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China threat can heal US-Japan rift

The US and Japan are going through a rocky patch but mutual fear of China makes their relationship too precious to wreck

A long-running row about relocating a [US Marine Corps base on Okinawa](#) is threatening to boil over, with Yukio Hatoyama, Japan's prime minister, admitting at the weekend that failure to resolve the dispute could force his resignation. Given that his Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) swept to a watershed election victory only last August, such an outcome could be deeply embarrassing for the US and deeply resented in Japan.

Despite its stated intention to pay greater attention to Asia, the Obama administration is making a hash of relations with Japan. Its insistence that Tokyo's new centre-left leaders honour a 2006 deal on the Futenma base between George Bush and their long-entrenched conservative predecessors looks like an attempt to ride roughshod over Japan's democratic process.

Blame for rising bilateral strains also lies with Hatoyama, who seems to have promised more than he can deliver. Shigeru Ishiba, a senior Liberal Democrat party opposition leader, openly mocked the prime minister last week for supposedly making an election pledge he had "no idea" how to fulfil.

The Okinawa dispute reflects broader differences. Hatoyama's view that Japan needs a more "balanced" relationship with Washington after 65 years of polite subservience in the security sphere, and his related interest in developing an EEC-style east Asian economic community including China, have produced sharply critical reactions in Washington.

"The relationship between the US and Japan is in its worst state ever," said Hisahiko Okazaki, a former ambassador, in the daily newspaper Sankei Shimbun. "The Japan-US alliance is too valuable an asset to lose," he wrote.

Despite such dramatic huffing and puffing, the bottom-line reality, say senior foreign ministry officials, former and serving ministers, and leading commentators, is there is not the remotest chance that the security alliance will be "lost". It may be adapted or modified. It may evolve. And for its part, says former deputy foreign minister Hitoshi Tanaka, Japan "needs to think seriously about how it can better contribute to international security" and "to consider if it is still right to stick to the existing interpretation of the constitutional prohibition on the use of force".

But the official consensus is firm that the US relationship will continue to form the "cornerstone" of Japan's defences, as foreign minister Katsuya Okada put it – a position shared by Hatoyama. The main reason behind this confidence that, despite all the stresses and strains, the alliance will endure is not hard to discern: growing mutual fear of China.

If Obama has mismanaged ties with Japan, his problems with China are infinitely greater by comparison, ranging from security issues such as Iran, Taiwan, North Korea and Tibet to fair trade, currency valuations, human rights and climate change. Obama wants to befriend China and work with it. But if China chooses a diverging path, as it often appears inclined to do, the help and assistance of Japan in containing it will be indispensable to the US – and vice versa.

Underscoring this point, last week's exchanges over Okinawa coincided with the latest, unsettling broadside from the People's Liberation Army that, according to some Japanese analysts, calls the shots in Beijing. "China's big goal in the 21st century is to become world number one, the top power," wrote PLA senior colonel Liu Mingfu. China, he said, was determined to become the "global champion" while conflict with the US over "who rises and [who] fails to dominate the world" was inevitable.

This may be bluster. But it is safer to assume it is not. With this unruly giant bellowing on the doorstep, Japan and the US need each other more than ever. What they lack is new thinking about how to make their relationship work better.