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Japan-U.S. Relations amid the Covid-19 Pandemic

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1. President Biden's Visit to Japan

The relationship between the leaders of Japan and the U.S. in recent years has evolved from one in which “the U.S. is the teacher and Japan is the pupil” to one where “the two leaders look in the same direction and think about world issues together.” During President Joe Biden’s visit to Japan in May, in addition to a bilateral summit, a meeting of the QUAD (Japan, the U.S., Australia, and India) leaders and the kickoff meeting for IPEF (Indo-Pacific Economic Framework) were also held. Among the 13 members of IPEF, including those participating online, it is believed that Prime Minister Fumio Kishida had visited Indonesia, Vietnam, and Thailand during the Golden Week holidays for prior consensus building on IPEF.

While President Biden’s visit was not reported as prominently in the media as President Donald Trump’s visit three years ago, the topic of greatest interest was President Biden’s “gaffe” regarding the U.S.’s willingness to be militarily involved to defend Taiwan. However, this was the third time such a remark had been made, so it is reckoned that this was actually a message the two leaders had agreed upon on this issue with an immediate impact on Japan.

Incidentally, it is indeed difficult to build a relationship with the U.S., which could completely reverse its policies with a change of administration—e.g., its withdrawal from and return to the Paris Agreement—but Japan and the world are now used to it. Personally, I think the U.S. presidential election system, the oldest in the world, is quite interesting, and I hope the American people also take pride in it.

2. Response to the Covid-19 Pandemic

Biden’s visit to Japan showed that the Japan-U.S. alliance relationship remains stable. However, the two countries have differed significantly in their response to the Covid-19

pandemic.

Over 1 million people died of Covid in the U.S. while the number of deaths in Japan is around 30,000. While Japan is commendable for controlling the epidemic to the lowest level in the world, the U.S. is also noteworthy for spending over \$6.5 trillion to deal with Covid. In particular, I think it is odd that the U.S. does not seem to appreciate its own Operation Warp Speed involving the U.S. military and the allocation of a substantial budget, which succeeded in accelerating the development and distribution of vaccines.

The U.S. must have achieved herd immunity, with 86 million people already infected with Covid. In the case of Japan, where each person has already been vaccinated at least twice, there is probably no need to worry about not achieving herd immunity. However, its culture of being more concerned about infecting others than getting infected means that mask wearing will probably continue for some time.

The biggest difference between the two countries is in its approach to employment. Some 20 million people lost their jobs around the time Covid hit the U.S., but with government financial aid and additional unemployment compensation to help the unemployed, most of them have already found new jobs at present. On the other hand, Japan has been able to curb the number of unemployed at around 1 million by continuous assistance to businesses. Economic growth rate in the U.S. for 2021 was 5.7% while that for Japan was 1.6%. The U.S. “laid off” around 10% of its workforce to strengthen its financial base, while Japan controlled unemployment by supporting weak businesses to maintain social stability. This is largely due to cultural differences between the two countries, and it is hard to determine which is better in this regard.

3. Concerns about Japan-U.S. Relations from Now On

As noted above, Japan and the U.S. have different cultures and their position in certain areas may also differ. For example, in terms of fossil fuels, while the U.S. is able to export LNG, Japan imports almost 100% of its crude oil. In such areas, Japan, which has worked on energy conservation over the years, should probably prioritize playing a leadership role over its partnership with the U.S., such as by promoting its export of clean coal-fired power plants.

However, it is important for the U.S., dubbed the “most unwesternized Western country,” and Japan, “the most westernized non-Western country,” to transcend their differences for the sake of maintaining and shaping the world order.

The problem with present day democracy is that social media excessively amplify voices “in favor” or “against” a certain position, rendering it difficult for the voice of the silent majority to be heard. Furthermore, social media give rise to divisions, triggering the attack on the U.S.

Congress on Jan. 6 last year. This was a truly shocking event, but I think then Vice President Mike Pence responded honorably. It is also commendable that the House of Representatives has set up a special committee to investigate this incident. Reviewing the past thoroughly is a virtue of the U.S.

On the other hand, it is disconcerting that this incident has brought about divisions in the Republican Party. Stable Japan-U.S. relationships, such as the Nakasone-Reagan, Koizumi-Bush (Jr.), and Abe-Trump relationship, have mostly happened during Republican administrations. I am closely watching with concern how the positive side of the good old Republican Party, where the old-fashioned sense of obligation and compassion still has a place, will evolve in the future.

Recently, I am astounded by opinion polls in the U.S. showing that many Americans think that “the U.S. should not be involved” in the Ukraine issue. It seems that this attitude is more pronounced among the younger generation. The U.S. leaning toward isolationism is undesirable for the world, not to mention Japan. Japan should persist in persuading the U.S. to continue to be an outward-looking nation actively involved with international affairs.

(Note) This article is a summary of the lecture delivered on June 27, “U.S.-Japan Relationship after President Biden’s Visit to Japan,” under the “KKC Fellowship Program for North American Social Studies Teachers.”

Since 1980, the Keizai Koho Center has been conducting the “KKC Fellowship Program for North American Social Studies Teachers” from the standpoint of promoting international mutual understanding. Social studies teachers are invited to Japan once a year for exchanges with educators, government officials, and experts. This year, the program resumed after being suspended for two years due to the Covid pandemic with thoroughgoing Covid prevention measures being taken.

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