

Japan's foreign policy for a new age: Realistic realism

Special to The Asahi Shimbun

The administration led by the Democratic Party of Japan has experienced a torrent criticism over its foreign policy since taking power from the Liberal Democratic Party. The DPJ leadership has promised to exploit the opportunities of a changing international system and to pursue more autonomous foreign policy, different from that of the LDP perceived as over-dependent on the United States and fundamentally antagonistic toward China.

However, just over a year into the DPJ's first administration it might be possible to talk of the collapse of Japanese foreign policy. The DPJ government has managed the extraordinary feat of first alienating its U.S. ally over the issue of relocating the U.S. Marine Corps Air Station Futenma in a failed attempt to exert a more equal voice in alliance cooperation, but then of actually demonstrating increased dependence on the United States in the wake of Japan-China disputes in the East China Sea. Conversely, the DPJ has found itself unable to sustain a new cooperative relationship with China, as rivalries over territory and resources have remerged. The DPJ's foreign policy has remained mired in the same domestic constraints in regard to North Korea. Little progress has been made on the establishment of an East Asian community, and to boot Japan-Russia relations have regressed back to quarrels over the Northern Territories.

The LDP and other observers of Japanese foreign policy might like to argue that all this vindicates their suspicions of the ineptitude of the DPJ and its policy prescriptions. Japan, after the initial experiments of the DPJ, has now come to its senses, they argue, and is moving back to a more pragmatic policy line, accepting of the need to conform with the past trajectory of the LDP, and appropriately moving closer to the United States as an ally, or in other words is back on a course of "reluctant realism."

However, for the DPJ to continue to pursue this course would be not only to default to the LDP's foreign policy mistakes of the past, but also become unsustainable over the longer term. The LDP's "reluctant realism" under Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi and his successors were replete with short-sighted and impossible contradictions. The agreement over Futenma's relocation—adopted by the LDP and now by the DPJ—is just one glaring example of the Japanese and U.S. governments' refusal to frankly recognize domestic political realities and to think more inventively about how to restructure the alliance to ensure its legitimacy and future stability. More widely, the LDP's and now increasingly the DPJ's seeking for Japan of an enhanced foreign policy presence mainly through the mechanism of the Japan-U.S. alliance is a move which contains the seeds of its own failure. For the more that Japan defaults to ready dependence on the United States in security and foreign policy, the more that will simply compound Japanese concerns over the risks of entrapment and abandonment by its ally over issues such as North Korea and the East China Sea, and the more that this will frustrate Japanese ambitions as a major power and engender mutual suspicions within the alliance and thus weaken its basis.

I call this defaulting on dependence on the United States not "reluctant realism," but "resentful realism," characterized by increasing



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Japanese paranoia about U.S. intentions, and Japanese cantankerousness and unpredictably, all of which is ultimately destabilizing for Japan-U.S. ties and for the wider East Asia region. Clearly neither "reluctant realism" nor "resentful realism" is sustainable solutions to Japan's foreign policy predicament.

Instead, I would advocate that Japan should return to pursuing a course of "realistic realism." Japanese policymakers, whether in the LDP or DPJ, need to perceive the international situation, Japan's power capabilities, and

its essential interests, much more clearly than in recent years. Japan should not just recognize that, as it has intimated in the recent review of the National Defense Program Guidelines, U.S. unipolarity is giving way to multipolarity in East Asia, but also have the strength of conviction to act upon this. Japan should, of course, continue to maintain its alliance with the United States because of shared security and economic interests, and hopefully shared values as well. At the same time, though, Japan must be prepared to stand up to the United States on key questions where a sense of realistic realism is giving way to reluctant or resentful realism. This may include Futenma or future entanglement in U.S. military adventurism. As we have discovered in Britain following wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, too much fawning to the United States as a hoped for means to exert influence can in the end actually make you less indispensable to the United States as an ally, and sometimes the best way to be a friend to the United States is to reject its wilder advances. Even more importantly, Japan must act in a serious fashion, rather than the current dalliance, to complement, and when necessary counter-balance, the Japan-U.S. relationship by strengthening other key strategic relations with a variety of rising and smaller powers. Japan has to find ways to co-exist with China, but its relations with China cannot be managed as currently through the Japan-U.S. alliance or attempts at trilateralism alone. For Japan the key to a long-term relationship with China, free of major frictions, if not totally free of strategic competition, must lie in efforts to embed its rising power within functioning East Asian regionalism.

Hence, Japan must redouble its efforts, and very long-term they must be, in building multilateralism and the East Asian community project.

The good news for the DPJ is that its foreign policy vision at least is not far from this type of 'realistic realism.' The DPJ has been willing to question all types of past taboos in foreign and security policy set up by the LDP. The obvious problem has been that the DPJ has simply been unable to implement its vision. In part, this is understandable due to lack of experience and its domestic political problems. But if the DPJ really is to succeed in adapting Japan's foreign policy to the emerging changes in the international system, then it must wean itself off the easy dependency on the United States and have the courage of its convictions to strike out on a new path. One thing for certain is that the current policy path, whilst easy over the short-term, is unsustainable and doomed to failure of the longer term.

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