

THE LAUGHINGSTOCK OF EAST ASIA

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North Korea launches an artillery bombardment against Yeonpyeong Island in South Korea, while a Chinese fishing trawler rams a Japanese Coast Guard patrol vessel in the seas off Japan's Senkaku Islands. As if to mock the ineffectual blunderings of the Democratic Party of Japan government, the Russian president then visits the Northern Territories. Countries around the region are free to act with impunity in this way because Japan is powerless to react. The reason for this impotence is the rift that the DPJ government opened up in the Japan-US alliance by its behavior regarding the US Marine Corps Futenma Air Station in Okinawa. Japan's position in East Asia is likely to become even more unstable. Utterly lacking in strategy and expertise, the DPJ government can no longer be trusted with responsibility for Japan and Japanese diplomacy.

North Korea Reads the Signs

On November 23, 2010, North Korea launched an attack on South Korean territory for the first time since the ceasefire that ended the Korean War in 1953. The attack itself was sudden, but I cannot say I was particularly surprised. I had been saying for some time that something of this sort was bound to happen sooner or later.

The attempted assassination of South Korean President Chun Doo-hwan in the Rangoon bombing in 1983 and the bombing of a Korean Air flight in 1987 both took place when the present North Korean leader Kim Jong-il was being acknowledged as designated successor to his father, Kim Il-sung. North Korea seems to perpetrate an outrage of one kind or another whenever there is a changing of the guard at the top of the regime—almost like a ceremony to swear loyalty to the new leader. This time, we have seen the sinking of a South Korean patrol boat in March and the recent artillery bombardment of an island in South Korean territory.

But the North Koreans are not stupid. The “ceremony” is unlikely to go any further. They know that if they take things too far they will only damage their own position. To put it another way, North Korea must have read the situation and concluded that it was safe to go as far as they did. China stood by North Korea right through the international brouhaha that followed its sinking of the South Korean corvette in March. South Korea has entrusted its emergency military command to the United States and is extremely unlikely to opt for a frontal attack against the North. And clearly North Korea has nothing to fear from today's Japan.

China is the key to any attempt to restrain North Korea's reckless behavior. So long as Pyongyang retains Beijing's support, there is every chance that the North Koreans will continue

to turn their back on the international community even after a change of leadership.

Japan, the United States, and South Korea need to work together to convince China to change its position on North Korea. As it is, China hardly relishes having to defend North Korea. Above all, Beijing is eager to avoid any situation that might trigger a large influx of refugees across its borders. The only hope for progress is to propose concrete measures for dealing with this problem and thus persuade China to change its mind. It is vital to reach an agreement along these lines before North Korea develops the ability to launch accurate nuclear missiles and goes on to bring the continental United States within range.

A strong Japan-US alliance is an essential prerequisite for progress in this direction. I will have more to say about this below.

The Reasons for the Senkaku Incident

It was September 7 when a Chinese fishing trawler and a Japanese Coast Guard vessel collided offshore of the Senkaku Islands. August and September are the typhoon season in the East China Sea—a boat would not normally be out fishing in this area at this time of year. Nevertheless, this year the trawler set out to fish the waters around the Senkaku Islands—and happened to collide with our Coast Guard. Am I looking too hard for conspiracies when I suspect that there may have been some kind of deliberate state collusion in this sequence of events?

This is nothing more than my own personal theory, but I cannot help feeling that China has successfully tested Japan on a national level. Immediately after leading his party to victory in the elections and bringing about a change of government, Prime Minister Hatoyama Yukio declared his intention to relocate the US Marine Corps Futenma Air Station “outside the country, or at the very least outside Okinawa.” By making this announcement, he was trampling on an earlier bilateral agreement that was the product of more than a decade’s work. Nevertheless, not long after this he was shamelessly letting it be known that “the more I study the question, the better I understand the deterrent value of the Marine presence in Okinawa.” As if this was not enough, Ozawa Ichirō, widely regarded as the power behind the throne, jovially described himself during a visit to China at the head of a delegation of 140 members of the National Diet as the “commander of the field battle unit” of Japan’s own “People’s Liberation Army.” China could well be forgiven for wondering what on earth Japan was up to.

I think it is quite plausible that the Chinese decided they had nothing to lose by shaking things up a bit at a time when national politics in Japan was absorbed by the DPJ leadership election.

Whatever the reality, there is no doubt that the newly installed government of Kan Naoto was rocked to its foundations by the incident. The government’s incoherent response did not

just anger the Japanese people; according to reports, it also confused the Chinese.

Whatever the true intentions of the Chinese trawler, its behavior was clearly not that of a boat trying to escape after being caught fishing illegally. Those who object that the problem would never have flared up if Japan had simply deported the fishermen according to normal procedures are therefore quite mistaken. Japan was quite within its rights to arrest the boat's captain. Had it not done so, Japan's position that no territorial dispute exists over the islands would have lost its force. Japan ought to have thrown the book at those responsible and brought them to trial under Japanese law.

The DPJ government chose not to take this course. Instead, it released the captain without charge. The explanation it gave spoke volumes. The government denied any political involvement at all. Instead, it claimed that the decision to release the captain had been taken by the Okinawa district public prosecutor.

This is an issue I brought up before the budget deliberation committee. According to the Japanese Constitution, questions of foreign policy and diplomacy are the responsibility of the cabinet. Although the Ministry of Foreign Affairs may take care of diplomatic business on a daily basis, responding to serious incidents that might affect the national interest is the job of the cabinet. I confronted Chief Cabinet Secretary Sengoku Yoshito on this issue. Had he not been aware that arresting, detaining, and then releasing the Chinese captain in this way was likely to have major repercussions for Japan's diplomacy? He admitted that he had. When I suggested that it had been a mistake to leave the responsibility for the decision to the public prosecutor, he responded by referring me to the legal principle according to which the public prosecutor can decide not to try a suspect if this is considered preferable in terms of rehabilitation or public order. But the released Chinese captain returned to China with a grin all over his face, flashing the "V" sign and announcing enthusiastically that he was ready to pilot his boat to the area again. What evidence of contrition or rehabilitation was there in that? And if Sengoku believes that social order was maintained by releasing the captain without charge, I would like to hear his reasons.

The public prosecutor is not elected by the public, and a decision of this kind lay beyond his responsibility. It is not the position of the public prosecutor to decide on a major diplomatic incident like this. At the risk of repeating myself, let me emphasize again: The decision must be taken by members of the National Diet, who are elected directly by the people.

Surely not many people swallowed the government's story that everything was decided by the public prosecutor. There was plenty of circumstantial evidence to suggest that the government made the decision itself and brought pressure to bear on the public prosecutor.

One assumes that the government's response was driven by consideration for diplomatic relations with China. If this was the case, though, then Prime Minister Kan ought to have held a conference immediately and appealed to people in Japan and overseas in the following terms: "The public prosecutor was in favor of proceeding with a trial. Having considered the

circumstances, however, I have instructed the minister of justice to exercise his authority and order the release of the captain. But I want people in Japan to examine the video footage of the collision. It is quite clear that the Chinese boat acted illegally. In spite of this, I have decided as prime minister to release the captain this time. But such an event must never be repeated.”

I find it impossible to believe that our relationship with China has moved forward one bit as a result of this unconditional release. All that was achieved was to increase the skepticism of our allies in the United States, South Korea, and the rest of the world, who must now be asking themselves: “Does Japan really have a functioning government?” The diplomatic fallout is likely to be serious.

The Party That Refuses to Take the Blame

If the government really thought it was acceptable to delegate responsibility for a major international fracas like the Senkaku incident to a public prosecutor, it does not understand Japan’s system of government. If, on the other hand, the government took a politically expedient decision and then tried to pass the buck onto the public prosecutor, then it lied to the people of Japan. Is the DPJ government ignorant, or mendacious, or both? Whatever the case may be, a government whose chief priority seems to be to absolve itself from responsibility is a major disaster for Japan.

The true nature of the government’s behavior was made clear for all to see when footage of the collision was leaked and posted online against the government’s wishes. I cannot say that the conduct of the Coast Guard officer who leaked the images was particularly praiseworthy, but neither can I accept that the government was right to keep the images from the public in the first place.

Before the images leaked, Chief Cabinet Secretary Sengoku was adamant that the only reason the government could not release the footage was because it would be inappropriate to do so “in advance of the trial.” But the “criminal” in the case had already been released and was already back in his own country. How on earth were they going to hold a trial? There is no extradition treaty between Japan and China. The fact is that by this stage, it was impossible for Japan to prosecute the captain. An eternity could pass and we would still be in a situation “in advance of the trial.”

Both the upper and lower houses of the Diet have an administrative right to carry out investigations, including summoning sworn witnesses and demanding the submission of reports and records. If this right is invoked, it is up to the minister of justice to decide whether to make the findings publically available. If a decision cannot be reached even at this level, the prime minister will step in. This has been the position of every government in the past.

When I asked Sengoku during the recent incident about the possibility of responding in this way, he confirmed that it was a possibility. If a political decision had been made to proceed

along these lines, full disclosure of the footage would surely have been possible at an early stage—“in advance of the trial” or not. But neither the prime minister nor his chief cabinet secretary showed any inclination to go down this route, and one day the information leaked out over YouTube.

Legal precedent allows for the non-release of material obtained through a parliamentary investigation only when it is clear that the public interest is better served by keeping the information restricted. Judged by these standards, it is crystal clear that the footage of the Senkaku collision ought to have been made public from the outset. What were the illegal actions of the Chinese fishing boat on September 7, and how did the Japanese Coast Guard respond? Nothing could be more pressing to the public interest than the right to know the facts in this matter.

We can only conclude that Prime Minister Kan decided that not disturbing relations with Beijing outweighed the people’s right to know the facts. Kan had invited Chinese President Hu Jintao to attend the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation leaders’ meeting in Japan in mid-November, and Kan had hopes for a bilateral summit. He stood to lose major face if his Chinese counterpart refused to meet him. The prospect terrified him. But the bilateral summit that the government went to such lengths to secure lasted just 20 minutes. From the information that has been made available, it seems unlikely that Japan gained anything tangible from the meeting.

In October, Kan was able to manufacture a “corridor summit” at the Asia-Europe Meeting in Brussels when the two leaders happened to pass each other in a palace corridor. On this occasion, incredibly, Kan had no interpreters with him. And so the plain truth is that no one on the Japanese side really understood what President Hu said. With a track record like this, it is not surprising that many people suspected the prime minister’s main objective was simply to bring about any meeting at all. The actual content of the meeting was of secondary importance.

This lack of preparedness is the natural consequence of the government’s decision to treat the bureaucrats as enemies and exclude them from the decision-making process. A new pattern has become established, not just in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs but throughout the government. A few high-ranking politicians meet behind closed doors in a minister’s office and then hand their decision as a *fait accompli* to the bureaucrats. Not only do they lack knowledge; they do not even understand how to use the bureaucracy properly. When the people supposedly in charge fail to grasp the most fundamental principles of the job in this way, it is only to be expected that the policies they release make so little sense.

It is no surprise that public servants who have been stripped of responsibility lose their enthusiasm for the job. It is no longer simply a case of bureaucrats reluctantly going along with policies they may disagree with personally. From what I hear, many of them feel increasingly estranged and are starting to openly reject the current administration. They have come to the conclusion that these people are not even worth paying lip service to.

The Fragile Alliance

I suggested the possibility above that the Senkaku incident had been contrived by the Chinese government. Dust had barely settled on the incident when Russian President Dmitri Medvedev visited Kunashiri Island in early November. This was the first time any Russian or Soviet leader had set foot on any of the Northern Territories.

The fact is that Hu Jintao and Medvedev have met five times this year. They held a summit at the height of the Senkaku controversy, issuing a statement to the effect that the two countries “shared an understanding” of history. This ought to have been sufficient in itself to warn those in charge of running the country that something serious was afoot. Instead, the government allowed the Russians to trivialize Medvedev’s visit to the Northern Territories as an “internal affair.” The government’s complacency and fumbling in the face of this crisis was embarrassing to watch.

It can hardly be a coincidence that the regional powers have started to behave in this way almost simultaneously. My own view is that the root cause of all these events, including the actions of North Korea, is the recent damage caused to the Japan-US alliance.

Japan’s foot-dragging over the relocation of the Futenma base quite clearly put a dent in the Japan-US alliance. But this did not prevent the DPJ government from announcing from the outset that it would take a firm stand against China. On the territorial dispute with Russia, too, the government came out with statements that did not need to be made, such as declaring anew that Russia was illegally occupying the Northern Territories. At a time when our alliance with the United States was on shaky ground, what was the government thinking in picking fights with Russia and China? If the government was determined to take a firm line with China, the very least it needed to do was avoid making an enemy of Russia.

When I was appointed to head the Defense Agency (now the Ministry of Defense) in 2002, relations with Beijing were at a low point because of Prime Minister Koizumi Jun’ichirō’s decision to visit the controversial Yasukuni Shrine. The situation was so serious that my predecessor in the post, Nakatani Gen, had been refused permission to visit China. With things the way they were, the first country I visited in my new capacity was the United States, where I got on well with Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld. After some consideration, I decided to visit Russia next. Again, I hit it off with Defense Minister Sergei Ivanov, who is deputy prime minister today. He paid a return visit to Japan a few months later. Of course, none of this escaped the notice of Beijing. They probably did not like what they were seeing at all. Next, I paid a first-ever visit as Defense Agency director general to India. At this point, China suddenly issued an invitation for me to visit.

Diplomacy is all about relationships of trust, and political maneuverings based on this foundation. At the moment, Japan has very little trust with US President Barack Obama or with

Russia's President Medvedev. The attempt to take a firm line with China from this position was doomed from the outset.

Henoko: Just a Temporary Solution

I was quite shocked to see that President Hu Jintao attended China's 2010 military parade in military uniform rather than the usual business suit. It brought home to me how much influence the military has acquired in internal affairs within China.

If the military clique has a grip on power, it will naturally be much less amenable to civilian control. If the navy, normally more restrained than the army, starts to openly espouse a military expansionist doctrine as China redefines itself as an ocean-going power, then it will really be time to get worried. With every day that passes, I am more convinced than ever of the need to strengthen the Japan-US alliance and remind China of this alliance's deterrent power.

So where should we start?

In terms of our relations with the United States, we have no alternative but to rebuild the relationship through tangible results. Nakaima Hirokazu was recently reelected as governor of Okinawa Prefecture. That he was forced to insist on moving the base outside Okinawa in the first place was entirely the fault of the DPJ government. It is essential to resolve the sense of danger surrounding the Futenma base, which is what sparked all the talk about relocation in the first place.

There are a number of good reasons why the US Marine Corps has a helicopter squadron based in Okinawa. If the idea were simply to cover the Korean Peninsula, then perhaps anywhere on the Sea of Japan coast would be acceptable. But the United States needs to protect Taiwan as well. Given this, the main island of Okinawa is just about within range for a strategy involving helicopters combined with fighter divisions. The division would not provide an effective deterrent if it were relocated outside Okinawa Prefecture—let alone outside the country. For this reason, there is no prospect of the US armed forces withdrawing from Okinawa in the present circumstances. Given the current atmosphere and public opinion on the Futenma base, it is natural to conclude that the base should be moved to Henoko, as previously agreed between Tokyo and Washington.

But we should not become fixated on Henoko. Deploying MV-22 Osprey helicopters would improve speed and range, making relocation of the base outside Okinawa a possibility. My personal opinion is that we should emphasize that Henoko is just a temporary solution until that becomes possible, and make renewed efforts to win the understanding of the local people on this basis.

This is also the time to get serious about rebuilding the Japan-US alliance. In doing so, it will not be enough to restore the alliance to the status quo ante. Instead, we need to redesign the

alliance completely to bring it in line with conditions in the world today.

Several issues with the Japan-US alliance at present make it doubtful whether the alliance would really function effectively in an emergency. At the moment, for example, the United States and Japan respond under separate command structures; this could easily become a major hindrance to responding promptly and effectively in the event of a crisis in the region.

There have always been limitations built into the Japan-US Security Treaty. No doubt many people felt reassured by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's announcement that the Senkaku Islands were covered under this treaty. In fact, however, she merely said that the question of sending US troops would be raised in Congress. The defense of Japan's outlying islands is supposed to be something Japan takes care of itself. Additionally, the applicability of the treaty is limited to areas where our national jurisdiction extends. If a plane came under attack outside Japanese territory, for example, the treaty would not apply.

We urgently need to carry out a thorough overhaul of the alliance. This review should include the security treaty itself, as well as legal issues, the management of the alliance, and military materiel. We also need to have a debate about changing the Self-Defense Forces Law to allow our forces to come to the assistance of Japanese nationals overseas and to protect our own marine borders. This would naturally involve a thorough rewriting of the National Defense Program Guidelines. The main thing is for Japan to make a series of suggestions and to cooperate with the United States in establishing a new framework built on a strong foundation.

The Need for a New Sense of Responsibility in the LDP

Former Prime Minister Hatoyama gave a speech at the University of Tokyo at the end of November 2010 in which he responded to accusations that his government had wrecked Japan's relations with the United States. This was not the case at all, he claimed. Instead, Hatoyama said, his government had "opened up a new kind of relationship" with the United States. I cannot be the only one who was astonished by these remarks from the man who allowed the Futenma issue to descend into chaos and who showed no understanding of the concept of deterrent force. Evidently the words "responsibility," "regret," and "improvement" do not feature in the DPJ's dictionary.

Nevertheless, the heaviest responsibility for bringing in the current government lies with our own Liberal Democratic Party. The only reason the electorate turned to the DPJ was that they were so thoroughly sick of the long-ruling LDP. The change of government took place not because people particularly liked the DPJ, but because they were so fed up with our party.

In this light, I thought that it was my duty to keep an eye on the new government and make sure that it did not damage the national interest. I believe I have done my best to help, including since Prime Minister Kan took over earlier this year. I used all the arguments at my command to convince the government to release the Senkaku collision video footage as soon as

possible. I advised the prime minister to come clean about the real reasons for releasing the Chinese captain. We would not hold it against him if he told the truth, I said. And I do not know how many times I told him that he should visit Okinawa before the gubernatorial election there, even if it meant getting a mauling from local residents. All my suggestions were rebuffed. Frankly, I have run out of patience.

A similar feeling is rapidly spreading through the population at large. With remarkable speed, a change of government and a new realignment of Japanese politics have become real possibilities. It is unclear when the next general election will be held, and of course we do not know what the results will be, but it is clear that we cannot join forces with the DPJ as it is today. Any realignment would have to be led by the LDP. In order to make this possible, we need to build up our strength now and be reborn as a party.

In the days when the LDP was in power, it used to act as a kind of go-between, listening to the demands of the regions and the private sector and forwarding these to the bureaucrats in Kasumigaseki. The bureaucrats, whatever their true feelings, always paid at least lip service to instructions that came from a powerful ruling party with a strong base of support. But once we fell from power, no one came to us for help anymore, and the ministries and government offices give us the cold shoulder. These experiences have brought home the reality that being in government is a privilege bestowed by the people. We need to build on this understanding and use it to help us grow. We must not make the mistake of thinking that we “did not lose” the upper house election and relapse into the bad old days of musical chairs between competing factions. We need to cleanse this DNA from the party once and for all.

I believe this period out of office is a heaven-sent opportunity for the LDP to reflect and reconsider. It is the perfect chance to take the time to polish and refine our policies while in opposition. Initially, I believed we should be content to remain in opposition for another two years or so. But if this kind of politics continues for another two years, the country will be ruined. There is no longer any time to lose.

By the time of the next general election, we need to break out of the current situation in which voters are forced to choose between two unpopular parties. It is not enough for us to squeak through in the elections simply because a majority of the electorate is so sick of the government that they vote for the opposition by default. Rebuilding the Japan-US alliance along the lines described above should be a key plank of our policy platform. We must formulate a clear set of policies and appeal to the electorate for support on that basis.

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