

# Opinion – The US-Japan Alliance Continues to Stand for Democracy, Despite a Role Reversal

Written by Tongfi Kim

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TONGFI KIM, APR 18 2021

On April 16, U.S. President Joe Biden hosted Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga at the White House, making Suga the first foreign leader to make such a visit under Biden's presidency. The joint statement after the summit said they 'underscore the importance of peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait and encourage the peaceful resolution of cross-Strait issues.' The last time a U.S. president and a Japanese prime minister mentioned Taiwan in a joint statement was 1969, years before Washington and Tokyo normalized their diplomatic ties with Beijing. The statement also expressed shared concerns 'regarding the human rights situations in Hong Kong and the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region.' This is a welcome development because the political roles of the United States and Japan in their seven-decades-old alliance are experiencing a major shift.

In alliance politics, relations between allies are largely defined by the fear of abandonment and entrapment, especially in relation to their primary adversaries. Within the U.S.-Japan alliance, Tokyo in the last decade was more concerned about abandonment by the United States in the face of rising Chinese assertiveness in the East China Sea while Washington worried that the dispute between Japan and China might entangle the United States into a military conflict. Allies' concerns are not limited to military risks, and they often extend to issues of economic policy and even international norms.

With a strong emphasis on democracy and human rights, Biden as a presidential candidate had proposed to host a global summit for democracy in his first year as president, and he remarked on March 25 that he was 'going to invite an alliance of democracies to come' to the United States and they were 'going to hold China accountable to follow the rules.' After initially worrying that the Biden administration might take a conciliatory approach toward China, Japanese policymakers now seem to be concerned about the costs of being dragged into the confrontation between the United States and China. Japan is the only member of G7 that has not joined the recent sanctions against China for its human rights abuses, and Japan's 'weak-kneed attitude' has been criticized domestically as well as internationally.

A decade ago, in contrast, it was Tokyo that was placing an emphasis on universal values in its diplomacy and the need to counter Beijing, as the Sino-Japanese maritime territorial dispute escalated from around 2010. In a 2012 opinion piece titled 'Asia's Democratic Security Diamond,' the former prime minister Shinzo Abe wrote that 'Japan's diplomacy must always be rooted in democracy,' and the Asia-Pacific regions' future prosperity should rest on universal values, while he advocated increased cooperation with Australia, India, and the United States. Although Washington was already increasing its attention to the region, many Japanese policymakers at the time viewed the Obama administration as too soft on China.

This role reversal is natural because threat perceptions are a major driving force for alliance politics, but Washington and Tokyo must set an example of democratic solidarity that stays above the fluctuating short-term geopolitical calculations. Democratic solidarity is not only important for the sake of universal values but also for the long-term material interests of the allies.

Unlike in the early years of the Cold War, democracies are no longer a small minority in the international society. In

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fact, 99 out of 166 countries Polity5 Project coded were considered democratic in 2018. Academic research has also shown that democratic allies are more reliable in military crises, less likely to abrogate alliance agreements opportunistically, more likely to prevail in military conflicts, and more likely to cooperate with one another economically. Given that the vast majority of countries that the United States has alliance obligations to defend are democratic (52 out of 66 in 2018) and many of them face military threats from autocracies such as China and Russia, advocating democratic solidarity is indeed good *Realpolitik*. Such a strategy is particularly important after the former president Donald Trump rejected the importance of alliances and democracy in U.S. foreign policy.

In short, democratic solidarity brings numerous benefits that are not related to the exclusion and containment of China. Chinese leaders naturally have criticized the Biden administration's focus on democracy, arguing that the United States must abandon 'the Cold War mentality and the zero-sum game approach.' China's Foreign Ministry spokesman warned the Japanese that they 'hope Japan can be prudent about its actions and rhetoric, and does not make groundless attacks on China just because it is an ally of the U.S.' There is an inevitable tension between democratic solidarity and engagement of China, but it is essential that the United States and Japan show that their commitment to democracy is not a cover for the containment of China.

As a non-Western country with a long history of democracy and the former enemy of the United States, Japan has a special role to play in the promotion of democratic solidarity advocated by Biden. The alliance between the first and third largest economies of the world boasts strong material capabilities, but the United States and Japan should lead the world by the power of their example, as Biden suggested for the leadership of the United States in his inaugural address.

It is time for Japan to signal its commitment to universal values by taking costly measures. This means standing up to China, its largest trading partner, as well as taking a more active role on other issues. Commenting on the repression of democratic protests in Myanmar and geopolitical competition, the High Representative of the European Union Josep Borrell recently wrote that the EU has been 'reaching out to all key stakeholders (ASEAN, China, Japan, India)' and 'like-minded partners, notably the US and UK.' Japan's pragmatic diplomacy has its own merits, but solidarity with 'like-minded' democratic partners is increasingly important. The U.S.-Japan joint statement, therefore, was a step in the right direction.

In turn, the United States must also demonstrate that its advocacy of democracy is not just for geopolitical competition with China. Pro-democracy diplomacy will at times alienate some countries and give short-term geopolitical advantage to Beijing. The benefits of consistent democratic solidarity, however, outweighs its costs. Together, Tokyo and Washington must show the multifaceted power of a democratic alliance.

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