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From military alliance to total alliance

By Yoneyuki Sugita

The policy issues that are most critical for the Barack Obama administration are (A) handling the financial crisis and economic recession, (B) the “war against terrorism,” including the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Iraq and a troop surge in Afghanistan, and (C) building peace and stability in the Middle East.

President Obama places lower priority on U.S. policy toward East Asia. And in East Asia, it is not Japan, but China that preoccupies the U.S. As Secretary of State Hillary Clinton asserted in the journal *Foreign Affairs* in December 2007, while she was still a presidential candidate, “Our relationship with China will be the most important bilateral relationship in the world in this century.”

In light of this, in order to allay Japan’s concerns that the Obama administration thinks the country is relatively insignificant, the U.S. Department of State announced that Clinton would visit Japan from Feb 16 to 18, on her first official trip abroad as secretary of state. U.S. secretaries of state normally make their first visits to Europe or the Middle East, but Clinton’s choice of Asia, “is a tremendous signal of the importance of Asia to (the U.S.) foreign policy agenda,” said Robert Wood, State Department spokesman.

Japanese officials and the media were all thrilled about the decision. The Japanese tend to regard Clinton’s statement at a senate confirmation hearing on Jan 13 that “our alliance with Japan is a cornerstone of American policy in Asia, essential to maintaining peace and prosperity in the Asia-Pacific region, and based on shared values and mutual interests” as clear evidence that Washington will assign substantial importance to the U.S.-Japan alliance.

Clinton is surely paying Japan a certain amount of respect, but what she did not say is also pertinent. Clinton did not say that Japan was the most important country in East Asia, nor did she say that the U.S.-Japan relationship was the most important bilateral relationship. As for China, Clinton said in the same confirmation hearing, “China is a critically important actor in a changing global landscape.” In comparison with her words in *Foreign Affairs*, Clinton downplays her emphasis on the importance of China; nevertheless, she seems to indicate that China is as important as, if not more important than Japan.

Despite Clinton’s forthcoming trip, and the importance of the bilateral relationship with China, the Obama administration is busy addressing many other critical issues. It lacks the political will and the resources to dedicate to East Asia. President Obama is probably seeking to maintain the status quo and to expend as little energy as possible in this region.

In such circumstances, there is an excellent opportunity for Japan to change the nature and orientation of the U.S.-Japan alliance from a military-centered alliance to a “total alliance.”

Japan has been emphasizing the military aspect of the U.S.-Japan alliance: principally of strengthening the U.S.-Japan security treaty system under the protection of the U.S. nuclear umbrella. As long as Japan maintains this kind of mindset, it cannot break away from its heavy dependence on the United States. Emphasizing the non-military aspects that are inherently included in such a total alliance—issues concerning the environment, renewable energy, education, culture etc—will certainly provide a great opportunity to create a framework within which Japan can cooperate and coexist with the United States on a more equal basis.

It is quite fortunate that both the United States and Japan are willing to engage in shaping a post-Kyoto Protocol framework within which they seek to include China and India. Both the United States and Japan are actively looking for ways to reduce their dependence on oil from the Middle East, and to develop renewable energies. President Obama understands the importance of education. He also has a deep knowledge and experience of citizens’ movements and grass-roots activities.

The Japanese government should expand the horizons of the U.S.-Japan relationship focusing on

citizen-level public diplomacy, which enjoys a very broad base in Japan. It is up to Japan to take the initiative and adopt a new approach to the United States and to the evolution of the U.S.-Japan relationship.

The writer is associate professor of American history at Osaka University.

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[30061015](#) at 04:59 PM JST - 12th February

focusing on citizen-level public diplomacy

Who believes any of this dreamy dribble drabble? Public diplomacy in Japan is strictly the domain of floppy cartoon characters.



[apecNetworks](#) at 06:03 PM JST - 12th February

I can see the author, Yoneyuki Sugita's point of view. It was Sec. Clinton's husband's Administration who created the geopolitical (power structure) situation in the Asia Pacific, and

Japan can see that they can contribute to US needs more than before. If the PRC and the Russian Federation maintains their strategic partnership, and the US economic situation is bad, Japan can be instrumental in ameliorating the changing dynamics in the Asia Pacific. Japan has cash, technology and influence that can help the US go thru whatever ails them. Japan can be a mediator in possible conflict of interests which may arise among the emerging powers. Finally, Japan may be the only Asia Pacific power who has intimate knowledge of the nature of the economic crisis in the US. The US could use a hand during these trying times.



[Betting](#) at 12:30 AM JST - 13th February

Japan has had about 60 years to really sow things up with America, but it absolutely blew its chance. Time moves on and so do friendships. What does Japan offer America that China doesn't?



[Nordon](#) at 12:56 AM JST - 13th February

The article makes Japan read like a jealous girlfriend.



[OssanAmerica](#) at 02:20 AM JST - 13th February

What does Japan offer America that China doesn't?

For starters, Japan doesn't maintain a huge nuclear military that trains with the United States in mind as the enemy. We could go on ad infinitum on this one.



[TokyoHustla](#) at 04:30 AM JST - 13th February

This article is amazingly ignorant. Of course the US values Japan, that's why we're asking for Japan to move us to Guam, so we can defend Japan.



[mushroomcloud](#) at 11:53 AM JST - 13th February

This article is the perfect illustration of the insecurity Japan has due to China's rise.

With the whole world economy in the toilet, this is not the time to posture and divide, but to work together to solve this crisis. Meaning, the US really needs China to continue being their biggest creditor, along with Japan in 2nd place.



[grafton](#) at 10:32 PM JST - 13th February

What a totally meaningless article?

You start reading feeling that it is going to say something & finish realising that it never said anything. Did nobody think to read this before publishing it or did they read it & not understand it & so believed it must be profoundly clever?

Moderator: Why don't you state why you think it is meaningless?



[mushroomcloud](#) at 11:38 PM JST - 13th February

'Of course China is important to us, they are our most likely enemy in Asia. All the Asian nations that are allied with us do so because they are concerned about China.'

Yes, and most, if not all of the Asian nations allied with us also have China as their number 1 trading partner.



[OssanAmerica](#) at 04:15 AM JST - 14th February

Yes, and most, if not all of the Asian nations allied with us also have >China as their number 1 trading partner.

That's true. We trade with China too big time. But economics are economics, and security is security.



[toadold](#) at 04:29 AM JST - 14th February

In my opinion, Japan is more important than China to the US. It can be difficult to deal with but that is in a large part because it is a democracy. There are elements in the US that prefer dealing with dictatorships and oligarchies because it is "easier" and more straight forward to their minds. Japan's economy, strategic location, and its connections with the other countries of Asia make it important to the US. Free trade with Japan has helped US growth which is something that the populists in the US have trouble accepting. I like the Chinese people that I've met but to quote John Derbyshire, " I don't hate the Chinese Communist Party for what they have done to the West but for what they have done to their own people."



[mushroomcloud](#) at 05:05 AM JST - 14th February

'That's true. We trade with China too big time. But economics are economics, and security is security.'

Indeed, dead on right, Ossan.

The reason why China is more important to the United States: the US, in many ways, can control Japan as it is one of America's proxy states. China, on the other hand, is an independent state and is not under America's wing. Along with having a nuclear arsenal, largest ownership of US treasury debt, and 3rd largest economy (which will, within 2-3 years, be the 2nd largest, replacing Japan), it is a no brainer for the US to treat China with more importance than Japan. In addition, Japan lacks any strategic military power and has been a stagnant economic power for the past 20 years.

Shared values or not, Japan, as a benign, listless, and generally friendless power, cannot offer much to the United States other than exporting cars and providing funds to buy treasury bonds. Not sitting on the UNSC while China does exasperates the situation considerably. We have seen China out-manuever and surpass Japan in so many instances over the past 5 years. It is time for Japan to fully recognize that they cannot play in the big power leagues, rather, they should devote their energies with improving the lot of their enormous elderly population, and take a leadership role in providing clean energy technologies.



[illsayit](#) at 03:00 PM JST - 15th February

The thing is Japan can play in the big league, because it is only based on finances, basically. This is the problem all over. Nobody wants to work for their lifestyle. The political set-up has Japan close with the USA, but I wouldnt count on it being a proxy state of America. That would be impossible, unless America counts it'S balls to suggest as much, in league with the infantry.



[Betting](#) at 07:35 PM JST - 15th February

"For starters, Japan doesn't maintain a huge nuclear military that trains with the United States in mind as the enemy. We could go on ad infinitum on this one".

As I said, what does Japan have to offer that China doesn't? Plenty of countries have nuclear arsenals and aren't so friendly to the US, nothing new there but only stating the obvious.

I think Mushroom cloud summed it up fairly nicely.



[toguro](#) at 07:50 AM JST - 17th February

Betting: I agree with you, mushroomcloud said a mothfulland it was all correct. I still believe that Japan is a very important ally in the region, but facts are facts, and mushroomcloud stated them very well.



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