

JAPAN CHAIR PLATFORM

March 15, 2013

Assessing the DPJ's Stewardship of the Alliance

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When Prime Minister Shinzo Abe ran for his party's leadership and then led his party to the polls, he attacked the then-governing Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) for poorly handling Japan's relations with the United States. Both during and after his summit with President Barack Obama, Abe even declared that with his return the U.S.-Japan alliance was finally restored to a solid footing after three years of DPJ rule. The argument is not new. Many journalists and academics on both sides of the Pacific have criticized the DPJ's handling of the alliance during its time in office. Yet a closer examination of the DPJ's three years in power shows that these criticisms are not entirely warranted. While the DPJ did cause significant strain in the alliance, the party deserves more credit than it has been given.

The DPJ's handling of the alliance had its problems but the primary cause of this was the first DPJ premier Yukio Hatoyama. Not only did Hatoyama stress closer relations with China as part of a strategy of moving closer to Asia—which made the United States feel uncomfortable—he supported an East Asian Community (EAC) which did not include the United States, thereby indicating a fundamental shift in Japan's foreign policy orientation away from the United States. Equally as damaging was his decision to renege on a 2006 agreement with the United States to relocate the Futenma airbase within Okinawa. Instead, he advocated it be moved off the island without an alternative, thereby falsely raising Okinawans' hopes for this solution. Additionally, he pledged to rethink the agreement to pay over \$6 billion for the transfer of 8,000 U.S. Marines to Guam, reduce Japan's monetary contributions to U.S. Forces Japan, renegotiate the Japan-U.S. Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA), and withdraw the Japanese naval refueling operation in the Indian Ocean supporting the United States (and others) conducting operations in Afghanistan. These policies poured cold water on alliance relations. Anxious of Japan's strategic direction under Hatoyama, trust between the allies was lost and the bond of friendship weakened.

This was not the case with Hatoyama's two successors Naoto Kan and Yoshihiko Noda. Both Kan and Noda shifted away from Hatoyama's ideas and moved Japan firmly back in line with the principles that guided the alliance under the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP). Importantly, they made significant moves to recover the lost trust and weakened bond of friendship.

Beginning with Kan, he should be given credit for making important policy shifts that returned the alliance back to its pre-Hatoyama footing. First and foremost, he shifted Japan's support back to the 2006 realignment agreement. Additionally, he dropped references to the EAC and renegotiating the SOFA, began advocating a U.S.-included East Asian Summit, and agreed to a new five-year treaty stipulating that Tokyo would maintain the annual costs of hosting U.S. bases at \$2.26 billion. Importantly, during his tenure, Japan's new National Defense Program Guidelines were released that clearly indicated the security challenges posed by China. In other words, Kan went to great lengths to make amends with the United States for the damage Hatoyama caused.

Importantly, while Kan himself cannot be attributed to its success, it was under his leadership that the United States and Japan successfully cooperated in Operation Tomodachi. In what was their first joint operation, over 20,000 U.S. servicemen and women worked side-by-side with over 100,000 Japanese soldiers to respond to the March 11 disasters. The operation not only demonstrated the enduring friendship that underlay the alliance, it also served to strengthen the bonds of the alliance on a soldier-to-soldier and citizen-to-citizen level and reaffirm trust in both capitals that the alliance can function in an emergency.

If Kan was responsible for putting alliance relations back on a solid footing, Noda deserves credit for strengthening it. His

achievements are numerous. Not only did he reaffirm Japan's commitment to the alliance, maintain a firm stance against China, continue to express commitment to the 2006 realignment agreement, promote security relations with key countries that the United States is also prioritizing in its rebalance to the Asia-Pacific region (i.e. Australia, India, Vietnam, Philippines), and strongly promote freedom of navigation in the South China Sea. He also expressed an interest in having Japan join the United States in Trans-Pacific Partnership negotiations, attempted to develop security relations with America's ally South Korea, and decided on billions of dollars in additional aid to Afghanistan post-2014 (making Japan the largest aid donor after the United States). Importantly, he made two decisions that demonstrated a forward-leaning stance in alliance relations.

The first is the relaxation of the 1967 arms export ban. Despite long-standing DPJ opposition, Noda relaxed the ban, thereby enabling Japan to participate in international joint development and production of military equipment and technology with other countries and export defense-related equipment to support peace-building or humanitarian objectives. The decision was warmly greeted in Washington as it enables Japan to participate in joint development projects with America and its NATO allies.

Second, Noda's cabinet chose to procure the Lockheed Martin F-35 Lightning II Joint Strike Fighters as its fifth generation jet fighter. This too was warmly greeted in Washington where, despite Tokyo's concern over delivery deadlines and price and cheaper and immediately available European options, Noda chose to stick with the F-35 strongly promoted by its ally. In so doing, he built upon the recovered trust and friendship to make important changes relevant to the alliance in the 21st century and, in the process, strengthen the alliance's interoperability capabilities.

Despite whatever criticisms people have of the DPJ, it is wrong to make Hatoyama's deleterious influence on the alliance synonymous with the DPJ's three years of alliance stewardship. It mischaracterizes the progress made by Kan and Noda and wrongly ignores the real bonds forged by U.S. soldiers during Operation Tomodachi. The changes Kan implemented were consequential in bringing the alliance back to its pre-Hatoyama status, and a case can be made that Noda strengthened the alliance to a level the LDP had not. Thus, contrary to the numerous arguments of how bad the DPJ was for the alliance, the friendship and bonds of trust between Tokyo and Washington had long returned to previous levels by the time Abe returned to the premiership. The DPJ's time in government had its problems, but its handling of the alliance was not entirely negative.

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