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## REASSURING PRESENCE JAPANESE ASSESSMENTS OF U.S. POWER

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Japan has historically been highly attuned to the distribution of power in the international system. For almost two millennia, Japanese strategy has been to bandwagon with the world's leading power while seeking greater freedom of maneuver within Asia. Until the eighteenth century that power was China. As the Qing Empire was collapsing at the end of the nineteenth century, Japan aligned with Great Britain in a bilateral alliance from 1902 to 1922. From 1940 to 1945 Japanese strategic thinkers mistakenly assumed that the world's leading power in the West would be Nazi Germany. Since World War II, Japan has aligned with and accommodated to U.S. global power.

Japanese debates about U.S. power in the postwar period are therefore fundamentally debates about the orientation of Japanese foreign policy itself. Assessments of U.S. power pass through two other prisms in Japanese political discourse as a result. The first prism is the entrapment-versus-abandonment dilemma faced by smaller alliance partners since the time of Thucydides: namely, how can Japan avoid becoming so close to the United States that Washington dictates its foreign and economic policies, but avoid becoming so separated from U.S. power that it loses the benefits of protection by the United States. The second prism is Japan's conflicted identity between East and West—is Japan an Asian power trying to influence the international system . . . a Western power trying to influence Asia . . . or a bridge between East and West? Japanese assessments of U.S. power are frequently articulated in ways that reflect the observers' perspectives on these questions. Conclusions drawn about U.S. power shape the outcome of these secondary debates and the balance of power among different schools of thought within Japan.

### Expectations of American Power

The 2009 CSIS survey of strategic elites in nine nations in Asia and the Pacific provided one useful snapshot of Japanese expectations about the future of U.S. power. When asked which nation would be most powerful in Asia in ten years, 73 percent of the Japanese respondents answered "China" and only 23 percent answered "United States." However, when asked which nation would be most important to Japan in ten years, 57 percent of the Japanese respondents answered "United States" while only 34 percent chose "China." The reason was obvious in subsequent questions in which 59 percent said that in ten years the United States would still be the greatest force for peace and stability in Asia, and 51 percent said that China would be the greatest threat to peace and stability in the region. When asked what they expected the most effective deterrent against attack on their country to be in ten years, 54 percent of the Japanese respondents chose the "alliance with the



United States,” while only 19 percent answered “Japan’s own military power,” and a paltry 3 percent pointed to regional multilateral institutions.<sup>1</sup>

In summary, the view of Japan’s strategic elite and general public appears to be that U.S. power is in relative decline—but not as rapidly as Japan’s own power—and, because China remains a major source of uncertainty, Japan is becoming more dependent on U.S. power, not less so, even as the Japanese economy becomes more dependent on China for growth.

This growing security dependence on the United States and economic dependence on China are deeply discomfiting for a nation that has struggled for decades with the entrapment-versus-abandonment dilemma and the identity conflict between East and West. The new Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) government tried under the cabinet of Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama (2008–2009) to tap into this discomfort with a populist political narrative that emphasized movement toward China to counterbalance the United States. Hatoyama’s vision turned out to be a complete political disaster for the DPJ, however, because it was out of line with the underlying realism of the Japanese public. In Japanese government polls taken in 2009, for example, 66.6 percent of respondents said that they did not feel close to China, and 71.9 percent rejected the idea of an alliance with Beijing. In the same poll, 73 percent said that they felt close to the United States, and 76.4 percent said that the U.S.-Japan alliance was useful for Japan.<sup>2</sup> Favorable attitudes

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1. Bates Gill, Michael Green, Kiyoto Tsuji, and William Watts, *Strategic Views on Asian Regionalism: Survey Results and Analysis* (Washington: D.C.: CSIS, 2009).

2. See “Kenpo kaisei ‘sansei’ 51.6 percent, futatabi tasuu simeru, Yomiuri Yoron Chosa [51.6 percent says “yes” for constitutional revision: Majority favors it, Yomiuri opinion poll],” *Yomiuri Shimbun*, April 3, 2009, [www.yomiuri.co.jp/politics/news/20090403-OYT1T00006.htm](http://www.yomiuri.co.jp/politics/news/20090403-OYT1T00006.htm).

about the United States in Japan even increased in 2010, as shown in polling by Pew and other organizations.<sup>3</sup> In January 2011 polls taken by *Yomiuri* and Gallup, an unprecedented 87 percent of Japanese say that they “do not trust China.”<sup>4</sup>

Elite commentary in the Japanese media also tends to acknowledge the decline of U.S. relative power in the international system. Many mainstream commentators also point out, however, that the United States retains unique strengths in terms of military power, technology, and political openness and that China or other rising powers will not be able to replicate those strengths.<sup>5</sup>

## Measures of American Power

Japanese scholarly work, government reports, and feature articles in the leading media tend to measure U.S. power in four broad categories:

### Statecraft

**Stewardship of international institutions.** Japan’s international position relies heavily on U.S. leadership in international organizations. It was U.S. sponsorship that led Japan from being an enemy of the United Nations to being the UN’s second-largest financial supporter and the second-ranked power in the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). The U.S. commitment to international organizations also provides an avenue for Japanese “binding” of U.S. power. The prevailing view in Japan is that the democratization of global institutions (such as the shift from the Group of Seven [G-7] to the Group of 20 [G-20]) is both inevitable and bad for Japan’s own influence. In recent years, Japan has hewn more closely to the U.S. position within the G-7, World Bank, and IMF on key issues such as the millennium challenge goals and expansion of Asian membership. Commentators generally give the Bush and Obama administrations high marks for managing the G-7 and G-20 meetings but are pessimistic about the ability of the United States to maintain control over the agenda and shape positive outcomes in the longer term.<sup>6</sup>

**Managing the balance of power in Asia.** Japanese strategic elites are also highly sensitive to perceived changes in U.S. grand strategy in Asia. They are most at ease with a U.S. approach that emphasizes cooperation with the maritime democracies and maintenance of the balance of power, and they are most apprehensive about U.S. strategies that shift to continental powers or a concert of power with China at Japan’s expense. The phrase “Japan-passing,” coined after President Bill Clinton flew over Japan in 1998 for a ten-day visit to China, is now part of the vernacular in the

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3. “Nicchu Kankei ‘Yoi’ Nihon 45 percent, Chugoku 50 percent,” *Yomiuri Shimbun*, December 8, 2009, [www.yomiuri.co.jp/world/news/20091208-OYT1T00061.htm](http://www.yomiuri.co.jp/world/news/20091208-OYT1T00061.htm).

4. “40% Consider Japan-U.S. Ties ‘Poor,’” *Yomiuri Shimbun*, December 23, 2010, [www.yomiuri.co.jp/dy/national/T101222005020.htm](http://www.yomiuri.co.jp/dy/national/T101222005020.htm).

5. See, for example, Kitaoka Shinichi, “Shuyou Kokukan Kyougi no Jidai ni okeru Nihon no Sekum [Japan’s obligation in an age of multilateral cooperation],” *Chuokoron*, February 2009; Nakanishi Hiroshi, “Kokusai Shakai wo Mochiukeru Kinkou to Atsureki no Hanseiki [The next half century of balance of power politics facing the international society],” *Chuokoron*, February 2009; Kato Ryoza, “Kawarikyuku Amerika to Nichibei Gaiko no Yukue [A changing America and the direction of U.S.-Japan foreign relations],” *Ronza*, October 2008.

6. See, for example, Tanaka Hitoshi, “The Crisis of Global Governance and the Rise of East Asia,” *East Asian Insights* 2, no. 4 (September 2008).

Japanese language. In other words, the U.S. ability to maintain a favorable strategic equilibrium in Asia through statecraft is seen as an instrument of U.S. power, while pursuit of a concert of power or bipolar condominium with China is seen as a sign of relative U.S. weakness. There is, of course, a point at which overly aggressive U.S. balancing behavior can provoke Japanese concern about entrapment, but in recent years most of Japan's concern has been about abandonment.

## Military Power

**Conventional forward presence.** To Japanese observers in the national security realm, U.S. forward military presence constitutes the most visible demonstration of U.S. power in the Pacific. The Japan Ministry of Defense has declared that U.S. aircraft carriers are the core capability of importance to Japan,<sup>7</sup> reflecting Japan's heavy dependence on open sea lanes of communication. The prospect of ballistic missile capabilities of the People's Liberation Army threatening U.S. carriers has begun to creep into the discussions of senior uniformed and civilian officials, as has concern that the U.S. Navy could be reduced from its current level of 282 ships to somewhere closer to 250 ships in the coming years. U.S. Air Force assets in Japan also constitute an important measurement of U.S. power, and it is clear that Japanese officials up to the level of prime minister have noted the qualitative leap in capabilities represented by fifth-generation fighters like the F-22 and F-35. There are concerns, however, that air assets can be more easily diverted from the western Pacific. There is less agreement among the strategic elite or the public with respect to the utility of the U.S. Marine Corps presence in Okinawa, but the mainstream view among officials, uniformed officers, and increasingly the DPJ leadership is that withdrawal of the Marines at this point would undermine deterrence.

**Nuclear weapons and extended deterrence.** Japanese scholars and officials are focused increasingly on U.S. declaratory policy, will power, and capabilities with respect to nuclear weapons and extended deterrence.<sup>8</sup> As the U.S. government prepared for the 2010 nuclear posture review (NPR), there was significant anxiety among Japanese scholars, politicians, and officials about U.S. views on the decreasing importance of nuclear weapons in the overall approach to extended deterrence. Much of that anxiety has subsided, in large part because of effective bilateral U.S.-Japan coordination during the NPR. Now, however, the U.S. nuclear arsenal is a focus of scholarly and official attention in Japan and is seen as one important measure of U.S. power and commitment in a way that was true for only the smallest handful of Japanese officials during the Cold War. For similar reasons, Japanese scholars, officials, and politicians are focusing on the effectiveness of missile defense, in terms of both technical capabilities and U.S. commitment to programmatic development. It should be noted, of course, that even as key Japanese officials and political leaders focus with increasing intensity on the credibility of U.S. extended deterrence, the vast majority of the Japanese public continues to hold strong views against nuclear weapons and aspires to a nuclear-free world.

**Iraq and Afghanistan.** After the forward conventional presence and the credibility of the U.S. nuclear deterrence, the area on which Japanese strategic elites appear to focus most in measuring

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7. Ministry of Defense, *Defense of Japan* (Tokyo: Ministry of Defense, 2009), p. 246.

8. For more, see Michael J. Green and Katsuhisa Furukawa, "Japan: New Nuclear Realism," in *The Long Shadow: Nuclear Weapons and Security in 21st Century Asia*, ed. Muthiah Alagappa (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008); also see Okada Katsuya, foreign minister of Japan (testimony to Foreign Affairs Committee, April 14, 2010; testimony before Diet Accounting Committee, April 12, 2010).

U.S. military power would be combat operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq seem less immediate to most of the Japanese public, but among the core group of strategic elites in the Foreign Ministry and Japan's Ministry of Defense and at senior political levels there is an understanding that U.S. setbacks in Iraq and Afghanistan would weaken overall U.S. leadership in the international system to Japan's detriment.<sup>9</sup> This is one reason why Japan remains the second-largest contributor of aid to both Afghanistan and Iraq (the other being a desire to retain U.S. support for security challenges in East Asia). That said, there is surprisingly little commentary even among national security realists about the strategic implications for Japan of U.S. success in Iraq and Afghanistan, beyond the immediate and obvious fact that the conflicts divert U.S. resources and attention from Asia. When politicians discuss the merits of economic assistance in those conflicts, it is usually phrased in vague terms about making an appropriate "international contribution."

**Korean Peninsula.** For centuries Japanese strategy has been shaped by developments on the Korean Peninsula, which the Meiji leader Yamagata Aritomo famously called a "dagger aimed at the heart of Japan." Japanese expansion before the Second World War was driven primarily by the desire to gain a line of "maximum advantage" over the peninsula, and Japan's postwar policy toward the United States has focused on ensuring a strong U.S. military presence in the Republic of Korea (ROK). The withdrawal of one combat brigade from the Second Infantry Division in 2004 evinced surprisingly little Japanese reaction, however, in spite of the fact that it coincided with increasing hostility between Tokyo and Pyongyang. In contrast, the robust schedule of U.S.-ROK military exercises that followed the North Korean sinking of the South Korean corvette *Cheonan* in 2010 was well received by the Japanese government and media. Overall, U.S. concessions toward Pyongyang are often replayed within Japanese elite circles as evidence of a flagging U.S. commitment to security in Asia (and as evidence of abandonment).

**Intentions over capabilities?** Publicly available Japanese strategic assessments of U.S. military power in the Pacific are striking in that most of the focus is on U.S. intentions and not capabilities per se (except to the extent that U.S. policy outcomes seem to reflect resource shortcomings). For example, the declaratory policy in the NPR ultimately proved more important to reassuring Japanese observers about the credibility of U.S. extended deterrence than did the actual weapons modernization plans for nuclear warheads or decisions on specific systems. Similarly, the robust exercise schedule after the *Cheonan* incident appears to have made more of an impression than reports about the likely size of the U.S. Navy.

## Economic Power

**Hegemony of the dollar.** Japanese Finance Ministry officials came to the view in the 1990s that Japan could solve its entrapment-versus-abandonment dilemma by lessening Japanese dependence on the dollar. Those visions have dimmed but have not died with the weakening of the Japanese economy. Today there is both a broad consensus among experts in Japan that the dollar's position is under threat and a division about the durability of dollar hegemony. On one side economists argue that (1) there is no viable alternative to the dollar in Europe or Asia, (2) U.S. military dominance will underpin the dollar's security well into the future, and (3) the U.S. economy can

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9. See, for example, National Institute for Defense Studies, *East Asian Strategic Review 2010* (Tokyo: National Institute for Defense Studies, 2010), pp. 230–231.

revive through dollar depreciation.<sup>10</sup> On the other side of the debate, the argument runs that U.S. fiscal deficits will lead to a crisis in the dollar and constrain the ability of policymakers to inject huge stimulus spending into the economy next time around. The alternative or hedge in this line of reasoning would be to establish special drawing rights (SDRs) backed by the IMF.<sup>11</sup>

**Underlying competitiveness of the U.S. economy.** In the 2009 survey by the Pew Global Attitudes Project the Japanese public gave the Obama administration's response to the financial crisis a far better assessment than Americans did, with 62 percent of Japanese respondents approving the Obama economic policies. However, there is also a broad view among Japanese economic experts in the public domain that the U.S. economic policies of low interest rates and Keynesian-style stimulus packages will not work as effectively as the U.S. government expects. The Cabinet Office put it politely by stating in its 2010 white paper that the government had "concerns" about the health of the U.S. economy after the major effects of the stimulus package wear off. The government assessment also noted that since the 1970s the growth of disposable income has not matched the growth of housing, medical, and educational expenses in the United States. Japanese economists have focused more concretely in their public writings on the high level of household debt in the United States and the weakness of the underlying U.S. economy without the bubble of the financial services sector.<sup>12</sup> Optimists are part of this mix as well, of course, and they note that the United States will be positioned to maintain its top economic position because it is an open, democratic, multiethnic, and resource-rich country with unmatched capacity for innovation in the information technology sector.

**Trade.** Japan was acutely sensitive to possible U.S. protectionist trends through the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s. Today there is strikingly less concern about protectionism or interest in the topic because Japanese multinational corporations now have major production networks already inside the United States and are looking to Asia for future growth opportunities. In terms of free trade negotiations, this has meant that the Japanese business community has had more interest in free trade agreements (FTAs) with Europe, where tariffs still remain a problem, or with South-east Asia, where FTAs would help resolve behind-the-border barriers to further Japanese exports

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10. See, for example, Iwai Katuhito, "Kahei Keizai to Sabu Puraimu Mondai no Honshitsu [The reality of the monetary system and the subprime crisis]," *Economisto*, September 9, 2008, pp. 22–23; Kobayashi Keiichiro, "Lehman Brothers Hatan jo, Beikoku Kinyu Kiki to Kijiku Tsuka Sisutem no Yukue [The Lehman Brothers collapse and the future of the currency system after the financial crisis]," Research Institute on Economics, Trade, and Industry (RIETI), September 18, 2008; Gyohten Toyoo, "Interview," *Toyo Keizai*, August 9, 2008.

11. See, for example, Mizuno Kazuo, "Beikoku no Rakujitsu, Yagate Kuru Doru Kiki [The decline of the United States—Coming of age of the dollar crisis]," *Economisto*, September 23, 2008, pp. 24–77; Mizuno Kazuo, "Bei Toushi Ginko no Hatan Wa Doru Honi Sei no Houkai wo Imi Suru [The collapse of U.S. investment banks means the end of the dollar-centered monetary system]," *Economisto*, December 2, 2008, pp. 28–29; Date Katsuhito, "Shin no Doru Kiki Wa Mada Saki [The real dollar crisis has yet to come]," *Nikkei Business*, January 26, 2009, pp. 82–84.

12. See, for example, Fujita Masahisa and Kobayashi Keiichiro, "Bei Keizai mo Balance Sheet no Wana ni [The U.S. economy is also trapped by balance sheet impairment]," *Nihon Keizai Shimbun*, January 30, 2010; Obata Seki, "Obama no Sekkyoku Zaisei de Kiki Ha Ichidan to Fukumaru [Obama's aggressive stimulus package will deepen the crisis]," *Toyo Keizai*, February 14, 2009; Takada Hajime, "Beikoku no Kozo Chosei ha Chokika—Choki Kinri Niha Nao Teika Yochi [The restructuring of the U.S. economy will take more time—Long-term interest rates might decline even more]," *Toyo Keizai*, October 3, 2009, pp. 26–27; Shirakawa Horimichi, "Kinyu Baburu naki Beikoku Seicho Ryoku no Danka [U.S. potential economic growth will be slowed without the bubble in the financial sector]," *Economisto*, January 5, 2010, pp. 23–24.

and investment. There is some interest in a U.S.-Japan bilateral economic partnership agreement (EPA) and also in joining with the United States in negotiations over the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), but primarily these are viewed as necessary strategic underpinnings to the alliance and a trans-Pacific open trading architecture in the future. Japanese leaders have been less outspoken on the need for U.S. leadership in formulating a trade architecture in Asia than have Australian, Korean, or Singaporean leaders. In part this also reflects Japanese politicians' ambivalence about any pressure to open their own agricultural markets.

## Soft Power

Japanese intellectuals have been intrigued by the concept of soft power, as one might expect in a nation where traditional military power instruments are constrained and economic instruments are less effective. The Chicago Council on Global Affairs 2008 survey on soft power in Asia found that the Japanese public rates U.S. soft power the highest in Asia, at 0.69 (on a 0 to 1 scale) compared with 0.56 for Korea and 0.51 for China. U.S. cultural influence was seen as the strongest of any country in the world in the same survey, and 83 percent of Japanese thought U.S. cultural influence was positive.<sup>13</sup>

## Hedging Strategies

Japan has hedged against the possibility of entrapment or abandonment by the United States since the occupation of Japan began in August 1945. The unique feature of Japanese hedging behavior today is that it is directed against three variables: the relative decline of U.S. power, the more accelerated relative decline of Japanese power, and the increase in Chinese power. Most Japanese hedging behavior remains at the margins of a core foreign policy alignment with the United States. Significant departures in these hedging strategies would indicate a pronounced loss of confidence in U.S. power.

## Multilateralism

Japan has relied on international organizations such as the UN and the World Trade Organization both to constrain U.S. unilateral action and to contribute to the U.S.-led international order from a more independent stance. That said, a collapse of U.S. power would render these international organizations far less effective and not much use as a hedge. Japan has also embraced East Asian regionalism during the past 15 years in the hopes of shaping and constraining both Chinese and American behavior. However, the 2009 CSIS survey of strategic elites in Japan suggested there is declining confidence that the region's nascent institutional architecture would provide much in the way of public goods or real security.<sup>14</sup>

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13. Christopher B. Whitney and David Shambaugh, *Soft Power in Asia: Results of a 2008 Multinational Survey of Public Opinion* (Chicago: Chicago Council on Global Affairs, 2009); for more on Japanese views of soft power, see U.S.-Japan Conference in Cultural and Educational Interchange (CULCON), Fulbright Japan, Japan Foundation, and Japan-U.S. Friendship Commission, *Japan & US Soft Power: Addressing Global Challenges* (Tokyo: Japan CULCON Secretariat, The Japan Foundation, June 12, 2009), [www.jpfc.go.jp/culcon/fulbright-culcon/dl/softpower\\_report.pdf](http://www.jpfc.go.jp/culcon/fulbright-culcon/dl/softpower_report.pdf).

14. Gill et al., *Strategic Views on Asian Regionalism*.

Moreover, the decision by the Naoto Kan government in November 2009 to embrace the TPP as the centerpiece of its international economic strategy revealed how fleeting Hatoyama's flirtation with Asian-only architecture really was. Participation in TPP would link Japan to the United States, Australia, and other advanced economies through a high-level FTA (resulting in tariff reductions of more than 90 percent) and would position Japan to engage in trade negotiations with China together with other Asian member countries of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development.<sup>15</sup>

## Bandwagoning with China

Japan's historic default position is to bandwagon with the leading global hegemonic power. China is not likely to achieve that status for many decades to come, if ever, and Japanese strategic elites recognize this fact. For this reason, there is little evidence of Japanese bandwagoning behavior toward China in Asia. Even the Hatoyama government's political narrative about moving closer to China was aimed (in a misguided way) at counterbalancing U.S. influence on Japan, and not bandwagoning with China for safety against Chinese attack. If Japan began ceding territorial claims in the East China Sea or limiting U.S. basing rights in order to appease Beijing—that would be a different matter. In the wake of the September 2010 Sino-Japanese collision over the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyutai Islands, that bandwagoning scenario seems highly unlikely for the foreseeable future.

## External Balancing

One straightforward hedge against declining Japanese and U.S. power and increasing Chinese power is external balancing with other states concerned about the shifting strategic equilibrium. During the past decade, Japanese elites have rediscovered the great game and have signed security cooperation agreements with Australia and India, although closer alignment with Korea remains mired in historic animosities and complex domestic politics. Of these potential external strategic partners, Korea is the most important in terms of managing the threat to Japan from both Beijing and Pyongyang. Japan-Korea relations have been plagued by disputes over territorial issues (the Tokdo/Takeshima Islands) and interpretations of history (every spring new textbooks are published in Japan, and inevitably some downplay Japan's annexation of Korea, sparking strong reactions in Seoul). Despite these irritants, polls in both countries have shown steadily improving bilateral views as Japanese and Korean views of China and North Korea have deteriorated.

## Counterstrike Capabilities

Retaining or developing unilateral counterstrike capability is another often explored hedge in Japan. Japan retains a latent nuclear deterrent, and during the past decade government declaratory policy has slowly eroded the legal constraints posed by the constitution (for example, determining that preemptive strikes against enemy missile bases as a last resort before being attacked would legally constitute "self-defense"). That said, there is no pronounced change in Japanese procurement or defense planning that would suggest any serious operational push for an independent counter-

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15. The government of Japan had intended to make a final decision on TPP participation by June 2011, but that has been postponed in the wake of the Tohoku earthquake.



strike capability. If anything, the government has redoubled its focus on interoperability with the United States in the wake of the disastrous tenure of Prime Minister Hatoyama.

## Economic Hedging Strategies

Japanese corporations—like their U.S. counterparts—have been hedging against a slower U.S. market for years by moving to China, India, and other Asian economies despite the fact that the North American and European economies remain politically stable and reliable profit centers even as growth is shifting away from North America. Some Japanese economic nationalists have pushed for new SDRs in the IMF or increased currency swaps among Asian economies, but as a practical matter the Bank of Japan, the Ministry of Finance, and Japanese corporations continue trading in dollars and viewing the dollar as a safe investment. China's embargo of rare earth metals to Japan during the Sino-Japanese confrontation over the Senkaku/Diaoyutai Islands in September 2010 reinforced the diversification strategy of Japanese businesses away from investment in China. Thus, while Japanese business leaders continue seeing China as the market with the greatest growth potential, they also spend far more time devising hedging strategies to deal with protectionism or collapse in China than they do hedging against the United States.

## Impact of the “3-11” Tohoku Earthquake

Although analysts have just begun to examine the strategic implications of the earthquake, tsunami, and subsequent nuclear disaster that struck northeastern Japan on March 11, 2011, there is some evidence that the speed and scope of U.S. military relief efforts and Operation Tomodachi (Japanese for “friend”)—the largest bilateral humanitarian relief mission in the history of the alliance—have reaffirmed positive perceptions of U.S. power.<sup>16</sup> Bilateral coordination on humanitarian assistance and disaster response also serves to demonstrate the value of the alliance as a public good and could further enhance initiatives promoting interoperability and jointness across a broad range of operations. The presumed emphasis of the central government on reconstruction and economic recovery in the near term would suggest little progress on the impasse over the relocation of a U.S. Marine base on Okinawa—an irritant in the alliance—but the trend post-March 11 generally points to the benefits of Japan's security dependence on the United States.

Japan's relationships with other states in the region stand to improve in the short term as Chinese and South Korean offers of assistance could result in a temporary respite from the tensions that animate their respective bilateral relationships with Japan. However, the short-lived thaw in Sino-Japanese relations after the earthquake quickly melted with news that Chinese naval forces were aggressively maneuvering near Japanese vessels in the contested East China Sea. Prospects for changes in relations with Russia seem more enduring as both Tokyo and Moscow appear ready to temporarily set aside the Northern Territories dispute to promote liquefied natural gas exports as a potential substitute for nuclear power. Nonetheless, Japan's long-standing issues with neighboring countries that have heretofore complicated regional diplomacy will likely resurface, and fundamental changes in Japanese strategic calculations with respect to U.S. power appear unlikely.

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16. See, for example, Martin Fackler, “Rebuilding Lives and American Ties to Japan,” *New York Times*, March 22, 2011; also “Jieitai Haken: Gyōsei to Renkeishi Kōkateki Shienwo [Self Defense Forces dispatch: effective support through administration and coordination],” *Yomiuri Shimbun*, March 22, 2011.

## Conclusion: Much Attention to U.S. Power, but Little Change in Behavior—So Far

The bottom line is that Japanese elites remain highly attuned to the instruments of U.S. power and concerned about America's relative decline in power. But Japan is fundamentally a status quo power. If anything, Japanese foreign policy behavior has aimed to uphold the U.S.-led neoliberal order as the United States has faced mounting challenges; Japan has not tried to defect from that order. Moreover, assessments of U.S. *commitment* and *intentions* still appear to be at least as important to Japanese calculations as any absolute measures of U.S. economic, military, diplomatic, or soft power.

There are two conceivable “game changers” to this trend. The first would be pronounced U.S. accommodation to Chinese power in Asia. If the United States conceded maritime control over the “second island chain”<sup>17</sup> to China (through operational changes or formal agreement with respect to Taiwan's status or freedom of navigation for the U.S. Navy), Japanese strategy could move in a pronounced direction toward either bandwagoning with China or development of unilateral deterrence capabilities. This scenario would be inconsistent with 70 years of U.S. military and diplomatic strategy, and only the most provocative and nonmainstream Japanese observers predict this will happen.

The second game changer would be a further collapse of the Japanese economy. There is a broad consensus in the Diet that Japan needs to enact tax reform in order to deal with the looming fiscal and demographic crises, agricultural reform to engage in FTAs and expand exports, regulatory reform to revitalize competitiveness, and defense policy reform to remove anachronistic constraints on the Self-Defense Forces in an age of declining defense budgets. The good news in Japan—that the nation has a lot of wealth and high technology—serves as a disincentive for drastic reform. The unstable structure of Japan's current party politics and the weakness of its prime ministers also perversely motivate politicians to take populist stands and put off difficult decisions (with which they often agree). Without action, Japan will eventually run out of the domestic savings pool it relies on to service the nation's massive debt. The impact of such a fiscal meltdown would be difficult to predict. It could result in bold new leadership, demoralization and further insularity, or demagoguery and hypernationalism.

The historical pattern has been for Japanese elites to postpone serious institutional change until it is unavoidable and then embrace the change in order to restore national power and preserve the national polity against dangerous outside influences. For now, continued U.S. preeminence postpones those difficult decisions. Should a crisis strike Japan, the credibility of U.S. power and the U.S.-Japan alliance could prove the most important variables in determining what emerges in the next chapter of Japanese political history.

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17. The second island chain is the strategic defense line that runs from the Ogasawara Islands south to Guam, beyond the East China Sea. The first island chain runs from the Japanese archipelago to the South China Sea via Okinawa Prefecture and Taiwan.