

WebMemo



Published by The Heritage Foundation

No. 3055
November 9, 2010

Do Not Expect Much from Japan During Obama Visit

Bruce Klingner and Dean Cheng

Any Japanese hopes that hosting the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit would highlight Tokyo's regional leadership abilities or reverse Prime Minister Naoto Kan's plummeting approval ratings have been dashed. Instead, the ruling Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) is buffeted by escalating domestic criticism for its timorous foreign policies, which encouraged Chinese and Russian adventurism at Tokyo's expense. Because the DPJ earlier alienated the United States—Japan's critical security guarantor—Tokyo now finds itself adrift in increasingly dangerous waters.

The DPJ's economic stewardship is equally feckless. The APEC meeting of 21 nations will focus attention on the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), a now nine-nation regional trade agreement and the Obama Administration's lone trade initiative. Yet the DPJ was unable to reach a consensus on whether Japan would announce its intention to join the accord. Instead, its internal task force meekly recommended that the government merely "conduct discussions to gather information in order to decide whether to or not to participate" in the TPP—hardly a harbinger of strong Japanese leadership.

President Obama should use his meeting with Kan to affirm the enduring importance of the bilateral security alliance, particularly to stem threats from the growing North Korean and Chinese militaries. But Washington shouldn't expect too much from its Japanese ally. Even when the Obama Administration tried to embolden Tokyo by providing the most direct U.S. security pledge over the dis-

puted Senkaku Islands, the DPJ still capitulated to Chinese pressure.

China: The 800-Pound Dragon in the Room. The APEC meeting is already being overshadowed by worsening Sino-Japanese relations. While this souring of relations was triggered by a naval confrontation in the Senkakus, it is reflective of broader regional unease over China's increasingly assertive posture throughout East Asia.

Earlier this year, Tokyo expressed concern over the largest Chinese naval task force transiting the Miyako Straits south of Okinawa. Beijing rebutted Japanese entreaties by noting that the exercises were held in international waters. Subsequently, Beijing denounced, in vitriolic terms, U.S.–South Korean exercises in international waters in the Yellow (West) Sea. These exercises were a show of force in response to North Korea's attack on the South Korean frigate *Cheonan*.

Chinese Major General Luo Yuan argued that the Yellow Sea is "the door to the Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei region," and therefore "China should feel threatened by any country undertaking military exercises in this region."¹

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:
<http://report.heritage.org/wm3055>

Produced by the Asian Studies Center

Published by The Heritage Foundation
214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE
Washington, DC 20002-4999
(202) 546-4400 • heritage.org

Nothing written here is to be construed as necessarily reflecting the views of The Heritage Foundation or as an attempt to aid or hinder the passage of any bill before Congress.

The Chinese made no effort to conceal their unhappiness with U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's offer to assist southeast Asia in mediating the territorial disputes of the South China Sea. While the U.S. offer was greeted positively by most of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi pointedly suggested that smaller nations are not considered the equal of larger ones, stating, "China is a big country and other countries are small countries, and that's just a fact."²

Beijing has also repeatedly expressed its unhappiness with the U.S. naval presence in the region. Central Military Commission Vice Chairman General Ma Xiaotian made it clear that military-to-military relations between the U.S. and China would suffer so long as Washington insisted on conducting maritime and aerial reconnaissance missions in the East and South China Seas.³

Relations were further complicated by the recent imbroglio involving a Chinese fishing boat in the waters around the disputed Senkaku Islands (Diaoyutai to the Chinese). The Chinese reaction to the arrest of their fisherman (who rammed two Japanese coast guard vessels) was to first escalate the rhetoric then slow their export of rare earth minerals—an essential component of many electronic items.

All of which raises the question: What position will China assume during the APEC meeting? Will it try to reclaim a conciliatory stance and reinstate a "charm offensive" toward the region? Or, given its fairly rapid recovery from the Great Recession, will it conclude that it is now ascendant in the region and assert itself even more forcefully?

Mending U.S.–Japanese Relations. Washington can take some comfort that the DPJ is showing signs that it will be less obstreperous than it was upon first assuming office last year. Most encouraging is the selection of Seiji Maehara as foreign minister,

which places a pragmatic, resolute security strategist at the helm.

The DPJ government had a belated epiphany that Japan resides in a dangerous neighborhood necessitating a strong security relationship with the U.S. Of course, that realization necessitated the DPJ jettisoning its prime minister, its corrupt party leader, and large parts of its election platform and reversing itself on key security policies.

The DPJ now seeks to repair its strained alliance with the U.S. Simmering bilateral tension is down, but Washington continues to await Japanese implementation of an agreement on realigning U.S. forces on Okinawa. Tokyo is now saying the right things, but it has been unwilling to move forward until after the November 28 Okinawan gubernatorial election.

Japanese timidity on allowing the planned redeployment of a U.S. Marine Corps air unit on Okinawa prevented any progress on addressing broader alliance issues. This, in turn, doomed any potential for a joint U.S.–Japanese security statement or even a joint press conference after the summit between President Obama and Prime Minister Kan.

A Core Element of American Strategy. Expectations are low for President Obama's meetings in Tokyo. The Japanese trip will likely be the least productive leg of Obama's Asia tour. This is to be expected, since APEC will be addressing less pressing economic issues than the G-20 summit will. Moreover, leaders at APEC may suffer from "summit fatigue," since it also follows the recent ASEAN+3 and East Asia summits.

That said, it would behoove President Obama to closely engage the Japanese leadership. Not only is the U.S.–Japan alliance a core element of American strategy in the Asia-Pacific region, but it is also an essential part of regional stability.

China has generally recognized that the U.S. partnership with Japan plays a major role in stabi-

1. Luo Yuan, "Yellow Sea Exercise Threat to the World," *China Daily*, July 30, 2010, at http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/usa/2010-07/30/content_11074959.htm (November 9, 2010).
2. John Pomfret, "U.S. Takes a Tougher Tone with China," *The Washington Post*, July 30, 2010, at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/07/29/AR2010072906416.html?hpid=topnews> (November 9, 2010).
3. Gao Chuan, Ding Qilin, "Ma Xiaotian: The US Is Undertaking High Intensity Surveillance and Reconnaissance in the East and South China Seas," XinhuaNet, June 5, 2010, at <http://china.huanqiu.com/roll/2010-06/843939.html> (November 9, 2010).

lizing the region. President Obama should therefore not neglect that aspect, or the hedging component of U.S. policy toward China, by failing to make it clear that Tokyo and Washington are, and will remain, closely allied.

—*Bruce Klingner is Senior Research Fellow, North-east Asia and Dean Cheng is Research Fellow in Chinese Political and Security Affairs in the Asian Studies Center at The Heritage Foundation.*