. He told the Diet or parliament last week that the partnership should be more equal, with Japan able to "actively propose roles and concrete actions" for the alliance to perform.

Hatoyama and his Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) won office in national elections in August, ousting the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), which had held power for more than half a century with only a short break in 1993-94. Responding to popular opposition, the Democrats campaigned for an end to Japan's naval refuelling mission in support of the US-led occupation of Afghanistan and the renegotiation of an agreement to move US bases in Japan.

More broadly, however, the Democratic Party is seeking to reposition Japan to play a more assertive role in Asian and international politics. The US-Japan Security Treaty signed in 1951 was a Cold War pact, in which the US provided military protection from the former Soviet Union and China in return for Tokyo's unswerving support for Washington's foreign policy. The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the economic rise of China have dramatically altered the strategic equation.

In the course of the election campaign, Hatoyama, while reaffirming the alliance with the US, indicated that his government would seek better relations with China and South Korea. Since taking office, the Democrats have floated the idea of an East Asian community, loosely modelled on the European Union and eventually with its own currency. The idea was raised by Foreign Minister Katsuya Okada during a visit to Beijing in September and again by Hatoyama at the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) in Thailand on October 24-25.

To improve relations with China and South Korea, Hatoyama is attempting to defuse the issue of the Yasukuni war shrine. Visits by former Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi to this symbol of Japanese militarism provoked

sharp protests by China and South Korea. Hatoyama has pledged not to visit the Yasukuni shrine and also called for the establishment of an alternative, secular national war memorial to the Japanese war dead.

However, Japan's proposal for an East Asian community is fraught with difficulties. Any attempt to form a bloc without the US will create tensions between Tokyo and Washington. Moreover, even if a grouping is formed, rivalry over who will play the leading role—Japan or China—will continue.

These unresolved tensions were just below the surface at the ASEAN summit, which was followed by a meeting that included Japan, China and South Korea, as well as Australia, India and New Zealand. Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd reiterated his proposal for an Asian Pacific community by 2020—that would include the US. From Canberra's standpoint, such a move is aimed at easing tensions between Australia's largest economic partner—China—and its longstanding strategic ally—the US.

Hatoyama, however, was deliberately vague about any US involvement, not ruling it out so as not to alienate Washington, but not explicitly including it either. In opposition to China, Japan previously backed the expansion of the ASEAN+3 meetings, which involve China, Japan and South Korea, to include three American strategic partners—Australia, New Zealand and India. There is no doubt that Hatoyama views his plan as a vehicle for Japan to play a more prominent role in Asia.

China has cautiously endorsed Hatoyama's proposal, but emphasised the ASEAN+3 should be the core of any such plan. Indicating the concerns in Chinese ruling circles, Wu Huaizhong, a Chinese Academy of Social Sciences academic, wrote in the *Global Times* in September that Tokyo wanted a "Japan-led order in Asia" in competition with China. Wu commented that dragging "too many countries into it is not practical" and called on Tokyo to drop the "zero sum" mentality over whether Japan or China would be the dominant Asian power.

The collapse of the former Soviet Union in 1991 posed

new economic and strategic dilemmas for Japanese capitalism that were sharply underscored by Washington's insistence that Tokyo foot a large part of the bill for the Gulf War in 1990-91. Since then, successive Japanese governments have attempted to play a more assertive role internationally and free the military from the constraints of the country's so-called pacifist constitution.

Following the September 11 attacks on the US, Prime Minister Koizumi fully backed the Bush administration's "war on terror", sent a naval refuelling mission to support the US takeover of Afghanistan and contributed Japanese troops to the occupation of Iraq. At the same time, Koizumi adopted a more aggressive stance in North East Asia, fuelling tensions and border disputes with China and South Korea.

An overriding fear in Tokyo is that China's rapid economic rise is overshadowing Japan, which has stagnated for two decades. The global recession has only compounded the economic problems facing Japan. Some analysts predict that by 2010 or 2011 China will overtake Japan as the world's second largest economy—a position that Japan has held for more than 40 years. The relative decline of Japanese capitalism is also expressed in the *Forbes*' 2009 list of top 50 Asian corporations. Japan had 13 in 2005 but now has just 4. In the latest list, China has 16, along with 3 from Hong Kong and 5 from Taiwan.

At the same time, Japan views the closer integration of Asia, including China, as a means of solving its economic woes. China is now Japan's largest trading partner and the source of cheap labour for Japanese corporations. Japan came together with China and South Korea in May to organise a \$US120 billion currency swap initiative for countries in South East Asia. Both Japan and China are in the process of negotiating free trade agreements with ASEAN, which has set 2015 as the deadline for its own free trade bloc.

Hatoyama's proposal for an East Asian community is thus an attempt to balance between various competing strategic interests and concerns in Tokyo. He is trying to mend relations with China and South Korea and adopt a more independent stance in relation to the Washington, while still maintaining the US alliance. Those contradictions are compounded by widespread opposition in Japan to the US-led occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq.

The Obama administration, which has made "reengagement" in Asia a priority, is unlikely to react positively to Hatoyama's initiatives. The *Wall Street Journal* last week underscored Japan's continuing strategic dependence on the US. Referring to Hatoyama's campaign pledge "to put more distance between Japan and the US", the article bluntly pointed to North Korea's nuclear program

and China's growing military might, commenting: "Does he think diplomacy alone can keep Japan safe?"

In a similar vein, the *Financial Times* noted that the ASEAN summit and Obama's visit to Asia represent "a battle for influence" between US, China and Japan. "The onus is on Washington to act before the idea of a regional community without the US becomes established in Asia," it stated. In Tokyo, Obama is likely to pressure Hatoyama to continue to closely follow US foreign policy, warning that without Washington, Tokyo is not in a strong position to counter China's rising influence.

While the broader strategic discussion will be confined to closed-door meetings, two specific issues remain unresolved and may flare up publicly. In the course of the election, the Democrats pledged to end Japan's naval refuelling mission. However, even before the election was over, the DPJ was backtracking—pledging other forms of support for the US-led occupation of Afghanistan. While various proposals have been floated—including a \$5 billion aid package over five years—nothing has been finalised.

The Democrats have also called for the revision of a 2006 plan to restructure US military bases on Okinawa, particularly the relocation of the US Marine air base at Futenma. The Pentagon wants to move the base from its current urban location to a coastal area by 2014 and move some of the US Marines to Guam. US Defence Secretary Robert Gates, who visited Japan last month, again ruled out any renegotiation and urged Tokyo to agree before Obama arrived.

For Hatoyama to back down on either issue would result not only in a loss of support, but open up divisions in the Democrats and with their allies. The Democratic Party includes several former Socialist Party factions that have traditionally opposed the US-Japan Security Treaty and US bases in Japan. Consumer affairs minister Mizuho Fukushima, who is chairwoman of the Social Democratic Party, which is part of the ruling coalition, has called for the US bases to be removed from Okinawa altogether.



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