Japan, the US Alliance and Asia

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INTRODUCTION

Japan’s security policy has undergone a remarkable transformation over the past decade, from the reforms of the Koizumi administration to the tumult of the current Kan government.

The debates during this period have been focused on an overriding policy dilemma: how to balance the tensions between Japan’s increasingly important relations with Asia and its long-standing alliance with the United States.

Much of Japan’s security discourse over this period, however, has been characterized by confusion and self-defeating paralysis. Unless Japan can come to terms with its middle-power status, it will continue to struggle with these tensions and remain vulnerable to irrational swings between bilateral and regional aspirations.

The regional and global context has further added to the drama and urgency of Japan’s security shift, with the rise of China and the continued menace of North Korea forcing Japan to critically re-examine its regional and global foreign and security policies.

Japan itself has also been additionally destabilized by the triple emergency of March 2011. While a fierce focus on domestic problems can be expected in the short term in the aftermath of the earthquake, tsunami, and radiation leaks from Fukushima, the underlying concern with Japan’s existential dilemma in the realm of foreign and security policies will persist and can be expected to intensify.

Key policy questions for the region, therefore, concern: (1) the factors driving Japan’s new regional foreign and security policy thinking; and (2) the extent to which Japan’s shifting perspectives on multilateralism and security can be accommodated within the US–Japan alliance.

ASIA VERSUS AMERICA

In its early forays into regional multilateralism, for instance under the Fukuda doctrine of the 1970s, Japan’s leaders combined a clear notion of identity politics (Japan as an Asian nation) with a desire to initiate, and later in Koizumi’s case even lead, regional community-building. The alliance with the US was not excluded from these attempts at vision-building but was moved from the centre to the periphery when Asian community-creation was discussed.

Koizumi, prime minister between 2001 and 2006, made an attempt to attach his name to Asia-first diplomacy, especially with a 2002
speech in Singapore calling for community-building in Asia. However, Koizumi sabotaged his own initiative through his repeated visits to the Yasukuni Shrine, which regional counterparts took as a sign that he was not yet attuned to regional feeling.

Koizumi’s successor Shinzo Abe is often portrayed as a conviction neo-nationalist politician whose hyperactive but brief term in office was remarkable for his attack on the icons of postwar Japanese political life: the pacifist constitution and education. But the advent of Abe can also be seen as laying the groundwork for Japan’s relative distancing from the US. Analysts have judged Abe as a driven individual who took on the unfinished business of Koizumi’s term, when precedent-breaking security policy and behavior was not institutionalized through revision of the 1947 Japanese Constitution. Abe’s rationalization of his attempt to legitimate collective self-defense through constitutional revision became the formula for the subsequent expressions of distancing from the US concurrent with the privileging of Asia-first diplomacy.

THE NEW DPJ

Japan’s diplomacy took a back seat as the LDP entered its death throes as a ruling party. However, the election of Yukio Hatoyama as the first prime minister of a DPJ-led government in August 2009 heralded a new and reckless configuration of distancing from the US accompanied by Asia-first diplomacy.

Hatoyama’s vision of an East Asian Community sounded familiar in that it was phrased in terms of identity politics, presenting Japan as an Asian nation that had a role in defining and leading the institutionalization of East Asian security.

Under Hatoyama, Asian identity was juxtaposed with Japan’s status as an alliance partner. The new DPJ prime minister declared that the era of US unipolarity was coming to an end and that the age of Asian multipolarity had arrived.

In the name of seeking greater “equality” in the relationship with the US, Japan under the Hatoyama Cabinet embarked on a destructive course of questioning the 2006 roadmap for the realignment of US forces within Okinawa, proposing the renegotiation of the Status of Forces Agreement, and feeding public dissatisfaction with the amount Japan was paying to host US bases.

None of this was a total surprise for US policymakers, who had tracked the imminent demise of the LDP and assessed the implications of a DPJ government before Hatoyama made his reckless promise to the people of Okinawa to rid the island of American troops.

Hatoyama’s successor, Naoto Kan, rapidly backtracked in a spectacular fashion, supporting US membership of the East Asia Summit and openly welcoming the US as a member of any new regional grouping.

But Kan’s seemingly pro-US stance has not led to a breakthrough in the Okinawa
nawa bases issue and cannot be taken as indicative of a full rebuttal of Hatoyama’s Asia-first diplomacy. Moreover, following the collision between a Chinese trawler and a Japanese Coast Guard vessel in the vicinity of the Senkaku Islands in September 2010, Japan-based commentators professed dismay at how long it took the US to reaffirm that the Senkaku Islands fell under the auspices of the Japan–US Security Treaty (Article 5).

JAPAN’S STRATEGIC DISCOURSE

Attempts to portray an integrated picture of Japan’s strategic outlook often lead to a vision that has little of substance and is confused and self-defeating. Multiple doubts that pervade official thinking on matters of policy outlook imply that Japan is undergoing a kind of national identity crisis as it questions its foreign and security policy future.

What Japan is seeking in its turn towards Asian multilateralism, and its turn away from a confined manifestation of bilateralism with the US, is as much a matter of self-interrogation as it is a critical questioning of its international policy.

Japan’s self-made predicament is as follows:

(1) Japan is unable to embrace the self-image of middle power

(2) This has led Japan into the subjective arena of national identity projection instead of clear strategic planning

(3) Unless Japan wholeheartedly and strategically adopts a middle power role and repositions itself within the US alliance through this policy framework, the tension between adopting Asia-first diplomacy or distancing from the US, and the need for protection under the US nuclear umbrella, will lead to further irrational challenges to the US-Japan alliance.

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Please cite as: Kersten, Rikki (2011) “Japan, the US Alliance and Asia,” ANU–MASI Policy Background Paper, No. 1, 1 August.