



November 12, 2009

Japan Cools to America as It Prepares for Obama Visit

By [HELENE COOPER](#)

WASHINGTON — [President Obama](#) will arrive in Tokyo on Friday, at a time when America's relations with [Japan](#) are at their most contentious since the trade wars of the 1990s — and back then, the fights were over luxury cars and semiconductors, not over whether the two countries should re-examine their half-century-old strategic relationship.

When Japan's Democratic Party [came to power in September](#), ending 50 years of largely one-party government, Obama administration officials put on an outwardly positive face, congratulating the newcomers. But quietly, some American officials expressed fears that the blunt criticism that the Japanese had directed at the United States during the political campaign would translate to a more contentious relationship.

Within weeks, those fears started to play out. The new Japanese government said the country would withdraw from an eight-year-old mission in the Indian Ocean to refuel warships supporting American efforts in Afghanistan.

The government also announced that it planned to revisit [a 2006 agreement](#) to relocate a Marine airfield on Okinawa to a less populated part of the island, and to move thousands of [Marines](#) from Okinawa to Guam.

And Japanese government officials have suddenly lost their shyness about publicly sparring with American officials, as evident in a dispute in September between Japan's ambassador to the United States, Ichiro Fujisaki, and the Pentagon.

Meanwhile, Japan's new prime minister, [Yukio Hatoyama](#), has called for a more equal relationship with the United States, and his government wants a review of the status of forces agreement, which protects American troops from Japanese legal prosecution. Japanese citizens, and Okinawans in particular, have demanded such a review for years.

When Mr. Hatoyama met Mr. Obama in New York during the [United Nations General Assembly](#) in September, the conditions seemed ripe for a kiss-and-make-up session. At their initial meeting, Mr. Obama congratulated Mr. Hatoyama "for running an extraordinary campaign" and complimented his party for "leading dramatic change in Japan."

Mr. Hatoyama responded with the usual diplomatic niceties, telling reporters after the meeting that "I told President Obama that the Japan-U.S. alliance will continue to be the central pillar, key pillar of the security of Japan and Japanese foreign policy."

But there were also a few awkward moments. Mr. Hatoyama and his wife, Miyuki, were the last to arrive at

a leaders' dinner at the Phipps Conservatory on the margins of the [Group of 20](#) economic summit meeting in Pittsburgh later that week in September. Mr. Obama and his wife, Michelle, had been greeting arriving guests for almost two hours. "I'm sorry we were late," Mrs. Hatoyama apologized.

A few days later, after the Obamas and the Hatoyamas flew to Copenhagen to lobby the [International Olympic Committee](#) for the [2016 Olympics](#), Tokyo beat out Chicago in the first round of voting, then was bumped as Rio de Janeiro took the prize.

But all of that paled in comparison with the uproar that erupted in Japan after Defense Secretary [Robert M. Gates](#) visited Tokyo in October. Mr. Gates, known for speaking bluntly, pressed Mr. Hatoyama and Japanese military officials to keep their commitment on the military agreements.

"It is time to move on," Mr. Gates said, calling Japanese proposals to reopen the base issue "counterproductive." Then, adding insult to injury in the eyes of Japanese commentators, Mr. Gates turned down invitations to attend a welcoming ceremony at the Defense Ministry and to dine with officials there.

In the weeks since, in advance of Mr. Obama's visit, both countries have taken pains to tone down the rancor. The Japanese government has sent several high-level officials, including members of Parliament, to Washington to take the political temperature. Besides meeting with Obama administration officials, the Japanese representatives have spoken with members of research and policy groups based in Washington, particularly experts on foreign policy issues related to Japan.

"The feelers they've been putting out is, 'Please don't push us to make a decision because if you do, you'll hear what you don't want to hear,'" said Andrew L. Oros, a professor at Washington College and the author of "Normalizing Japan: Politics, Identity and the Evolution of Security Practice."

Japan's new government is "trying to backtrack from some of their campaign rhetoric, but it's too soon," Mr. Oros said.

"This was a historic election," he added. "They overturned 50 years of conservative rule. They can't do everything at once."

Indeed, the new government is under political pressure at home. More than 20,000 Okinawa residents held a protest rally against the base last week, and residents have been vociferous in letting the government know that they expect it to keep its campaign promises.

Administration officials said they had no intention of letting the relationship slide. Mr. Obama will be "looking to build his relationship and his personal ties with the new D.P.J. government there," Jeffrey A. Bader, Mr. Obama's senior director for East Asian affairs, told reporters on Monday, using the initials for the Democratic Party of Japan. "This government is looking for a more equal partnership with the United States. We are prepared to move in that direction."

But the United States, while tamping down the tone of the discussion, is still pressing Japan, particularly on the Okinawa base issue. Mr. Obama, in an interview on Tuesday with NHK television of Japan, said Japan must honor the agreement.

While "it's perfectly appropriate for the new government to want to re-examine how to move forward," Mr.

Obama told NHK, he added that he was “confident that once that review is completed that they will conclude that the alliance we have, the basing arrangements that have been discussed, all those things serve the interest of Japan and they will continue.”

In an effort to defuse tensions and perhaps make up for saying it would not refuel the Indian Ocean warships, Japan said Tuesday that it would [sharply increase its nonmilitary aid to Afghanistan](#), pledging \$5 billion for a variety of projects that include building schools and highways, training police officers, clearing land mines, and rehabilitating former [Taliban](#) fighters.

But even if the military squabble is eventually resolved, Japan’s economic relationship with the United States is being altered. China has now surpassed the United States as Japan’s major trading partner, a switch that economists expect to continue as China’s economy grows.

“Japan sees its future more within Asia,” said Eswar S. Prasad, an Asia specialist and professor at [Cornell University](#). “They feel that they owe a lot less to the U.S. right now. U.S. economic policy is hurting them in a lot of ways, particularly with the decline in the value of the dollar versus the yen.”

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