

Paying the Price for the “Lost Three Years”

By NABESHIMA Keizo

Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda and U.S. President Barack Obama announced a joint statement during their talks in Washington on April 30, reconfirming that the two countries continue to strengthen the bilateral alliance to fulfill their roles and responsibilities in securing the stability in the Asia-Pacific region. This was the Japanese prime minister's first official visit to the United States in three years since Taro Aso of Liberal Democratic Party had made his visit in 2009. The Japan-U.S. Joint Statement was the first one after the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ)'s administration had been established in 2009. Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama pledged to resolve the issues concerning the relocation of the U.S. Marine Corps Futenma Air Station in Okinawa in his talks with President Obama in September 2009. However, his public promise to relocate the air base “outside of the prefecture” got mired in stalemate. It caused Japan to lose U.S. confidence, which worsened the bilateral relationship.

The next prime minister Naoto Kan also failed to have an official meeting with U.S. president. In spite of China's growing military threat, North Korea's progress in nuclear and missile developments and Russia's increase in Far Eastern military power during that period of time, the Japan-U.S. cooperation remained in deadlock under the DPJ administration bound by the Futenma relocation issue, which inflicted huge damage on Japan's interests. With Noda's visit to the United States, DPJ has finally paid the price for the “lost three years.” It is not just the Noda Cabinet that has to take responsibility for implementing the joint statement. It is the responsibility of the whole of the current ruling DPJ. If party members just stand in the way of prime minister within the party politics over the consumption tax hike, it will put the Japan-U.S. alliance in danger again.

The bilateral summit meeting was also accompanied by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Secretary of the Treasury Timothy Geithner. It was significant that the two heads of state had confirmed the importance of strengthening the relationship between Japan and the United States prior to the third meeting of the ministerial-level U.S.-China Strategic and Economic Dialogue, which was held in Beijing from May 3 to 4. Meanwhile, Japan also held its sixth foreign affairs ministerial-level strategic dialogue and its first ministerial-level economic dialogue with Indian counterparts in New Delhi on April 30. At those meetings, Foreign Minister Koichiro Gemba, Minister of Economy, Trade and Industry Yukio Edano and other senior officials agreed to launch an inter-governmental dialogue to address maritime security and cyber-terrorism countermeasures. This agreement was a significant achievement for strengthening Japan's Asian diplomacy.

For its central pillar, the Japan-U.S. Joint Statement declares that the two countries pledge to “fulfill their roles and responsibilities by utilizing the full range of capabilities” to advance Asia-Pacific regional and global peace, prosperity and security. The first-priority issue is security and national defense cooperation. More specifically, Japan is committed to developing a dynamic defense force, with the U.S strategic rebalancing to the Asia Pacific (U.S military realignment). The second-priority issue is how to enhance a system to support internationally acceptable rules and frameworks through, for example, the East Asia Summit (EAS). The third-priority issue is how to secure the utilization of maritime, cosmic and cyber space in accordance with the relevant rules. All these initiatives are intended to deal with the impacts caused by China’s growing military and economic forces.

The security issue is based on the Joint Statement of the Japan-U.S. Security Consultative Committee (SCC) outlining U.S. military realignment policy, which was announced three days before the bilateral summit meeting. The statement set the goal of “strengthening the deterrence capabilities of the Japan-U.S. alliance” with the Futenma relocation set as a separate issue. The Ministers affirmed that these adjustments are necessary to realize a U.S. force posture in the Asia-Pacific region that is “more geographically distributed,” “operationally resilient” and “politically sustainable.” As part of these adjustments, the Ministers decided to relocate 9,000 of the 19,000 III Marine Expeditionary Force (III MEF) personnel from Okinawa to Guam (5,000), Hawaii and other places. In conjunction with these adjustments, the U.S. government also informed the Japanese government that it is establishing a U.S. Marine Corps rotational presence in Australia. This is intended to strengthen the deterrence capabilities by distributing forces to key areas from Okinawa, which is within striking distance of China’s ballistic missiles.

A particularly significant point of the SCC Joint Statement is a new cooperative initiative between Japan and the United States in the Asia-Pacific region. The Japanese government’s sea lane security measures, such as the provision of patrol boats for coastal states by strategically using official development assistance (ODA) programs, “can be expected to boost synergies with U.S. military and diplomatic strategy.” (Foreign Minister Gemba) In addition, the Japanese government also considers cooperation in developing joint training areas in Guam and the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, such as Tinian, as shared-use facilities by the JSDF and U.S forces. It is apparent that the Japan-U.S. security cooperation measures will strengthen the deterrence capabilities of the bilateral alliance and those measures should be implemented without delay. That leads to fulfilling the “roles and responsibilities” promised by the two heads of state.

(This is the English translation of an article written by Mr. NABESHIMA Keizo, former Chief

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