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Q: What is your view of U.S. President George W. Bush's East Asian policy?

A: Soon after the six-nation talks on North Korea's nuclear program got off the ground last year, a White House official influential in Asian affairs repeatedly told me that while China planned to exclude Japan from the talks, Washington persuaded Beijing to secure Japan's participation. And the reason was that the administration of Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro has done so much for Washington in the Iraq war.

What this illustrates is that the Chinese element is always entwined at the base of Japan-U.S. relations. Japanese tend to think that Japan-U.S. relations involve just the two countries. But in reality, the alliance, both from a historical and current perspective, is part of a triangle of which China constitutes one corner. People need to realize that.

In the early days of George W. Bush's administration, people thought that U.S.-China relations had chilled in comparison to the Clinton administration.

But after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, the interests of Washington, of engaging China in the war against terrorism, and Beijing, of condoning, if not encouraging, a visible U.S. presence in the Asian region to keep in check a Muslim surge in its Xinjiang Uygur autonomous region, coincided.

As a result, after that incident, relations have become more intense than during Clinton's administration.

Q: In this triangular relationship, how should Japan deal with the United States?

A: For two decades in the first half of the 20th century, Japanese foreign policy revolved around its alliance with Britain, and for 55 years following World War II, it revolved around its alliance with the United States. So for three-quarters of the 20th century, Japan maintained ties with Anglo-Saxon societies. Many Japanese consider that this country prospered most during those years, with Japan's surge to global prominence through its alliance with Britain, and its rise from the ashes and its economic miracle under the guidance of the United States.

However, the biggest weakness of Japan's diplomacy is its failure to develop a strong base for relations worthy of mutual trust with its neighbors.

Looking at the 21st century, it is probably necessary to place importance on relations with the United States, while at the same time, building a more durable base for relations with Japan's Asian neighbors. This is what I call shinbei-nyua, keeping faith in America while joining Asia.

While it is difficult to envision a single currency, or unified monetary policy as in the case of the European Union, there are moves to

create an East Asian community. Japan should take the initiative to promote interface and exchange in the region.

Having said that, the alliance with the United States, centered on the security arrangement, is a half-complete relationship. What is outrageous is that from a business perspective, for more than half a century, Japan has yet to form a holistic economic agreement with its partner.

While Tokyo is working to set up a free-trade agreement with Mexico, such an agreement with Washington has yet to be put on the table. I think such an agreement is only natural between two economically mature nations such as Japan and the United States.

We should rethink the current arrangement, with its unrealistic expectations and overreliance on the security alliance, and appropriately distance ourselves from the U.S. defense structure by phasing out bases and revising the Status of Forces Agreement. We should seek to create a defense cooperation relationship between two "adult" equal partners. The assertion that "if we propose a gradual phasing out of U.S. bases, bilateral relations will sour" is an outdated, fixed mentality.

Q: Considering the North Korean threat, is it realistic to consider scaling back U.S. bases here?

A: During the Cold War, Pyongyang, with the Soviet Union and China behind it, posed the threat of regime transformation, namely transforming neighbors into communist states. However, today, North Korea is considered a "rogue nation" and the threat posed is more about a reckless use of missiles or nuclear weapons.

While the fear of an attack exists, the potency of the threat, which I would call a "bluff threat," diminishes once the attack is actually launched, as it would trigger retaliation, likely resulting in annihilation of the regime.

Therefore, it is a sound strategic choice to try to convert North Korea into a constructive member of the global community through engagement.

Having said that, the argument that U.S. military presence in the Far East needs to be maintained at the current level of 100,000 troops, of whom 45,000 are stationed in Japan, is based on a fixed, outdated mentality.

Even if the U.S. military presence were to be withdrawn to Guam or Hawaii, as long as an emergency dispatch contingent is maintained there, I don't think it would be necessary to overestimate the North Korean threat. Many military experts in Washington share this opinion.

But for those who are making the decisions in Washington, a withdrawal from Japan, just as the scaling down of troops in Europe, would result in compressing the scale of the U.S. military as a whole.

And with the host nation support budget -- Japan shoulders 70 percent of the bill for U.S. forces, something no other country hosting U.S. forces does -- the thinking is that it is better to maintain forces here, and, therefore, foster the image that a threat exists.

Even if forces are withdrawn, if the two countries can come up with a new security agreement that truly defines security of the East Asian region as its mission, then Japan can still make a budget allocation to maintain an emergency contingent for the sake of preventing a power vacuum.

That is one alternative, and an important step, which would permit the United States to maintain its presence, cut back on budget

expenditure and restore Japan's dignity and independence.

Q: The Koizumi administration has loyally followed the United States through the Iraq war. What alternative line should opposition party Minshuto (Democratic Party of Japan) present in the upcoming Upper House election?

A: U.S. policy toward the Middle East has always been bound in the frame where Washington has had to support Israel. That has been the fundamental difference between the United States and Japan, which is the only leading country that has never provided military assistance to a Mideast country, nor engaged in military intervention in the region.

If Minshuto were to highlight this difference in policy, then it will become clear that there is an alternative to Koizumi's insistence that "Japan has no other choice but to follow the United States." The party can also present a clear alternative by redesigning relations with the United States with a new focus on Asia. Japan has many choices before it.

Looking at the 21st century and Japan's principle of renouncing force as a means of resolving conflicts, one alternative is taking the initiative in a peaceful fight against terrorism. The real fight against terrorism should not involve force, but supporting and participating in the International Criminal Court (ICC), and making sure that transnational organized crime and crimes against humanity are properly dealt with.

The question is how to nudge Washington to shed its unilateral stand and ensure that it plays a responsible leadership role in the global community. That is the message that Japan should send. It should encourage the United States to engage in creating a system to build a new order; controlling weapons of mass destruction, not through force, but through such means as participation in the ICC.
Personally, I would like to say to Americans, "Return to the America that used to be." Japan should not simply follow Bush, but give such advice.

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