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America and Japan Approach a Rising China

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America's post–Cold War China policy was premised on the hope that multidimensional engagement with Beijing would result in a strong, rich, peaceful, and democratic China. Almost two decades later, America's attitude toward China reflects the fear that engagement has led instead to a China that is indeed stronger and richer, but still authoritarian. It appears increasingly likely that China will use its growing power to challenge American leadership in Asia. The United States and Japan can meet this challenge through greater military cooperation and by strengthening and supporting democratic ideals.

The Bush administration's China policy today looks like that adopted by the Clinton administration in its latter years. Although many in the foreign policy community mocked a late-1990s study by the RAND Corporation that proposed a policy of "congagement" (containment and engagement) with China,[1] the two administrations have followed just such a policy. America is heavily engaged with China economically, diplomatically, and culturally, but at the same time is trying to contain its regional and global ambitions. It appears that there is an underlying reality to relations with China that neither Republicans nor Democrats can avoid.

Picking up where Bill Clinton left off, George W. Bush has improved alliance relationships with Japan and Australia, bolstered defense ties with Taiwan, and opened new doors for partnerships with India and Vietnam. Bush's 2005 visit to Mongolia was not merely a scenic tour.

In addition, the Bush administration has engaged in intense diplomacy to convince Europe to maintain its arms embargo on China, and has pressured Israel to stop selling defense technologies to Beijing. Washington continues to ban the sale of U.S. military equipment to China, and may tighten the sale of the dual-use technology that has contributed to modernizing the People's Liberation Army. In short, while America encourages Chinese economic growth, it also works to minimize Beijing's capacity to build up its military.

When then–deputy secretary of state Robert B. Zoellick articulated the administration's vision of China as a "responsible stakeholder" in September 2005, he reaffirmed its commitment to engagement with China.[2] America envisions a substantial role for China in international politics, but hopes that it will be responsible by honoring its World Trade Organization commitments, cutting support to tyrannical regimes such as Iran and Sudan, working within the international energy market, and democratizing at home. President Bush and his advisors believe that through diplomacy they can convince Beijing to play that sort of international role and to commit to political reform.

But like his predecessors, Bush is not betting the future on his persuasive powers. Instead, the administration talks about "hedging" against darker future directions for Beijing. The administration's efforts to bolster alliances and partnerships and its shifting of greater military capability from the Atlantic to the Pacific Ocean is considered a hedge against a stronger and more ambitious China.

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In response to increased Chinese military capability, the United States has begun redeploying its assets to and within the Pacific. The Pentagon has moved attack submarines and cruise missiles to Guam, where it is forming a strike force of six bombers and forty-eight fighters which have been deployed from continental bases. The Navy is moving a second aircraft carrier to east Asia, and is converting Trident ballistic submarines into platforms for stealth cruise missiles.

The Sun Also Rises

Japan is the key to this hedging strategy. Although Washington has been prodding Japan for over a decade to contribute more to international security, regional military dangers and bold new Japanese leadership have made such prodding less necessary. Tokyo has watched as Beijing has expanded its military power and deployed into contested waters. Kim Jong Il's determination to acquire nuclear weapons—coupled with his missile tests—has made Japan take its own defense seriously.

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The changes underway in the U.S.-Japanese defense relationship would have been hard to imagine a decade ago. Within the next few years, the United States and Japan will have an interoperable missile defense system and a collocated air command system. As Richard Lawless, the senior defense official in charge of Asia, has said: the United States and Japan will "operate together, train together, and work together, and share—to a much greater degree—missions, roles and responsibilities."[3] Tokyo is as determined as Washington to develop greater military capabilities to check Beijing's military expansion and to protect itself against the vagaries of a mad North Korea. Recently elected Japanese prime minister Shinzo Abe once joked that Japan, living in a dangerous neighborhood, has been "mugged by reality."[4]

Abe has said that revising Japan's "peace constitution" will be a priority of his administration. The constitutional ban on collective self-defense, in place since Japan's defeat in World War II, has hobbled Japan's ability to conduct military missions with the United States and other partners. As Washington and Tokyo develop a closer military relationship, the ban must be lifted.

Of equal significance is Japan's incremental shift to a foreign policy that emphasizes universal values in its national security policy. During then–prime minister Junichiro Koizumi's final trip to Washington in the summer of 2006, he signed a joint statement that said:

> The United States and Japan stand together not only against mutual threats but also for the advancement of universal values such as freedom, human dignity and human rights, democracy, market economy, and rule of law.[5]

It is no coincidence that this declaration mentions universal values that China rejects. Nor has it gone unnoticed in Japan that in its geopolitical competition with China, Tokyo's commitment to those universal values provides it with a key diplomatic advantage. Indeed, most of Japan's major foreign policy initiatives now highlight support for democracy promotion.

Koizumi's own commitment was symbolized not just by his call for other states to join Japan in embracing freedom, democracy, and the rule of law. He also created a policy council to align Tokyo's foreign aid policy with its democracy-promotion goals.[6]

Shinzo Abe has been no less insistent on a foreign policy that includes values as well as interests.[7] He articulates a vision of greater cooperation among Australia, Japan, India, and the United States in Asia, the four great Asian-Pacific democracies: "Our ties could be enhanced by making freedom, democracy, respect for fundamental human rights, and the rule of law into key [principles]."[8]

Although Japan only recently adopted the rhetoric of liberty, and although it has a mixed record on democracy promotion, Tokyo can work with Washington to make democracy the primary issue in Asia.[9] China has tended to make substantial political reforms when it feels left behind. Its loss to Japan in the Sino-Japanese War led to the fall of the Qing Dynasty and attempts at constitutional governance. Deng Xiaoping realized how backward China was relative to its neighbors in the late 1970s and initiated a program of reform and opening. If its neighbors once again show—by example—how advanced their political systems are, a democratic transition may yet occur on the mainland.

A Democratic Security Community

The United States and Japan are converging in their approaches to China. Multidimensional engagement will not end, but the two have joined to balance China's military weight. This common China policy, however, may be insufficient. Should Beijing become more aggressive, America and Japan will need to become a strong counterweight to China. Should the Chinese government's legitimacy begin to weaken, America and Japan need to be prepared for other security threats. To avoid either of these troubling outcomes, American and Japanese policies on China should focus more intently on the greatest strategic prize: a democratic China.

Fortunately, Washington and Tokyo have articulated a regional vision in the Bush-Koizumi joint statement that has the best hope of pushing China in the right direction. The statement says the two countries will promote individual freedoms; increase transparency and confidence in political, economic, and military fields; and protect human rights.[10]

A more ambitious vision—that of Shinzo Abe—would commit Tokyo, Washington, Canberra, and Delhi to building a political and security institution whose membership criteria are based on those values. Beijing would complain that such an arrangement is a containment vehicle, but it certainly need not be so—China might reform itself to meet the criteria. Reform-minded Chinese could equate democratization with patriotism, as membership in such an institution would confer countless benefits upon China. Moreover, there are many different forums in Asia through which countries can currently engage China. If, however, China proceeds down the troubling path of conflict, Japan, the United States, and other regional democracies will be better able to respond through a democratic security community.

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Abe himself has spoken about this problem:

> I believe that if we look at Japan, Australia and India . . . these are the major countries in this region that share important values such as liberty, democracy, human rights, respect for the rule of law. So in addition to these three countries, as well as the United States, I believe we could have a forum to talk about various matters among those countries. . . . This does not mean counterbalancing China at all. . . . In fact, there are other forums where China is included, like APEC [Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation], the East Asia Summit, or ASEAN+3 [Association of Southeast Asian Nations, plus China, Japan, and South Korea]. We also highly believe in the importance of our relationship with China.[11]

The History Problem

Although naysayers scoff at the notion that Japan can play any leadership role in Asia given its "history" problem, many in the region believe that Tokyo has sufficiently atoned for its past crimes. Japanese policy has offered assurance that its leadership will not follow a militaristic path. While it is true that Tokyo might do more to reassure its neighbors that it is truly a different country, Japan today is a paragon of respect for freedom and human rights.[12]

Beijing, however, has cynically used the emotional issue of Japan's past actions as a bludgeon against Tokyo in its larger geopolitical maneuvering—indeed, the Chinese foreign ministry wasted no time in warning newly minted prime minister Abe to "properly" handle the history issue.[13] Tokyo can approach fellow democracies which suffered at its hands—such as South Korea and the Philippines—in a spirit of solemn remorse. These countries may be more willing to separate the issue of moral culpability from geopolitical maneuvering.

Abe's first trip to China and then South Korea was meant in part to drive a wedge between the perceived anti-Japan policies of Seoul and Beijing ahead of South Korean president Roh Moo-hyun's October 2006 summit with Chinese premier Hu Jintao. During Abe's trip, the North Koreans tested a nuclear weapon which changed the subject from the "history" issue and Japan's purported "militarization" to the threats posed by the Kim Jong Il regime. The initial response by China and Japan seemed more in sync than usual. There was consensus on United Nations Security Council Resolution 1718,[14] which imposed sanctions on trade with North Korea which ranged from conventional weapons and ballistic-missile components to luxury goods. Tokyo has since agreed to a joint Sino-Japanese commission to study history issues, akin to the one established between France and Germany after World War II. Abe's efforts to stabilize Japan's relationship with China have provided him with maneuvering space to make Japan the kind of international leader he wishes it to become.

In interviews about his trip to China, Abe makes a point of mentioning how much the Chinese want to repair relations because of their dependence on Japanese investment. He thus inverts the common argument for why Japan should behave itself when it comes to China: business interests should come first. The prime minister makes the often-ignored point that economic leverage is a two-way street. He is prepared to improve relations as long as China realizes that Japan is a great power that is increasingly willing to throw its weight around politically.

Washington should not make too much of Abe's attempts to stabilize relations with China. Tokyo's patience will be tested. Washington has adopted a "China will solve the problem" approach to the North Korea question about which Japan is skeptical. Before he was prime minister, Abe talked about the need for offensive strike capabilities. In his opinion, the Japanese constitution does not prohibit Japanese acquisition of nuclear weapons. Abe has shown himself to be serious about defending Japan from Kim Jong Il, and may not long tolerate a policy that allows China to lead all parties back to the status quo. Key officials have spoken of the need for a debate about Japan's nuclear future.

> The Japanese constitution must be revised so that Japan can play a greater role on the international stage. . . . No longer will Japan engage in a "diplomacy of cowardice."

Finally, Abe is committed to revising the constitution, an ambition that should be viewed in the context of the rise of China. Abe makes three arguments. First, the Japanese must adopt a constitution "with their own hands"—a reference to the fact that the current constitution was written during the U.S. military occupation overseen by General Douglas MacArthur. Second, according to Abe, the constitution does not reflect Japan's current values. Third, Article 9, which forbids the use of force to settle international disputes, must be revised so that Japan can play a greater role on the international stage.

One senses that the third point is of greatest importance to Abe, who is preparing his country for the foreign policy shift that Koizumi began. No longer will Japan engage in a "diplomacy of cowardice."[15] Senior government advisors point out that Japan will not be taken seriously in Asia if it is not a military power. They have come to view years of yen diplomacy as inadequate for building enduring regional influence. As China accumulates military power, it is gaining influence as well. Tokyo believes that it must be able to contribute to regional security if it is to compete effectively with Beijing. Finally, an Article 9 revision would psychologically mark the end of World War II, which, in the minds of the postwar generation now assuming power, is a must if Japan is to "normalize."

The Asian-Pacific Future

Washington has an opportunity to work with the liberal nationalist Abe to favorably shape China's future—and thus the future of the Pacific Rim—but policymakers face some serious obstacles. It is still unclear whether China is willing to persuade the Kim Jong Il regime to disarm. If the talks drag on without resolution, Japan—as the country most vulnerable to Kim's missiles and the nuclear weapons he may one day place on them—may lose confidence in the American alliance. The next time Kim places missiles on a launching pad, talk of the United States preempting a test will not seem unreasonable if it rescues the American alliance with Japan. Since Washington is building its Asia policy around a remunerated Japan, it must take great care to ensure that its North Korea policy does not leave Tokyo more vulnerable.

The grand project for Tokyo and Washington, however, is to build the kind of democratic institutions in Asia that have kept the peace in Europe. Japan is not used to this kind of foreign policy, but it seems to have found a willing innovator in Shinzo Abe.

AEI editorial assistant Evan Sparks worked with Mr. Blumenthal to edit and produce this Asian Outlook.

Notes

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